Children of the Mist eBook

Children of the Mist by Eden Phillpotts

Contents

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Page 1

CHILDREN OF THE MIST

BOOK I

THE BOY'S ROMANCE

CHAPTER I

THE PIXIES' PARLOUR

Phoebe Lyddon frowned, and, as an instant protest, twin dimples peeped into life at the left corner of her bonny mouth. In regarding that attractive ripple the down-drawn eyebrows were forgotten until they rose again into their natural arches. A sweet, childish contour of face chimed with her expression; her full lips were bright as the bunch of ripe wood-strawberries at the breast of her cotton gown; her eyes as grey as Dartmoor mists; while, for the rest, a little round chin, a small, straight nose, and a high forehead, which Phoebe mourned and kept carefully concealed under masses of curly brown hair, were the sole features to be specially noted about her. She was a trifle below the standard of height proper to a girl of nineteen, but all compact, of soft, rounded lines, plump, fresh of colour, healthy, happy, sweet as a ripe apple.

From a position upon swelling hillsides above the valley of a river, she scanned the scene beneath, made small her eyes to focus the distance, and so pursued a survey of meadow and woodland, yet without seeing what she sought. Beneath and beyond, separated from her standpoint by grasslands and a hedge of hazel, tangled thickets of blackthorn, of bracken, and of briar sank to the valley bottom. Therein wound tinkling Teign through the gorges of Fingle to the sea; and above it, where the land climbed upward on the other side, spread the Park of Whiddou, with expanses of sweet, stone-scattered herbage, with tracts of deep fern, coverts of oak, and occasional habitations for the deer.

This spectacle, through a grey veil of fine rain, Phoebe noted at mid-afternoon of a day in early August; and, as she watched, there widened a rift under the sun's hidden throne, and a mighty, fan-shaped pencil of brightness straggled downwards, proceeded in solemn sweep across the valley, and lighted the depths of the gorge beyond with a radiance of misty silver. The music of jackdaws welcomed this first indication of improved weather; then Phoebe's sharp eyes beheld a phenomenon afar off through the momentary cessation of the rain. Three parts of a mile away, on a distant hillside, like the successive discharges of a dozen fowling-pieces, little blotches of smoke or mist suddenly appeared. Rapidly they followed each other, and sometimes the puffs of vapour were exploded together, sometimes separately. For a moment the girl felt puzzled; then she comprehended and laughed.

“’Tis the silly auld sheep!” she said to herself. “They ’m shakin ’theer fleeces ’cause they knaw the rain’s over-past. Bellwether did begin, I warrant, then all the rest done the same.”

Each remote member of the flock thus freed its coat from the accumulated moisture of a long rainfall; then the huddled heap, in which they had combined to withstand the weather and show tail to the western storm, began to scatter. With coughs and sneezes the beasts wandered forward again, and pursued their business of grazing.

Page 2

Steadily the promises of the sky multiplied and Phoebe's impatience increased. Her position did not, however, depend for comfort upon the return of sunshine, for she stood out of the weather, where sundry giant rocks to the number of five arose in a fantastic pile. Nature's primal architects were responsible for the Pixies' Parlour, and upon the awful morning of Dartmoor's creation these enormous masses had first been hurled to their present position—outposts of the eternal granite, though themselves widely removed from the central waste of the Moor. This particular and gigantic monument of the past stands with its feet in land long cultivated. Plough and harrow yearly skirt the Pixies' Parlour; it rises to-day above yellow corn, to-morrow amid ripening roots; it crowns the succeeding generations of man's industry, and watches a ceaseless cycle of human toil. The rocks of which it is composed form a sort of rude chamber, sacred to fairy folk since a time before the memory of the living; briars and ivy-tods conceal a part of the fabric; a blackthorn, brushed at this season with purple fruit, rises above it; one shadowed ledge reveals the nightly roosting place of hawk or raven; and marks of steel on the stone show clearly where some great or small fragment of granite has been blasted from the parent pile for the need of man. Multi-coloured, massive, and picturesque, the Parlour, upon Phoebe Lyddon's visit to it, stood forth against the red bosom of naked land; for a fierce summer had early ripened the vanished harvest, and now its place was already ploughed again, while ashes of dead fire scattered upon the earth showed where weed and waste had been consumed after ingathering of the grain.

Patches of August blue now lightened the aerial grey; then sunshine set a million gems twinkling on the great bejewelled bosom of the valley. Under this magic heat an almost instantaneous shadowy ghost of fresh vapour rose upon the riparian meadows, and out of it, swinging along with the energy of youth and high spirits, came a lad. Phoebe smiled and twinkled a white handkerchief to him, and he waved his hat and bettered his pace for answer.

Soon Will Blanchard reached his sweetheart, and showed himself a brown, straight youngster, with curly hair, pugnacious nose, good shoulders, and a figure so well put together that his height was not apparent until he stood alongside another man. Will's eyes were grey as Phoebe's, but of a different expression; soft and unsettled, cloudy as the recent weather, full of the alternate mist and flash of a precious stone, one moment all a-dreaming, the next aglow. His natural look was at first sight a little stern until a man came to know it, then this impression waned and left a critic puzzled. The square cut of his face and abrupt angle of his jaw did not indeed belie Will Blanchard, but the man's smile magically dissipated this austerity of aspect, and no sudden sunshine ever brightened a dark day quicker than pleasure

Page 3

made bright his features. It was a sulky, sleepy, sweet, changeable face—very fascinating in the eyes of women. His musical laugh once fluttered sundry young bosoms, brightened many pretty eyes and cheeks, but Will's heart was Phoebe Lyddon's now—had been for six full months—and albeit a mere country boy in knowledge of the world, younger far than his one-and-twenty years of life, and wholly unskilled in those arts whose practice enables men to dwell together with friendship and harmony, yet Will Blanchard was quite old enough and wise enough and rich enough to wed, and make a husband of more than common quality at that—in his own opinion.

Fortified by this conviction, and determined to wait no longer, he now came to see Phoebe. Within the sheltering arms of the Pixies' Parlour he kissed her, pressed her against his wet velveteen jacket, then sat down under the rocks beside her.

"You 'm comed wi' the sun, dear Will."

"Ay—the weather breaks. I hope theer'll be a drop more water down the river bimebye. You got my letter all right?"

"Ess fay, else I shouldn't be here. And this tremendous matter in hand?"

"I thought you'd guess what 't was. I be weary o' waitin' for 'e. An' as I comed of age last month, I'm a man in law so well as larnin', and I'm gwaine to speak to Miller Lyddon this very night."

Phoebe looked blank. There was a moment's silence while Will picked and ate the wood-strawberries in his sweetheart's dress.

"Caan't 'e think o' nothin' wiser than to see faither?" she said at last.

"Theer ban't nothin' wiser. He knaws we 'm tokened, and it's no manner o' use him gwaine on pretendin' to himself 't isn't so. You 'm wife-old, and you've made choice o' me; and I'm a ripe man, as have thought a lot in my time, and be earnin' gude money and all. Besides, 't is a dead-sure fact I'll have auld Morgan's place as head waterkeeper, an' the cottage along with it, in fair time."

"Ban't for me to lift up no hindrances, but you knaw faither."

"Ess, I do—for a very stiff-necked man."

"Maybe 't is so; but a gude faither to me."

"An' a gude friend to me, for that matter. He aint got nothing 'gainst me, anyway—no more 's any man living."

“Awnly the youth and fieriness of ’e.”

“Me fiery! I lay you wouldn’t find a cooler chap in Chagford.”

“You ’m a dinky bit comical-tempered now and again, dear heart.”

He flushed, and the corners of his jaw thickened.

“If a man was to say that, I’d knock his words down his throat.”

“I knaw you would, my awn Will; an’ that’s bein’ comical-tempered, ban’t it?”

“Then perhaps I’d best not to see your faither arter all, if you ’m that way o’ thinkin’,” he answered shortly.

Then Phoebe purred to him and rubbed her cheek against his chin, whereon the glint vanished from his eyes, and they were soft again.

Page 4

“Mother’s the awnly livin’ sawl what understands me,” he said slowly.

“And I—I too, Will!” cried Phoebe. “Ess fay. I’ll call you a holy angel if you please, an’ God knaws theer ’s not an angel in heaven I’d have stead of ’e.”

“I ban’t no angel,” said Will gravely, “and never set up for no such thing; but I’ve thought a lot ’bout the world in general, and I’m purty wise for a home-stayin’ chap, come to think on it; and it’s borne in ’pon me of late days that the married state ’s a gude wan, and the sooner the better.”

“But a leap in the dark even for the wisest, Will?”

“So’s every other step us takes for that matter. Look at them grasshoppers. Off they goes to glory and doan’t knaw no more ’n the dead wheer they’ll fetch up. I’ve seed ’em by the river jump slap in the water, almost on to a trout’s back. So us hops along and caan’t say what’s comin’ next. We ’m built to see just beyond our awn nose-ends and no further. That’s philosophy.”

“Ban’t comfortin’ if ’t is,” said Phoebe.

“Whether or no, I’ll see your faither ’fore night and have a plain answer. I’m a straight, square man, so’s the miller.”

“You’ll speed poorly, I’m fearin’, but ’t is a honest thing; and I’ll tell faither you ’m all the world to me. He doan’t seem to knaw what it is for a gal to be nineteen year old somehow.”

Solemnly Will rose, almost overweighted with the consciousness of what lay before him.

“We’ll go home-along now. Doan’t ’e tell him I’m coming. I’ll take him unbeknawnst. And you keep out the way till I be gone again.”

“Does your mother knaw, Will?”

“Ess, she an’ Chris both knaw I be gwaine to have it out this night. Mother sez I be right, but that Miller will send me packing wi’ a flea in my ear; Chris sez I be wrong to ax yet awhile.”

“You can see why that is; ’she ’s got to wait herself,” said Phoebe, rather spitefully.

“Waitin’ ’s well enough when it caan’t be helped. But in my case, as a man of assured work and position in the plaace, I doan’t hold it needful no more.”

Together the young couple marched down over the meadows, gained the side of the river, and followed its windings to the west. Through a dip in the woods presently

peeped the ancient stannary town of Chagford, from the summit of its own little eminence on the eastern confines of Dartmoor. Both Will and Phoebe dwelt within the parish, but some distance from the place itself. She lived at Monks Barton, a farm and mill beside the stream; he shared an adjacent cottage with his mother and sister. Only a bend of the river separated the dwellings of the lovers—where Rushford Bridge spanned the Teign and beech and fir rose above it.

Page 5

In a great glory of clearness after rain, boy and girl moved along together under the trees. The fisherman's path which they followed wound where wet granite shone and ivy glimmered beneath the forest; and the leaves still dripped briskly, making a patter of sound through the underwood, and marking a thousand circles and splashes in the smooth water beneath the banks of the stream. Against a purple-grey background of past rain the green of high summer shone bright and fresh, and each moss-clad rock and fern-fringed branch of the forest oaks sent forth its own incense of slender steam where the sunlight sparkled and sucked up the moisture. Scarce half a mile from Phoebe's home a shining yellow twig bent and flashed against the green, and a broad back appeared through a screen of alder by the water's edge.

"'T is a rod," said Will. "Bide a moment, and I'll take the number of his ticket. He 'm the first fisherman I've seen to-day."

As under-keeper or water-bailiff to the Fishing Association, young Blanchard's work consisted in endless perambulation of the river's bank, in sharp outlook for poacher and trespasser, and in the survey of fishermen's bridges, and other contrivances for anglers that occurred along the winding course of the waters. His also was the duty of noting the license numbers, and of surprising those immoral anglers who sought to kill fish illegally on distant reaches of the river. His keen eyes, great activity, and approved pluck well fitted Will for such duties. He often walked twenty miles a day, and fishermen said that he knew every big trout in the Teign from Fingle Bridge to the dark pools and rippling steps under Sittaford Tor, near the river's twin birthplaces. He also knew where the great peel rested, on their annual migration from sea to moor; where the kingfisher's nest of fish-bones lay hidden; where the otter had her home beneath the bank, and its inland vent-hole behind a silver birch.

Will bid the angler "good afternoon," and made a few general remarks on sport and the present unfavourable condition of the water, shrunk to mere ribbons of silver by a long summer drought. The fisherman was a stranger to Will—a handsome, stalwart man, with a heavy amber moustache, hard blue eyes, and a skin tanned red by hotter suns than English Augusts know. His disposition, also, as it seemed, reflected years of a tropic or subtropic existence, for this trivial meeting and momentary intrusion upon his solitude resulted in an explosion as sudden as unreasonable and unexpected.

"Keep back, can't you?" he exclaimed, while the young keeper approached his side; "who 's going to catch fish with your lanky shadow across the water?"

Will was up in arms instantly.

"Do 'e think I doan't knaw my business? Theer 's my shadder 'pon the bank a mile behind you; an' I didn't ope my mouth till you'd fished the stickle to the bottom and missed two rises."

This criticism angered the elder man, and he freed his tailfly fiercely from the rush-head that held it.

Page 6

“Mind your own affairs and get out of my sight, whoever you are. This river’s not what it used to be by a good deal. Over-fished and poached, and not looked after, I’ll swear.”

Thus, in ignorance, the sportsman uttered words of all most like to set Will Blanchard’s temper loose—a task sufficiently easy at the best of times.

“What the hell d’ you knaw ’bout the river?” he flamed out. “And as to ‘my affairs,’ ‘t is my affairs, an’ I be water-bailiff, an’ I’ll thank you for the number of your ticket—so now then!”

“What’s become of Morgan?” asked the other.

“He ’m fust, I be second; and ’t is my job to take the license numbers.”

“Pity you’re such an uncivil young cub, then.”

“Gimme your ticket directly minute!”

“I’m not going to.”

The keeper looked wicked enough by this time, but he made a great effort to hold himself in.

“Why for not?”

“Because I didn’t take one.”

“That ban’t gwaine to do for me.”

“Ban’t it? Then you’ll have to go without any reason. Now run away and don’t bleat so loud.”

“Look here,” retorted Will, going straight up to the fisherman, and taking his measure with a flashing eye, “You gimme your ticket number or your name an’ address, else I’ll make ’e.”

They counted nearly the same inches, but the angler was the elder, and a man of more powerful build and massive frame than his younger opponent. His blue eyes and full, broad face spoke a pugnacity not less pronounced than the keeper’s own finer features indicated; and thus these two, destined for long years to bulk largely each upon the life of the other, stood eye to eye for the first time. Will’s temper was nearly gone, and now another sneer set it loose with sudden and startling result.

“Make me, my young moorcock? Two more words and I’ll throw you across the river!”

The two words were not forthcoming, but Will dropped his stick and shot forward straight and strong as an angry dog. He closed before the stranger could dispose of his rod, gripped him with a strong wrestling hold, and cross-buttocked him heavily in the twinkling of an eye. The big man happily fell without hurt upon soft sand at the river's brink; but the indignity of this defeat roused his temper effectually. He grinned nevertheless as he rose again, shook the sand off his face, and licked his hands.

"Good Devon, sure enough, my son; now I'll teach *you* something you never heard tell of, and break your damned fool's neck for you into the bargain!"

But Phoebe, who had wandered slowly on, returned quickly at the sound of the scuffle and high words. Now she fluttered between the combatants and rendered any further encounter for the time impossible. They could not close again with the girl between them, and the stranger, his anger holding its breath, glanced at her with sudden interest, stayed his angry growl, suffered rage to wane out of his eyes and frank admiration to appear in them.

Page 7

“Doan’t be fighting!” cried Phoebe. “Whatever’s the mischief, Will? Do bate your speed of hand! You’ve thrawed the gentleman down, seemin’ly.”

“Wheer ’s his ticket to then?”

“Why, it isn’t Miller Lyddon’s young maid, surely!” burst out the fisherman; “not Phoebe grown to woman!”

A Devon accent marked the speech, suddenly dragged from him by surprise.

“Ess, I be Phoebe Lyddon; but don’t ’e fall ’pon each other again, for the Lard’s sake,” she said.

“The boy ’s as tetchy in temper as a broody hen. I was only joking all the time, and see how he made me pay for my joke. But to think I should remember you! Grown from bud to pretty blossom, by God! And I danced you on my knee last time I saw you!”

“Then you ’m wan of they two Grimbal brothers as was to be home again in Chagford to-day!” exclaimed Will.

“That’s so; Martin and I landed at Plymouth yesterday. We got to Chagford early this morning.”

Will laughed.

“I never!” he said. “Why, you be lodging with my awn mother at the cottage above Rushford Bridge! You was expected this marnin’, but I couldn’t wait for ’e. You ’m Jan Grimbal—eh?”

“Right! And you’re a nice host, to be sure!”

“’T is solemn truth, you ’m biding under our roof, the ‘Three Crowns’ bein’ full just now. And I’m sorry I thrawed ’e; but you was that glumpy, and of course I didn’t know ’e from Adam. I’m Will Blanchard.”

“Never mind, Will, we’ll try again some day. I could wrestle a bit once, and learned a new trick or two from a Yankee in Africa.”

“You’ve come back ‘mazin’ rich they say, Jan Grimbal?”

“So, so. Not millionaires, but all right—both of us, though I’m the snug man of the two. We got to Africa at the right moment, before 1867, you know, the year that O’Reilly saw a nigger-child playing with the first Kimberley diamond ever found. Up we went, the pair of us. Things have hummed since then, and claims and half-claims and quarter-claims

are coming to be worth a Jew's eye. We're all right, anyway, and I've got a stake out there yet."

"You 'm well pleased to come back to dear li'l Chagford after so many years of foreign paarts, I should think, Mr. Grimbal?" said Phoebe.

"Ay, that I am. There's no place like Devon, in all the earth, and no spot like Chagford in Devon. I'm too hard grit to wink an eyelid at sight of the old scenes again myself; but Martin, when he caught first sight of great rolling Cosdon crowning the land—why, his eyes were wetted, if you'll believe it."

"And you comed right off to fish the river fust thing," said Will admiringly.

"Ay, couldn't help it. When I heard the water calling, it was more than my power to keep away. But you're cruel short of rain, seemingly, and of course the season 's nearly over."

Page 8

“I’ll shaw you dark hovers, wheer braave feesh be lying yet,” promised Will; and the angler thanked him, foretelling a great friendship. Yet his eyes rarely roamed from Phoebe, and anon, as all three proceeded, John Grimbal stopped at the gate of Monks Barton and held the girl in conversation awhile. But first he despatched Will homewards with a message for his mother. “Let Mrs. Blanchard know we’ll feed at seven o’clock off the best that she can get,” he said; “and tell her not to bother about the liquor. I’ll see to that myself.”

CHAPTER II

A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING

Monks Barton, or Barton Monachorum, as the farm was called in a Tudor perambulation of Chagford, owed its name to traditions that holy men aforetime dwelt there, performed saintly deeds, and blessed a spring in the adjacent woods, whose waters from that date ever proved a magical medicament for “striking” of sore eyes. That the lands of the valley had once been in monastic possession was, however, probable enough; and some portions of the old farm did in truth rise upon the ruins of a still more ancient habitation long vanished. Monks Barton stood, a picturesque agglomeration of buildings, beside the river. The mill-wheel, fed by a stream taken from the Teign some distance up the valley and here returned again to the parent water, thundered on its solemn round in an eternal twinkling twilight of dripping ferns and green mosses; while hard by the dwelling-house stood and offered small diamond panes and one dormer-window to the south. Upon its whitewashed face three fruit-trees grew—a black plum, a cherry, a winter pear; and before the farmhouse stretched a yard sloping to the river ford, where a line of massive stepping-stones for foot-passengers crossed the water. On either side of this space, walled up from the edge of the stream, little gardens of raspberry and gooseberry bushes spread; and here, too, appeared a few apple-trees, a bed of herbs, a patch of onions, purple cabbages, and a giant hollyhock with sulphur-coloured blossoms that thrust his proud head upwards, a gentleman at large, and the practical countrymen of the kitchen-garden. The mill and outbuildings, the homestead and wood-stacks embraced a whole gamut of fine colour, ranging from the tawny and crimson of fretted brick and tile to varied greys of drying timber; from the cushions and pillows of moss and embroidery of houseleeks and valerian, that had flourished for fifty years on a ruined shippen, to the silver gleam of old thatches and the shining gold of new. Nor was the white face of the dwelling-house amiss. Only one cold, crude eye stared out from this time-tinctured scene; only one raw pentroof of corrugated iron blotted it, made poets sigh, artists swear, and Miller Lyddon contemplate more of the same upon his land.

Page 9

A clucking and grunting concourse of fowls and pigs shared the farmyard; blue pigeons claimed the roof; and now, in the westering light, with slow foot, sweet breath, and swelling udder, many kine, red as the ripe horse-chestnut, followed each other across the ford, assembled themselves together and lowed musically to the milkers. Phoebe Lyddon and John Grimbal still stood at the farm-gate, and they watched, as a boy and an aged man came forward with buckets and stools. Then, to the muffled thud of the water-wheel and the drone and murmur of the river, was added a purr of milk, foaming into tin pails, and sharp, thin monitions from the ancient, as he called the cows by their names and bid them be still.

In John Grimbal, newly come from South Africa, this scene awakened a lively satisfaction and delight. It told him that he was home again; and so did the girl, though it seemed absurd to think that Phoebe had ever sat upon his knee and heard his big stories, when as yet he himself was a boy and the world still spread before him unconquered. He mused at the change and looked forward to bringing himself and his success in life before those who had known him in the past. He very well remembered who had encouraged his ambitions and spoken words of kindness and of hope; who also had sneered, criticised his designs unfavourably, and thrown cold water upon his projects. John Grimbal meant to make certain souls smart as he had smarted; but he feared his brother a little in this connection, and suspected that Martin would not assert himself among the friends of his youth, would not assume a position his riches warranted, would be content with too humble a manner of life.

As a matter of fact, the ambition of neither extended much beyond a life of peace among the scenes of his childhood; but while the younger traveller returned with unuttered thanksgivings in his heart that he was privileged again to see the land he loved and henceforth dwell amid its cherished scenes, the greater energy and wider ambition of his brother planned a position of some prominence if not power. John was above all else a sportsman, and his programme embraced land, a stout new dwelling-house, preserves of game in a small way, some fishing, and the formation of a new rifle-corps at Chagford. This last enterprise he intended to be the serious business of life; but his mind was open to any new, agreeable impressions and, indeed, it received them at every turn. Phoebe Lyddon awoke a very vital train of thoughts, and when he left her, promising to come with his brother on the following day to see the miller, John Grimbal's impressionable heart was stamped with her pretty image, his ear still held the melody of her voice.

He crossed the stepping-stones, sat down upon the bank to change his flies, and looked at the home of Phoebe without sentiment, yet not without pleasure. It lay all cuddled on the bosom of a green hill; to the west stretched meadows and orchard along the winding valley of the river; to the east extended more grass-land that emerged into ferny coombs and glades and river dells, all alive with the light of wild flowers and the music of birds, with the play of dusky sunshine in the still water, and of shadows on the shore.

Page 10

A little procession of white ducks sailed slowly up the river, and each as it passed twisted its head to peer up at the spectator. Presently the drake who led them touched bottom, and his red-gold webs appeared. Then he paddled ashore, lifted up his voice, waggled his tail, and with a crescendo of quacking conducted his harem into the farmyard. One lone Muscovy duck, perchance emulating the holy men of old in their self-communion, or else constrained by circumstance to a solitary life, appeared apart on a little island under the alders. A stranger in a strange land, he sat with bent head and red-rimmed, philosophic eyes, regarding his own breast while sunset lights fired the metallic lustre of his motley. Quite close to him a dead branch thrust upwards from the water, and the river swirled in oily play of wrinkles and dimples beyond it. Here, with some approach to his old skill, the angler presently cast a small brown moth. It fell lightly and neatly, cocked for a second, then turned helplessly over, wrecked in the sudden eddy as a natural insect had been. A fearless rise followed, and in less than half a minute a small trout was in the angler's net. John Grimbal landed this little fish carefully and regarded it with huge satisfaction before returning it to the river. Then, having accomplished the task set by sudden desire,—to catch a Teign trout again, feel it, smell it, see the ebony and crimson, the silver belly warming to gold on its sides and darkening to brown and olive above,—having by this act renewed sensations that had slept for fifteen years, he put up his rod and returned to his temporary quarters at the dwelling of Mrs. Blanchard.

His brother was waiting in the little garden to welcome him. Martin walked up and down, smelled the flowers, and gazed with sober delight upon the surrounding scene. Already sunset fires had waned; but the high top of the fir that crowned Rushford Bridge still glowed with a great light on its red bark; an uprising Whiddon, where it lay afar off under the crown of Cranbrook, likewise shone out above the shadowed valley.

Martin Grimbal approached his brother and laid his hand upon the fisherman's arm. He stood the smaller in stature, though of strong build. His clean-shaved face had burned much darker than John's; he was indeed coffee-brown and might have been mistaken for an Indian but for his eyes of ordinary slate-grey. Without any pretension to good looks, Martin Grimbal displayed what was better—an expression of such frank benignity and goodness that his kind trusted him and relied upon him by intuition. Honest and true to the verge of quixotism was this man in all dealings with his fellows, yet he proved a faulty student of character. First he was in a measure blinded by his own amiable qualities to acute knowledge of human nature; secondly, he was drawn away from humanity rather than not, for no cynic reason, but by the character of his personal predilections and pursuits.

Page 11

“I’ve seen father’s grave, John,” were his first words to his brother. “It’s beside the mother’s, but that old stone he put up to her must be moved and—”

“All right, all right, old chap. Stones are in your line, not mine. Where’s dinner? I want bread, not a stone, eh?”

Martin did not laugh, but shrugged his shoulders in good-tempered fashion. His face had a measure of distinction his brother’s lacked, and indeed, while wanting John’s tremendous physical energy and robust determination, he possessed a finer intellect and instinct less animal. Even abroad, during their earlier enterprises, Martin had first provided brains sufficient for himself and John; but an accident of fortune suddenly favoured the elder; and while John took full care that Martin should benefit with himself, he was pleased henceforth to read into his superior luck a revelation of superior intelligence, and from that moment followed his own inclinations and judgment. He liked Martin no less, but never turned to him for counsel again after his own accidental good fortune; and henceforward assumed an elder brother’s manner and a show of superior wisdom. In matters of the world and in knowledge of such human character as shall be found to congregate in civilisation’s van, or where precious metals and precious stones have been discovered to abound, John Grimbal was undoubtedly the shrewder, more experienced man; and Martin felt very well content that his elder brother should take the lead. Since the advent of their prosperity a lively gratitude had animated his mind. The twain shared nothing save bonds of blood, love of their native land, and parity of ambition, first manifested in early desires to become independent. Together they had gone abroad, together they returned; and now each according to his genius designed to seek happiness where he expected to find it. John still held interests in South Africa, but Martin, content with less fortune, and mighty anxious to be free of all further business, realised his wealth and now knew the limits of his income.

The brothers supped in good spirits and Will Blanchard’s sister waited upon them. Chris was her “brother in petticoats,” people said, and indeed she resembled him greatly in face and disposition. But her eyes were brown, like her dead father’s, and a gypsy splendour of black hair crowned her head. She was a year younger than Will, wholly wrapped up in him and one other.

A familiarity, shy on Martin’s side and patronising in John, obtained between the brothers and their pretty attendant, for she knew all about them and the very cottage in which their parents had dwelt and died. The girl came and went, answered John Grimbal’s jests readily, and ministered to them as one not inferior to those she served. The elder man’s blue eyes were full of earthy admiration. He picked his teeth between the courses and admired aloud, while Chris was from the room.

“’Tis wonderful how pretty all the women look, coming back to them after ten years of nigger girls. Roses and cream isn’t in it with their skins, though this one’s dark as a clear night—Spanish fashion.”

Page 12

“Miss Blanchard seems very beautiful to me certainly,” admitted Martin.

“I’ve seen only two maids—since setting foot in Chagford,” continued his brother, “and it would puzzle the devil to say which was best to look at.”

“Your heart will soon be lost, I’ll wager—to a Chagford girl, I hope. I know you talked about flying high, but you might be happier to take a mate from—well, you understand.”

“It’s all very well to build theories on board ship about bettering myself socially and all that, but it’s rot; I’ll be knocked over by one of the country witches, I know I shall,—I feel it. I love the sound of the Devon on their lips, and the clear eyes of them, and the bright skin. ’Tis all I can do to keep from hugging the women, and that’s a fact. But you, you cold-blooded beggar, your heart’s still for the grey granite and the old ghostly stones, and creepy, lonely places on the Moor! We’re that different, you and me.”

Martin nodded thoughtfully, and, the meal being now ended, both men strolled out of doors, then wandered down to smoke a pipe on Rushford Bridge and listen to the nightly murmur of the river. Darkness moved on the face of land and water; twilight had sucked all the colour away from the valley; and through the deepening monochrome of the murk there passed white mists with shadowy hands, and peeped blind pale eyes along the winding water, where its surface reflected the faded west. Nocturnal magic conjured the least meadow into an unmeasured sea of vapour; awoke naiads in the waters and dryads in the woods; transformed the solemn organ music of great beetles into songs of a roaming spirit; set unseen shapes stirring in the starlight; whispered of invisible, enchanted things, happy and unhappy, behind the silence.

A man moved from the bridge as the brothers reached it. Then Will Blanchard, knocking out his pipe and taking a big inspiration, set his face steadily toward Monks Barton and that vital interview with Miller Lyddon now standing in the pathway of his life.

He rapped at the farm door and a step came slowly down the stone-paved passage. Then Billy Blee, the miller’s right-hand man, opened to him. Bent he was from the small of the back, with a highly coloured, much wrinkled visage, and ginger hair, bleached by time to a paler shade. His poll was bald and shining, and thick yellow whiskers met beneath a clean-shorn chin. Billy’s shaggy eyebrows, little bright eyes, and long upper lip, taken with the tawny fringe under his chops, gave him the look of an ancient and gigantic lion-monkey; and indeed there was not lacking in him an ape-like twist, as shall appear.

“Hullo! boy Blanchard! An’ what might you want?” he asked.

“To see Miller.”

“Come in then; we’m all alone in kitchen, him and me, awver our grog and game. What’s the matter now?”

“A private word for Miller’s ear,” said Will cautiously.

Page 13

“Come you in then. Us’ll do what we may for ’e. Auld heads be the best stepping-stones young folks can have, understood right; awnly the likes of you mostly chooses to splash through life on your awn damn silly roads.”

Mr. Blee, whose friendship and familiarity with his master was of the closest, led on, and Will soon stood before Mr. Lyddon.

The man who owned Monks Barton, and who there prosperously combined the callings of farmer and miller, had long enjoyed the esteem of the neighbourhood in which he dwelt, as had his ancestors before him, through many generations. He had won reputation for a sort of silent wisdom. He never advised any man ill, never hesitated to do a kindly action, and himself contrived to prosper year in, year out, no matter what period of depression might be passing over Chagford. Vincent Lyddon was a widower of sixty-five—a grey, thin, tall man, slow of speech and sleepy of eye. A weak mouth, and a high, round forehead, far smoother than his age had promised, were distinguishing physical features of him. His wife had been dead eighteen years, and of his two children one only survived. The elder, a boy toddling in early childhood at the water’s edge, was unmissed until too late, and found drowned next day after a terrible night of agony for both parents. Indeed, Mrs. Lyddon never recovered from the shock, and Phoebe was but a year old when her mother died. Further, it need only be mentioned that the miller had heard of Will’s courting more than once, but absolutely refused to allow the matter serious consideration. The romance was no more than philandering of children in his eyes.

“Will—eh? Well, my son, and how can I serve you?” asked the master of Monks Barton, kindly enough. He recrossed his legs, settled in his leather chair, and continued the smoking of a long clay pipe.

“Just this, Mr. Lyddon,” began Will abruptly. “You calls me your ‘son’ as a manner o’ speech, but I wants to be no less in fact.”

“You ban’t here on that fool’s errand, bwoy, surely? I thought I’d made my mind clear enough to Phoebe six months ago.”

“Look you here now. I be earnin’ eighteen shillings a week an’ a bit awver; an’ I be sure of Morgan’s berth as head-keeper presently; an’ I’m a man as thinks.”

“That’s brave talk, but what have ’e saved, lad?” inquired Mr. Blee.

The lover looked round at him sharply.

“I thought you was out the room,” he said. “I be come to talk to Miller, not you.”

“Nay, nay, Billy can stay and see I’m not tu hard ’pon ’e,” declared Mr. Lyddon. “He axed a proper question. What’s put by to goody in the savings’ bank, Will?”

“Well—five pounds; and ’t will be rose to ten by Christmas, I assure ’e.”

“Fi’ puns! an’ how far ’s that gwaine?”

“So far as us can make it, in coourse.”

“Doan’t you see, sonny, this ban’t a fair bargain? I’m not a hard man—”

Page 14

“By gor! not hard enough by a powerful deal,” said Billy.

“Not hard on youth; but this match, so to call it, looks like mere moonshine. Theer ’s nought *to* it I can see—both childer, and neither with as much sense as might sink a floatin’ straw.”

“We love each other wi’ all our hearts and have done more ’n half a year. Ban’t that nothing?”

“I married when I was forty-two,” remarked the miller, reflectively, looking down at his fox-head slippers, the work of Phoebe’s fingers.

“An’ a purty marryin’ time tu!” declared Mr. Blee. “Look at me,” he continued, “parlous near seventy, and a bacherlor-man yet.”

“Not but Widow Comstock will have ’e if you ax her a bit oftener. Us all knows that,” said the young lover, with great stratagem.

Billy chuckled, and rubbed his wrinkles.

“Time enough, time enough,” he answered, “but you—scarce out o’ clouts—why, ‘t is playin’ at a holy thing, that’s what ’t is—same as Miss Phoebe, when she was a li’l wee cheel, played at bein’ parson in her night-gownd, and got welted for it, tu, by her gude faither.”

“We ’m both in earnest anyway—me and Phoebe.”

“So am I,” replied the miller, sitting up and putting down his pipe; “so am I in earnest, and wan word ’s gude as a hunderd in a pass like this. You must hear the truth, an’ that never broke no bones. You ’m no more fitted to have a wife than that tobacco-jar—a hot-headed, wild-fire of a bwoy—”

“A right Jack-o’-Lantern, as everybody knaws,” suggested Mr. Blee.

“Ess fay, ’tis truth. Shifting and oncertain as the marsh gallopers on the moor bogs of a summer night. Awnly a youth’s faults, you mind; but still faults. No, no, my lad, you’ve got to fight your life’s battle and win it, ‘fore you’m a mate for any gal; an’ you’ve got to begin by fightin’ yourself, an’ breaking an’ taming yourself, an’ getting yourself well in hand. That’s a matter of more than months for the best of us.”

“And then?” said Will, “after ‘tis done? though I’m not allowin’ I’m anything but a ripe man as I stand here afore you now.”

“Then I’d say, ’I’m glad to see you grawed into a credit to us all, Will Blanchard, and worth your place in the order o’ things; but you doan’t marry Phoebe Lyddon—never, never, never, not while I’m above ground.’”

His slow eyes looked calmly and kindly at Will, and he smiled into the hot, young, furious face.

“That’s your last word then?”

“It is, my lad.”

“And you won’t give a reason?”

“The reason is, ‘what’s bred in the bone comes out in the flesh.’ I knawed your faither. You’m as volatile as him wi’out his better paarts.”

“Leave him wheer he lies—underground. If he’d lived ‘stead of bein’ cut off from life, you’d ‘a’ bin proud to knaw him.”

“A gypsy-man and no better, Will,” said Mr. Blee. “Not but what he made a gude end, I allow.”

Page 15

“Then I’ll be up and away. I’ve spoke ‘e fair, Miller—fair an’ straight—an’ so you to me. You won’t allow this match. Then we’ll wed wi’out your blessin’, an’ sorry I shall be.”

“If that’s your tune, my young rascal, I’ll speak again! Phoebe’s under age, remember that, and so sure as you dare take her a yard from her awn door you’ll suffer for it. ’Tis a clink job, you mind—a prison business; and what’s more, you ’m pleased to speak so plain that I will tu, and tell ’e this. If you dare to lift up your eyes to my child again, or stop her in the way, or have speech with her, I’ll set p’liceman ’pon ’e! For a year and more she ’m not her awn mistress; and, at the end of that time, if she doan’t get better sense than to tinker arter a harum-scarum young jackanapes like you, she ban’t a true Lyddon. Now be off with ‘e an’ doan’t dare to look same way Phoebe ‘s walkin’, no more, else theer’ll be trouble for ’e.”

“Wonnerful language, an’ in a nutshell,” commented Billy, as, blowing rather hard, the miller made an end of his warning.

“Us’ll leave it theer, then, Mr. Lyddon; and you’ll live to be sorry ever you said them words to me. Ess fay, you’ll live to sing different; for when two ’s set ‘pon a matter o’ marryin’, ban’t fathers nor mothers, nor yet angels, be gwaine to part ’em. Phoebe an’ me will be man an’ wife some day, sure ’s the sun ’s brighter ’n the mune. So now you knaw. Gude night to ’e.”

He took up his hat and departed; Billy held up his hands in mute amazement; but the miller showed no emotion and relighted his pipe.

“The rising generation do take my breath away twenty times a day,” said Mr. Blee. “To think o’ that bwoy, in li’l frocks awnly yesterday, standin’ theer frontin’ two aged men wi’ such bouldacious language!”

“What would you do, Billy, if the gal was yourn?”

“Same as you, to a hair. Bid her drop the chap for gude ’n all. But theer ’s devil’s pepper in that Blanchard. He ain’t done with yet.”

“Well, well, he won’t shorten my sleep, I promise you. Near two years is a long time to the young. Lord knaws wheer a light thing like him will be blawed to, come two years. Time ’s on my side for certain. And Phoebe ’s like to change also.”

“Why, a woman’s mind ’s no more ’n a feather in a gale of wind at her time o’ life; though to tell her so ’s the sure way to make her steadfast.”

A moment later Phoebe herself entered. She had heard Will depart and now, in a fever of impatience, crept with bright, questioning eyes to her father’s chair. Whereupon Mr. Blee withdrew in a violent hurry. No one audibly desired him to do so, but a side-look from the girl was enough.

CHAPTER III

EXIT WILL

Page 16

Phoebe's conversation with her father occupied a space of time extending over just two minutes. He met her eager eyes with a smile, patted her head, pinched her ear, and by his manner awakened a delicious flutter of hope in the girl before he spoke. When, therefore, Phoebe learned that Will was sent about his business for ever, and must henceforth be wholly dismissed from her mind, the shock and disappointment of such intelligence came as a cruel blow. She stood silent and thunderstruck before Miller Lyddon, a world of reproaches in her frightened eyes; then mutely the corners of her little mouth sank as she turned away and departed with her first great sorrow.

Phoebe's earliest frantic thought had been to fly to Will, but she knew such a thing was impossible. There would surely be a letter from him on the following morning hidden within their secret pillar-box between two bricks of the mill wall. For that she must wait, and even in her misery she was glad that with Will, not herself, lay decision as to future action. She had expected some delay; she had believed that her father would impose stern restrictions of time and make a variety of conditions with her sweetheart; she had even hoped that Miller Lyddon might command lengthened patience for the sake of her headstrong, erratic Will's temper and character; but that he was to be banished in this crushing and summary fashion overwhelmed Phoebe, and that utterly. Her nature, however, was not one nourished from any very deep wells of character. She belonged to a class who suffer bitterly enough under sorrow, but the storm of it while tearing like a tropical tornado over heart and soul, leaves no traces that lapse of time cannot wholly and speedily obliterate. On them it may be said that fortune's sharpest strokes inflict no lasting scars; their dispositions are happily powerless to harbour the sustained agony that burrows and gnaws, poisons man's estimate of all human affairs, wrecks the stores of his experience, and stamps the cicatrix of a live, burning grief on brow and brain for ever. They find their own misery sufficiently exalted; but their temperament is unable to sustain a lifelong tribulation or elevate sorrow into tragedy. And their state is the more blessed. So Phoebe watered her couch with tears, prayed to God to hear her solemn promises of eternal fidelity, then slept and passed into a brief dreamland beyond sorrow's reach.

Meantime young Blanchard took his stormy heart into a night of stars. The moon had risen; the sky was clear; the silvery silence remained unbroken save for the sound of the river, where it flowed under the shadows of great trees and beneath aerial bridges and banners of the meadow mists. Will strode through this scene, past his mother's cottage, and up a hill behind it, into the village. His mind presented in turn a dozen courses of action, and each was built upon the abiding foundation of Phoebe's sure faithfulness. That she would cling to him for

Page 17

ever the young man knew right well; no thought of a rival, therefore, entered into his calculations. The sole problem was how quickest to make Mr. Lyddon change his mind; how best to order his future that the miller should regard him as a responsible person, and one of weight in affairs. Not that Will held himself a slight man by any means; but he felt that he must straightway assert his individuality and convince the world in general and Miller Lyddon in particular of faulty judgment. He was very angry still as he retraced the recent conversation. Then, among those various fancies and projects in his mind, the wildest and most foolish stood out before him as both expedient and to be desired. His purpose in Chagford was to get advice from another man; but before he reached the village his own mind was established.

Slated and thatched roofs glimmered under moonlight, and already the hamlet slept. A few cats crept like shadows through the deserted streets, from darkness into light, from light back to darkness; and one cottage window, before which Will Blanchard stood, still showed a candle behind a white blind. Most quaint and ancient was this habitation—of picturesque build, with tiny granite porch, small entrance, and venerable thatches that hung low above the upper windows. A few tall balsams quite served to fill the garden; indeed so small was it that from the roadway young Blanchard, by bending over the wooden fence, could easily reach the cottage window. This he did, tapped lightly, and then waited for the door to be opened.

A man presently appeared and showed some surprise at the sight of his late visitor.

“Let me in, Clem,” said Will. “I knawed you’d be up, sitting readin’ and dreamin’. ‘T is no dreamin’ time for me though, by God! I be corned straight from seeing Miller ’bout Phoebe.”

“Then I can very well guess what was last in your ears.”

Clement Hicks spoke in an educated voice. He was smaller than Will but evidently older. Somewhat narrow of build and thin, he looked delicate, though in reality wiry and sound. He was dark of complexion, wore his hair long for a cottager, and kept both moustache and beard, though the latter was very scant and showed the outline of his small chin through it. A forehead remarkably lofty but not broad, mounted almost perpendicularly above the man’s eyes; and these were large and dark and full of fire, though marred by a discontented expression. His mouth was full-lipped, his other features huddled rather meanly together under the high brow: but his face, while admittedly plain even to ugliness, was not commonplace; for its eyes were remarkable, and the cast of thought ennobled it as a whole.

Will entered the cottage kitchen and began instantly to unfold his experiences.

“You knaw me—a man with a level head, as leaps after looking, not afore. I put nothing but plain reason to him and he flouted me like you might a cheel. An’ I be gwaine to make him eat his words—such hard words as they was tu! Think of it! Me an’ Phoebe never to meet no more! The folly of sayin’ such a thing! Wouldn’t ’e reckon that grey hairs knawed better than to fancy words can keep lovers apart?”

Page 18

“Grey hairs cover old brains; and old brains forget what it feels like to have a body full o’ young blood. The best memory can’t keep the feeling of youth fresh in a man.”

“Well, I ban’t the hot-headed twoad Miller Lyddon thinks, or pretends he thinks, anyway. I’ll shaw un! I can wait, an’ Phoebe can wait, an’ now she’ll have to. I’m gwaine away.”

“Going away. Why?”

“To shaw what ’s in me. I ban’t sorry for this for some things. Now no man shall say that I’m a home-stayin’ gaby, tramping up an’ down Teign Vale for a living. I’ll step out into the wide world, same as them Grimbals done. They ’m back again made of money, the pair of ’em.”

“It took them fifteen years and more, and they were marvellously lucky.”

“What then? I’m as like to fare well as they. I’ve worked out a far-reaching plan, but the first step I’ve thought on ’s terrible coorious, an’ I reckon nobody but you’d see how it led to better things. But you ’m book-larned and wise in your way, though I wish your wisdom had done more for yourself than it has. Anyway, you ’m tokened to Chris and will be one of the family some day perhaps when Mother Coomstock dies, so I’ll leave my secret with you. But not a soul else—not mother even. So you must swear you’ll never tell to man or woman or cheel what I’ve done and wheer I be gone.”

“I’ll swear if you like.”

“By the livin’ God.”

“By any God you believe is alive.”

“Say it, then.”

“By the living God, I, Clement Hicks, bee-master of Chagford, Devon, swear to keep the secret of my friend and neighbour, William Blanchard, whatever it is.”

“And may He tear the life out of you if you so much as think to tell.”

Hicks laughed and shook his hair from his forehead.

“You’re suspicious of the best friend you’ve got in the world.”

“Not a spark. But I want you to see what an awful solemn thing I reckon it.”

“Then may God rot me, and plague me, and let me roast in hell-fire with the rogues for ever and a day, if I so much as whisper your news to man or mouse! There, will that do?”

“No call to drag in hell fire, ’cause I knaw you doan’t set no count on it. More doan’t I. Hell’s cold ashes now if all what you ve said is true. But you’ve sworn all right and now I’ll tell ’e.”

He bent forward and whispered in the other’s ear, whereon Hicks started in evident amazement and showed himself much concerned.

“Good Heavens! Man alive, are you mad?”

“You doan’t ’zactly look on ahead enough, Clem,” said Will loftily. “Ban’t the thing itself’s gwaine to make a fortune, but what comes of it. ‘Tis a tidy stepping-stone lead-in’ to gert matters very often, as your books tell, I dare say.”

“It can’t lead to anything whatever in your case but wasted years.”

“I’m best judge of that. I’ve planned the road, and if I ban’t home again inside ten year as good a man as Grimbal or any other I’ll say I was wrong.”

Page 19

“You’re a bigger fool than even I thought, Blanchard.”

Will’s eye flashed.

“You ’m a tidy judge of a fule, I grant,” he said angrily, “or should be. But you ’m awnly wan more against me. You’ll see you ’m wrong like the rest. Anyway, you’ve got to mind what you’ve sweared. An’ when mother an’ Chris ax ’e wheer I be, I’ll thank you to say I’m out in the world doin’ braave, an’ no more.”

“As you like. It ’s idle, I know, trying to make you change your mind.”

A thin voice from an upper chamber of the cottage here interrupted their colloquy, and the mother of the bee-keeper reminded him that he was due early on the following day at Okehampton with honey, and that he ought long since to be asleep.

“If that’s Will Blanchard,” she concluded, “tell un to be off home to bed. What ‘s the wisdom o’ turning night hours into day like this here?”

“All right, mother,” shouted Will. “Gude-night to ’e. I be off this moment.”

Then bidding his friend farewell, he departed.

“Doan’t think twice o’ what I said a minute since. I was hot ’cause you couldn’t see no wisdom in my plan. But that’s the way of folks. They belittle a chap’s best thoughts and acts till the time comes for luck to turn an’ bring the fruit; then them as scoffed be the first to turn round smilin’ an’ handshaking and sayin’, ’What did us say? Didn’t us tell ‘e so from the very beginning?’”

Away went the youthful water-keeper, inspired with the prospect of his contemplated flight. He strode home at a rapid pace, to find all lights out and the household in bed. Then he drank half a pint of cider, ate some bread and cheese, and set about a letter to Phoebe.

A little desk on a side-table, the common property of himself, his mother, and sister, was soon opened, and materials found. Then, in his own uncial characters, that always tended hopefully upward, and thus left a triangle of untouched paper at the bottom of every sheet, Will wrote a letter of two folios, or eight complete pages. In this he repeated the points of his conversation with Phoebe’s father, told her to be patient, and announced that, satisfied of her unfailing love and steadfastness through all, he was about to pass into the wider world, and carve his way to prosperity and fortune. He hid particulars from her, but mentioned that Clement Hicks would forward any communications. Finally he bid her keep a stout heart and live contented in the certainty of ultimate happiness. He also advised Phoebe to forgive her father. “I have already done it, honor bright,” he wrote; “’t is a wise man’s part to bear no malice, especially against an old grey body whose judgment ’pears to be gone bad for some

reason." He also assured Phoebe that he was hers until death should separate them; in a postscript he desired her to break his departure softly to his mother if opportunity to do so occurred; and, finally, he was not ashamed

Page 20

to fill the empty triangles on each page with kisses, represented by triangles closely packed. Bearing this important communication, Will walked out again into the night, and soon his letter awaited Phoebe in the usual receptacle. He felt therein himself, half suspecting a note might await him, but there was nothing. He hesitated for a moment, then climbed the gate into Monks Barton farmyard, went softly and stood in the dark shadow of the mill-house. The moon shone full upon the face of the dwelling, and its three fruit-trees looked as though painted in profound black against the pale whitewash; while Phoebe's dormer-window framed the splendour of the reflected sky, and shone very brightly. The blind was down, and the maiden behind it had been asleep an hour or two; but Will pictured her as sobbing her heart out still. Perhaps he would never see her again. The path he had chosen to follow might take him over seas and through vast perils; indeed, it must do so if the success he desired was to be won. He felt something almost like a catch in his throat as he turned away and crossed the sleeping river. He glanced down through dreaming glades and saw one motionless silver spot on the dark waters beneath the alders. Sentiment was at its flood just then, and he spoke a few words under his breath. "'Tis thicky auld Muscovy duck, roostin' on his li'l island; poor lone devil wi' never a mate to fight for nor friend to swim along with. Worse case than mine, come to think on it!" Then an emotion, rare enough with him, vanished, and he sniffed the night air and felt his heart beat high at thoughts of what lay ahead.

Will returned home, made fast the outer door, took off his boots, and went softly up a creaking stair. Loud and steady music came from the room where John Grimbal lay, and Blanchard smiled when he heard it. "'Tis the snore of a happy man with money in his purse," he thought. Then he stood by his mother's door, which she always kept ajar at night, and peeped in upon her. Damaris Blanchard slumbered with one arm on the coverlet, the other behind her head. She was a handsome woman still, and looked younger than her eight-and-forty years in the soft ambient light. "Muneshine do make dear mother so purty as a queen," said Will to himself. And he would never wish her "good-by," perhaps never see her again. He hastened with light, impulsive step into the room, thinking just to kiss the hand on the bed, but his mother stirred instantly and cried, "Who's theer?" with sleepy voice. Then she sat up and listened—a fair, grey-eyed woman in an old-fashioned night-cap. Her son had vanished before her eyes were opened, and now she turned and yawned and slept again.

Will entered his own chamber near at hand, doffed for ever the velveteen uniform of water-keeper, and brought from a drawer an old suit of corduroy. Next he counted his slight store of money, set his 'alarum' for four o'clock, and, fifteen minutes later, was in bed and asleep, the time then being a little after midnight.

Page 21

CHAPTER IV

BY THE RIVER

Clement Hicks paid an early visit to Will's home upon the following morning. He had already set out to Okehampton with ten pounds of honey in the comb, and at Mrs. Blanchard's cottage he stopped the little public vehicle which ran on market-days to the distant town. That the son of the house was up and away at dawn told his family nothing, for his movements were at all times erratic, and part of his duty consisted in appearing on the river at uncertain times and in unexpected localities. Clement Hicks often called for a moment upon his way to market, and Chris, who now greeted her lover, felt puzzled at the unusual gravity of his face. She turned pale when she heard his tremendous news; but the mother was of more Spartan temperament and received intelligence of Will's achievement without changing colour or ceasing from her occupation.

Between Damaris Blanchard and her boy had always existed a perfect harmony of understanding, rare even in their beautiful relationship. The thoughts of son and mother chimed; not seldom they anticipated each other's words. The woman saw much of her dead husband reflected in Will and felt a moral conviction that through the storms of youth, high temper, and inexperience, he would surely pass to good things, by reason of the strenuous honesty and singleness of purpose that actuated him; he, on his side, admired the great calmness and self-possession of his mother. She was so steadfast, so strong, and wiser than any woman he had ever seen. With a fierce, volcanic affection Will Blanchard loved her. She and Phoebe alike shared his whole heart.

"It is a manly way of life he has chosen, and that is all I may say. He is ambitious and strong, and I should be the last to think he has not done well to go into the world for a while," said Clement.

"When is he coming back again?" asked Chris.

"He spoke of ten years or so."

"Then 'twill be more or less," declared Mrs. Blanchard, calmly. "Maybe a month, maybe five years, or fifteen, not ten, if he said ten. He'll shaw the gude gold he's made of, whether or no. I'm happy in this and not surprised. 'Twas very like to come arter last night, if things went crooked."

"'Tis much as faither might have done," said Chris.

"'Tis much what he did do. Thank you for calling, Clem Hicks. Now best be away, else they'll drive off to Okehampton without 'e."

Clement departed, Chris wept as the full extent of her loss was impressed upon her, and Mrs. Blanchard went up to her son's room. There she discovered the velveteen suit with a card upon them: "Hand over to Mr. Morgan, Head Water-keeper, Sandypark." She looked through his things, and found that he had taken nothing but his money, one suit of working clothes, and a red tie—her present to him on his birthday during the previous month. All his other

Page 22

possessions remained in their usual places. With none to see, the woman's eye moistened; then she sat down on Will's bed and her heart grew weak for one brief moment as she pictured him fighting the battle. It hurt her a little that he had told Clement Hicks his intention and hid it from his mother. Yet as a son, at least, he had never failed. However, all affairs of life were a matter of waiting, more or less, she told herself; and patience was easier to Damaris Blanchard than to most people. Under her highest uneasiness, maternal pride throbbed at thought of the manly independence indicated by her son's action. She returned to the duties of the day, but found herself restless, while continually admonishing Chris not to be so. Her thoughts drifted to Monks Barton and Will's meeting with his sweetheart's father. Presently, when her daughter went up to the village, Mrs. Blanchard put off her apron, donned the cotton sunbonnet that she always wore from choice, and walked over to see Mr. Lyddon. They were old friends, and presently Damaris listened sedately to the miller without taking offence at his directness of speech. He told the story of his decision and Will's final reply, while she nodded and even smiled once or twice in the course of the narrative.

"You was both right, I reckon," she said placidly, looking into Mr. Lyddon's face. "You was wise to mistrust, not knawin' what's at the root of him; and he, being as he is, was in the right to tell 'e the race goes to the young. Wheer two hearts is bent on joining, 'tis join they will—if both keeps of a mind long enough."

"That's it, Damaris Blanchard; who's gwaine to b'lieve that a bwoy an' gal, like Will an' Phoebe, do knaw theer minds? Mark me, they'll both chaange sweethearts a score of times yet 'fore they come to mate."

"Caan't speak for your darter, Lyddon; but I knaw my son. A masterful bwoy, like his faither before him, wild sometimes an' wayward tu, but not with women-folk. His faither loved in wan plaace awnly. He'll be true to your cheel whatever betides, or I'm a fule."

"What's the use of that if he ban't true to himself? No, no, I caan't see a happy ending to the tale however you look at it. Wish I could. I fear't was a ugly star twinkled awver his birthplace, ma'am."

"'Twas all the stars of heaven, Miller," said the mother, frankly, "for he was born in my husband's caravan in the auld days. We was camped up on the Moor, drawn into one of them roundy-poundies o' grey granite stones set up by Phoenicians at the beginning of the world. Ess fay, a braave shiny night, wi' the li'l windows thrawed open to give me air. An' 'pon Will's come-of-age birthday, last month, if us didn't all drive up theer an' light a fire an' drink a dish of tea in the identical spot! 'Tis out Newtake' way."

"Like a story-book."

"'Twas Clem Hicks, his thought, being a fanciful man. But I'll bid you gude-marnin' now. Awnly mind this, as between friends and without a spark of malice: Will Blanchard means to marry your maid, sure as you'm born, if awnly she keeps strong for him. It rests with her, Miller, not you."

Page 23

“Much what your son said in sharper words. Well, you’m out o’ reckoning for once, wise though you be most times; for if a maiden’s happiness doan’t rest with her faither, blamed if I see wheer it should. And to think such a man as me doan’t knaw wiser ’n two childern who caan’t number forty year between ’em is flat fulishness, surely?”

“I knaw Will,” said Mrs. Blanchard, slowly and emphatically; “I knaw un to the core, and that’s to say more than you or anybody else can. A mother may read her son like print, but no faither can see to the bottom of a wife-old daughter—not if he was Solomon’s self. So us’ll wait an’ watch wi’out being worse friends.”

She went home again the happier for her conversation; but any thought that Mr. Lyddon might have been disposed to devote to her prophecy was for the time banished by the advent of John Grimbal and his brother.

Like boys home from school, they dwelt in the present delight of their return, and postponed the varied duties awaiting them, to revel again in the old sights, sounds, and scents. To-day they were about an angling excursion, and the fishers’ road to Fingle lying through Monks Barton, both brothers stopped a while and waited upon their old friend of the mill, according to John’s promise of the previous afternoon. Martin carried the creel and the ample luncheon it contained; John smoked a strong cigar and was only encumbered with his light fly-rod; the younger designed to accompany his brother through Fingle Valley; then leave him there, about his sport, and proceed alone to various places of natural and antiquarian interest. But John meant fishing and nothing else. To him great woods were no more than cover for fur and feathers; rivers and streams meant a vehicle for the display of a fly to trout, and only attracted him or the reverse, according to the fish they harboured. When the moorland waters spouted and churned, cherry red from their springs in the peat, he deemed them a noble spectacle; when, as at present, Teign herself had shrunk to a mere silver thread, and the fingerling trout splashed and wriggled half out of water in the shallows, he freely criticised its scanty volume and meagre depths.

Miller Lyddon welcomed the men very heartily. He had been amongst those who dismissed them with hope to their battle against the world, and now he reminded them of his sanguine predictions. Will Blanchard’s disappearance amused John Grimbal and he laughed when Billy Blee appeared red-hot with the news. Mr. Lyddon made no secret of his personal opinion of Blanchard, and all debated the probable design of the wanderer.

“Maybe he’s ‘listed,” said John, “an’ a good thing too if he has. It makes a man of a young fellow. I’m for conscription myself—always have been.”

“I be minded to think he’ve joined the riders,” declared Billy. “Theer comed a circus here last month, with braave doin’s in the way of horsemanship and Merry Andrews, and such like devilries. Us all goes to see it from miles round every year; an’ Will was theer.

Circus folk do see the world in a way denied to most, and theer manner of life takes ’em even as far as Russia and the Indies I’ve heard.”

Page 24

“Then there’s the gypsy blood in him—” declared Mr. Lyddon, “that might send him roaming oversea, if nothing else did.”

“Or my great doings are like to have fired him,” said John. “How’s Phoebe?” he continued, dismissing Will. “I saw her yesterday—a bowerly maiden she’s grown—a prize for a better man that this wild youngster, now bolted God knaws where.”

“So I think,” agreed the miller, “an’ I hope she’ll soon forget the searching grey eyes of un and his high-handed way o’ speech. Gals like such things. Dear, dear! though he made me so darned angry last night, I could have laughed in his faace more ’n wance.”

“Missy’s under the weather this marnin’,” declared Billy. “Who tawld her I ban’t able to say, but she knawed he’d gone just arter feedin’ the fowls, and she went down valley alone, so slow, wi’ her purty head that bent it looked as if her sunbonnet might be hiding an auld gran’mother’s poll.”

“She’ll come round,” said Martin; “she’s only a young girl yet.”

“And there ’s fish as good in the sea as ever came out, and better,” declared his brother. “She must wait for a man who is a man,—somebody of good sense and good standing, with property to his name.”

Miller Lyddon noted with surprise and satisfaction John Grimbal’s warmth of manner upon this question; he observed also the stout, hearty body of him, and the handsome face that crowned it. Then the brothers proceeded down-stream, and the master of Monks Barton looked after them and caught himself hoping that they might meet Phoebe.

At a point where the river runs between a giant shoulder of heather-clad hill on one side and the ragged expanses of Whiddon Park upon the other, John clambered down to the streamside and began to fish, while Martin dawdled at hand and watched the sport. A pearly clearness, caught from the clouds, characterised earth as well as air, and proved that every world-picture depends for atmosphere and colour upon the sky-picture extended above it. Again there was movement and some music, for the magic of the wind in a landscape’s nearer planes is responsible for both. The wooded valley lay under a grey and breezy forenoon; swaying alders marked each intermittent gust with a silver ripple of upturned foliage, and still reaches of the river similarly answered the wind with hurrying flickers and furrows of dimpled light. Through its transparent flood, where the waters ran in shadow and escaped reflections, the river revealed a bed of ruddy brown and rich amber. This harmonious colouring proceeded from the pebbly bottom, where a medley of warm agate tones spread and shimmered, like some far-reaching mosaic beneath the crystal. Above Teign’s shrunken current extended oak and ash, while her banks bore splendid concourse of the wild water-loving dwellers in that happy

valley. Meadowsweet nodded creamy crests; hemlock and fool's parsley and seeding willow-herb crowded together beneath far-scattered filigree of

Page 25

honeysuckles and brambles with berries, some ripe, some red; while the scarlet corals of briar and white bryony gemmed every riotous trailing thicket, dene, and dingle along the river's brink; and in the grassy spaces between rose little chrysoprase steeples of wood sage all set in shining fern. Upon the boulders in midstream subaqueous mosses, now revealed and starved by the drought, died hard, and the seeds of grasses, figworts, and persicarias thrust up flower and foliage, flourishing in unwonted spots from which the next freshet would rudely tear them. Insect life did not abundantly manifest itself, for the day was sunless; but now and again, with crisp rattle of his gauze wings, a dragon-fly flashed along the river. Through these scenes the Teign rolled drowsily and with feeble pulses. Upon one bank rose the confines of Whiddon; on the other, abrupt and interspersed with gulleys of shattered shale, ascended huge slopes whereon a whole summer of sunshine had scorched the heather to dry death. But fading purple still gleamed here and there in points and splashes, and the lesser furze, mingling therewith, scattered gold upon the tremendous acclivities even to the crown of fir-trees that towered remote and very blue upon the uplifted sky-line. Swallows, with white breasts flashing, circled over the river, and while their elevation above the water appeared at times tremendous, the abrupt steepness of the gorge was such that the birds almost brushed the hillside with their wings. A sledge, laden with the timber of barked sapling oaks, creaked and jingled over the rough road beside the stream; a man called to his horses and a dog barked beside him; then they disappeared and the spacious scene was again empty, save for its manifold wild life and music.

John Grimbal fished, failed, and cursed the poor water and the lush wealth of the riverside that caught his fly at every critical moment. A few small trout he captured and returned; then, flinging down rod and net, he called to his brother for the luncheon-basket. Together they sat in the fern beside the river and ate heartily of the fare that Mrs. Blanchard had provided; then, as John was about to light a pipe, his brother, with a smile, produced a little wicker globe and handed it to him. This unexpected sight awoke sudden and keen appetite on the elder's face. He smacked his lips, swore a hearty oath of rejoicing, and held out an eager hand for the thing.

"My God! to think I'll suck the smoke of that again,—the best baccy in the wide world!"

The little receptacle contained a rough sort of sun-dried Kaffir tobacco, such as John and Martin had both smoked for the past fifteen years.

"I thought it would be a treat. I brought home a few pounds," said the younger, smiling again at his brother's hungry delight. John cut into the case, loaded his pipe, and lighted it with a contented sign. Then he handed the rest back to its owner.

“No, no,” said Martin. “I’ll just have one fill, that’s all. I brought this for you. ’T will atone for the poor sport. The creel I shall leave with you now, for I’m away to Fingle Bridge and Prestonbury. We’ll meet at nightfall.”

Page 26

Thereupon he set off down the valley, his mind full of early British encampments, while John sat and smoked and pondered upon his future. He built no castles in the air, but a solid country house of red brick, destined to stand in its own grounds near Chagford, and to have a snug game-cover or two about it, with a few good acres of arable land bordering on forest. Roots meant cover for partridges in John Grimbal's mind; beech and oak in autumn represented desirable food for pheasants; and corn, once garnered and out of the way, left stubble for all manner of game.

Meantime, whilst he reviewed his future with his eyes on a blue cloud of tobacco smoke, Martin passed Phoebe Lyddon farther down the valley. Him she recognised as a stranger; but he, with his eyes engaged in no more than unconscious guarding of his footsteps, his mind buried in the fascinating problems of early British castramentation, did not look at her or mark a sorrowful young face still stained with tears.

Into the gorge Phoebe had wandered after reading her sweetheart's letter. There, to the secret ear of the great Mother, instinct had drawn her and her grief; and now the earliest shock was over; a dull, numb pain of mind followed the first sorrow; unwonted exercise had made her weary; and physical hunger, not to be stayed by mental suffering, forced her to turn homewards. Red-eyed and unhappy she passed beside the river, a very picture of a woful lover.

The sound of Phoebe's steps fell on John Grimbal's ear as he lay upon his back with crossed knees and his hands behind his head. He partly rose therefore, thrust his face above the fern, saw the wayfarer, and then sprang to his feet. The cause of her tearful expression and listless demeanour was known to him, but he ignored them and greeted her cheerily.

"Can't catch anything big enough to keep, and sha'n't until the rain comes," he said; "so I'll walk along with you, if you're going home."

He offered his hand; then, after Phoebe had shaken it, moved beside her and put up his rod as he went.

"Saw your father this morning, and mighty glad I was to find him so blooming. To my eye he looks younger than my memory picture of him. But that's because I've grown from boy to man, as you have from child to woman."

"So I have, and 't is a pity my faither doan't knaw it," answered Phoebe, smarting under her wrongs, and willing to chronicle them in a friendly ear. "If I ban't full woman, who is? Yet I'm treated like a baaby, as if I'd got no 'pinions an' feelings, and wasn't—wasn't auld enough to knaw what love meant."

Grimbal's eyes glowed at the picture of the girl's indignation, and he longed to put his arms round her and comfort her.

“You must be wise and dutiful, Phoebe,” he said. “Will Blauchard’s a plucky fellow to go off and face the world. And perhaps he’ll be one of the lucky ones, like I was.”

“He will be, for certain, and so you’d say if you knawed him same as I do. But the cruel waitin’—years and years and years—’t is enough to break a body’s heart.”

Page 27

Her voice fluttered like bells in a wild wind; she trembled on the brink of tears; and he saw by little convulsive movements and the lump in her round throat that she could not yet regard her lot with patience. She brought out her pocket-handkerchief again, and the man noticed it was all wet and rolled into a ball.

“Life’s a blank thing at lovers’ parting,” he said; “but time rubs the rough edges off matters that fret our minds the worst. Days and nights, and plenty of ’em, are the best cure for all ills.”

“An’ the best cure for life tu! The awnly cure. Think of years an’ years without him. Yesterday us met up in Pixies’ Parlour yonder, an’ I was peart an’ proud as need be; to-day he’s gone, and I feel auld and wisht and all full of weary wonder how I’m gwaine to fare and if I’llever see him again. ’T is cruel—bitter cruel for me.”

That she could thus pity herself so soon argued a mind incapable of harbouring great sorrow for many years; and the man at her side, without appreciating this fact, yet, by a sort of intuition, suspected that Phoebe’s grief, perhaps even her steadfastness of purpose, would suffer diminution before very great lapse of time. Without knowing why, he hoped it might be so. Her voice fell melodiously upon an ear long tuned to the whine of native women. It came from the lungs, was full and sweet, with a shy suddenness about it, like the cooing of wood doves. She half slipped at a stile, and he put out his hand and touched her waist and felt his heart throb. But Phoebe’s eyes rarely met her new friend’s. The girl looked with troubled brows ahead into the future, while she walked beside him; and he, upon her left hand, saw only the soft cheek, the pouting lips, and the dimples that came and went. Sometimes she looked up, however, and Grimbal noted how the flutter of past tears shook her round young breast, marked the spring of her step, the freedom of her gait, and the trim turn of her feet and ankles. After the flat-footed Kaffir girls, Phoebe’s instep had a right noble arch in his estimation.

“To think that I, as never wronged faither in thought or deed, should be treated so hard! I’ve been all the world to him since mother died, for he’s said as much to many; yet he’s risen up an’ done this, contrary to justice and right and Scripture, tu.”

“You must be patient, Phoebe, and respect his age, and let the matter rest till the time grows ripe. I can’t advise you better than that.”

“‘Patient!’ My life’s empty, I tell ’e—empty, hollow, tasteless wi’out my Will.”

“Well, well, we’ll see. I’m going to build a big red-brick house presently, and buy land, and make a bit of a stir in my small way. You’ve a pretty fancy in such things, I’ll bet a dollar. You shall give me a helping hand—eh? You must tell me best way of setting up house. And you might help me as to furniture and suchlike if you had time for it. Will you, for an old friend?”

Page 28

Phoebe was slightly interested. She promised to do anything in her power that might cause Mr. Grimbal satisfaction; and he, very wisely, assured her that there was no salve for sorrow like unselfish labours on behalf of other people. He left her at the farm-gate, and tramped back to the Blanchard cottage with his mind busy enough. Presently he changed his clothes, and set a diamond in his necktie. Then he strolled away into the village, to see the well-remembered names above the little shop windows; to note curiously how Chagford market-place had shrunk and the houses dwindled since last he saw them; to call with hearty voice and rough greeting at this habitation and that; to introduce himself again among men and women who had known him of yore, and who, for the most part, quite failed to recognise in their bluff and burly visitor the lad who set forth from his father's cottage by the church so many years before.

CHAPTER V

THE INCIDENT OF MR. JOEL FORD

Of Blanchard family history a little more must be said. Timothy Blanchard, the husband of Damaris and father of Will and Chris, was in truth of the nomads, though not a right gypsy. As a lad, and at a time when the Romany folk enjoyed somewhat more importance and prosperity than of late years, he joined them, and by sheer force of character and mother wit succeeded in rising to power amongst the wanderers. The community with which he was connected for the most part confined its peregrinations to the West; and time saw Timothy Blanchard achieve success in his native country, acquire two caravans, develop trade on a regular "circuit," and steadily save money in a small way; while his camp of some five-and-twenty souls—men, women, and numerous children—shared in their leader's prosperity. These earlier stages of the man's career embraced some strange circumstances, chief amongst them being his marriage. Damaris Ford was the daughter of a Moor farmer. Her girlhood had been spent in the dreary little homestead of "Newtake," above Chagford, within the fringe of the great primeval wastes; and here, on his repeated journeys across the Moor, Tim Blanchard came to know her and love her well.

Farmer Ford swore round oaths, and sent Blanchard and his caravans packing when the man approached him for his daughter's hand; but the girl herself was already won, and week after her lover's repulse Damaris vanished. She journeyed with her future husband to Exeter, wedded him, and became mistress of his house on wheels; then, for the space of four years, she lived the gypsy life, brought a son and daughter into the world, and tried without avail to obtain her father's forgiveness. That, however, she never had, though her mother communicated with her in fear and trembling; and when, by strange chance, on Will's advent, Damaris Blanchard was brought to bed near her old home, and became a mother in one of the venerable hut circles which plentifully scatter that lonely region, Mrs. Ford, apprised of the fact in secret, actually stole to her daughter's side by night and wept over her grandchild. Now the farmer and his wife

were dead; Newtake at present stood without a tenant; and Mrs. Blanchard possessed no near relations save her children and one elder brother, Joel, to whom had passed their parent's small savings.

Page 29

Timothy Blanchard continued a wandering existence for the space of five years after his marriage; then he sold his caravans, settled in Chagford, bought the cottage by the river, rented some market-garden land, and pursued his busy and industrious way. Thus he prospered through ten more years, saving money, developing a variety of schemes, letting out on hire a steam thresher, and in various other ways adding to his store. The man was on the high road to genuine prosperity when death overtook him and put a period to his ambitions. He was snatched from mundane affairs leaving numerous schemes half developed and most of his money embarked in various enterprises. Unhappily Will was too young to continue his father's work, and though Mrs. Blanchard's brother, Joel Ford, administered the little estate to the best of his power, much had to be sacrificed. In the sequel Damaris found herself with a cottage, a garden, and an annual income of about fifty pounds a year. Her son was then twelve years of age, her daughter eighteen months younger. So she lived quietly and not without happiness, after the first sorrow of her husband's loss was in a measure softened by time.

Of Mr. Joel Ford it now becomes necessary to speak. Combining the duties of attorney, house-agent, registrar of deaths, births, and marriages, and receiver of taxes and debts, the man lived a dingy life at Newton Abbot. Acid, cynical, and bald he was, very dry of mind and body, and but ten years older than Mrs. Blanchard, though he looked nearer seventy than sixty. To the Newton mind Mr. Ford was associated only with Quarter Day—that black, recurrent cloud on the horizon of every poor man's life. He dwelt with an elderly housekeeper—a widow of genial disposition; and indeed the attorney himself was not lacking in some urbanity of character, though few guessed it, for he kept all that was best in himself hidden under an unlovely crust. His better instincts took the shape of family affection. Damaris Blanchard and he were the last branches of one of the innumerable families of Ford to be found in Devon, and he had no small regard for his only living sister. His annual holiday from business—a period of a fortnight, sometimes extended to three weeks if the weather was more than commonly fair—he spent habitually at Chagford; and Will on these occasions devoted his leisure to his uncle, drove him on the Moor, and made him welcome. Will, indeed, was a favourite with Mr. Ford, and the lad's high spirits, real ignorance of the world, and eternal grave assumption of wisdom even tickled the man of business into a sort of dry cricket laughter upon occasions. When, therefore, a fortnight after young Blanchard's mysterious disappearance, Joel Ford arrived at his sister's cottage for the annual visit, he was as much concerned as his nature had power to make him at the news.

For three weeks he stayed, missing the company of his nephew not a little; and his residence in Chagford had needed no special comment save for an important incident resulting therefrom.

Page 30

Phoebe Lyddon it was who in all innocence and ignorance set rolling a pebble that finally fell in thundering avalanches; and her chance word was uttered at her father's table on an occasion when John and Martin Grimbal were supping at Monks Barton.

The returned natives, and more especially the elder, had been much at the mill since their reappearance. John, indeed, upon one pretext or another, scarcely spent a day without calling. His rough kindness appealed to Phoebe, who at first suspected no danger from it, while Mr. Lyddon encouraged the man and made him and his brother welcome at all times.

John Grimbal, upon the morning that preceded the present supper party, had at last found a property to his taste. It might, indeed, have been designed for him. Near Whiddon it lay, in the valley of the Moreton Road, and consisted of a farm and the ruin of a Tudor mansion. The latter had been tenanted until the dawn of this century, but was since then fallen into decay. The farm lands stretched beneath the crown of Cranbrook, hard by the historic "Bloody Meadow," a spot assigned to that skirmish between Royalist and Parliamentary forces during 1642 which cost brilliant young Sidney Godolphin his life. Here, or near at hand, the young man probably fell, with a musket-bullet in his leg, and subsequently expired at Chagford[1] leaving the "misfortune of his death upon a place which could never otherwise have had a mention to the world," according to caustic Chancellor Clarendon.

[1] *At Chagford.* The place of the poet's passing is believed to have been an ancient dwelling-house adjacent to St. Michael's Church. At that date it was a private residence of the Whiddon family; but during later times it became known as the "Black Swan Inn," or tavern (a black swan being the crest of Sir John Whiddon, Judge of Queen's Bench in the first Mary's reign); while to-day this restored Mansion appears as the hostelry of the "Three Crowns."

Upon the aforesaid ruins, fashioned after the form of a great E, out of compliment to the sovereign who occupied the throne at the period of the decayed fabric's erection, John Grimbal proposed to build his habitation of red brick and tile. The pertaining farm already had a tenant, and represented four hundred acres of arable land, with possibilities of development; snug woods wound along the boundaries of the estate and mingled their branches with others not more stately though sprung from the nobler domain of Whiddon; and Chagford was distant but a mile, or five minutes' ride.

Tongues wagged that evening concerning the Red House, as the ruin was called, and a question arose as to whom John Grimbal must apply for information respecting the property.

"I noted on the board two names—one in London, one handy at Newton Abbot—a Mr. Joel Ford, of Wolborough Street."

Phoebe blushed where she sat and very nearly said, “My Will’s uncle!” but thought better of it and kept silent. Meanwhile her father answered.

Page 31

“Ford’s an attorney, Mrs. Blanchard’s brother, a maker of agreements between man and man, and a dusty, dry sort of chip, from all I’ve heard tell. His father and mine were friends forty years and more agone. Old Ford had Newtake Farm on the Moor, and wore his fingers to the bone that his son might have good schooling and a learned profession.”

“He’s in Chagford this very minute,” said Phoebe.

Then Mr. Blee spoke. On the occasion of any entertainment at Monks Barton he waited at table instead of eating with the family as usual. Now he addressed the company from his station behind Mr. Lyddon’s chair.

“Joel Ford’s biding with his sister. A wonderful deep man, to my certain knowledge, an’ wears a merchant-like coat an’ shiny hat working days an’ Sabbaths alike. A snug man, I’ll wager, if ’t is awnly by the token of broadcloth on week-days.”

“He looks for all the world like a yellow, shrivelled parchment himself. Regular gimlet eyes, too, and a very fitch for sharpness, though younger than his appearance might make you fancy,” said the miller.

“Then I’ll pay him a visit and see how things stand,” declared John. “Not that I’d employ any but my own London lawyer, of course,” he added, “but this old chap can give me the information I require; no doubt.”

“Ess fay! an’ draw you a dockyment in all the cautiousness of the law’s language,” promised Billy Blee. “’T is a fact makes me mazed every time I think of it,” he continued, “that mere fleeting ink on the skin tored off a calf can be so set out to last to the trump of doom. Theer be parchments that laugh at the Queen’s awn Privy Council and make the Court of Parliament look a mere fule afore ’em. But it doan’t do to be ‘feared o’ far-reachin’ oaths when you ’m signing such a matter, for ’t is in the essence of ’em that the parties should swear deep.”

“I’ll mind what you say, Billy,” promised Grimbal; “I’ll pump old Ford as dry as I can, then be off to London and get such a good, binding deed of purchase as you suggest.”

And it was this determination that presently led to a violent breach between the young man and his elder.

John waited upon Mr. Ford, at Mrs. Blanchard’s cottage, where he had first lodged with his brother on their return from abroad, and found the lawyer exceedingly pleasant when he learned the object of Grimbal’s visit. Together they drove over to the Red House, and its intending tenant soon heard all there was to tell respecting price and the provisions under which the estate was to be disposed of. For this information he expressed proper gratitude, but gave no hint of his future actions.

Page 32

Mr. Ford heard nothing more for a fortnight. Then he ascertained that John Grimbal was in the metropolis, that the sale of the Red House and its lands had been conducted by the London agent, and that no penny of the handsome commission involved would accrue to him. This position of affairs greatly (and to some extent reasonably) angered the local man, and he did not forgive what he considered a very flagrant slight. Extreme acerbity was bred in him, and his mind, vindictive by nature, cherished from that hour a hearty detestation of John Grimbal. The old man, his annual holiday ruined by the circumstance, went home to Newton, vowing vague vengeance and little dreaming how soon opportunity would offer to deal his enemy a return blow; while the purchaser of the Red House laughed at Ford's angry letters, told him to his face that he was a greedy old rascal, and went on his way well pleased with himself and fully occupied with his affairs.

Necessary preliminaries were hastened; an architect visited the crumbling fabric of the old Red House and set about his plans. Soon, upon the ancient foundations, a new dwelling began to rise. The ancient name was retained at Martin's entreaty and the surrounding property developed. A stir and hum crept through the domain. Here was planting of young birch and larch; here clearing of land; here mounds of manure steamed on neglected fallows. John Grimbal took up temporary quarters in the home farm that he might be upon the spot at all hours; and what with these great personal interests, good news of his property in Africa, and the growing distraction of one soft-voiced, grey-eyed girl, the man found his life a full and splendid thing.

That he should admit Phoebe into his thoughts and ambitions was not unreasonable for two reasons: he knew himself to be heartily in love with her by this time, and he had heard from her father a definite statement upon the subject of Will Blanchard. Indeed, the miller, from motives of worldly wisdom, took an opportunity to let John Grimbal know the situation.

"No shadow of any engagement at all," he said. "I made it plain as a pikestaff to them both. It mustn't be thought I countenanced their crack-brained troth-plighting. 'T was by reason of my final 'Nay' that Will went off. He 's gone out of her life, and she 'm free as the air. I tell you this because you may have heard different, and you mix with the countryside and can contradict any man who gives out otherwise. And, mind you, I say it from no ill-will to the bwoy, but out of justice to my cheel."

Thus, to gain private ends, Mr. Lyddon spoke, and his information greatly heartened the listener. John had more than once sounded Phoebe on the subject of Will during the past few months, and was bound to confess that any chance he might possess appeared small; but he was deeply in love and a man accustomed to have his own way. Increasing portions of his time and thought were devoted to this ambition, and when Phoebe's father spoke as recorded, Grimbal jumped at the announcement and pushed for his own hand.

Page 33

“If a man that was a man, with a bit of land and a bit of stuff behind him, came along and asked to court her, ’t would be different, I suppose?” he inquired.

“I’d wish just such a man might come, for her sake.”

“Supposing I asked if I might try to win Phoebe?”

“I’d desire your gude speed, my son. Nothing could please, me better.”

“Then I’ve got you on my side?”

“You really mean it? Well, well! Gert news to be sure, an’ I be pleased as Punch to hear ’e. But take my word, for I’m richer than you by many years in knawledge of the world, though I haven’t seen so much of it. Go slow. Wait a while till that brown bwoy graws a bit dim in Phoebe’s eyes. Your life ’s afore you, and the gal ’s scarce marriageable, to my thinking. Build your house and bide your time.”

“So be it; and if I don’t win her presently, I sha’n’t deserve to.”

“Ess, but taake time, lad. She ’m a dutiful, gude maiden, and I’d be sore to think my awn words won’t carry their weight when the right moment comes for speaking ’em. Blanchard’s business pulled down the corners of her purty mouth a bit; but young hearts caan’t keep mournful for ever.”

Billy Blee then took his turn on the argument. Thus far he had listened, and now, according to his custom, argued on the popular side and bent his sail to the prevalent wind of opinion.

“You say right, Miller. ’T is out of nature that a maid should fret her innards to fiddlestrings ’bout a green bwoy when theer’s ripe men waitin’ for her.”

“Never heard better sense,” declared John Grimbal, in high good-humour; and from the red-letter hour of that conversation he let his love grow into a giant. A man of old-fashioned convictions, he honestly believed the parent wise who exercised all possible control over a child; and in this case personal interest prompted him the more strongly to that opinion. Common sense the world over was on his side, and no man with the facts before him had been likely to criticise Miller Lyddon on the course of action he thought proper to pursue for his daughter’s ultimate happiness. That he reckoned without his host naturally escaped the father’s thought at this juncture. Will Blanchard had dwindled in his mind to the mere memory of a headstrong youngster, now far removed from the scene of his stupidity and without further power to trouble. That he could advise John to wait a while until Will’s shadow grew less in Phoebe’s thought, argued kindness and delicacy of mind in Mr. Lyddon. Will he only saw and gauged as the rest of the world. He did not fathom all of him, as Mrs. Blanchard had said; while concerning Phoebe’s inner heart and the possibilities of her character, at a pinch, he

could speak with still less certainty. She was a virgin page, unturned, unscanned. No man knew her strength or weakness; she did not know it herself.

Page 34

Time progressed; the leaf fell and the long drought was followed by a mild autumn of heavy rains. John Grimbal's days were spent between the Red House and Monks Barton. His rod was put up; but he had already made friends and now shot many partridges. He spent long evenings in the society of Phoebe and her father at the farm; and the miller not seldom contrived to be called away on these occasions. Billy proved ever ready to assist, and thus the two old men did the best in their power to aid Grimbal's suit. In the great, comfortable kitchen, generally at some distance from each other, Phoebe and the squire of the new Red House would sit. She, now suspecting, was shy and uneasy; he, his wits quickened by love, displayed a tact and deftness of words not to have been anticipated from him. At first Phoebe took fire when Grimbal criticised Will in anything but a spirit of utmost friendliness; but it was vital to his own hopes that he should cloud the picture painted on her heart if he could; so, by degrees and with all the cleverness at his command, he dropped gall into poor Phoebe's cup in minute doses. He mourned the extreme improbability of Blanchard's success, grounding his doubt on Will's uneven character; he pictured Blanchard's fight with the world and showed how probable it was that he would make it a losing battle by his own peculiarities of temper. He declared the remoteness of happiness for Miss Lyddon in that direction to be extreme; he deplored the unstable nature of a young man's affection all the world over; and he made solid capital out of the fact that not once since his departure had her lover communicated with Phoebe. She argued against this that her father had forbidden it; but Mr. Grimbal overrode the objection, and asked what man in love would allow himself to be bound by such a command. As a matter of fact, Will had sent two messages at different times to his sweetheart. These came through Clement Hicks, and only conveyed the intelligence that the wanderer was well.

So Phoebe suffered persistent courting and her soft mould of mind sank a little under the storm. Now, weary and weak, she hesitated; now a wave of strength fortified her spirit. That John Grimbal should be dogged and importunate she took as mere masculine characteristics, and the fact did not anger her against him; but what roused her secret indignation almost as often as they met was his half-hidden air of sanguine confidence. He was humble in a way, always the patient lover, but in his manner she detected an indefinable, irritating self-confidence—the demeanour of one who already knows himself a conqueror before the battle is fought.

Thus the position gradually developed. As yet her father had not spoken to Phoebe or pretended to any knowledge of what was doing; but there came a night, at the end of November, when John Grimbal, the miller, and Billy sat and smoked at Monks Barton after Phoebe's departure to bed. Mr. Blee, very well knowing what matter moved the minds of his companions, spoke first.

Page 35

“Missy have put on a temperate way of late days it do seem. I most begin to think that cat-a-mountain of a bwoy ’s less in her thoughts than he was. She ‘m larnin’ wisdom, as well she may wi’ sich a faither.”

“I doan’t knaw what to think,” answered Mr. Lyddon, somewhat gloomily. “I ban’t so much in her confidence as of auld days. Damaris Blanchard’s right, like enough. A maid ’s tu deep even for the faither that got her, most times. A sweet, dear gal as ever was, for all that. How fares it, John? She never names ’e to me, though I do to her.”

“I’m biding my time, neighbour. I reckon ’t will be right one day. It only makes me feel a bit mean now and again to have to say hard things about young Blanchard. Still, while she ’s wrapped up there, I may whistle for her.”

“You ’m in the right,” declared Billy. “‘T is an auld sayin’ that all manner of dealings be fair in love, an’ true no doubt, though I’m a bachelor myself an’ no prophet in such matters.”

“All’s fair for certain,” admitted John, as though he had not before considered the position from this standpoint.

“Ay, an’ a darter’s welfare lies in her faither’s hand. Thank God, I’m not a parent to my knowledge; but ‘tis a difficult calling in life, an’ a young maiden gal, purty as a picksher, be a heavy load to a honest mind.”

“So I find it,” said the miller.

“You’ve forbid Will—lock, stock, and barrel—therefore, of coourse, she ’s no right to think more of him, to begin with,” continued the old man. It was a new idea.

“Come to think of it, she hasn’t—eh?” asked John.

“No, that’s true enough,” admitted Mr. Lyddon.

“I speak, though of low position, but well thought of an’ at Miller’s right hand, so to say,” continued Mr. Blee; “so theer ’t is: Missy’s in a dangerous pass. Eve’s flesh be Eve’s flesh, whether hid under flannel or silk, or shawed mother-naked to the sun after the manner of furrin cannibals. A gal ‘s a gal; an’ if I was faither of such as your darter, I’d count it my solemn duty to see her out of the dangers of life an’ tidily mated to a gude man. I’d say to myself, ’Her’ll graw to bless me for what I’ve done, come a few years.’”

So Billy Blee, according to his golden rule, advised men upon the road they already desired to follow, and thus increased his reputation for sound sense and far-reaching wisdom.

“It’s true, every word he says,” declared John Grimbal.

“I believe it,” answered the miller; “though God forbid any word or act of mine should bring wan tear to Phoebe’s cheek. Yet, somehow, I doan’t knaw but you ’m right.”

“I am, believe me. It’s the truth. You want Phoebe’s real happiness considered, and that now depends on—well, I’ll say it out—on me. We have reached the point now when you must speak, as you promised to speak, and throw the weight of your influence on my side. Then, after you’ve had your say, I’ll have mine and put the great question.”

Page 36

Mr. Lyddon nodded his head and relapsed into taciturnity.

CHAPTER VI

AN UNHAPPY POET

That a man of many nerves, uncertain in temper and with no physical or temporal qualifications, should have won for himself the handsomest girl in Chagford caused the unreflective to marvel whenever they considered the point. But a better knowledge of Chris Blauchard had served in some measure to explain the wonder. Of all women, she was the least likely to do the thing predicted by experience. She had tremendous force of character for one scarce twenty years of age; indeed, she lived a superlative life, and the man, woman, child, or dog that came within radius of her existence presently formed a definite part of it, and was loved or detested according to circumstances. Neutrality she could not understand. If her interests were wide, her prejudices were strong. A certain unconscious high-handedness of manner made the circle of her friends small, but those who did love her were enthusiastic. Upon the whole, the number of those who liked her increased with years, and avowed enemies had no very definite reasons for aversion. Of her physical perfections none pretended two opinions; but the boys had always gone rather in fear of Chris, and the few men who had courted her during the past few years were all considerably her seniors. No real romance entered into this young woman's practical and bustling life until the advent of Clement Hicks, though she herself was the flame of hearts not a few before his coming.

Neurotic, sensual, as was Chris herself in a healthy fashion, a man of varying moods, and perhaps the richer for faint glimmerings of the real fire, Hicks yet found himself no better than an aimless, helpless child before the demands of reality. Since boyhood he had lived out of touch with his environment. As bee-keeper and sign-writer he made a naked living for himself and his mother, and achieved success sufficient to keep a cottage roof over their heads, but that was all. Books were his only friends; the old stones of the Moor, the lonely wastes, the plaintive music of a solitary bird were the companions of his happiest days. He had wit enough to torture half his waking hours with self-analysis, and to grit his teeth at his own impotence. But there was no strength, no virile grip to take his fate in his own hands and mould it like a man. He only mourned his disadvantages, and sometimes blamed destiny, sometimes a congenital infirmity of purpose, for the dreary course of his life. Nature alone could charm his sullen moods, and that not always. Now and again she spread over the face of his existence a transitory contentment and a larger hope; but the first contact with facts swept it away again. His higher aspirations were neither deep nor enduring, and yet the man's love of nature was lofty and just, and represented all the religion he had. No moral principles guided

Page 37

him, conscience never pricked. Nevertheless, thus far he had been a clean liver and an honest man. Vice, because it affronted his sense of the beautiful and usually led towards death, did not attract him. He lived too deep in the lap of Nature to be deceived by the pseudo-realism then making its appearance in literature, and he laughed without mirth at these pictures from city-bred pens at that time paraded as the whole truth of the countryman's life. The later school was not then above the horizon; the brief and filthy spectacle of those who dragged their necrosis, marasmus, and gangrene of body and mind across the stage of art and literature, and shrieked Decay, had not as yet appeared to make men sicken; the plague-spot, now near healed, had scarce showed the faintest angry symptom of coming ill. Hicks might under no circumstances have been drawn in that direction, for his morbidity was of a different description. Art to this man appeared only in what was wholesome; it even embraced a guide to conduct, for it led him directly to Nature, and Nature emphatically taught him the value of obedience, the punishment of weakness, the reward for excess and every form of self-indulgence. But a softness in him shrank from these aspects of the Mother. He tried vainly and feebly to dig some rule of life from her smiles alone, to read a sermon into her happy hours of high summer sunshine. Beauty was his dream; he possessed natural taste, and had cultivated the same without judgment. His intricate disposition and extreme sensitiveness frightened him away from much effort at self-expression; yet not a few trifling scraps and shreds of lyric poetry had fallen from his pen in high moments. These, when the mood changed, he read again, and found dead, and usually destroyed. He was more easily discouraged than a child who sets out to tell its parent a story, and is all silence and shamefaced blushes at the first whisper of laughter or semblance of a smile. The works of poets dazed him, disheartened him, and secret ambitions toward performance grew dimmer with every book he laid his hands on. Ambition to create began to die; the dream scenery of his ill-controlled mental life more and more seldom took shape of words on paper; and there came a time when thought grew wholly wordless for him; a mere personal pleasure, selfish, useless, unsubstantial as the glimmer of mirage over desert sands.

Into this futile life came Chris, like a breath of sweet air from off the deep sea. She lifted him clean out of his subjective existence, awoke a healthy, natural love, built on the ordinary emotions of humanity, galvanised self-respect and ambition into some activity, and presently inspired a pluck strong enough to propose marriage. That was two years ago; and the girl still loved this weakly soul with all her heart, found his language unlike that of any other man she had seen or heard, and even took some slight softening edge of culture into herself from him. Her common

Page 38

sense was absolutely powerless to probe even the crust of Clement's nature; but she was satisfied that his poetry must be a thing as marketable as that in printed books. Indeed, in an elated moment he had assured her that it was so. During the earlier stages of their attachment, she pestered him to write and sell his verses and make money, that their happiness might be hastened; while he, on the first budding of his love, and with the splendid assurance of its return, had promised all manner of things, and indeed undertaken to make poems that should be sent by post to the far-away place where they printed unknown poets, and paid them. Chris believed in Clement as a matter of course. His honey must at least be worth more to the world than that of his bees. Over her future husband she began at once to exercise the control of mistress and mother; and she loved him more dearly after they had been engaged a year than at the beginning of the contract. By that time she knew his disposition, and instead of displaying frantic impatience at it, as might have been predicted, her tolerance was extreme. She bore with Clem because she loved him with the full love proper to such a nature as her own; and, though she presently found herself powerless to modify his character in any practical degree, his gloomy and uneven mind never lessened the sturdy optimism of Chris herself, or her sure confidence that the future would unite them. Through her protracted engagement Mrs. Blanchard's daughter maintained a lively and sanguine cheerfulness. But seldom was it that she lost patience with the dreamer. Then her rare, indignant outbursts of commonplace and common sense, like a thunderstorm, sweetened the stagnant air of Clement's thoughts and awoke new, wholesome currents in his mind.

As a rule, on the occasion of their frequent country walks, Clem and Chris found personal problems and private interests sufficient for all conversation, but it happened that upon a Sunday in mid-December, as they passed through the valley of the Teign, where the two main streams of that river mingle at the foothills of the Moor, the subject of Will and Phoebe for a time at least filled their thoughts. The hour was clear and bright, yet somewhat cheerless. The sun had already set, from the standpoint of all life in the valley, and darkness, hastening out of the east, merged the traceries of a million naked boughs into a thickening network of misty grey. The river beneath these woods churned in winter flood, while clear against its raving one robin sang little tinkling litanies from the branch of an alder.

Chris stood upon Lee Bridge at the waters' meeting and threw scraps of wood into the river; Clem sat upon the parapet, smoked his pipe, and noted with a lingering delight the play of his sweetheart's lips as her fingers strained to snap a tough twig. Then the girl spoke, continuing a conversation already entered upon.

"Phoebe Lyddon's that weak in will. How far's such as her gwaine in life without some person else to lean upon?"

Page 39

“If the ivy cannot find a tree it creeps along the ground, Chrissy.”

“Ess, it do; or else falls headlong awver the first bank it comes to. Phoebe’s so helpless a maiden as ever made a picksher. I mind her at school in the days when we was childer together. Purty as them china figures you might buy off Cheap Jack, an’ just so tender. She’d come up to dinky gals no bigger ‘n herself an’ pull out her li’l handkercher an’ ax ’em to be so kind as to blaw her nose for her! Now Will’s gone, Lard knaws wheer she’ll drift to.”

“To John Grimbal. Any man could see that. Her father’s set on it.”

“Why don’t Will write to her and keep her heart up and give her a little news? ‘Twould be meat an’ drink to her. Doan’t matter ‘bout mother an’ me. We’ll take your word for it that Will wants to keep his ways secret. But a sweetheart—’tis so differ’nt. I wouldn’t stand it!”

“I know right well you wouldn’t. Will has his own way. We won’t criticise him. But there’s a masterful man in the running—a prosperous, loud-voiced, bull-necked bully of a man, and one not accustomed to take ‘no’ for his answer. I’m afraid of John Grimbal in this matter. I’ve gone so far as to warn Will, but he writes back that he knows Phoebe.”

“Jan Grimbal’s a very differ’nt fashion of man to his brother; that I saw in a moment when they bided with us for a week, till the ’Three Crowns’ could take ’em in. I hate Jan—hate him cruel; but I like Martin. He puts me in mind o’ you, Clem, wi’ his nice way of speech and tender quickness for women. But it’s Phoebe we’m speaking of. I think you should write stern to Will an’ frighten him. It ban’t fair fightin’, that poor, dear Phoebe ‘gainst the will o’ two strong men.”

“Well, she’s had paltry food for a lover since he went away. He’s got certain ideas, and she’ll hear direct when—but there, I must shut my mouth, for I swore by fantastic oaths to say nothing.”

“He ought to write, whether or no. You tell Will that Jan Grimbal be about building a braave plaace up under Whiddon, and is looking for a wife at Monks Barton morning, noon, an’ evening. That’s like to waken him. An’ tell him the miller’s on t’other side, and clacking Jan Grimbal into Phoebe’s ear steadier than the noise of his awn water-wheel.”

“And she will grow weak, mark me. She sees that red-brick place rising out of the bare boughs, higher and higher, and knows that from floor to attics all may be hers if she likes to say the word. She hears great talk of drawing-rooms, and pictures, and pianos, and greenhouses full of rare flowers, and all the rest—why, just think of it!”

“Ban’t many gals as could stand ’gainst a piano, I daresay.”

“I only know one—mine.”

Chris looked at him curiously.

“You ‘m right. An’ that, for some queer reason, puts me in mind of the other wan, Martin Grimbal. He was very pleasant to me.”

Page 40

“He’s too late, thank God!”

“Ess, fay! An’ if he’d comed afore ’e, Clem, he’d been tu early. Theer’s awnly wan man in the gert world for me.”

“My gypsy!”

“But I didn’t mean that. He wouldn’t look at me, not even if I was a free woman. ’T was of you I thought when I talked to Mr. Grimbal. He’m well-to-do, and be seekin’ a house in the higher quarter under Middledown. You an’ him have the same fancy for the auld stones. So you might grow into friends—eh, Clem? Couldn’t it so fall out? He might serve to help—eh? You ‘m two-and-thirty year auld next February, an’ it do look as though they silly bees ban’t gwaine to put money enough in the bank to spell a weddin’ for us this thirty year to come. Theer’s awnly your aunt, Widow Coomstock, as you can look to for a penny, and that tu doubtful to count on.”

“Don’t name her, Chris. Good Lord! poor drunken old thing, with that crowd of hungry relations waiting like vultures round a dying camel! Never think of her. Money she has, but I sha’n’t see the colour of it, and I don’t want to.”

“Well, let that bide. Martin Grimbal’s the man in my thought.”

“What can I do there?”

“Doan’t knaw, ’zactly; but things might fall out if he got to like you, being a bookish sort of man. Anyway, he’s very willing to be friends, for that he told me. Doan’t bear yourself like Lucifer afore him; but take the first chance to let him knaw your fortune’s in need of mendin’.”

“You say that! D’ you think self-respect is dead in me?” he asked, half angry.

There was no visible life about them, so she put her arms round him.

“I ax for love of ‘e, dearie, an’ for want of ’e. Do ‘e think waitin’ ’s sweeter for me than for you?”

Then he calmed down again, sighed, returned the caress, touched her, and stroked her breast and shoulder with sudden earthly light in his great eyes.

“It ’s hard to wait.”

“That’s why I say doan’t lose chances that may mean a weddin’ for us, Clem. Theer ’s so much hid in ’e, if awnly the way to bring it out could be found.”

“A mine that won’t pay working,” he said bitterly, the passion fading out of eyes and voice. “I know there ’s something hidden; I feel there ’s a twist of brain that ought to rise above keeping bees and take me higher than honey-combs. Yet look at hard truth. The clods round me get enough by their sweat to keep wives and feed children. I’m only a penniless, backboneless, hand-to-mouth wretch, living on the work of laborious insects.”

“If it ban’t your awn fault, then whose be it, Clem?”

“The fault of Chance—to pack my build of brains into the skull of a pauper. This poor, unfinished abortion of a head-piece of mine only dreams dreams that it cannot even set on paper for others to see.”

“You’ve given up trying whether it can or not, seemin’ly. I never hear tell of no verses now.”

Page 41

“What ’s the good? But only last night, so it happens, I had a sort of a wild feeling to get something out of myself, and I scribbled for hours and hours and found a little morsel of a rhyme.”

“Will ’e read it to me?”

He showed reluctance, but presently dragged a scrap of paper out of his, pocket. Not a small source of trouble was his sweetheart’s criticism of his verses.

“It was the common sight of a pair of lovers walking tongue-tied, you know. I call it ‘A Devon Courting.’”

He read the trifle slowly, with that grand, rolling sea-beat of an accent that Elizabeth once loved to hear on the lips of Raleigh and Drake.

“Birds gived awver singin’,
Flittermice was wingin’,
Mists lay on the meadows—
A purty sight to see.
Down-long in the dimpsy, the dimpsy, the dimpsy,
Down-long in the dimpsy
Theer went a maid wi’ me.

“Five gude mile o’ walkin’,
Not wan word o’ talkin’,
Then I axed a question
And put the same to she.
Up-long in the owl-light, the owl-light, the owl-light,
Up-long in the owl-light,
Theer corned my maid wi’ me.

“But I wonder you write the common words, Clem—you who be so much tu clever to use ’em.”

“The words are well enough. They were not common once.”

“Well, you knaw best. Could ’e sell such a li’l auld funny thing as that for money?”

He shook his head.

“No; it was only the toil of making it seemed good. It is worthless.”

“An’ to think how long it took ’e! If you’d awnly put the time into big-fashioned verses full of the high words you’ve got. But you knaw best. Did ’e hear anything of them rhymes ’bout the auld days you sent to Lunnon?”

“They sent them back again. I told you ’t was wasting three stamps. It ’s not for me, I know it. The world is full of dumb singers. Maybe I haven’t got even a pinch of the fire that *must* break through and show its flame, no matter what mountains the earth tumbles on it. God knows I burn hot enough sometimes with great thoughts and wild longings for love and for sweeter life and for you; but my fires—whether they are soul-fires or body-fires—only burn my heart out.”

She sighed and squeezed his hand, understanding little enough of what he said.

“We must be patient. ‘T is a solid thing, patience. I’m puttin’ by pence; but it ‘s so plaguy little a gal can earn, best o’ times and with the best will.”

“If I could only write the things I think! But they vanish before pen and paper and the need of words, as the mists of the night vanish before the hard, searching sun. I am ignorant of how to use words; and those in the world who might help me will never know of me. As for those around about, they reckon me three parts fool, with just a little gift of re-writing names over their dirty shop-fronts.”

Page 42

“Yet it ’s money. What did ‘e get for that butivul fox wi’ the goose in his mouth you painted ’pon Mr. Lamacraft’s sign to Sticklepath?”

“Ten shillings.”

“That’s solid money.”

“It isn’t now. I bought a book with it—a book of lies.”

Chris was going to speak, but changed her mind and sighed instead.

“Well, as our affairs be speeding so poorly, we’d best to do some gude deed an’ look after this other coil. You must let Will knaw what ’s doin’ by letter this very night. ’T is awnly fair, you being set in trust for him.”

“Strange, these Grimbal brothers,” mused Clement, as the lovers proceeded in the direction of Chagford. “They come home with everything on God’s earth that men might desire to win happiness, and, by the look of it, each marks his home-coming by falling in love with one he can’t have.”

“Shaws the fairness of things, Clem; how the poor may chance to have what the rich caan’t buy; so all look to stand equal.”

“Fairness, you call it? The damned, cynical irony of this whole passion-driven puppet-show—that’s what it shows! The man who is loved cannot marry the woman he loves lest they both starve; the man who can give a woman half the world is loathed for his pains. Not that he ’s to be pitied like the pauper, for if you can’t buy love you can buy women, and the wise ones know how to manufacture a very lasting substitute for the real thing.”

“You talk that black and bitter as though you was deep-read in all the wickedness of the world,” said Chris; “yet I knaw no man can say sweeter things than you sometimes.”

“Talk! It ’s all talk with me—all snarling and railing and whining at hard facts, like a viper wasting its venom on steel. I’m sick of myself—weary of the old, stale round of my thoughts. Where can I wash and be clean? Chrissy, for God’s sake, tell me.”

“Put your hope in the Spring,” she said, “an’ be busy for Will.”

In reality, with the approach of Christmas, affairs between Phoebe and the elder Grimbal had reached a point far in advance of that which Clement and Chris were concerned with. For more than three months, and under a steadily increasing weight of opposition, Miller Lyddon’s daughter fought without shadow of yielding. Then came a time when the calm but determined iteration of her father’s desires and the sledge-hammer love-making of John Grimbal began to leave an impression. Even then her love for Will was

bright and strong, but her sense of helplessness fretted her nerves and temper, and her sweetheart's laconic messages, through the medium of another man, were sorry comfort in this hour of tribulation. With some reason she felt slighted. Neither considering Will's peculiarities, nor suspecting that his silence was only, the result of a whim or project, she began to resent it. Then John Grimbal caught her in a dangerous mood. Once she wavered, and he had the wisdom to leave her at the moment of victory.

Page 43

But on the next occasion of their meeting, he took good care to keep the advantage he had gained. Conscious of his own honest and generous intentions, Grimbal went on his way. The subtler manifestations of Phoebe's real attitude towards him escaped his observation; her reluctance he set down as resulting from the dying shadow of affection for Will Blanchard. That she would be very happy and proud and prosperous in the position of his wife, the lover was absolutely assured. He pursued her with the greater determination, in that he believed he was saving her from herself. What were some few months of vague uncertainty and girlish tears compared with a lifetime of prosperity and solid happiness? John Grimbal made Phoebe handsome presents of pretty and costly things after the first great victory. He pushed his advantage with tremendous vigour. His great face seemed reflected in Phoebe's eyes when she slept as when she woke; his voice was never out of her ears. Weary, hopeless, worn out, she prayed sometimes for strength of purpose. But it was a trait denied to her character and not to be bestowed at a breath. Her stability of defence, even as it stood, was remarkable and beyond expectation. Then the sure climax rolled in upon poor Phoebe. Twice she sought Clement Hicks with purpose to send an urgent message; on each occasion accident prevented a meeting; her father was always smiling and droning his desires into her ear; John Grimbal haunted her. His good-nature and kindness were hard to bear; his patience made her frantic. So the investment drew to its conclusion and the barriers crumbled, for the forces besieged were too weak and worn to restore them; while a last circumstance brought victory to the stronger and proclaimed the final overthrow.

This culmination resulted from a visit to the spiritual head of Phoebe's dwelling-place. The Rev. James Shorto-Champernowne, Vicar of Chagford, made an appointment to discuss the position with Mr. Lyddon and his daughter. A sportsman of the old type, and a cleric of rare reputation for good sense and fairness to high and low, was Mr. Shorto-Champernowne, but it happened that his more tender emotions had been buried with a young wife these forty years, and children he had none. Nevertheless, taking the standpoint of parental discipline, he held Phoebe's alleged engagement a vain thing, not to be considered seriously. Moreover, he knew of Will's lapses in the past; and that was fatal.

"My child, have little doubt that both religion and duty point in one direction and with no faltering hands," he said, in his stately way. "Communicate with the young man, inform him that conversation with myself has taken place; then he can hardly maintain an attitude of doubt, either to the exalted convictions that have led to your decision, or to the propriety of it. And, further, do not omit an opportunity of well-doing, but conclude your letter with a word of counsel. Pray him to seek a Guide to his future

Page 44

life, the only Guide able to lead him aright. I mean his Mother Church. No man who turns his back upon her can be either virtuous or happy. I mourned his defection from our choir some years ago. You see I forget nobody. My eyes are everywhere, as they ought to be. Would that he could be whipped back to the House of God—with scorpions, if necessary! There is a cowardice, a lack of sportsmanlike feeling, if I may so express it, in these fallings away from the Church of our fathers. It denotes a failing of intellect amid the centres of human activity. There is a blight of unbelief abroad—a nebulous, pestilential rationalism. Acquaint him with these facts; they may serve to re-establish one whose temperament must be regarded as abnormal in the light of his great eccentricity of action. Now farewell, and God be with you."

The rotund, grey-whiskered clergyman waved his hand; Miller Lyddon and his daughter left the vicarage; while both heard, as it seemed, his studied phrases and sonorous voice rolling after them all the way home. But poor Phoebe felt that the main issues as to conscience were now only too clear; her last anchor was wrenched from its hold, and that night, through a mist of unhappy tears, she succumbed, promised to marry John Grimbal and be queen of the red castle now rising under Cranbrook's distant heights.

That we have dealt too scantily with her tragic experiences may be suspected; but the sequel will serve to show how these circumstances demand no greater elaboration than has been accorded to them.

CHAPTER VII

LIBATION TO POMONA

A *winter* moon threw black shadows from stock and stone, tree and cot in the valley of the Teign. Heavy snow had fallen, and moor-men, coming down from the highlands, declared it to lie three feet deep in the drifts. Now fine, sharp weather had succeeded the storm, and hard frost held both hill and vale.

On Old Christmas Eve a party numbering some five-and-twenty persons assembled in the farmyard of Monks Barton, and Billy Blee, as master of the pending ceremonies, made them welcome. Some among them were aged, others youthful; indeed the company consisted mostly of old men and boys, a circumstance very easily understood when the nature of their enterprise is considered. The ancients were about to celebrate a venerable rite and sacrifice to a superstition, active in their boyhood, moribund at the date with which we are concerned, and to-day probably dead altogether. The sweet poet[2] of Dean Prior mentions this quaint, old-time custom of "christening" or "wassailing" the fruit-trees among Christmas-Eve ceremonies; and doubtless when he dwelt in Devon the use was gloriously maintained; but an adult generation in the years

of this narrative had certainly refused it much support. It was left to their grandfathers and their sons; and thus senility and youth preponderated in the present company. For the boys, this midnight fun with lantern and fowling-piece was good Christmas sport, and they came readily enough; to the old men their ceremonial possessed solid value, and from the musty storehouse of his memory every venerable soul amongst them could cite instances of the sovereign virtue hid in such a procedure.

Page 45

[2] *The sweet poet.*

"Wassaile the trees, that they may beare
You many a Plum, and many a Peare;
For more or lesse fruites they will bring,
As you doe give them Wassailing."

Hesperides.

"A brave rally o' neighbours, sure 'nough," cried Mr. Blee as he appeared amongst them. "Be Gaffer Lezzard come?"

"Here, Billy."

"Hast thy fire-arm, Lezzard?"

"Ess, 't is here. My gran'son's carrying of it; but I holds the powder-flask an' caps, so no ruin be threatened to none."

Mr. Lezzard wore a black smock-frock, across the breast of which extended delicate and skilful needlework. His head was hidden under an old chimney-pot hat with a peacock's feather in it, and, against the cold, he had tied a tremendous woollen muffler round his neck and about his ears. The ends of it hung down over his coat, and the general effect of smock, comforter, gaitered shanks, boots tied up in straw, long nose, and shining spectacles, was that of some huge and ungainly bird, hopped from out a fairy-tale or a nightmare.

"Be Maister Chappie here likewise?" inquired Billy.

"I'm waitin'; an' I've got a fowling-piece, tu."

"That's gude then. I be gwaine to carry the auld blunderbuss what's been in Miller Lyddon's family since the years of his ancestors, and belonged to a coach-guard in the King's days. 'T is well suited to apple-christenin'. The cider's here, in three o' the biggest earth pitchers us'a' got, an' the lads is ready to bring it along. The Maister Grimbals, as will be related to the family presently, be comin' to see the custom, an' Miller wants every man to step back-along arterwards an' have a drop o' the best, 'cordin' to his usual gracious gudeness. Now, Lezzard, me an' you'll lead the way."

Mr. Blee then shouldered his ancient weapon, the other veteran marched beside him, and the rest of the company followed in the direction of Chagford Bridge. They proceeded across the fields; and along the procession bobbed a lantern or two, while a few boys carried flaring torches. The light from these killed the moonbeams within a narrow radius, shot black tongues of smoke into the clear air, and set the meadows glimmering redly where contending radiance of moon and fire powdered the virgin snow

with diamond and ruby. Snake-like the party wound along beside the river. Dogs barked; voices rang clear on the crystal night; now and again, with laughter and shout, the lads raced hither and thither from their stolid elders, and here and there jackets carried the mark of a snowball. Behind the procession a trampled grey line stretched out under the moonlight. Then all passed like some dim, magic pageant of a dream; the distant dark blot of naked woodlands swallowed them up, and the voices grew faint and ceased. Only the endless song of the river sounded, with a new note struck into it by the world of snow.

Page 46

For a few moments the valley was left empty, so empty that a fox, who had been prowling unsuccessfully about Monks Barton since dusk, took the opportunity to leave his hiding-place above the ducks' pool, cross the meadows, and get him home to his earth two miles distant. He slunk with pattering foot across the snow, marking his way by little regular paw-pits and one straight line where his brush roughened the surface. Steam puffed in jets from his muzzle, and his empty belly made him angry with the world. At the edge of the woods he lifted his head, and the moonlight touched his green eyes. Then he recorded a protest against Providence in one eerie bark, and so vanished, before the weird sound had died.

Phoebe Lyddon and her lover, having given the others some vantage of ground, followed them to their destination—Mr. Lyddon's famous orchard in Teign valley. The girl's dreary task of late had been to tell herself that she would surely love John Grimbal presently—love him as such a good man deserved to be loved. Only under the silence and in the loneliness of long nights, only in the small hours of day, when sleep would not come and pulses were weak, did Phoebe confess that contact with him hurt her, that his kisses made her giddy to sickness, that all his gifts put together were less to her than one treasure she was too weak to destroy—the last letter Will had written. Once or twice, not to her future husband, but to the miller, Phoebe had ventured faintly to question still the promise of this great step; but Mr. Lyddon quickly overruled all doubts, and assisted John Grimbal in his efforts to hasten the ceremony. Upon this day, Old Christmas Eve, the wedding-day lay not a month distant and, afterwards the husband designed to take his wife abroad for a trip to South Africa. Thus he would combine business and pleasure, and return in the spring to witness the completion of his house. Chagford highly approved the match, congratulated Phoebe on her fortune, and felt secretly gratified that a personage grown so important as John Grimbal should have chosen his life's partner from among the maidens of his native village.

Now the pair walked over the snow; and silent and stealthy as the vanished fox, a grey figure followed after them. Dim as some moon-spirit against the brightness, this shape stole forward under the rough hedge that formed a bank and threw a shadow between meadow and stream. In repose the grey man, for a man it was, looked far less substantial than the stationary outlines of fences and trees; and when he moved it had needed a keen eye to see him at all. He mingled with the moonlight and snow, and became a part of a strange inversion of ordinary conditions; for in this white, hushed world the shadows alone seemed solid and material in their black nakedness, in their keen sharpness of line and limit, while things concrete and ponderable shone out a silvery medley of snow-capped, misty traceries, vague of outline, uncertain of shape, magically changed as to their relations by the unfamiliar carpet now spread between them.

Page 47

The grey figure kept Phoebe in sight, but followed a path of his own choosing. When she entered the woods he drew a little nearer, and thus followed, passing from shadow to shadow, scarce fifty yards behind.

Meanwhile the main procession approached the scene of its labours. Martin Grimbal, attracted by the prospect of reading this page from an old Devonian superstition, was of the company. He walked with Billy Blee and Gaffer Lezzard; and these high priests, well pleased at their junior's attitude towards the ceremony, opened their hearts to him upon it.

"'T is an ancient rite, auld as cider—maybe auld as Scripture, to, for anything I've heard to the contrary," said Mr. Lezzard.

"Ay, so 't is," declared Billy Blee, "an' a custom to little observed nowadays. But us might have better blooth in springtime an' braaver apples come autumn if the trees was christened more regular. You doan't see no gert stock of sizable apples best o' years now—li'l scrubbly auld things most times."

"An' the cider from 'em—poor roapy muck, awnly fit to make 'e thirst for better drink," criticised Gaffer Lezzard.

"'Tis this way: theer's gert virtue in cider put to apple-tree roots on this particular night, accordin' to the planets and such hidden things. Why so, I can't tell 'e, any more 'n anybody could tell 'e why the moon sails higher up the sky in winter than her do in summer; but so 't is. An' facts be facts. Why, theer's the auld 'Sam's Crab' tree in this very orchard we'm walkin' to. I knawed that tree three year ago to give a hogshead an' a half as near as damn it. That wan tree, mind, with no more than a few baskets of 'Redstreaks' added."

"An' a shy bearer most times, tu," added Mr. Lezzard.

"Just so; then come next year, by some mischance, me being indoors, if they didn't forget to christen un! An', burnish it all! theer wasn't fruit enough on the tree to fill your pockets!"

"Whether 't is the firing into the branches, or the cider to the roots does gude, be a matter of doubt," continued Mr. Lezzard; but the other authority would not admit this.

"They 'm like the halves of a flail, depend on it: wan no use wi'out t'other. Then theer's the singing of the auld song: who's gwaine to say that's the least part of it?"

"'T is the three pious acts thrawn together in wan gude deed," summed up Mr. Lezzard; "an' if they'd awnly let apples get ripe 'fore they break 'em, an' go back to the straw for straining, 'stead of these tom-fule, new-fangled hair-cloths, us might get tidy cider still."

By this time the gate of the orchard was reached; Gaffer Lezzard, Billy, and the other patriarch, Mr. Chapple,—a very fat old man,—loaded their weapons, and the perspiring cider-carriers set down their loads.

“Now, you bwoys, give awver runnin’ ’bout like rabbits,” cried out Mr. Chapple. “You ‘m here to sing while us pours cider an’ shoots in the trees; an’ not a drop you’ll have if you doan’t give tongue proper, so I tell ’e.”

Page 48

At this rebuke the boys assembled, and there followed a hasty gabbling, to freshen the words in young and uncertain memories. Then a small vessel was dipped under floating toast, that covered the cider in the great pitchers, and the ceremony of christening the orchard began. Only the largest and most famous apple-bearers were thus saluted, for neither cider nor gunpowder sufficient to honour more than a fraction of the whole multitude existed in all Chagford. The orchard, viewed from the east, stretched in long lines, like the legions of some arboreal army; the moon set sparks and streaks of light on every snowy fork and bough; and at the northwestern foot of each tree a network of spidery shadow-patterns, sharp and black, extended upon the snow.

Mr. Blee himself made the first libation, led the first chorus, and fired the first shot. Steaming cider poured from his mug, vanished, sucked in at the tree-foot, and left a black patch upon the snow at the hole of the trunk; then he stuck a fragment of sodden toast on a twig; after which the christening song rang out upon the night—ragged at first, but settling into resolute swing and improved time as its music proceeded. The lusty treble of the youngsters soon drowned the notes of their grandfathers; for the boys took their measure at a pace beyond the power of Gaffer Lezzard and his generation, and sang with heart and voice to keep themselves warm. The song has variants, but this was their version—

“Here ’s to thee, auld apple-tree,
Be sure you bud, be sure you blaw,
And bring forth apples good enough—
Hats full, caps full, three-bushel bags full,
Pockets full and all—
Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
Hats full, caps full, three-bushel bags full,
Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!”

Then Billy fired his blunderbuss, and a flame leapt from its bell mouth into the branches of the apple-tree, while surrounding high lands echoed its report with a reverberating bellow that rose and fell, and was flung from hill to hill, until it gradually faded upon the ear. The boys cheered again, everybody drank a drop of the cider, and from under a cloud of blue smoke, that hung flat as a pancake above them in the still air, all moved onward. Presently the party separated into three groups, each having a gunner to lead it, half a dozen boys to sing, and a dwindling jar of cider for the purposes of the ceremony. The divided choirs clashed their music, heard from a distance; the guns fired at intervals, each sending forth its own particular detonation and winning back a distinctive echo; then the companies separated widely and decreased to mere twinkling, torchlit points in the distance. Accumulated smoke from the scattered discharges hung in a sluggish haze between earth and moon, and a sharp smell of burnt powder tainted the sweetness of the frosty night.

Page 49

Upon this scene arrived John Grirnbal and his sweetheart. They stood for a while at the open orchard gate, gazed at the remote illumination, and heard the distant song. Then they returned to discussion of their own affairs; while at hand, unseen, the grey watcher moved impatiently and anxiously. The thing he desired did not come about, and he blew on his cold hands and swore under his breath. Only an orchard hedge now separated them, and he might have listened to Phoebe's soft speech had he crept ten yards nearer, while John Grimbal's voice he could not help hearing from time to time. The big man was just asking a question not easy to answer, when an unexpected interruption saved Phoebe from the difficulty of any reply.

"Sometimes I half reckon a memory of that blessed boy still makes you glum, my dear. Is it so? Haven't you forgot him yet?"

As he spoke an explosion, differing much in sound from those which continued to startle the night, rang suddenly out of the distance. It arose from a spot on the confines of the orchard, and was sharp in tone—sharp almost as the human cries which followed it. Then the distant lights hastened towards the theatre of the catastrophe. "What has happened?" cried Phoebe, thankful enough to snatch conversation away from herself and her affairs.

"Easy to guess. That broken report means a burst gun. One of those old fools has got excited, put too much powder into his blunderbuss and blown his head off, likely as not. No loss either!"

"Please, please go and see! Oh, if 'tis Billy Blee come to grief, faither will be lost. Do 'e run, Mr. Grimbal—Jan, I mean. If any grave matter's failed out, send them bwoys off red-hot for doctor."

"Stop here, then. If any ugly thing has happened, there need be no occasion for you to see it."

He departed hastily to where a distant galaxy of fiery eyes twinkled and tangled and moved this way and that, like the dying sparks on a piece of burnt paper.

Then the patient grey shadow, rewarded by chance at last, found his opportunity, slipped into the hedge just above Grimbal's sweetheart, and spoke to her.

"Phoebe, Phoebe Lyddon!"

The voice, dropping out of empty air as it seemed, made Phoebe jump, and almost fall; but there was an arm gripped round her, and a pair of hot lips on hers before she had time to open her mouth or cry a word.

"Will!"

“Ess, so I be, alive an’ kicking. No time for anything but business now. I’ve followed ’e for this chance. Awnly heard four day ago ’bout the fix you’d been drove to. An’ Clem’s made it clear ’t was all my damn silly silence to blame. I had a gert thought in me and wasn’t gwaine to write till—but that’s awver an’ done, an’ a purty kettle of feesh, tu. We must faace this coil first.”

“Thank God, you can forgive me. I’d never have had courage to ax ’e.”

“You was drove into it. I knaw there’s awnly wan man in the world for ‘e. Ban’t nothin’ to forgive. I never ought to have left ’e—a far-seein’ man, same as me. Blast him! I’d like to tear thicky damned fur off you, for I lay it comed from him.”

Page 50

“They were killing me, Will; and never a word from you.”

“I knaw, I knaw. What’s wan girl against a parish full, an’ a blustering chap made o’ diamonds?”

“The things doan’t warm me; they make me shiver. But now—you can forgive me—-that’s all I care for. What shall I do? How can I escape it? Oh, Will, say I can!”

“In coourse you can. Awnly wan way, though; an’ that’s why I’m here. Us must be married right on end. Then he’s got no more power over ’e than a drowned worm, nor Miller, nor any.”

“To think you can forgive me enough to marry me after all my wickedness! I never dreamed theer was such a big heart in the world as yourn.”

“Why, we promised, didn’t us? We’m built for each other. I knawed I’d only got to come. An’ I have, at cost, tu, I promise ’e. Now we’ll be upsides wi’ this tramp from furrin paarts, if awnly you do ezacally what I be gwaine to tell you. I’d meant to write it, but I can speak it better as the chance has come.”

Phoebe’s heart glowed at this tremendous change in the position. She forgot everything before sight and sound of Will. The nature of her promises weakened to gossamer. Her first love was the only love for her, and his voice fortified her spirit and braced her nerves. A chance for happiness yet remained and she, who had endured enough, was strong in determination to win it yet at any cost if a woman could.

“If you awnly knawed the half I’ve suffered before they forced me, you’d forgive,” she said. His frank pardon she could hardly realise. It seemed altogether beyond the desert of her weakness.

“Let that bide. It’s the future now. Clem’s told me everything. Awnly you and him an’ Chris knaw I’m here. Chris will serve ’e. Us must play a hidden game, an’ fight this Grimbal chap as he fought me—behind back. Listen; to-day fortnight you an’ me ’m gwaine to be married afore the registrar to Newton Abbot. He ‘m my awn Uncle Ford, as luck has it, an’ quite o’ my way o’ thinkin’ when I told him how ‘t was, an’ that Jan Grimbal was gwaine to marry you against your will. He advised me, and I’m biding in Newton for next two weeks, so as the thing comes out right by law. But you’ve got to keep it still as death.”

“If I could awnly fly this instant moment with ’e!”

“You caan’t. ‘T would spoil all. You must stop home, an’ hear your banns put up with Grimbal, an’ all the rest of it. Wish I could! Meat an’ drink ‘t would be, by God! But he’ll get his pay all right. An’ afore the day comes, you nip off to Newton, an’ I’ll meet ‘e, an’

us'll be married in a wink, an' you'll be back home again to Monks Barton 'fore you knaw it."

"Is that the awnly way? Oh, Will, how terrible!"

"God knaws I've done worse 'n that. But no man's gwaine to steal the maid of my choosin' from me while I've got brains and body to prevent it."

"Let me look at you, lovey—just the same, just the same! 'Tis glorious to hear your voice again. But this thin coat, so butivul in shaape, tu! You 'm a gentleman by the look of it; but 't is summer wear, not winter."

Page 51

“Ess, ‘tis cold enough; an’ I’ve got to get back to Newton to-night. An’ never breathe that man’s name no more. I’ll shaw ’e wat ‘s a man an’ what ban’t. Steal my true love, would ’e?—God forgive un, I shaan’t—not till we ‘m man an’ wife, anyway. Then I might. Give ’e up! Be I a chap as chaanges? Never—never yet.”

Phoebe wept at these words and pressed Will to her heart.

“‘Tis strength, an’ fire, an’ racing blood in me to hear ’e, dear, braave heart. I was that weak without ’e. Now the world ’s a new plaace, an’ I doan’t doubt fust thought was right, for all they said. I’ll meet ‘e as you bid me, an’ nothin’ shall ever keep me from ’e now—nothing!”

“‘T is well said, Phoebe; an’ doan’t let that anointed scamp kiss ’e more ‘n he must. Be braave an’ cunnin’, an’ keep Miller from smelling a rat. I’d like to smash that man myself now wheer he stands,—Grimbal I mean,—but us must be wise for the present. Wipe your shiny eyes an’ keep a happy faace to ’em, an’ never let wan of the lot dream what’s hid in ‘e. Cock your li’l nose high, an’ be peart an’ gay. An’ let un buy you what he will, —’t is no odds; we can send his rubbish back again arter, when he knaws you’m another man’s wife. Gude-bye, Phoebe dearie; I’ve done what ’peared to me a gert deed for love of ’e; but the sight of ’e brings it down into no mighty matter.”

“You’ve saved my life, Will—saved all my days; an’ while I’ve got a heart beating ‘t will be yourn, an’ I’ll work for ‘e, an’ slave for ’e, an’ think for ‘e, an’ love ‘e so long as I live —an’ pray for ’e, tu, Will, my awn!”

He parted from her as she spoke, and she, by an inspiration, hurried towards the approaching crowd that the trampled marks of the snow where she had been standing might not be noted under the gleam of torches and lanterns.

John Grimbal’s prophecy was happily not fulfilled in its gloomy completeness: nobody had blown his head off; but Billy Blee’s prodigality of ammunition proved at last too much for the blunderbuss of the bygone coach-guard, and in its sudden annihilation a fragment had cut the gunner across the face, and a second inflicted a pretty deep flesh-wound on his arm. Neither injury was very serious, and the general escape, as John Grimbal pointed out, might be considered marvellous, for not a soul save Billy himself had been so much as scratched.

With Martin Grimbal on one side and Mr. Chapple upon the other, the wounded veteran walked slowly and solemnly along. The dramatic moments of the hour were dear to him, and while tolerably confident at the bottom of his mind that no vital hurt had been done, he openly declared himself stricken to death, and revelled in a display of Christian fortitude and resignation that deceived everybody but John Grimbal. Billy gasped and gurgled, bid them see to the bandages, and reviewed his past life with ingenuous satisfaction.

“Ah, sawls all! dead as a hammer in an hour. ’T is awver. I feel the life swelling out of me.”

Page 52

“Don’t say that, Billy,” cried Martin, in real concern. “The blood’s stopped flowing entirely now.”

“For why? Theer’s no more to come. My heart be pumping wind, lifeless wind; my lung-play’s gone, tu, an’ my sight’s come awver that coorious. Be Gaffer Lezzard nigh?”

“Here, alongside ’e, Bill.”

“Gimme your hand then, an’ let auld scores be wiped off in this shattering calamity. Us have differed wheer us could these twoscore years; but theer mustn’t be no more ill-will wi’ me tremblin’ on the lip o’ the graave.”

“None at all; if ’t wasn’t for Widow Coomstock,” said Gaffer Lezzard. “You ‘m tu pushing theer, an’ I say it even now, for truth’s truth, though it be the last thing a man’s ear holds.”

“Break it to her gentle,” said Billy, ignoring the other’s criticism; “she’m on in years, and have cast a kindly eye awver me since the early sixties. My propositions never was more than agreeable conversation to her, but it might have come. Tell her theer’s a world beyond marriage customs, an’ us’ll meet theer.”

Old Lezzard showed a good deal of anger at this speech, but being in a minority fell back and held his peace.

“Would ’e like to see passon, dear sawl?” asked Mr. Chapple, who walked on Billy’s left with his gun reversed, as though at a funeral.

“Me an’ him be out, along o’ rheumatics keeping me from the House of God this month,” said the sufferer, “but at a solemn death-bed hour like this here, I’d soon see un as not. Ban’t no gert odds, for I forgive all mankind, and doan’t feel no more malice than a bird in a tree.”

“You’re a silly old ass,” burst out Grimbal roughly. “There’s nothing worth naming the matter with you, and you know it better than we do. The Devil looks after his own, seemingly. Any other man would have been killed ten times over.”

Billy whined and even wept at this harsh reproof. “Ban’t a very fair way to speak to an auld gunpowder-blawn piece, like what I be now,” he said; “gormed if ’t is.”

“Very onhandsome of ‘e, Mr. Grimbal,” declared the stout Chappie; “an’ you so young an’ in the prime of life, tu!”

Here Phoebe met them, and Mr. Blee, observing the signs of tears upon her face, supposed that anxiety for him had wet her cheeks, and comforted his master’s child.

“Doan’t ’e give way, missy. ‘T is all wan, an’ I ban’t ’feared of the tomb, as I’ve tawld ’em. Us must rot, every bone of us, in our season, an’ ’t is awnly the thought of it, not the fear of it, turns the stomach. But what’s a wamblyness of the innards, so long as a body’s sawl be ripe for God?”

“A walkin’ sermon!” said Mr. Chappie.

Doctor Parsons was waiting for Billy at Monks Barton, and if John Grimbal had been brusque, the practitioner proved scarcely less so. He pronounced Mr. Blee but little hurt, bandaged his arm, plastered his head, and assured him that a pipe and a glass of spirits was all he needed to fortify his sinking spirit. The party ate and drank, raised a cheer for Miller Lyddon and then went homewards. Only Mr. Chappie and Gaffer Lezzard entered the house and had a wineglass or two of some special sloe gin. Mr. Lezzard thawed and grew amiable over this beverage, and Mr. Chappie repeated Billy’s lofty sentiments at the approach of death for the benefit of Miller Lyddon.

Page 53

“’T is awnly my fearless disposition,” declared the wounded man with great humility; “no partic’lar credit to me. I doan’t care wan iotum for the thought of churchyard mould—not wan iotum. I knaw the value of gude rich soil tu well; an’ a man as grudges the rames[3] of hisself to the airth that’s kept un threescore years an’ ten’s a carmudgeonly cuss, surely.”

[3] *Rames* = skeleton; remains.

“An’ so say I; theer’s true wisdom in it,” declared Mr. Chapple, while the miller nodded.

“Theer be,” concluded Gaffer Lezzard. “I allus sez, in my clenching way, that I doan’t care a farden damn what happens to my bones, if my everlasting future be well thought on by passon. So long as I catch the eye of un an’ see um beam ‘pon me to church now an’ again, I’m content with things as they are.”

“As a saved sawl you ’m in so braave a way as the best; but, to say it without rudeness, as food for the land a man of your build be nought, Gaffer,” argued Mr. Chapple, who viewed the veteran’s withered anatomy from his own happy vantage ground of fifteen stone.

But Gaffer Lezzard would by no means allow this.

“Ban’t quantity awnly tells, my son. ’T is the aluminium in a man’s bones that fats land—roots or grass or corn. Anybody of larnin’, ’ll tell ’e that. Strip the belly off ‘e, an’, bone for bone, a lean man like me shaws as fair as you. No offence offered or taken, but a gross habit’s mere clay and does more harm than gude underground.”

Mr. Chapple in his turn resented this contemptuous dismissal of tissue as matter of no agricultural significance. The old men went wrangling home; Miller Lyddon and Billy retired to their beds; the moon departed behind the distant moors; and all the darkened valley slept in snow and starlight.

CHAPTER VIII

A BROTHERS’ QUARREL

Though Phoebe was surprised at Will Blanchard’s mild attitude toward her weakness, she had been less so with more knowledge. Chris Blanchard and her lover were in some degree responsible for Will’s lenity, and Clement’s politic letter to the wanderer, when Phoebe’s engagement was announced, had been framed in words best calculated to shield the Miller’s sore-driven daughter. Hicks had thrown the blame on John Grimbal, on Mr. Lyddon, on everybody but Phoebe herself. Foremost indeed he had censured Will, and pointed out that his own sustained silence, however high-

minded the reason of it, was a main factor in his sweetheart's sufferings and ultimate submission.

In answer to this communication Blanchard magically reappeared, announced his determination to marry Phoebe by subterfuge, and, the deed accomplished, take his punishment, whatever it might be, with light heart. Given time to achieve a legal marriage, and Phoebe would at least be safe from the clutches of millionaires in general.

Page 54

Much had already been done by Will before he crept after the apple-christeners and accomplished his meeting with Phoebe. A week was passed since Clement wrote the final crushing news, and during that interval Will had been stopping with his uncle, Joel Ford, at Newton Abbot. Fate, hard till now, played him passing fair at last. The old Superintendent Registrar still had a soft corner in his heart for Will, and when he learnt the boy's trouble, though of cynic mind in all matters pertaining to matrimony, he chose to play the virtuous and enraged philosopher, much to his nephew's joy. Mr. Ford promised Will he should most certainly have the law's aid to checkmate his dishonourable adversary; he took a most serious view of the case and declared that all thinking men must sympathise with young Blanchard under such circumstances. But in private the old gentleman rubbed his hands, for here was the very opportunity he desired as much as a man well might—the chance to strike at one who had shamefully wronged him. His only trouble was how best to let John Grimbal know whom he had to thank for this tremendous reverse; for that deed he held necessary to complete his revenge.

As to where Will had come from, or whither he was returning, after his marriage Joel Ford cared not. The youngster once wedded would be satisfied; and his uncle would be satisfied too. The procedure of marriage by license requires that one of the parties shall have resided within the Superintendent's district for a space of fifteen days preceding the giving of notice; then application in prescribed form is made to the Registrar; and his certificate and license are usually received one clear day later. Thus a resident in a district can be married at any time within eight-and-forty hours of his decision. Will Blanchard had to stop with his uncle nine or ten days more to complete the necessary fortnight, and as John Grimbal's marriage morning was as yet above three weeks distant, Phoebe's fate in no way depended upon him.

Mr. Ford explained the position to Will, and the lover accepted it cheerfully.

"As to the marriage, that'll be hard and fast as a bench of bishops can make it; but wedding a woman under age, against the wish of her legal guardian, is an offence against the law. Nobody can undo the deed itself, but Miller Lyddon will have something to say afterwards. And there's that blustering blackguard, John Grimbal, to reckon with. Unscrupulous scoundrel! Just the sort to be lawless and vindictive if what you tell me concerning him is true."

"And so he be; let un! Who cares a brass button for him? 'T is awnly Miller I thinks of. What's worst he can do?"

"Send you to prison, Will."

"For how long?"

“That I can’t tell you exactly. Not for marrying his daughter of course, but for abduction —that’s what he’ll bring against you.”

“An’ so he shall, uncle, an’ I’ll save him all the trouble I can. That’s no gert hardship—-weeks, or months even. I’ll go like a lark, knawin’ Phoebe’s safe.”

Page 55

So the matter stood and the days passed. Will's personal affairs, and the secret of the position from which he had come was known only to Clement Hicks. The lover talked of returning again thither after his marriage, but he remained vague on that point, and, indeed, modified his plans after the above recorded conversation with his uncle. Twice he wrote to Phoebe in the period of waiting, and the letter had been forwarded on both occasions through Clement. Two others knew what was afoot, and during that time of trial Phoebe found Chris her salvation. The stronger girl supported her sinking spirit and fortified her courage. Chris mightily enjoyed the whole romance, and among those circumstances that combined to make John Grimbal uneasy during the days of waiting was her constant presence at Monks Barton. There she came as Phoebe's friend, and the clear, bright eyes she often turned on him made him angry, he knew not why. As for Mrs. Blanchard, she had secretly learnt more than anybody suspected, for while Will first determined to tell her nothing until afterwards, a second thought rebuked him for hiding such a tremendous circumstance from his mother, and he wrote to her at full length from Newton, saying nothing indeed of the past but setting out the future in detail. Upon the subject Mrs. Blanchard kept her own counsel.

Preparations for Phoebe's wedding moved apace, and she lived in a dim, heart-breaking dream. John Grimbal, despite her entreaties, continued to spend money upon her; yet each new gift brought nothing but tears. Grown desperate in his determination to win a little affection and regard before marriage, and bitterly conscious that he could command neither, the man plied her with what money would buy, and busied himself to bring her happiness in spite of herself. Troubled he was, nevertheless, and constantly sought the miller that he might listen to comforting assurances that he need be under no concern.

"'T is natural in wan who's gwaine to say gude-bye to maidenhood so soon," declared Mr. Lyddon. "I've thought 'bout her tears a deal. God knaws they hurt me more 'n they do her, or you either; but such sad whims and cloudy hours is proper to the time. Love for me's got a share in her sorrow, tu. 'T will all be well enough when she turns her back on the church-door an' hears the weddin'-bells a-clashing for her future joy. Doan't you come nigh her much during the next few weeks."

"Two," corrected Mr. Grimbal, moodily.

"Eh! Awnly two! Well, 't is gert darkness for me, I promise you—gert darkness comin' for Monks Barton wi'out the butivul sound an' sight of her no more. But bide away, theer's a gude man; bide away these coming few days. Her last maiden hours mustn't be all tears. But my gifts do awnly make her cry, tu, if that's consolation to 'e. It's the tenderness of her li'l heart as brims awver at kindness."

Page 56

In reality, Phoebe's misery was of a complexion wholly different. The necessity for living thus had not appeared so tremendous until she found herself launched into this sea of terrible deception. In operation such sustained falsity came like to drive her mad. She could not count the lies each day brought forth; she was frightened to pray for forgiveness, knowing every morning must see a renewal of the tragedy. Hell seemed yawning for her, and the possibility of any ultimate happiness, reached over this awful road of mendacity and deceit, was more than her imagination could picture. With loss of self-respect, self-control likewise threatened to depart. She became physically weak, mentally hysterical. The strain told terribly on her nature; and Chris mourned to note a darkness like storm-cloud under her grey eyes, and unwonted pallor upon her cheek. Dr. Parsons saw Phoebe at this juncture, prescribed soothing draughts, and ordered rest and repose; but to Chris the invalid clung, and Mr. Lyddon was not a little puzzled that the sister of Phoebe's bygone sweetheart should now possess such power to ease her mind and soothe her troubled nerves.

John Grimbal obeyed the injunction laid upon him and absented himself from Monks Barton. All was prepared for the ceremony. He had left his Red House farm and taken rooms for the present at "The Three Crowns." Hither came his brother to see him four nights before the weddingday. Martin had promised to be best man, yet a shadow lay between the brothers, and John, his mind unnaturally jealous and suspicious from the nature of affairs with Phoebe, sulked of late in a conviction that Martin had watched his great step with unfraternal indifference and denied him the enthusiasm and congratulation proper to such an event.

The younger man found his brother scanning a new black broadcloth coat when he entered. He praised it promptly, whereupon John flung it from him and showed no more interest in the garment. Martin, not to be offended, lighted his pipe, took an armchair beside the fire, and asked for some whiskey. This mollified the other a little; he produced spirits, loaded his own pipe, and asked the object of the visit.

"A not over-pleasant business, John," returned his brother, frankly; "but 'Least said, soonest mended.' Only remember this, nothing must ever lessen our common regard. What I am going to say is inspired by my—"

"Yes, yes—cut that. Spit it out and have done with it. I know there's been trouble in you for days. You can't hide your thoughts. You've been grim as a death's-head for a month—ever since I was engaged, come to think of it. Now open your jaws and have done."

John's aggressive and hectoring manner spoke volubly of his own lack of ease. Martin nerved himself to begin, holding it his duty, but secretly fearing the issue in the light of his brother's hard, set face.

“You’ve something bothering you too, old man. I’m sure of it. God is aware I don’t know much about women myself, but—”

Page 57

“Oh, dry up that rot! Don’t think I’m blind, if you are. Don’t deceive yourself. There’s a woman-hunger in you, too, though perhaps you haven’t found it out yet. What about that Blanchard girl?”

Martin flushed like a schoolboy; his hand went up over his mouth and chin as though to hide part of his guilt, and he looked alarmed and uneasy.

John laughed without mirth at the other’s ludicrous trepidation.

“Good heavens! I’ve done nothing surely to suggest—?”

“Nothing at all—except look as if you were going to have a fit every time you get within a mile of her. Lovers know the signs, I suppose. Don’t pretend you’re made of different stuff to the rest of us, that’s all.”

Martin removed his hand and gasped before the spectacle of what he had revealed to other eyes. Then, after a silence of fifteen seconds, he shut his mouth again, wiped his forehead with his hand, and spoke.

“I’ve been a silly fool. Only she’s so wonderfully beautiful—don’t you think so?”

“A gypsy all over—if you call that beautiful.”

The other flushed up again, but made no retort.

“Never mind me or anybody else. I want to speak to you about Phoebe, if I may, John. Who have I got to care about but you? I’m only thinking of your happiness, for that’s dearer to me than my own; and you know in your heart that I’m speaking the truth when I say so.”

“Stick to your gate-posts and old walls and cow-comforts and dead stones. We all know you can look farther into Dartmoor granite than most men, if that’s anything; but human beings are beyond you and always were. You’d have come home a pauper but for me.”

“D’ you think I’m not grateful? No man ever had a better brother than you, and you’ve stood between me and trouble a thousand times. Now I want to stand between you and trouble.”

“What the deuce d’ you mean by naming Phoebe, then?”

“That is the trouble. Listen and don’t shout me down. She’s breaking her heart—blind or not blind, I see that—breaking her heart, not for you, but Will Blanchard. Nobody else has found it out; but I have, and I know it’s my duty to tell you; and I’ve done it.”

An ugly twist came into John Grimbal’s face. “You’ve done it; yes. Go on.”

“That’s all, brother, and from your manner I don’t believe it’s entirely news to you.”

“Then get you gone, damned snake in the grass! Get gone, ’fore I lay a hand on you! You to turn and bite *me!* Me, that’s made you! I see it all—your blasted sheep’s eyes at Chris Blanchard, and her always at Monks Barton! Don’t lie about it,” he roared, as Martin raised his hand to speak; “not a word more will I hear from your traitor’s lips. Get out of my sight, you sneaking hypocrite, and never call me ‘brother’ no more, for I’ll not own to it!”

“You’ll be sorry for this, John.”

“And you too. You’ll smart all your life long when you think of this dirty trick played against a brother who never did you no hurt. You to come between me and the girl that’s promised to marry me! And for your own ends. A manly, brotherly plot, by God!”

Page 58

“I swear, on my sacred honour, there’s no plot against you. I’ve never spoken to a soul about this thing, nor has a soul spoken of it to me; that’s the truth.”

“Rot you, and your sacred honour too! Go, and take your lies with you, and keep your own friends henceforth, and never cross my threshold more—you or your sacred, stinking honour either.”

Martin rose from his chair dazed and bewildered. He had seen his brother’s passion wither up many a rascal in the past; but he himself had never suffered until now, and the savagery of this language hurled against his own pure motives staggered him. He, of course, knew nothing about Will Blanchard’s enterprise, and his blundering and ill-judged effort to restrain his brother from marrying Phoebe was absolutely disinterested. It had been a tremendous task to him to speak on this delicate theme, and regard for John alone actuated him; now he departed without another word and went blankly to the little new stone house he had taken and furnished on the outskirts of Chagford under Middledown. He walked along the straight street of whitewashed cots that led him to his home, and reflected with dismay on this catastrophe. The conversation with his brother had scarcely occupied five minutes; its results promised to endure a lifetime.

Meanwhile, and at the identical hour of this tremendous rupture, Chris Blanchard, well knowing that the morrow would witness Phoebe’s secret marriage to her brother, walked down to see her. It happened that a small party filled the kitchen of Monks Barton, and the maid who answered her summons led Chris through the passage and upstairs to Phoebe’s own door. There the girls spoke in murmurs together, while various sounds, all louder than their voices, proceeded from the kitchen below. There were assembled the miller, Billy Blee, Mr. Chapple, and one Abraham Chown, the police inspector of Chagford, a thin, black-bearded man, oppressed with the cares of his office.

“They be arranging the programme of festive delights,” explained Phoebe. “My heart sinks in me every way I turn now. All the world seems thinking about what’s to come; an’ I knaw it never will.”

“’T is a wonnerful straange thing to fall out. Never no such happened before, I reckon. But you ‘m doin’ right by the man you love, an’ that’s a thought for ‘e more comfortin’ than gospel in a pass like this. A promise is a promise, and you’ve got to think of all your life stretching out afore you. Will’s jonic, take him the right way, and that you knaw how to do—a straight, true chap as should make any wife happy. Theer’ll be waitin’ afterwards an’ gude need for all the patience you’ve got; but wance the wife of un, allus the wife of un; that’s a butivul thing to bear in mind.”

“’T is so; ‘t is everything. An’ wance we’m wed, I’ll never tell a lie again, an’ atone for all I have told, an’ do right towards everybody.”

“You caan’t say no fairer. Be any matter I can help ’e with?”

Page 59

“Nothing. It’s all easy. The train starts for Moreton at half-past nine. Sam Bonus be gwaine to drive me in, and bide theer for me till I come back from Newton. Faither’s awnly too pleased to let me go. I said ’t was shopping.”

“An’ when you come home you’ll tell him—Mr. Lyddon—straight?”

“Everything, an’ thank God for a clean breast again.”

“An’ Will?”

“Caan’t say what he’ll do after. Theer’ll be no real marryin’ for us yet a while. Faither can have the law of Will presently,—that’s all I knaw.”

“Trust Will to do the right thing; and mind, come what may to him, theer’s allus Clem Hicks and me for friends.”

“Ban’t likely to be many others left, come to-morrow night. But I’ve run away from my own thoughts to think of you and him often of late days. He’ll get money and marry you, won’t he, when his aunt, Mrs. Coomstock, dies?”

“No; I thought so tu, an’ hoped it wance; but Clem says what she’ve got won’t come his way. She’s like as not to marry, tu—there ’m a lot of auld men tinkering after her, Billy Blee among ’em.”

Sounds arose from beneath. They began with harsh and grating notes, interrupted by a violent hawking and spitting. Then followed renewal of the former unlovely noises. Presently, at a point in the song, for such it was, half a dozen other voices drowned the soloist in a chorus.

“‘T is Billy rehearsin’ moosic,” explained Phoebe, with a sickly smile. “He haven’t singed for a score of years; but they’ve awver-persuaded him and he’s promised to give ’em an auld ballet on my wedding-day.”

“My stars! ’t is a gashly auld noise sure enough,” criticised Phoebe’s friend frankly; “for all the world like a stuck pig screechin’, or the hum of the threshin’ machine poor faither used to have, heard long ways off.”

Quavering and quivering, with sudden painful flights into a cracked treble, Billy’s effort came to the listeners.

“‘Twas on a Monday marnin’
Afore the break of day,
That I tuked up my turmit-hoe
An’ trudged dree mile away!”

Then a rollicking chorus, with rough music in it, surged to their ears—

"An' the fly, gee hoppee!
The fly, gee whoppee!
The fly be on the turmits,
For 't is all my eye for me to try
An' keep min off the turmits!"

Mr. Blee lashed his memory and slowly proceeded, while Chris, moved by a sort of sudden mother-instinct towards pale and tearful Phoebe, strained her to her bosom, hugged her very close, kissed her, and bid her be hopeful and happy.

"Taake gude heart, for you 'm to mate the best man in all the airth but wan!" she said; "an', if 't is awnly to keep Billy from singing in public, 't is a mercy you ban't gwaine to take Jan Grimbal. Doan't 'e fear for him. There'll be a thunder-storm for sartain; then he'll calm down, as better 'n him have had to 'fore now, an' find some other gal."

Page 60

With this comfort Chris caressed Phoebe once more, heartily pitying her helplessness, and wishing it in her power to undertake the approaching ordeal on the young bride's behalf. Then she departed, her eyes almost as dim as Phoebe's. For a moment she forgot her own helpless matrimonial projects in sorrow for her brother and his future wife. Marriage at the registry office represented to her, as to most women, an unlovely, uncomfortable, and unfinished ceremony. She had as easily pictured a funeral without the assistance of the Church as a wedding without it.

CHAPTER IX

OUTSIDE EXETER GAOL

Within less than twelve hours of the time when she bid Chris farewell Phoebe Lyddon was Phoebe Lyddon no more. Will met her at Newton; they immediately proceeded to his uncle's office; and the Registrar had made them man and wife in space of time so brief that the girl could hardly realise the terrific event was accomplished, and that henceforth she belonged to Will alone. Mr. Ford had his little joke afterwards in the shape of a wedding-breakfast and champagne. He was gratified at the event and rejoiced to be so handsomely and tremendously revenged on his unfortunate enemy. The young couple partook of the good things provided for them; but appetite was lacking to right enjoyment of the banquet, and Will and his wife much desired to escape and be alone.

Presently they returned to the station and arrived there before Phoebe's train departed. Her husband then briefly explained the remarkable course of action he designed to pursue.

"You must be a braave gal and think none the worse of me. But't is this way: I've broke law, and a month or two, or six, maybe, in gaol have got to be done. Your faither will see to that."

"Prison! O, Will! For marryin' me?"

"No, but for marryin' you wi'out axin' leave. Miller Lyddon told me the upshot of taking you, if I done it; an' I have; an' he'll keep his word. So that's it. I doan't want to make no more trouble; an' bein' a man of resource I'm gwaine up to Exeter by first train, so soon as you've started. Then all bother in the matter will be saved Miller."

"O Will! Must you?"

"Ess fay, 't is my duty. I've thought it out through many hours. The time'll soon slip off; an' then I'll come back an' stand to work. Here's a empty carriage. Jump in. I can sit along with 'e for a few minutes."

“How ever shall I begin? How shall I break it to them, dearie?”

“Hold up your li’l hand,” said Will with a laugh. “Shaw ’em the gawld theer. That’ll speak for ’e. ’S truth!” he continued, with a gesture of supreme irritation, “but it’s a hard thing to be snatched apart like this—man an’ wife. If I was takin’ ’e home to some lew cot, all our very awn, how differ’nt ’t would be!”

“You will some day.”

“So I will then. I’ve got ‘e for all time, an’ Jan Grimbal’s missed ’e for all time. Damned if I ban’t a’most sorry for un!”

Page 61

“So am I,—in a way,—as you are. My heart hurts me to think of him. He’ll never forgive me.”

“Me, you mean. Well, ‘t is man to man, an’ I ban’t feared of nothing on two legs. You just tell ’em that ’t was to be, that you never gived up lovin’ me, but was forced into lyin’ and such-like by the cruel way they pushed ’e. Shaw ’em the copy of the paper if they doan’t b’lieve the ring. An’ when Miller lifts up his voice to cuss me, tell un quiet that I knawed what must come of it, and be gone straight to Exeter Gaol to save un all further trouble. He’ll see then I’m a thinking, calculating man, though young in years.”

Phoebe was now reduced to sighs and dry sobs. Will sat by her a little longer, patted her hands and spoke cheerfully. Then the train departed and he jumped from it as it moved and ran along the platform with a last earnest injunction.

“See mother first moment you can an’ explain how ’t is. Mother’ll understand, for faither did similar identical, though he wasn’t put in clink for it.”

He waved his hand and Phoebe passed homewards. Then the fire died out of his eyes and he sighed and turned. But no shadow of weakness manifested itself in his manner. His jaw hardened, he smote his leg with his stick, and, ascertaining the time of the next train to Exeter, went back to bid Mr. Ford farewell before setting about his business.

Will told his uncle nothing concerning the contemplated action; and such silence was unfortunate, for had he spoken the old man’s knowledge must have modified his fantastic design. Knowing that Will came mysteriously from regular employment which he declined to discuss, and assuming that he now designed returning to it, Mr. Ford troubled no more about him. So his nephew thanked the Registrar right heartily for all the goodness he had displayed in helping two people through the great crisis of their lives, and went on his way. His worldly possessions were represented by a new suit of blue serge which he wore, and a few trifles in a small carpet-bag.

It was the past rather than the present or future which troubled Will on his journey to Exeter; and the secret of the last six months, whatever that might be, lay heavier on his mind than the ordeal immediately ahead of him. In this coming achievement he saw no shame; it was merely part payment for an action lawless but necessary. He prided himself always on a great spirit of justice, and justice demanded that henceforth he must consider the family into which he had thus unceremoniously introduced himself. To no man in the wide world did he feel more kindly disposed than to Miller Lyddon; and his purpose was now to save his father-in-law all the annoyance possible.

Page 62

Arrived at Exeter, Will walked cheerfully away to the County Gaol, a huge red-brick pile that scarce strikes so coldly upon the eye of the spectator as ordinary houses of detention. Grey and black echo the significance of a prison, but warm red brick strikes through the eye to the brain, and the colour inspires a genial train of ideas beyond reason's power instantly to banish. But the walls, if ruddy, were high, and the rows of small, remote windows, black as the eye-socket of a skull, stretched away in dreary iron-bound perspective where the sides of the main fabric rose upward to its chastened architectural adornments. Young Blanchard grunted to himself, gripped his stick, from one end of which was suspended his carpet-bag, and walked to the wicket at the side of the prison's main entrance. He rang a bell that jangled with tremendous echoes among the naked walls within; then there followed the rattle of locks as the sidegate opened, and a warder looked out to ask Will his business. The man was burly and of stout build, while his fat, bearded face, red as the gaol walls themselves, attracted Blanchard by its pleasant expression. Will's eyes brightened at the aspect of this janitor; he touched his hat very civilly, wished the man "good afternoon," and was about to step in when the other stopped him.

"Doan't be in such a hurry, my son. What's brought 'e, an' who do 'e want?"

"My business is private, mister; I wants to see the head man."

"The Governor? Won't nobody less do? You can't see him without proper appointment. But maybe a smaller man might serve your turn?"

Will reflected, then laughed at the warder with that sudden magic of face that even softened hard hearts towards him.

"To be plain, mate, I'm here to stop. You'll be sure to knaw 'bout it sooner or late, so I'll tell 'e now. I've done a thing I must pay for, and 't is a clink job, so I've comed right along."

The warder grew rather sterner, and his eye instinctively roamed for a constable.

"Best say no more, then. Awnly you've comed to the wrong place. Police station's what you want, I reckon."

"Why for? This be County Gaol, ban't it?"

"Ess, that's so; but we doan't take in folks for the axin'. Tu many queer caraters about."

Will saw the man's eyes twinkle, yet he was puzzled at this unexpected problem.

"Look here," he said, "I like you, and I'll deal fair by you an' tell you the rights of it. Step out here an' listen."

“Mind, what you sez will be used against you, then.”

“Theer ban’t no secret in it, for that matter.”

The husband thereupon related his recent achievement, and concluded thus:

“So, having kicked up a mort o’ trouble, I doan’t want to make no more—see? An’ I stepped here quiet to keep it out of the papers, an’ just take what punishment’s right an’ vitty for marryin’ a maid wi’out so much as by your leave. Now, then, caan’t ’e do the rest?”

Page 63

He regarded the warder gravely and inquiringly, but as the red-faced man slowly sucked up the humour of the situation, his mouth expanded and his eyes almost disappeared. Then he spoke through outbursts and shakings of deep laughter.

“Oh Lard! Wheerever was you born to?”

Will flushed deeply, frowned, and clenched his fists at this question.

“Shut your gert mouth!” he said angrily. “Doan’t bellow like that, or I’ll hit ’e awver the jaw! Do’e think I want the whole of Exeter City to knaw my errand? What’s theer to gape an’ snigger at? Caan’t ’e treat a man civil?”

This reproof set the official off again, and only a furious demand from Blanchard to go about his business and tell the Governor he wanted an interview partially steadied him.

“By Gor! you’ll be the death of me. Caan’t help it—honour bright—doan’t mean no rudeness to you. Bless your young heart, an’ the gal’s, whoever she be. Didn’t ’e knaw? But theer! course you didn’t, else you wouldn’t be here. Why, ’t is purty near as hard to get in prison as out again. You’ll have to be locked up, an’ tried by judge an’ jury, and plead guilty, and be sentenced, an’ the Lard He knaws what beside ‘fore you come here. How do the lawyers an’ p’licemen get their living?”

“That’s news. I hoped to save Miller Lyddon all such trouble.”

“Why not try another way, an’ see if you can get the auld gentleman to forgive ’e?”

“Not him. He’ll have the law in due time.”

“Well, I’m ‘mazin’ sorry I caan’t oblige ’e, for I’m sure we’d be gude friends, an’ you’d cheer us all up butivul.”

“But you ’m certain it caan’t be managed?”

“Positive.”

“Then I’ve done all a man can. You’ll bear witness I wanted to come, won’t ’e?”

“Oh yes, I’ll take my oath o’ that. *I* shaan’t forget ’e.”

“All right. And if I’m sent here again, bimebye, I’ll look out for you, and I hopes you’ll be as pleasant inside as now.”

“I’ll promise that. Shall be awnly tu pleased to make you at home. I like you; though, to be frank, I reckon you’m tu gnat-brained a chap to make a wife happy.”

“Then you reckon a damned impedent thing! What d’ you knaw ’bout it?”

“A tidy deal. I’ve been married more years than you have hours, I lay.”

“Age ban’t everything; ’t is the fashion brains in a man’s head counts most.”

“That’s right enough. ’T is something to knaw that. Gude-bye to ’e, bwoy, an’ thank you for makin’ me laugh heartier than I have this month of Sundays.”

“More fule you!” declared Will; but he was too elated at the turn of affairs to be anything but amiable just now. Before the other disappeared, he stopped him.

“Shake hands, will ‘e? I thank you for lightenin’ my mind—bein’ a man of law, in a manner of speakin’. Ess, I’m obliged to ’e. Of coourse I doan’t *want* to come to prison ’zackly. That’s common sense.”

Page 64

“Most feel same as you. No doubt you’re in the wrong, though the law caan’t drop on honest, straightforrard matrimony to my knowledge. Maybe circumstances is for ’e.”

“Ess, they be—every jack wan of ’em!” declared Will. “An’ if I doan’t come here to stop, I’ll call in some day and tell ’e the upshot of this coil in a friendly way.”

“Do so, an’ bring your missis. Shall be delighted to see the pair of ’e any time. Ax for Thomas Bates.”

Will nodded and marched off, while the warder returned to his post, and when he had again made fast the door behind him, permitted the full splendor of his recent experience to tumble over his soul in a laughter perhaps louder than any heard before or since within the confines of one of Her Majesty’s prisons.

CHAPTER X

THE BRINGING OF THE NEWS

Phoebe meantime returned to Chagford, withdrew herself into her chamber, and feverishly busied brains and hands with a task commended that morning by Will when she had mentioned it to him. The various trinkets and objects of value lavished of late upon her by John Grimbal she made into a neat packet, and tied up a sealskin jacket and other furs in a second and more bulky parcel. With these and a letter she presently despatched a maid to Mr. Grimbal’s temporary address. Phoebe’s note explained how, weak and friendless until the sudden return of Will into her life, she had been thrown upon wickedness, falsehood, and deceit to win her own salvation in the face of all about her. She told him of the deed done that day, begged him to be patient and forget her, and implored him to forgive her husband, who had fought with the only weapons at his command. It was a feeble communication, and Phoebe thought that her love for Will might have inspired words more forcible; but relief annihilated any other emotion; she felt thankful that the lying, evasion, and prevarication of the last horrible ten days were at an end. From the nightmare of that time her poor, bruised conscience emerged sorely stricken; yet she felt that the battle now before her was a healthy thing by comparison, and might serve to brace her moral senses rather than not.

At the tea-table she first met her father, and there were present also Billy Blee and Mr. Chapple. The latter had come to Monks Barton about a triumphal arch, already in course of erection at Chagford market-place, and his presence it was that precipitated her confession, and brought Phoebe’s news like a thunderbolt upon the company.

Mr. Chapple, looking up suddenly from the saucer that rested upon his outspread fingers and thumb, made a discovery, and spoke with some concern.

“Faith, Missy, that’s ill luck—a wisht thing to do indeed! Put un off, like a gude maid, for theer ‘s many a wise sayin’ ’gainst it.”

“What’s her done?” asked Billy anxiously.

“Luke ‘pon her weddin’ finger. ’Tis poor speed to put un on ’fore her lard an’ master do it, at the proper moment ordained by Scripture.”

Page 65

“If she hasn’t! Take un off, Miss Phoebe, do!” begged Mr. Blee, in real trepidation; and the miller likewise commanded his daughter to remove her wedding-ring.

“An auld wife’s tale, but, all the same, shouldn’t be theer till you ’m a married woman,” he said.

Thus challenged, the way was made smooth as possible for the young wife. She went over to her father, walked close to him, and put her plump little hand with its shining addition upon his shoulder.

“Faither dear, I be a married woman. I had to tell lies and play false, but’t was to you an’ Mr. Grimbal I’ve been double, not to my husband that is. I was weak, and I’ve been punished sore, but—”

“Why, gal alive! what rigmarole ‘s this? Married—ay, an’ so you shall be, in gude time. You ’m light-headed, lass, I do b’lieve. But doan’t fret, I’ll have Doctor—”

“Hear me,” she said, almost roughly. “I kept my word—my first sacred word—to Will. I loved him, an’ none else but him; an’ ’tis done—I’ve married him this marnin’, for it had to be, an’ theer’s the sign an’ token of it I’ve brought along with me.”

She drew the copy of the register from her pocket, opened it with trembling fingers, set it before Mr. Lyddon, and waited for him to speak. But it was some time before he found words or wind to do so. Literally the fact had taken his breath. A curious expression, more grin than frown—an expression beyond his control in moments of high emotion—-wrinkled his eyelids, stretched his lips, and revealed the perfect double row of his false teeth. His hand went forward to the blue paper now lying before him, then the fingers stopped half way and shook in the air. Twice he opened his mouth, but only a sharp expiration, between a sigh and a bark, escaped.

“My God, you’ve shook the sawl of un!” cried Billy, starting forward, but the miller with an effort recovered his self-possession, scanned the paper, dropped it, and lifted up his voice in lamentation.

“True—past altering—’t is a thing done! May God forgive you for this wicked deed, Phoebe Lyddon—I’d never have b’lieved it of ’e—never—not if an angel had tawld me. My awn that was, and my awnly one! My darter, my soft-eyed gal, the crown of my grey hairs, the last light of my life!”

“I pray you’ll come to forgive me in time, dear faither. I doan’t ax ’e to yet a while. I had to do it—a faithful promise. ’T was for pure love, faither; I lied for him—lied even to you; an’ my heart ’s been near to breakin’ for ’e these many days; but you’d never have listened if I’d told ’e.”

“Go,” he said very quietly. “I caan’t abear the sight of’e just now. An’ that poor fule, as thrawed his money in golden showers for ’e! Oh, my gude God, why for did ’E leave me any childern at all? Why didn’t ’E take this cross-hearted wan when t’ other was snatched away? Why didn’t ‘E fill the cup of my sorrer to the brim at a filling an’ not drop by drop, to let un run awver now I be auld?”

Page 66

Phoebe turned to him in bitter tears, but the man's head was down on his hands beside his plate and cup, and he, too, wept, with a pitiful childish squeak between his sobs. Weakness so overwhelming and so unexpected—a father's sorrow manifested in this helpless feminine fashion—tore the girl's very heartstrings. She knelt beside him and put her arms about him; but he pushed her away and with some return of self-control and sternness again bid her depart from him. This Phoebe did, and there was silence, while Mr. Lyddon snuffled, steadied himself, wiped his face with a cotton handkerchief, and felt feebly for a pair of spectacles in his pocket. Mr. Chapple, meantime, had made bold to scan the paper with round eyes, and Billy, now seeing the miller in some part recovered, essayed to comfort him.

"Theer, theer, maister, doan't let this black come-along-o't quench 'e quite. That's better! You such a man o' sense, tu! 'T was awver-ordained by Providence, though a artful thing in a young gal; but women be such itemy twoads best o' times—stage-players by sex, they sez; an' when love for a man be hid in 'em, gormed if they caan't fox the God as made 'em!"

"Her to do it! The unthankfulness, the cold cruelty of it! An' me that was mother an' father both to her—that did rock her cradle with these hands an' wash the li'l year-auld body of her. To forget all—all she owed! It cuts me that deep!"

"Deep as a wire into cheese, I lay. An' well it may; but han't no new thing; you stablish yourself with that. The ways o' women 's like—'t was a sayin' of Solomon I caan't call home just this minute; but he knawed, you mind, none better. He had his awn petticoat trouble, same as any other Christian man given to women. What do 'e say, neighbour?"

Billy, of opinion that Mr. Chapple should assist him in this painful duty, put the last question to his rotund friend, but the other, for answer, rose and prepared to depart.

"I say," he answered, "that I'd best go up-along and stop they chaps buildin' the triumphant arch. 'Pears won't be called for now. An' theer's a tidy deal else to do likewise. Folks was comin' in from the Moor half a score o' miles for this merry-makin'."

"'T is a practical thought," said Billy. "Them as come from far be like to seem fules if nothin' 's done. You go up the village an' I'll follow 'e so quick as I can."

Mr. Chapple thereupon withdrew and Billy turned to the miller. Mr. Lyddon had wandered once and again up and down the kitchen, then fallen into his customary chair; and there he now sat, his elbows on his knees, his hands over his face. He was overwhelmed; his tears hurt him physically and his head throbbed. Twenty years seemed to have piled themselves upon his brow in as many minutes.

Page 67

“Sure I could shed water myself to see you like this here,” said Mr. Blee, sympathetically; “but ’t is wan of them eternal circumstances we ’m faaced with that all the rain falled of a wet winter won’t wash away. Theer ’s the lines. They ’m a fact, same as the sun in heaven ’s a fact. God A’mighty’s Self couldn’t undo it wi’out some violent invention; an’ for that matter I doan’t see tu clear how even Him be gwaine to magic a married woman into a spinster again; any more than He could turn a spinster into a married woman, onless some ordinary human man came forrard. You must faace it braave an’ strong. But that imp o’ Satan—that damn Blanchard bwoy! Theer! I caan’t say what I think ’bout him. Arter all that’s been done: the guests invited, the banns axed out, the victuals bought, and me retracin’ my ballet night arter night, for ten days, to get un to concert pitch—well, ’t is a matter tu deep for mere speech.”

“The—the young devil! I shall have no pity—not a spark. I wish to God he could hang for it!”

“As to that, might act worse than leave it to Jan Grimbal. He’ll do summat ‘fore you’ve done talkin’, if I knaw un. An’ a son-in-law ’s a son-in-law, though he’ve brought it to pass by a brigand deed same as this. ’T is a kicklish question what a man should do to the person of his darter’s husband. You bide quiet an’ see what chances. Grimbal’s like to take law into his awn hands, as any man of noble nature might in this quandary.”

The disappointed lover’s probable actions offered dreary food for thought, and the two old men were still conversing when a maid entered to lay the cloth for supper. Then Billy proceeded to the village and Mr. Lyddon, unnerved and restless, rambled aimlessly into the open air, addressed any man or woman who passed from the adjacent cottages, and querulously announced, to the astonishment of chance listeners, that his daughter’s match was broken off.

An hour later Phoebe reappeared in the kitchen and occupied her usual place at the supper-table. No one spoke a word, but the course of the meal was suddenly interrupted, for there came a knock at the farmhouse door, and without waiting to be answered, somebody lifted the latch, tramped down the stone passage, and entered the room.

Now Phoebe, in the privacy of her little chamber beneath the thatch, had reflected miserably on the spectacle of her husband far away in a prison cell, with his curls cropped off and his shapely limbs clad convict-fashion. When, therefore, Will, and not John Grimbal, as she expected, stood before her, his wife was perhaps more astonished than any other body present. Young Blanchard appeared, however. He looked weary and hungry, for he had been on his legs during the greater part of the day and had forgotten to eat since his pretence of wedding-breakfast ten hours earlier. Now, newly returned from Exeter, he came straight to Monks Barton before going to his home.

Page 68

Billy Blee was the first to find his voice before this sudden apparition. His fork, amply laden, hung in the air as though his arm was turned to stone; with a mighty gulp he emptied his mouth and spoke.

“Gormed if you ban’t the most ‘mazin’ piece ever comed out o’ Chagford!”

“Miller Lyddon,” said Will, not heeding Mr. Blee, “I be here to say wan word ‘fore I goes out o’ your sight. You said you’d have law of me if I took Phoebe; an’ that I done, ’cause we was of a mind. Now we ‘m man an’ wife, an’ I’m just back from prison, wheer I went straight to save you trouble. But theer ‘s preambles an’ writs an’ what not. I shall be to mother’s, an’ you can send Inspector Chown when you like. It had to come ’cause we was of a mind.”

He looked proudly at Phoebe, but departed without speaking to her, and silence followed his going. Mr. Lyddon stared blankly at the door through which Will departed, then his rage broke forth.

“Curse the wretch! Curse him to his dying day! An’ I’ll do more—more than that. What he can suffer he shall, and if I’ve got to pay my last shilling to get him punishment I’ll do it—my last shilling I’ll pay.”

He had not regarded his daughter or spoken to her since his words at their first meeting; and now, still ignoring Phoebe’s presence, he began eagerly debating with Billy Blee as to what law might have power to do. The girl, wisely enough, kept silence, ate a little food, and then went quietly away to her bed. She was secretly overjoyed at Will’s return and near presence; but another visitor might be expected at any moment, and Phoebe knew that to be in bed before the arrival of John Grimbal would save her from the necessity of a meeting she much feared. She entered upon her wedding-night, therefore, while the voices below droned on, now rising, now falling; then, while she was saying her prayers with half her mind on them, the other half feverishly intent on a certain sound, it came. She heard the clink, clink of the gate, thrown wide open and now swinging backwards and forwards, striking the hasp each time; then a heavy step followed it, feet strode clanging down the passage, and the bull roar of a man’s voice fell on her ear. Upon this she huddled under the clothes, but listened for a second at long intervals to hear when he departed. The thing that had happened, however, since her husband’s departure and John Grimbal’s arrival, remained happily hidden from Phoebe until next morning, by which time a climax in affairs was past and the outcome of tragic circumstances fully known.

When Blanchard left the farm, he turned his steps very slowly homewards, and delayed some minutes on Rushford Bridge before appearing to his mother. For her voice he certainly yearned, and for her strong sense to throw light upon his future actions; but she did not know everything there was to be known and he felt that with himself, when

all was said, lay decision as to his next step. While he reflected a new notion took shape and grew defined and seemed good to him.

Page 69

“Why not?” he said to himself, aloud. “Why not go back? Seeing the provocation—they might surely—?” He pursued the idea silently and came to a determination. Yet the contemplated action was never destined to be performed, for now an accident so trifling as the chance glimmer of a lucifer match contributed to remodel the scheme of his life and wholly shatter immediate resolutions. Craving a whiff of tobacco, without which he had been since morning, Will lighted his pipe, and the twinkle of flame as he did so showed his face to a man passing across the bridge at that moment. He stopped in his stride, and a great bellow of wrath escaped him, half savage, half joyful.

“By God! I didn’t think to meet so soon!”

Here was a red-hot raving Nemesis indeed; and Will, while prepared for a speedy meeting with his enemy, neither expected nor desired an encounter just then. But it had come, and he knew what was before him. Grimbal, just returned from a long day’s sport, rode back to his hotel in a good temper. He drank a brandy-and-soda at the bar, then went up to his rooms and found Phoebe’s letter; whereupon, as he was in muddy pink, he set off straight for Monks Barton; and now he stood face to face with the man on earth he most desired to meet. By the light of his match Will saw a red coat, white teeth under a great yellow moustache, and a pair of mad, flaming eyes, hungry for something. He knew what was coming, moved quickly from the parapet of the bridge, and flung away his pipe to free his hands. As he did so the other was on him. Will warded one tremendous stroke from a hunting-crop; then they came to close quarters, and Grimbal, dropping his whip, got in a heavy half-arm blow on his enemy’s face before they gripped in holds. The younger man, in no trim for battle, reeled and tried to break away; but the other had him fast, picked him clean off the ground, and, getting in his weight, used a Yankee throw, with intent to drop Will against the granite of the bridge. But though Blanchard went down like a child before the attack, he disappeared rather than fell; and in the pitchy night it seemed as though some amiable deity had caught up the vanquished into air. A sudden pressure of the low parapet against his own legs as he staggered forward, told John Grimbal what was done and, at the same moment, a tremendous splash in the water below indicated his enemy’s dismal position. Teign, though not in flood at the time, ran high, and just below the bridge a deep pool opened out. Around it were rocks upon which rose the pillars of the bridge. No sound or cry followed Will Blanchard’s fall; no further splash of a swimmer, or rustle on the river’s bank, indicated any effort from him. Grimbal’s first instincts were those of regret that revenge had proved so brief. His desire was past before he had tasted it. Then for a moment he hesitated, and the first raving lust to kill Phoebe’s husband waned a trifle before the sudden conviction that he had done so. He crept down to the river, ploughed about to find the man, questioning what he should do if he did find him. His wrath waxed as he made search, and he told himself that he should only trample Blanchard deeper into water if he came upon him. He kicked here and there with his heavy boots; then abandoned the search and proceeded to Monks Barton.

Page 70

Into the presence of the miller he thundered, and for a time said nothing of the conflict from which he had come. The scene needs no special narration. Vain words and wishes, oaths and curses, filled John Grimbal's mouth. He stamped on the floor, finding it impossible to remain motionless, roared the others down, loaded the miller with bitter reproaches for his blindness, silenced Mr. Blee on every occasion when he attempted to join the discussion. The man, in fine, exhibited that furious, brute passion and rage to be expected from such a nature suddenly faced with complete dislocation of cherished hopes. His life had been a long record of success, and this tremendous reverse, on his first knowledge of it, came near to unhinge John Grimbal's mind. Storm succeeded storm, explosion followed upon explosion, and the thought of the vanity of such a display only rendered him more frantic. Then chance reminded the raging maniac of that thing he had done, and now, removed from the deed by a little time, he gloried in it.

"Blast the devil—short shrift he got—given straight into my hand! I swore to kill him when I heard it; an' I have—pitched him over the bridge and broken his blasted neck. I'd burn in ragin' hell through ten lifetimes to do it again. But that's done once for all. And you can tell your whore of a daughter she's a widow, not a wife!"

"God be gude to us!" cried Billy, while Mr. Lyddon started in dismay. "Is this true you'm tellin'? Blue murder? An' so, like's not, his awn mother'll find un when she goes to draw water in the marnin'!"

"Let her, and his sister, too; and my God-damned brother! All in it—every cursed one of 'em. I'd like—I'd like—Christ—"

He broke off, was silent for a moment, then strode out of the room towards the staircase. Mr. Lyddon heard him and rushed after him with Billy. They scrambled past and stood at the stair-foot while Grimbal glanced up in the direction of Phoebe's room, and then glared at the two old men.

"Why not, you doddering fools? Can you still stand by her, cursed jade of lies? My work's only half done! No man's ever betrayed me but he's suffered hell for it; and no woman shall."

He raged, and the two with beating hearts waited for him.

Then suddenly laughing aloud, the man turned his back, and passed into the night without more words.

"Mad, so mad as any zany!" gasped Mr. Blee. "Thank God the whim's took un to go. My innards was curdlin' afore him!"

The extravagance of Grimbal's rage had affected Mr. Lyddon also. With white and terrified face he crept after Grimbal, and watched that tornado of a man depart.

“My stars! He do breathe forth threatenings and slaughters worse ’n in any Bible carater ever I read of,” said the miller, “and if what he sez be true—”

“I’ll wager ’t is. Theer ’s method in him. Your son-in-law, if I may say it, be drownded, sure ’s death. What a world!”

Page 71

“Get the lanterns and call Sam Bonus. He must stand to this door an’ let no man in while we ’m away. God send the chap ban’t dead. I don’t like for a long-cripple to suffer torture.”

“That’s your high religion. An’ I’ll carry the brandy, for ’t is a liquor, when all ’s said, what ’s saved more bodies in this world than it ‘s damned sawls in the next, an’ a thing pleasant, tu, used with sense—specially if a man can sleep ’fore ’t is dead in un.”

“Hurry, hurry! Every minute may mean life or death. I’ll call Bonus; you get the lanterns.”

Ten minutes later a huge labourer stood guard over Monks Barton, and the miller, with his man, entered upon their long and fruitless search. The thaw had come, but glimmering ridges of snow still outlined the bases of northern-facing hedges along the river. With infinite labour and some difficulty they explored the stream, then, wet and weary, returned by the southern bank to their starting-point at Rushford Bridge. Here Billy found a cloth cap by the water’s edge, and that was the only evidence of Will’s downfall. As they clambered up from the river Mr. Lyddon noted bright eyes shining across the night, and found that the windows of Mrs. Blanchard’s cottage were illuminated.

“They ‘m waitin’ for him by the looks of it,” he said. “What ought us to do, I wonder?”

Billy never objected to be the bearer of news, good or ill, so that it was sensational; but a thought struck him at seeing the lighted windows.

“Why, it may be he’s theer! If so, then us might find Grimbal didn’t slay un arter all. ‘T was such a miz-maze o’ crooked words he let fly ’pon us, that perhaps us misread un.”

“I wish I thought so. Come. Us can ax that much.”

A few minutes later they stood at Mrs. Blanchard’s door and knocked. The widow herself appeared, fully dressed, wide awake, and perfectly collected. Her manner told Mr. Lyddon nothing.

“What might you want, Miller?”

“’T is Will. There’s bin blows struck and violence done, I hear.”

“I can tell ‘e the rest. The bwoy’s paid his score an’ got full measure. He wanted to be even with you, tu, but they wouldn’t let un.”

“If he ban’t dead, I’ll make him smart yet for his evil act.”

“I warned ‘e. He was cheated behind his back, an’ played with the same cards what you did, and played better.”

“Wheer is he now? That’s what I want to knaw.”

“Up in the house. They met on the bridge an’ Grimbal bested him, Will bein’ weary an’ empty-bellied. When the man flinged him in the stream, he got under the arch behind the rocks afore he lost his head for a time and went senseless. When he comed to he crawled up the croft and I let un in.”

“Thank God he’s not dead; but punishment he shall have if theer’s justice in the land.”

“Bide your time. He won’t shirk it. But he’s hurted proper; you might let Jan Grimbal knaw, ’t will ease his mind.”

Page 72

“Not it,” declared Billy; “he thought he’d killed un; cracked the neck of un.”

“The blow ’pon his faace scatted abroad his left nostril; the fall brawked his arm, not his neck; an’ the spurs t’ other was wearin’ tored his leg to the bone. Doctor’s seen un; so tell Grimbal. Theer’s pleasure in such payment.”

She spoke without emotion, and showed no passion against the master of the Red House. When Will had come to her, being once satisfied in her immediate motherly agony that his life was not endangered, she allowed her mind a sort of secret, fierce delight at his performance and its success in the main issue. She was proud of him at the bottom of her heart; but before other eyes bore herself with outward imperturbability.

“You’ll keep the gal, I reckon?” she said quietly; “if you can hold hand off Will till he’m on his legs again, I’d thank you.”

“I shall do what I please, when I please; an’ my poor fule of a daughter stops with me as long as I’ve got power to make her.”

“Hope you’ll live to see things might have been worse.”

“That’s impossible. No worse evil could have fallen upon me. My grey hairs a laughing-stock, and your awn brother’s hand in it. He knawed well enough the crime he was committing.”

“You’ve a short memory, Miller. I lay Jan Grimbal knaws the reason if you doan’t. The worm that can sting does, if you tread on it. Gude-night to ’e.”

“An’ how do you find yourself now?” Billy inquired, as his master and he returned to Monks Barton.

“Weary an’ sick, an’ filled with gall. Was it wrong to make the match, do ‘e think, seein’ ’t was all for love of my cheel? Was I out to push so strong for it? I seem I done right, despite this awful mischance.”

“An’ so you did; an’ my feelin’s be the same as yours to a split hair, though I’ve got no language for em at this unnatural hour of marnin’,” said Billy.

Then in silence, to the bobbing illumination of their lanterns, Mr. Lyddon and his familiar dragged their weary bodies home.

CHAPTER XI

LOVE AND GREY GRANITE

The lofty central area of Devon has ever presented a subject of fascination to geologists; and those evidences of early man which adorn Dartmoor to-day have similarly attracted antiquarian minds for many generations past. But the first-named student, although his researches plunge him into periods of mundane time inconceivably more remote than that with which the archaeologist is concerned, yet reaches conclusions more definite and arrives at a nearer approximation to truth than any who occupy themselves in the same area with manifold and mysterious indications of early humanity's sojourn. The granite upheaval during that awful revolt of matter represented by the creation of Dartmoor has been assigned to a period between the Carboniferous and Permian eras; but whether

Page 73

the womb of one colossal volcano or the product of a thousand lesser eruptions threw forth this granite monster, none may yet assert. Whether Dartmoor first appeared as a mighty shield, with one uprising spike in its midst, or as a target supporting many separate bosses cannot be declared; for the original aspect of the region has long vanished, though our worn and weathered land of tors still shadows, in its venerable desolation, those sublimer, more savage glories manifested ere the eye of man or beast existed to receive an image of them.

But the earliest human problems presented by Devon's watershed admit of no sure solution, albeit they date from a time adjacent contrasted with that wherein the land was born. Nature's message still endures for man to read as his knowledge grows; but the records of our primal fellows have grown dim and uncertain as the centuries rolled over them. There exists, however, within the lofty, lonely kingdom of the granite, a chain of human evidences extending from prehistoric ages to the ruined shepherd's cot of yesterday. At many spots a spectator may perceive in one survey the stone ruin of the Danmonian's habitation, and hypaethral temple or forum, the heather-clad debris left by Elizabethan streamers of alluvial tin, the inky peat-ridges from which a moorman has just cut his winter firing. But the first-named objects, with kindred fragments that have similarly endured, chiefly fire imagination. Seen grey at gloaming time, golden through sunny dawns, partaking in those spectral transformations cast upon the moor by the movement of clouds, by the curtains of the rain, by the silver of breaking day, the monotone of night and the magic of the moon, these relics reveal themselves and stand as a link between the present and the far past. Mystery broods over them and the jealous wings of the ages hide a measure of their secret. Thus far these lonely rings of horrent stones and the alignments between them have concealed their story from modern man, and only in presence of the ancient pound, the foundations of a dwelling, the monolith that marked a stone-man's sepulchre, the robbed cairn and naked kistvaen, may we speak with greater certainty and, through the glimmering dawn of history and the records of Britain's earliest foes, burrow back to aboriginal man on Dartmoor. Then research and imagination rebuild the eternal rings of granite and, erecting upon them tall domes of thatch and skins on wattle ribs, conceive the early village like a cluster of gigantic mushrooms, whose cowls are uplifted in that rugged fastness through the night of time. We see Palaeolithic man sink into mother earth before the superior genius of his Neolithic successor; and we note the Damnonian shepherds flourishing in lonely lodges and preserving their flocks from the wolf, while Egypt's pyramids were still of modern creation, and the stars twinkled in strange constellations, above a world innocent as yet of the legends that would name them. The stone-workers have vanished away, but their labour endures; their fabricated flints still appear, brought to light from barrows and peat-ties, from the burrows of rabbits and the mounds of the antiquary mole; the ruins of their habitations, the theatres of their assemblies and unknown ceremonies still stand, and probably will continue so to do as long as Dartmoor's bosom lies bare to the storm and stress of the ages.

Page 74

Modern man has also fretted the wide expanse, has scratched its surface and dropped a little sweat and blood; but his mansion and his cot and his grave are no more; plutonic rock is the only tablet on which any human story has been scribbled to endure. Castles and manor-houses have vanished from the moorland confines like the cloudy palaces of a dream; the habitations of the mining folk shall not be seen to-day, and their handiwork quickly returns to primitive waste; fern and furze hide the robbed cairn and bury the shattered cross; flood and lightning and tempest roam over the darkness of a region sacred to them, and man stretches his hand for what Nature touches not; but the menhir yet stands erect, the “sacred” circles are circles still, and these, with like records of a dim past, present to thinking travellers the crown and first glory of the Moor. Integral portions of the ambient desolation are they—rude toys that infant humanity has left in Mother Nature’s lap; and the spectacle of them twines a golden thread of human interest into the fabric of each lonely heath, each storm-scarred mountain-top and heron-haunted stream. Nothing is changed since skin-clad soldiers and shepherds strode these wastes, felt their hearts quicken at sight of women, or their hands clench over celt-headed spears before danger. Here the babies of the stone-folk, as the boys and girls to-day, stained their little mouths and ringers with fruit of briar and whortle; the ling bloomed then as now; the cotton-grass danced its tattered plume; the sphagnum mosses opened emerald-green eyes in marsh and quaking bog; and hoary granite scattered every ravine and desert valley. About those aboriginal men the Moor spread forth the same horizon of solemn enfolding hills, and where twinkle the red hides of the moor-man’s heifers through upstanding fern, in sunny coombs and hawthorn thickets, yesterday the stone-man’s cattle roamed and the little eyes of a hidden bear followed their motions. Here, indeed, the first that came in the flesh are the last to vanish in their memorials; here Nature, to whom the hut-circle of granite, all clad in Time’s lichen livery of gold and grey, is no older than the mushroom ring shining like a necklace of pearls within it—Nature may follow what course she will, may build as she pleases, may probe to the heart of things, may pursue the eternal Law without let from the pigmies; and here, if anywhere from man’s precarious standpoint, shall he perceive the immutable and observe a presentment of himself in those ephemera that dance above the burn at dawn, and ere twilight passes gather up their gauze wings and perish.

Page 75

According to individual temperament this pregnant region attracts and fascinates the human spectator or repels him. Martin Grimbal loved Dartmoor and, apart from ties of birth and early memories, his natural predilections found thereon full scope and play. He was familiar with most of those literary productions devoted to the land, and now developed an ambition to add some result of personal observation and research to extant achievements. He went to work with method and determination, and it was not until respectable accumulations of notes and memoranda already appeared as the result of his labours that the man finally—almost reluctantly—reconciled himself to the existence of another and deeper interest in his life than that furnished by the grey granite monuments of the Moor. Hide it from himself he could no longer, nor yet wholly from others. As in wild Devon it is difficult at any time to escape from the murmur of waters unseen, so now the steady flood of this disquieting emotion made music at all waking hours in Martin's archaeologic mind, shattered his most subtle theories unexpectedly, and oftentimes swept the granite clean out of his head on the flood of a golden river.

After three months of this beautiful but disquieting experience, Martin resigned himself to the conclusion that he was in love with Chris Blanchard. He became very cautious and timid before the discovery. He feared much and contemplated the future with the utmost distrust. Doubt racked him; he checked himself from planning courses of conduct built on mad presumptions. By night, as a sort of debauch, in those hours when man is awake and fancy free, he conceived of a happy future with Chris and little children about him; at morning light, if any shadow of that fair vision returned, he blushed and looked round furtively, as though some thought-reader's cold eye must be sneering at such presumption. He despaired of finding neutral ground from which his dry mind could make itself attractive to a girl. Now and again he told himself that the new emotion must be crushed, in that it began to stand between him and the work he had set himself to do for his county; but during more sanguine moods he challenged this decision and finally, as was proper and right, the flood of the man's first love drowned menhir and hut-circle fathoms deep, and demanded all his attention at the cost of mental peace. An additional difficulty appeared in the fact that the Blanchard family were responsible for John Grimbal's misfortune; and Martin, without confusing the two circumstances, felt that before him really lay the problem of a wife or a brother. When first he heard of the event that set Chagford tongues wagging so briskly, he rightly judged that John would hold him one of the conspirators; and an engagement to Chris Blanchard must certainly confirm the baffled lover's suspicions and part the men for ever. But before those words, as they passed through his brain, Martin Grimbal stopped, as the peasant before a shrine. "An engagement to Chris Blanchard!" He was too much a man and too deep merged in love to hesitate before the possibility of such unutterable happiness.

Page 76

For his brother he mourned deeply enough, and when the thousand rumours bred of the battle on the bridge were hatched and fluttered over the countryside, Martin it was who exerted all his power to stay them. Most people were impressed with the tragic nature of the unfortunate John's disappointment; but his energetic measures since the event were held to pay all scores, and it was believed the matter would end without any more trouble from him. Clement Hicks entertained a different opinion, perhaps judging John Grimbal from the secrets of his own character; but Will expressed a lively faith that his rival must now cry quits, after his desperate and natural but unsuccessful attempt to render Phoebe a widow. The shattered youth took his broken bones very easily, and only grunted when he found that his wife was not permitted to visit him under any pretence whatever; while as for Phoebe, her wild sorrow gradually lessened and soon disappeared as each day brought a better account of Will. John Grimbal vanished on the trip which was to have witnessed his honeymoon. He pursued his original plans with the modification that Phoebe had no part in them, and it was understood that he would return to Chagford in the spring.

Thus matters stood, and when his brother was gone and Will and Phoebe had been married a month, Martin, having suffered all that love could do meantime, considered he might now approach the Blanchards. Ignorantly he pursued an awkward course, for wholly unaware that Clement Hicks felt any interest in Will and his sister beyond that of friendship, Martin sought from him the general information he desired upon the subject of Chris, her family and concerns.

Together the two men went upon various excursions to ancient relics that interested them both, though in different measure. It was long before Martin found courage to bring forth the words he desired to utter, but finally he managed to do so, in the bracing conditions that obtained on Cosdon Beacon upon the occasion of a visit to its summit. By this time he had grown friendly with Hicks and must have learnt all and more than he desired to know but for the bee-keeper's curious taciturnity. For some whim Clement never mentioned his engagement; it was a subject as absent from his conversation as his own extreme poverty; but while the last fact Martin had already guessed, the former remained utterly concealed from him. Neither did any chance discover it until some time afterwards.

The hut-circles on Cosdon's south-eastern flank occupied Martin's pencil. Clement gazed once upon the drawing, then turned away, for no feeling or poetry inspired the work; it was merely very accurate. The sketches made, both men ascended immense Cosdon, where its crown of cairns frets the long summit; and here, to the sound of the wind in the dead heather, with all the wide world of Northern Devon extended beneath his gaze under a savage sunset, Martin found courage to speak. At first Hicks did not hear. His eyes were on the pageant of the sky and paid tribute of sad thought before an infinity of dying cloud splendours. But the antiquary repeated his remark. It related to Will Blanchard, and upon Clement dropping a monosyllabic reply his companion continued:

Page 77

“A very handsome fellow, too. Miss Blanchard puts me in mind of him.”

“They’re much alike in some things. But though Chris knows her brother to be good to look at, you’ll never get Will to praise her. Funny, isn’t it? Yet to his Phoebe, she’s the sun to a star.”

“I think so too indeed. In fact, Miss Blanchard is the most beautiful woman I ever saw.”

Clement did not answer. He was gazing through the sunset at Chris, and as he looked he smiled, and the sadness lifted a little from off his face.

“Strange some lucky fellow has not won her before now,” proceeded the other, glancing away to hide the blush that followed his diplomacy.

Here, by all experience and reason, and in the natural sequence of events Clement Hicks might have been expected to make his confession and rejoice in his prize, but for some cause, from some queer cross-current of disposition, he shut his mouth upon the greatest fact of his life. He answered, indeed, but his words conveyed a false impression. What sinister twist of mind was responsible for his silence he himself could not have explained; a mere senseless monkey-mischief seemed to inspire it. Martin had not deceived him, because the elder man was unused to probing a fellow-creature for facts or obtaining information otherwise than directly. Clement noted the false intonation and hesitation, recollected his sweetheart’s allusion to Martin Grimbal, and read into his companion’s question something closely akin to what in reality lay behind it. His discovery might have been expected to hasten rather than retard the truth, and a first impulse in any man had made the facts instantly clear; but Clement rarely acted on impulse. His character was subtle, disingenuous, secretive. Safe in absolute possession, the discovery of Martin’s attachment did not flutter him. He laughed in his mind; then he pictured Chris the wife of this man, reviewed the worldly improvement in her position such a union must effect, and laughed no more. Finally he decided to hold his peace; but his motives for so doing were not clear even to himself.

“Yes,” he answered, “but she’s not one to give her hand without her heart.”

These words, from Martin’s point of view, embraced a definite assurance that Chris was free; and, as they walked homewards, he kept silence upon this thought for the space of half an hour. The uneasy hopes and black fears of love circled him about. Perhaps his timorous mind, in some moods, had been almost relieved at declaration of the girl’s engagement to another. But now the tremendous task of storming a virgin heart lay ahead of him, as he imagined. Torments unfelt by those of less sensitive mould also awaited Martin Grimbal. The self-assertive sort of man, who rates himself as not valueless, and whose love will not prevent callous calculation on the weight of his own person and purse upon the argument, is doubtless wise in his generation, and his sanguine

Page 78

temperament enables him to escape oceans of unrest, hurricanes of torment; but self-distrust and humility have their value, and those who are oppressed by them fall into no such pitiable extreme as that too hopeful lover on whose sanguine ear “No” falls like a thunderbolt from red lips that were already considered to have spoken “Yes.” A suitor who plunges from lofty peaks of assured victory into failure falls far indeed; but Martin Grimbal stood little chance of suffering in that sort as his brother John had done.

The antiquary spoke presently, fearing he must seem too self-absorbed, but Clement had little to say. Yet a chance meeting twisted the conversation round to its former topic as they neared home. Upon Chagford Bridge appeared Miller Lyddon and Mr. Blee. The latter had been whitewashing the apple-tree stems—a course to which his master attached more importance than that pursued on Old Christmas Eve—and through the gathering dusk the trunks now stood out livid and wan as a regiment of ghosts.

“Heard from your brother since he left?” Mr. Lyddon inquired after evening greetings.

“I cannot yet. I hope he may write, but you are more likely to hear than I.”

“Not me. I’m nothing to un now.”

“Things will come right. Don’t let it prey on your mind. No woman ever made a good wife who didn’t marry where her heart was,” declared Martin, exhibiting some ignorance of the subject he presumed to discuss.

“Ah! you was ag’in’ us, I mind,” said the miller, drawing in. “He said as much that terrible night.”

“He was wrong—utterly. I only spoke for his good. I saw that your daughter couldn’t stand the sight of him and shivered if he touched her. It was my duty to speak. Strange you didn’t see too.”

“So easy to talk afterwards! I had her spoken word, hadn’t I? She’d never lied in all her life afore. Strange if I *had* seen, I reckon.”

“You frightened her into falsehood. Any girl might have been expected to lie in that position,” said Clement coolly; then Mr. Blee, who had been fretting to join the conversation, burst into it unbidden.

“Be gormed if I ban’t like a cat on hot bricks to hear ’e! wan might think as Miller was the Devil hisself for cruelty instead o’ bein’, as all knaws, the most muty-hearted[4] faither in Chagford.”

[4] *Muty-hearted* = soft-hearted.

“As to that, I doan’t knaw, Billy,” declared Mr. Lyddon stoutly; “I be a man as metes out to the world same measure as I get from the world. Right is right, an’ law is law; an’ if I doan’t have the law of Will Blanchard—”

“There’s little enough you can do, I believe,” said Hicks; “and what satisfaction lies in it, I should like to know, if it’s not a rude question?”

The old man answered with some bitterness, and explained his power.

“William Blanchard’s done abduction, according to Lawyer Bellamy of Plymouth; an’ abduction’s felony, and that’s a big thing, however you look ’pon it.”

Page 79

“Long an’ short is,” cut in Billy, who much desired to air a little of his new knowledge, “that he can get a sentence inside the limits of two years, with or without hard labour; at mercy of judge and jury. That’s his dose or not his dose, ’cording to the gracious gudeness of Miller.”

“Will’s nearly ready to go,” said Clement. “Let his arm once be restored, and he’ll do your hard labour with a good heart, I promise you. He wants to please Mr. Lyddon, and will tackle two months or two years or twenty.”

“Two an’ not a second less—with hard labour I’ll wager, when all’s taken into account.”

“Why are you so hot, Billy Blee? You’re none the worse.”

“Billy’s very jealous for me, same as Elijah was for the Lard o’ Hosts,” said Mr. Lyddon.

Then Martin and Clement climbed the steep hill that lay between them and Chagford, while the miller and his man pursued their way through the valley.

CHAPTER XII

A STORY-BOOK

Despite the miller’s explicit declaration, there was yet a doubt as to what he might do in the matter of Will Blanchard. Six weeks is a period of time that has often served to cool dispositions more fiery, purposes more inflexible than those of Mr. Lyddon, and his natural placidity of temperament, despite outbreaks, had begun to reassert itself. Billy Blee, misunderstanding his master in this, suspected that the first fires of rage were now sunk into a conflagration, not so visible, but deeper and therefore more dangerous to the sufferer, if not to other people. He failed to observe that each day of waiting lessened the miller’s desire towards action, and he continued to urge some step against Will Blanchard, as the only road by which his master’s peace of mind might be regained. He went further, and declared delay to be very dangerous for Mr. Lyddon’s spleen and other physical organs. But though humanity still prevented any definite step, Billy’s master so far adopted his advice as to see a solicitor and learn what the law’s power might be in the matter. Now he knew, as was recorded in the previous chapter; and still Mr. Lyddon halted between two opinions. He usually spoke on the subject as he had spoken to Martin Grimbal and Clement Hicks; but in reality he felt less desire in the direction of revenge than he pretended. Undoubtedly his daughter contributed not a little to this irresolution of mind. During the period of Will’s convalescence, his wife conducted herself with great tact and self-restraint. Deep love for her father not only inspired her, but also smoothed difficulties from a road not easy. Phoebe kept much out of sight until the miller’s first dismay and sorrow had subsided; then she crept back into her old position and by a thousand deft deeds and proper speeches won him again

unconsciously. She anticipated his unspoken desire, brightened his every-day life by unobtrusive actions, preserved a bright demeanour, never mentioned Will, and never contradicted her father when he did so.

Page 80

Thus the matter stood, and Mr. Lyddon held his hand until young Blanchard was abroad again and seeking work. Then he acted, as shall appear. Before that event, however, incidents befell Will's household, the first being an unexpected visit from Martin Grimbal; for the love-sick antiquary nerved himself to this great task a week after his excursion to Cosdon. He desired to see Will, and was admitted without comment by Mrs. Blanchard. The sufferer, who sat at the kitchen fire with his arm still in a sling, received Martin somewhat coldly, being ignorant of the visitor's friendly intentions. Chris was absent, and Will's mother, after hoping that Mr. Grimbal would not object to discuss his business in the kitchen, departed and left the men together.

"Sit down," said Will. "Be you come for your brother or yourself?"

"For myself. I want to make my position clear. You must not associate me with John in this affair. In most things our interests were the same, and he has been a brother in a thousand to me; but concerning Miss—Mrs. Blanchard—he erred in my opinion—greatly erred—and I told him so. Our relations are unhappily strained, to my sorrow. I tell you this because I desire your friendship. It would be good to me to be friends with you and your family. I do not want to lose your esteem by a misunderstanding."

"That's fair speech, an' I'm glad to hear 'e say it, for it ban't my fault when a man quarrels wi' me, as anybody will tell 'e. An' mother an' Chris will be glad. God knaws I never felt no anger 'gainst your brother, till he tried to take my girl away from me. Flesh an' blood weern't gwaine to suffer that."

"Under the circumstances, and with all the difficulties of your position, I never could blame you."

"Nor Phoebe," said the other warmly. "I won't have wan word said against her. Absolute right she done. I'm sick an' savage, even now, to think of all she suffered for me. I grits my teeth by night when it comes to my mind the mort o' grief an' tears an' pain heaped up for her—just because she loved wan chap an' not another."

"Let the past go and look forward. The future will be happy presently."

"In the long run 't will for sure. Your brother's got all he wants, I reckon, an' I doan't begrudge him a twinge; but I hope theer ban't no more wheer that comed from, for his awn sake, 'cause if us met unfriendly again, t' other might go awver the bridge, an' break worse 'n his arm."

"No, no, Blanchard, don't talk and think like that. Let the past go. My brother will return a wiser man, I pray, with his great disappointment dulled."

"A gert disappointment! To be catched out stealin', an' shawed up for a thief!"

"Well, forgive and forget. It's a valuable art—to learn to forget."

"You wait till you 'm faaced wi' such trouble, an' try to forget! But we 'm friends, by your awn shawm', and I be glad 't is so. Ax mother to step in from front the house, will 'e? I'd wish her to know how we 'm standin'."

Page 81

Mrs. Blanchard appeared with her daughter, and subsequent conversation banished a haunting sense of disloyalty to his brother from Martin's mind. Chris never looked more splendid or more sweet than in that noon, new come from a walk with Clement Hicks. Martin listened to her voice, stayed as long as he dared, and then departed with many emotions breaking like a storm upon his lonely life. He began to long for her with overwhelming desire. He had scarcely looked at a woman till now, and this brown-eyed girl of twenty, so full of life, so beautiful, set his very soul helplessly adrift on the sea of love. Her sudden laugh, like Will's, but softer and more musical, echoed in the man's ear as he returned to his house and, in a ferment, tramped the empty rooms.

His own requirements had been amply met by three apartments, furnished with sobriety and great poverty of invention; but now he pictured Chris singing here, tripping about with her bright eyes and active fingers. Like his brother before him, he fell back upon his money, and in imagination spent many pounds for one woman's delight. Then from this dream he tumbled back into reality and the recollection that his goddess must be wooed and won. No man ever yet failed to make love from ignorance how to begin, but the extent and difficulties of his undertaking weighed very heavily on Martin Grimbal at this juncture. To win even a measure of her friendship appeared a task almost hopeless. Nevertheless, through sleepless nights, he nerved himself to the tremendous attempt. There was not so much of self-consciousness in him, but a great store of self-distrust. Martin rated himself and his powers of pleasing very low; and unlike the tumultuous and volcanic methods of John, his genius disposed him to a courtship of most tardy development, most gradual ripening. To propose while a doubt existed of the answer struck him as a proceeding almost beyond the bounds of man's audacity. He told himself that time would surely show what chance or hope there might be, and that opportunity must be left to sneak from the battle at any moment when ultimate failure became too certainly indicated. In more sanguine moods, however, by moonlight, or alone on the high moors, greater bravery and determination awoke in him. At such times he would decide to purchase new clothes and take thought for externals generally. He also planned some studies in such concerns as pleased women if he could learn what they might be. His first deliberate if half-hearted attack relied for its effect upon a novel. Books, indeed, are priceless weapons in the armory of your timid lover; and let but the lady discover a little reciprocity, develop an unsuspected delight in literature, as often happens, and the most modest volume shall achieve a practical result as far beyond its intrinsic merit as above the writer's dream.

Page 82

Martin, then, primed with a work of fiction, prayed that Chris might prove a reader of such things, and called at Mrs. Blanchard's cottage exactly one fortnight after his former visit. Chance favoured him to an extent beyond his feeble powers to profit by. Will was out for a walk, and Mrs. Blanchard being also from home, Martin enjoyed conversation with Chris alone. He began well enough, while she listened and smiled. Then he lost his courage and lied, and dragging the novel from his pocket, asserted that he had bought the tale for her brother.

"A story-book! I doubt Will never read no such matter in his life, Mr. Grimbal."

"But get him to try. It's quite a new thing. There's a poaching adventure and so forth—-all very finely done according to the critical journals."

"He'll never sit down to that gert buke."

"You read it then, and tell him if it is good."

"Me! Well, I do read now and again, an' stories tu; but Will wouldn't take my word. Now if Phoebe was to say 't was braave readin', he'd go for it fast enough."

"I may leave it, at any rate?"

"Leave it, an' thank you kindly."

"How is Will getting on?"

"Quite well again. Awnly riled 'cause Mr. Lyddon lies so low. Clem told us what the miller can do, but us doan't knaw yet what he will do."

"Perhaps he doesn't know himself," suggested Martin. The name of "Clem," uttered thus carelessly by her, made him envious. Then, inspired by the circumstance, a request which fairly astounded the speaker by its valour dropped on his listener's ear.

"By the way, don't call me 'Mr. Grimbal.' I hope you'll let me be 'Martin' in a friendly way to you all, if you will be so very kind and not mind my asking."

The end of the sentence had its tail between its legs, but he got the words cleanly out, and his reward was great.

"Why, of course, if you'd rather us did; an' you can call me 'Chris' if you mind to," she said, laughing. "'T is strange you took sides against your brother somehow to me."

"I haven't—I didn't—except in the matter of Phoebe. He was wrong there, and I told him so,—"

He meant to end the sentence with the other's name, only the word stuck in his throat; but "Miss Blanchard" he would not say, after her permission, so left a gap.

"He'll not forgive 'e that in a hurry."

"Not readily, but some day, I hope. Now I must really go—wasting your precious time like this; and I do hope you may read the book."

"That Will may?"

"No—yes—both of you, in fact. And I'll come to know whether you liked it. Might I?"

"Whether Will liked it?"

She nodded and laughed, then the door hid her; while Martin Grimbal went his way treading upon air. Those labourers whom he met received from him such a "Good evening!" that the small parties, dropping back on Chagford from their outlying toil, grinned inquiringly, they hardly knew at what.

Page 83

Meantime, Chris Blanchard reflected, and the laughter faded out of her eyes, leaving them grave and a little troubled. She was sufficiently familiar with lovers' ways. The bold, the uncouth, the humble, and timorous were alike within her experience. She watched this kind-faced man grow hot and cold as he spoke to her, noted the admixture of temerity and fear that divided his mind and appeared in his words. She had seen his lips tremble and refuse to pronounce her name; and she rightly judged that he would possibly repeat it aloud to himself more than once before he slept that night. Chris was no flirt, and now heartily regretted her light and friendly banter upon the man's departure. "I be a silly fule, an' wouldn't whisper a word of this to any but Clem," she thought, "for it may be nothing but the nervous way of un, an' such a chap 's a right to seek a sight further 'n me for a wife; an' yet they all 'pear the same, an' act the same soft sort o' style when they 'm like it." Then she considered that, seeing what friendship already obtained between Clement and Martin Grimbal, it was strange the latter still went in ignorance. "Anyways, if I'm not wrong, the sooner he 'm told the better, for he's a proper fashioned man," she thought.

While Chris was still revolving this matter in her mind, Mrs. Blanchard returned with some news.

"Postmistress stepped out of the office wi' this as I corned down the village," she said. "'T is from Mrs. Watson, I fancy."

Her daughter brought a light, and the letter was perused. "Uncle 's took bad," Mrs. Blanchard presently announced; "an' sends to say as he wants me to go along an' help Sarah Watson nurse un."

"Him ill! I never thought he was made of stuff to be ill."

"I must go, whether or no. I'll take the coach to Moreton to-morrow."

Mrs. Blanchard mentally traversed her wardrobe as she drank tea, and had already packed in anticipation before the meal was ended. Will, on returning, was much perturbed at this bad news, for since his own marriage Uncle Ford had become a hero among men to him.

"What's amiss she doan't say—Mrs. Watson—but it's more 'n a fleabite else he wouldn't take his bed. But I hopes I'll have un to rights again in a week or so. 'Mind me to take a bottle of last summer's Marshmally brew, Chris. Doctors laugh at such physic, but I knaw what I knaw."

"Wonder if't would better him to see me?" mused Will.

"No, no; no call for that. You'll be fit to stand to work by Monday, so mind your business an' traapse round an' look for it. Theer 's plenty doin' 'pon the land now, an' I want to

hear you' ve got a job 'fore I come home. Husbands must work for two; an' Phoebe'll be on your hands come less than a couple o' years."

"One year and five months and seven days 't is."

"Very well. You've got to mind a brace of things meantime; to make a vitty home for her by the sweat of your body, an' to keep your hands off her till she 'm free to come to 'e."

Page 84

“Big things both, though I ban’t afeared of myself afore ’em. I’ve thought a lot in my time, an’ be allowed to have sense an’ spirit for that matter.”

“Spirit, ess fay, same as your faither afore you; but not so much sense as us can see wi’out lightin’ cannel.”

“Wonder if Uncle Joel be so warm a man as he’d have us think sometimes of an evenin’ arter his hot whiskey an’ water?” said Chris.

“Don’t ’e count on no come-by-chance from him. He’s got money, that I knaw, but ban’t gwaine to pass our way, for he tawld me so in as many words. Sarah Watson will reap what he’s sawed; an’ who shall grumble? He ‘m a just man, though not of the accepted way o’ thinkin’.”

“Why for didn’t he marry her?” asked Will.

“Caan’t tell’e, more’n the dead. Just a whim. I asked her same question, when I was last to Newton, an’ she said ’t was to save the price of a licence she reckoned, though in his way of life he might have got matrimony cheap as any man. But theer ’t is. Her ’s bin gude as a wife to un—an’ better ’n many—this fifteen year.”

“A very kind woman to me while I was biding along with uncle,” said Will. “All the same you should have some of the money.”

“I’m well as I be. An’ this dead-man-shoe talk’s vain an’ giddy. I lay he’m long ways from death, an’ the further the better. Now I be gwaine to pack my box ’fore supper.”

Mrs. Blanchard withdrew, and Chris, suddenly recollecting it, mentioned Martin Grimbal’s visit. Will laughed and read a page or two of the story-book, then went out of doors to see Clement Hicks; and his sister, with a spare hour before her while a rabbit roasted, sat near the spit and occupied her mind with thought.

Will’s business related to himself. He was weary of waiting for Mr. Lyddon, and though he had taken care to let Phoebe know by Chris that his arm was well and strong enough for the worst that might be found for it to do, no notice was taken of his message, no sign escaped the miller.

All interested persons had their own theories upon this silence. Mrs. Blanchard suspected that Mr. Lyddon would do nothing at all, and Will readily accepted this belief; but he found it impossible to wait with patience for its verification. This indeed was the harder to him because Clement Hicks predicted a different issue and foretold an action of most malignant sort on the miller’s part. What ground existed for attributing any such deed to Mr. Lyddon was not manifest, but the bee-keeper stuck to it that Will’s father-in-law would only wait until he was in good employment and then proceed to his confusion.

This conviction he now repeated.

“He’s going to make you smart before he’s done with you, if human nature’s a factor to rely upon. It’s clear to me.”

“I doan’t think so ill of un. An’ yet I ban’t wishful to leave it to chance. You, an’ you awnly, knaw what lies hid in the past behind me. The question is, should I take that into account now, or go ahead as if it never had failed out?”

Page 85

“Let it alone, as it has let you alone. Never rake it up again, and forget it if you can. That’s my advice to you. Forget you ever—”

“Hush!” said Will. “I’d rather not hear the word, even ’pon your lips.”

They then discussed the main matter from the opposite vantage-grounds of minds remote in every particular; but no promising procedure suggested itself to either man, and it was not until upon his homeward way that Will, unaided, arrived at an obvious and very simple conclusion. With some glee he welcomed this idea.

“I’ll just wait till Monday night,” he said to himself, “an’ then I’ll step right down to Miller, an’ ax un what’s in the wind, an’ if I can help his hand. Then he must speak if he’s a man.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE MILLER’S OFFER

Will, followed his determination and proceeded to Monks Barton on the following Monday evening, at an hour when he knew that Mr. Lyddon would have finished supper and be occupied about a pipe or a game of cards with Mr. Blee. The old men occasionally passed an hour at “oaks” or “cribbage” before retiring, but on this occasion they were engaged in conversation, and both looked up with some surprise when Blanchard appeared.

“You—you here again!” said the miller, and his mouth remained slightly open after the words.

“You ’m allus setting sober hair on end—blessed if you ain’t!” was Billy’s comment.

Will, for his part, made no introductory speeches, but went straight to the point.

“Theer’s my arm,” he said, thrusting it out before him. “’T is mended so neat that Doctor Parsons says no Lunnon bone-setter could have done it better. So I’ve comed just to say theer’s no call for longer waitin’. ’T was a sportsmanlike thing in you, Miller Lyddon, to bide same as you did; and now, if you’d set the law movin’ an’ get the job out o’ hand, I’d thank you kindly. You see, if they put me in for two year, ’t will leave mighty li’l time to get a home ready for Phoebe against the day she comes of age.”

“You needn’t be at any trouble about that.”

“But I shall be. Do ’e think my wife’s gwaine to be any differ’nt to lesser folks? A home she’ll have, an’ a braave, vitty home, tu, though I’ve got to sweat blood for it. So if you’d take your bite so soon as convenient, you’d sarve me.”

“I doan’t say you ‘m axin’ anything onreasonable,” said Mr. Lyddon, thoughtfully. “An’ what might you think o’doin, when you comes out o’ prison?”

“First gude work that offers.”

“Maybe you doan’t kuaw that chaps whose last job was on the treadmill finds it uncommon hard to get another?”

“Depends what they was theer for, I should reckon, Miller”

“Not a bit of it. Gaol-birds is all feathered alike inside clink, an’ honest men feathers ’em all alike when they come out,” declared Will’s father-in-law.

Page 86

“A sheer Cain, as no man will touch by the hand—that’s what you’ll be,” added Billy, without apparent regret.

“If that’s so,” said Will, very calmly, “you’d best to think twice ’fore you sends me. I’ve done a high-handed deed, bein’ forced into the same by happenings here when I went off last summer; but ’t is auld history now. I’d like to be a credit to ’e some time, not a misery for all time. Why not—?” He was going to suggest a course of action more favourable to himself than that promised; but it struck him suddenly that any attitude other than the one in which he had come savoured of snivelling for mercy. So he stopped, left a break of silence, and proceeded with less earnestness in his voice.

“You’ve had a matter of eight weeks to decide in, so I thought I might ax’e, man to man, what’s gwaine to be done.”

“I have decided,” said the miller coldly; “I decided a week ago.”

Billy started and his blue eyes blinked inquiringly. He sniffed his surprise and said “Well!” under his breath.

“Ess, ’t is so, I didn’t tell ’e, Blee, ‘cause I reckoned you’d try an’ turn me from my purpose, which wasn’t to be done.”

“Never—not me. I’m allus in flat agreement with ’e, same as any wise man finds hisself all times.”

“Well, doan’t ‘e take it ill, me keepin’ it to myself.”

“No, no—awnly seem’ how—”

“If it ’s all the same,” interrupted Will, “I’d like to knaw what you ’m gwaine for to do.”

“I’m gwaine to do nort, Will Blanchard—nort at all. God He knaws you ‘ve wronged me, an’ more ‘n me, an’ her—Phoebe—worst of all; but I’ll lift no hand ag’in’ you. Bide free an’ go forrard your awn way—”

“To the Dowl!” concluded Billy.

There was a silence, then Will spoke with some emotion.

“You ‘m a big, just man, Miller Lyddon; an’ if theer was anything could make me sorry for the past—which theer ban’t—’t would be to knaw you’ve forgived me.”

“He ain’t done no such thing!” burst out Mr. Blee. “Tellin’ ’e to go to the Dowl ban’t forgivin’ of ’e!”

“That was your word,” answered Will hotly, “an’ if you didn’t open your ugly mouth so wide, an’ shaw such a ‘mazing poor crop o’ teeth same time, me an’ Miller might come to onderstanding. I be here to see him, not you.”

“Gar! you ‘m a beast of a bwoy, looked at anyhow, an’ I wouldn’t have no dealin’s with ’e for money,” snorted the old man.

“Theer we’ll leave it then, Blanchard,” said Mr. Lyddon, as Will turned his back upon the last speaker without answering him. “Go your way an’ try to be a better man; but doan’t ax me to forget what ’s passed—no, nor forgive it, not yet. I’ll come to a Christian sight of it some day, God willin’; but it ’s all I can say that I bear you no ill-will.”

“An’ I’m beholden enough for that. You wait an’ keep your eye on me. I’ll shaw you what’s in me yet. I’ll surprise ’e, I promise. Nobody in these paarts ’cept mother, knaws what ’s in me. But, wi’out boastful words, I’ll prove it. Because, Miller, I may assure ’e I’m a man as have thought a lot in my time ’bout things in general.”

Page 87

“Ess, you’m a deep thinker, I doan’t doubt. Now best to go; an’, mind, no dealins wi’ Phoebe, for that I won’t stand.”

“I’ve thought that out, tu. I’ll give ’e my word of honour ’pon that.”

“Best to seek work t’other side the Moor, if you ax me. Then you’ll be out the way.”

“As to that, I’d guessed maybe Martin Grimbal, as have proved a gert friend to me an’ be quite o’ my way o’ thinking, might offer garden work while I looked round. Theer ban’t a spark o’ pride in me—tu much sense, I hope, for that.”

The miller sighed.

“You’ve done a far-reachin’ thing, as hits a man from all sorts o’ plaaces, like the echo in Teign Valley. I caan’t see no end to it yet.”

“Martin Grimbal’s took on Wat Widdicombe, so you needn’t fule yourself he’ll give ’e work,” snapped Mr. Blee.

“Well, theer be others.”

And then that sudden smile, half sly, half sweet, leapt to Will’s eyes and brightened all his grave face, as the sun gladdens a grey sky after rain.

“Look now, Miller Lyddon, why for shouldn’t you, the biggest man to Chagford, give me a bit of work? I ban’t no caddlin’[5] chap, an’ for you—by God, I’d dig a mountain flat if you axed me!”

[5] *Caddling* = loafing, idling.

“Well, I be gormed!” gasped Billy. It was a condition, though whether physical or mental he only knew, to which Will reduced Mr. Blee upon every occasion of their meeting.

“You hold your jaw an’ let me talk to Mr. Lyddon. ’Tis like this, come to look at it: who should work for ’e same as what I would? Who should think for my wife’s faither wi’ more of his heart than me? I’d glory to do a bit of work for ‘e—aye, I would so, high or low; an’ do it in a way to make you rub your eyes!”

Billy saw the first-formed negative die still-born on his master’s lips. He began to cry out volubly that Monks Barton was over-manned, and that scandal would blast every opening bud on the farm if such a thing happened. Will glared at him, and in another moment Mr. Blee might have suffered physically had not the miller lifted his hand and bid both be silent.

For a full minute no man spoke, while in Mr. Lyddon's mind proceeded a strange battle of ideas. Will's audacity awakened less resentment than might have been foreseen. The man had bent before the shock of his daughter's secret marriage and was now returning to his customary mental condition. Any great altitude of love or extremity of hate was beyond Mr. Lyddon's calibre. Life slipped away and left his forehead smooth. Sorrow brought no great scars, joy no particular exaltation. This temperament he had transmitted to Phoebe; and now she came into his mind and largely influenced him. A dozen times he opened his mind to say "No," but did not say it. Personal amiability could hardly have overcome natural dislike of Blanchard at such a moment, but the unexpected usually happens when weak natures are called upon to make sudden decisions; and though such may change their resolve again and again at a later date and before new aspects of the problem, their first hasty determination will often be the last another had predicted from them.

Page 88

A very curious result accrued from Mr. Lyddon's mental conflict, and it was reached by an accidental train of thought. He told himself that his conclusion was generous to the extreme of the Christian ideal; he assured himself that few men so placed had ever before acted with such notable magnanimity; but under this repeated mental asseveration there spoke another voice which he stifled to the best of his power. The utterance of this monitor may best be judged from what followed.

"If I gave you work you'd stand to it, Will Blanchard?" he asked at length.

"Try me!"

"Whatsoever it might be?"

"Try me. Ban't for me to choose."

"I will, then. Come to-morrow by five, an' Billy shall show 'e what's to do."

It would be difficult to say which, of those who heard the miller's resolve received it with most astonishment. Will's voice was almost tremulous.

"You'll never be sorry, never. I couldn't have hoped such a thing. Caan't think how I comed to ax it. An' yet—but I'll buckle to anything and everything, so help me. I'll think for 'e an' labour for 'e as no hireling that was ever born could, I will. An' you've done a big, grand-fashion thing, an' I'm yours, body an' bones, for it; an' you'll never regret it."

The young man was really moved by an issue so unexpected. He had uttered his suggestion on the spur of the moment, as he uttered most things, and such a reception argued a greatness of heart and generosity of spirit quite unparalleled in his experience. So he departed wishing all good on Mr. Lyddon and meaning all good with his whole soul and strength.

When he had gone the miller spoke; but contrary to custom, he did not look into Mr. Blee's face while so doing.

"You'm astonished, Billy," he said, "an' so be I, come to think of it. But I'm gettin' tu auld to fret my life away with vain strife. I be gwaine to prove un. He'd stand to anything, eh? 'Twas his word."

"An' well he might."

"Can 'e picture Blanchard cleaning out the pigs' house?"

"No fay!"

"Or worse?"

“Ah!”

They consulted, and it presently appeared that Mr. Lyddon deliberately designed to set Will about the most degrading task the farm could furnish.

“’Twill sting the very life of un!” said Billy gleefully, and he proceeded to arrange an extremely trying programme for Will Blanchard.

“Doan’t think any small spite leads me to this way of dealing with un,” explained Mr. Lyddon, who knew right well that it was so. “But ’tis to probe the stuff he’s made of. Nothing should be tu hard for un arter what he’ve done, eh?”

“You’m right. ’Tis true wisdom to chastise the man this way if us can, an’ shake his wicked pride.”

Billy’s genius lent itself most happily to this scheme. He applauded the miller’s resolution until his master himself began to believe that the idea was not unjust; he ranged airily, like a blue-fly, from one agglomeration of ordure to another; and he finally suggested a task, not necessary to dwell on, but which reached the utmost height or depth of originality in connection with such a subject. Mr. Lyddon laboured under some shadow of doubt, but he quickly agreed when his man reminded him of the past course of events.

Page 89

"'Tis nothin', when all's said. Who'd doubt if he'd got to choose between that or two year in gaol? He'm lucky, and I'll tell un so come the marnin'."

Thus matters were left, and the miller retired in some secret shame, for he had planned an act which, if great in the world's eye, had yet a dark side from his own inner view of it; but Mr. Blee suffered no pang from conscience upon the question. He heartily disliked Blanchard, and he contemplated the morrow with keen satisfaction. If his sharp tongue had power to deepen the wound awaiting Will's self-respect, that power would certainly be exercised.

Meantime the youth himself passed homeward in a glow of admiration for Mr. Lyddon.

"I'd lay down my life smilin' for un," he told Chris, who was astounded at his news. "I'll think for un, an' act for un, till he'll feel I'm his very right hand. An' if I doan't put a spoke in yellow Billy's wheel, call me a fule. Snarling auld swine! But Miller! Theer's gude workin' religion in that man; he'm a shining light for sartain."

They talked late upon this wondrous turn of fortune, then Will recollected his mother and nothing would serve but that he wrote instantly to tell her of the news.

"It'll cheer up uncle, tu, I lay," he said.

"A letter comed while you was out," answered Chris; "he'm holding his awn, but 'tis doubtful yet how things be gwaine to fare in the upshot."

"Be it as 'twill, mother can do more 'n any other living woman could for un," declared Will.

CHAPTER XIV

LOGIC

As Mr. Blee looked out upon a grey morning, the sallows leaping from silver to gold, from bud to blossom, scattered brightness through the dawn, and the lemon catkins of the hazel, the russet tassels of alders, brought light along the river, warmth into the world. A bell beat five from Chagford Church tower, and the notes came drowsily through morning mists. Then quick steps followed on the last stroke of the hour and Will stood by Billy's side in Monks Barton farmyard. The old man raised his eyes from contemplation of a spade and barrow, bid Blanchard "Good morning" with simulated heartiness, and led the way to work, while Will followed, bringing the tools. They passed into a shrubbery of syringa bushes twenty yards distant, and the younger man, whose humour had been exceedingly amiable until that moment, now flushed to his eyes before the spectacle of his labour.

“Do ‘e mean that Miller’s got nothin’ for me to do but this?”

“Plenty, plenty, I ’sure ’e; but that ban’t your business, be it? Theer’s the work, an’ I’d rather ’twas yourn than mine. Light your pipe an’ go ahead. Not a purty job, more ’tis; but beggars mustn’t be choosers in this hard world.”

Billy bolted after these remarks. He heard a growl behind him, but did not look round. Half an hour later, he crept back again by a circuitous route, watched Will awhile unseen, then stole grinning away to milk the cows.

Page 90

The young man, honestly thunderstruck at the task planned for him, judged that thinking would not mend matters, and so began to work quickly without stopping to reflect. But his thoughts could not be controlled, any more than his disposition changed. A growing consciousness of deep and deliberate insult surged up in him. The more he brooded the slower he worked, and finally anger mastered determination. He flung down his spade, saluted a red sunrise with the worst language at his command, and strode down to the river. Here, for some time and until blue smoke began to climb from the kitchen chimney of the farm, Will paced about; then with a remarkable effort returned to his task. He actually started again, and might have carried the matter to completion; but an evil demon was abroad, and Billy, spying the young man at work anew, reappeared.

“You’m makin’ poor speed, my son,” he said, viewing the other’s progress with affected displeasure.

It proved enough, for Will’s smouldering fires were ready to leap at any fuel.

“Go to blue, blazing hell!” he cried. “You’m at the bottom of this business, I’ll lay a pound. Get out o’ my sight, you hookem-snivey auld devil, or I’ll rub your dirty ginger poll in it, sure’s death!”

“My stars! theer’s crooked words! Do ‘e try an’ keep tighter hand on your temper, Blanchard. A man should knaw hisself anyways ’fore he has the damn fulishness to take a wife. An’ if you ax me—”

Mr. Blee’s remarks were here brutally arrested, for the contents of Will’s spade saluted his furrowed features, and quite obliterated the old man. He fled roaring, and the other flung his spade twenty yards away, overturned his wheelbarrow, and again strode to the river. He was fairly bubbling and boiling now, nor did the business of cleaning gaiters and boots, arms and hands, restore him to peace. A black pig gazed upon him and grunted as he came up from the water. It seemed to him a reincarnation of Billy, and he kicked it hard. It fled screaming and limping, while Will, his rage at full flood, proceeded through the farmyard on his way home. But here, by unhappy chance, stood Mr. Lyddon watching his daughter feed the fowls. Her husband ran full upon Phoebe, and she blushed in a great wave of joy until the black scowl upon his face told her that something was amiss. His evident anger made her start, and the involuntary action upset her bowl of grain. For a moment she stood motionless, looking upon him in fear, while at her feet fought and struggled a cloud of feathered things around the yellow corn.

“If you’ve done your job, Will, may’st come and shaake Phoebe by the hand,” said Mr. Lyddon nervously, while he pretended not to notice the other’s passion.

“I haven’t done it; and if I had, is a scavenger’s hand fit to touch hers?” thundered Blanchard. “I thought you was a man to swear by, and follow through thick an’ thin,” he

continued, “but you ban’t. You’m a mean, ill-minded sawl, as would trample on your awn flesh an’ blood, if you got the chance. Do your awn dirty work. Who be I that you should call on me to wallow in filth to please your sour spite?”

Page 91

“You hear him, you hear him!” cried out the miller, now angry enough himself. “That’s how I’m sarved for returnin’ gude to his evil. I’ve treated un as no man else on God’s airth would have done; and this is what I gets. He’s mad, an’ that’s to speak kind of the wretch!”

The young wife could only look helplessly from one to the other. That morning had dawned very brightly for her. A rumour of what was to happen reached her on rising, but the short-lived hope was quickly shattered, and though she had not seen him since their wedding-day, Phoebe was stung into bitterness against Will at this juncture. She knew nothing of particulars, but saw him now pouring harsh reproaches on her father, and paying the miller’s unexampled generosity with hard and cruel words. So she spoke to her husband.

“Oh, Will, Will, to say such things! Do ’e love me no better ’n that? To slight dear faither arter all he’s forgiven!”

“If you think I’m wrong, say it, Phoebe,” he answered shortly. “If you’m against me, tu —”

“‘Against you!’ How can you speak so?”

“No matter what I say. Be you on his side or mine? ’Cause I’ve a right to knaw.”

“Caan’t ’e see ’twas faither’s gert, braave, generous thought to give ’e work, an’ shaw a lesson of gudeness? An’ then we meet again—”

“Ess fay—happy meetin’ for wife an’ husband, me up to the eyes in—Theer, any fule can see ’twas done a purpose to shame me.”

“You’re a fule to say it! ’Tis your silly pride’s gwaine to ruin all your life, an’ mine, tu. Who’s to help you if you’ve allus got the black monkey on your shoulder like this here?”

“You’m a overbearin’, headstrong madman,” summed up the miller, still white with wrath; “an’ I’ve done with ’e now for all time. You’ve had your chance an’ thrawed it away.”

“He put this on me because I was poor an’ without work.”

“He didn’t,” cried the girl, whose emotions for a moment took her clean from Will to her father. “He never dreamed o’ doin’ any such thing. He couldn’t insult a beggar-man; an’ you knaw it. ’Tis all your ugly, wicked temper!”

“Then I’ll take myself off, an’ my temper, tu,” said Will, and prepared to do so; while Mr. Lyddon listened to husband and wife, and his last hope for the future dwindled and died, as he heard them quarrel with high voices. His daughter clung to him and supported his action, though what it had been she did not know.

“Caan’t ‘e see you’re breakin’ faither’s heart all awver again just as ’twas mendin’?” she said. “Caan’t ’e sing smaller, if ’tis awnly for thought of me? Doan’t, for God’s love, fling away like this.”

“I met un man to man, an’ did his will with a gude thankful heart, an’ comed in the dawn to faace a job as—”

“‘Tweren’t the job, an’ you knaw it,” broke in Mr. Lyddon. “I wanted to prove ‘e an’ all your fine promises; an’ now I knaw their worth, an’ your worth. An’ I curse the day ever my darter was born in the world, when I think she’m your wife, an’ no law can break it.”

Page 92

He turned and went into the house, and Phoebe stood alone with her husband.

“Theer!” cried Will. “You’ve heard un. That was in his heart when he spoke me so fair. An’ if you think like he do, say it. Lard knaws I doan’t want ’e no more, if you doan’t want me!”

“Will! How can you! An’ us not met since our marriage-day. But you’m cruel, cruel to poor faither.”

“Say so, an’ think so; an’ b’lieve all they tell ’e ’gainst your lawful husband; an’ gude-bye. If you’m so poor-spirited as to see your man do thicky work, you choosed wrong. Not that ’tis any gert odds. Stop along wi’ your faither as you loves so much better ‘n me. An’ doan’t you fear I’ll ever cross his threshold again to anger un, for I’d rather blaw my brains out than do it.”

He shook and stuttered with passion; his eyes glowed, his lips changed from their natural colour to a leaden blue. He groped for the gate when he reached it, and passed quickly out, heedless of Phoebe’s sorrowful cry to him. He heard her light step following and only hastened his speed for answer. Then, hurrying from her, a wave of change suddenly flowed upon his furious mind, and he began to be very sorry. Presently he stopped and turned, but she had stayed her progress by now, and for a moment’s space stood and watched him, bathed in tears. At the moment when he hesitated and looked back, however, his wife herself had turned away and moved homewards. Had she been standing in one place, Will’s purposes would perchance have faded to air, and his arm been round her in a moment; but now he only saw Phoebe retreating slowly to Monks Barton; and he let her go.

Blanchard went home to breakfast, and though Chris discovered that something was amiss, she knew him too well to ask any questions. He ate in silence, the past storm still heaving in a ground-swell through his mind. That his wife should have stood up against him was a sore thought. It bewildered the youth utterly, and that she might be ignorant of all details did not occur to him. Presently he told his wrongs to Chris, and grew very hot again in the recital. She sympathised deeply, held him right to be angry, and grew angry herself.

“He ‘m daft,” she said, “an’ I’d think harder of him than I do, but that he’s led by the nose. ’Twas that auld weasel, Billy Blee, gived him the wink to set you on a task he knawed you’d never carry through.”

“Theer’s truth in that,” said Will; then he recollected his last meeting with the miller’s man, and suddenly roared with laughter.

“‘Struth! What a picter he was! He agged an’ agged at me till I got fair mad, an’—well, I spiled his meal, I do b’lieve.”

His merriment died away slowly in a series of long-drawn chuckles. Then he lighted his pipe, watched Chris cleaning the cups and plates, and grew glum again.

"'Twas axin' me—a penniless chap; that was the devil of it. If I'd been a moneyed man wi'out compulsion to work, then I'd have been free to say 'No,' an' no harm done. De'e follow?"

Page 93

“I’m thankful you done as you did. But wheer shall ’e turn now?”

“Doan’t knaw. I’ll lay I’ll soon find work.”

“Theer’s some of the upland farms might be wanting harrowin’ an’ seed plantin’ done.”

“Who’s to Newtake, Gran’faither Ford’s auld plaace, I wonder?”

“’Tis empty. The last folks left ’fore you went away. Couldn’t squeeze bare life out of it. That’s the fourth party as have tried an’ failed.”

“Yet gran’faither done all right.”

“He was a wonnerful man of business, an’ lived on a straw a day, as mother says. But the rest—they come an’ go an’ just bury gude money theer to no better purpose than the gawld at a rainbow foot.”

“Well, I’ll go up in the village an’ look around before Miller’s got time to say any word against me. He’ll spoil my market if he can, I knaw.”

“He’d never dare!”

“I’d have taken my oath he wouldn’t essterday. Now I think differ’nt. He never meant friendship; he awnly wanted for me to smart. Clem Hicks was right.”

“Theer’s Mr. Grimbal might give ‘e work, I think. Go an’ ax un, an’ tell un I sent ’e.”

A moment later Chris was sorry she had made this remark.

“What be talkin’ ’bout?” Will asked bluntly. “Tell un *you* sent me?”

“Martin wants to be friends.”

“‘Martin,’ is it?”

“He axed me to call un so.”

“Do he knaw you’m tokened to Clem?”

“Caan’t say. It almost ’peared as if he didn’t last time he called.”

“Then sooner he do the better. Axed you to call un ’Martin’!”

He stopped and mused, then spoke again.

“Our love-makin’s a poor business, sure enough. I’ve got what I wanted an’, arter this marnin’, could ’most find it in me to wish my cake was dough again; an’ you—you ain’t got what you want, an’ ban’t no gert sign you will, for Clem’s the weakest hand at turnin’ a penny ever I met.”

“I’ll wait for un, whether or no,” said Chris, fiercely. “I’ll wait, if need be, till we’m both tottling auld mumpheads!”

“Ess; an’ when Martin Grimbal knaws that is so, ’twill be time enough to ax un for work, I dare say,—not sooner. Better he should give Clem work than me. I’d thought of him myself, for that matter.”

“I’ve axed Clem to ax un long ago, but he won’t.”

“I’ll go and see Clem right away. ’Tis funny he never let the man knaw ’bout you. Should have been the first thing he tawld un.”

“Perhaps he thought ’twas so far off that—”

“Doan’t care what he thought. Weern’t plain dealin’ to bide quiet about that, an’ I shall tell un so.”

“Well, doan’t ’e quarrel with Clem. He’m ’bout the awnly friend you’ve got left now.”

“I’ve got mother an’ you. I’m all right. I can see as straight as any man, an’ all my brain-work in the past ban’t gwaine to be wasted ’cause wan auld miller fellow happens to put a mean trick on me. I’m above caring. I just goes along and remembers that people has their failings.”

Page 94

“We must make allowance for other folk.”

“So us must; an’ I be allus doin’ it; so why the hell doan’t they make allowance for me? That’s why I boil awver now an’ again—damn it! I gets nought but kicks for my halfpence—allus have; an’ I won’t stand it from mortal man much longer!”

Chris kept her face, for Will’s views on conduct and man’s whole duty to man were no new thing.

“Us must keep patient, Will, ’specially with the auld.”

“I be patient. It ’mazes me, looking back, to see what I have suffered in my time. But a man’s a man, not a post or a holy angel. Us wouldn’t hear such a deal about angels’ tempers either if they’d got to faace all us have.”

“That’s profanity an’ wickedness.”

“‘Tis truth. Any fule can be a saint inside heaven; an’ them that was born theer and have flown ’bout theer all theer time, like birds in a wood, did ought to be even-tempered. What’s to cross’em?”

“You shouldn’t say such things!”

Suddenly a light came into his eyes.

“I doan’t envy ’em anyway. Think what it must be never to have no mother to love ’e! They ’m poor, motherless twoads, for all their gold crowns an’ purple wings.”

“Will! whatever will ‘e say next? Best go to Clem. An’ forget what I spoke ‘bout Martin Grimbal an’ work. You was wiser’n me in that.”

“I s’pose so. If a man ban’t wiser ’n his sister, he’s like to have poor speed in life,” said Will.

Then he departed, but the events of that day were still very far from an end, and despite the warning of Chris, her brother soon stood on the verge of another quarrel. It needed little to wake fresh storms in his breast and he criticised Clement’s reticence on the subject of his engagement in so dictatorial and hectoring a manner that the elder man quickly became incensed. They wrangled for half an hour, Hicks in satirical humour, Will loud with assurances that he would have no underhand dealings where any member of his family was concerned. Clement presently watched the other tramp off, and in his mind was a dim thought. Could Blanchard forget the past so quickly? Did he recollect that he, Clement Hicks, shared knowledge of it? “He’s a fool, whichever way you look at him,” thought the poet; “but hardly such a fool as to forget that, or risk angering me of all men.”

Later in the day Will called at a tap-room, drank half a pint of beer, and detailed his injuries for the benefit of those in the bar. He asked what man amongst them, situated as he had been, had acted otherwise; and a few, caring not a straw either way, declared he had showed good pluck and was to be commended; But the bulky Mr. Chapple—he who assisted Billy Blee in wassailing Miller Lyddon's apple-trees—stoutly criticised Will, and told him that his conduct was much to blame. The younger argued against this decision and explained, with the most luminous diction at his command, that 'twas in the offering of such a task to a penniless man its sting and offence appeared.

Page 95

“He knawed I was at low ebb an’ not able to pick an’ choose. So he gives me a starvin’ man’s job. If I’d been in easy circumstances an’ able to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ at choice, I’d never have blamed un.”

“Nonsense and stuff!” declared Mr. Chapple. “Theer’s not a shadow of shame in it.”

“You’m Miller’s friend, of coourse,” said Will.

“’Tis so plain as a pike, I think!” squeaked a hare-lipped young man of weak intellect who was also present. “Blanchard be right for sartain.”

“Theer! If soft Gurney sees my drift it must be pretty plain,” said Will, in triumph.

“But as ’tis awnly him that does, lad,” commented Mr. Chapple, drily, “caan’t say you’ve got any call to be better pleased. Go you back an’ do the job, like a wise man.”

“I’d clear the peat out o’ Cranmere Pool sooner!” said Will.

And he turned homewards again, wretched enough, yet fiercely prodding his temper when it flagged, and telling himself repeatedly that he had acted as became a man of spirit and of judgment. Then, upon a day sufficiently leaden and dreary until that moment, burst forth sudden splendours, and Will’s life, from a standpoint of extreme sobriety in time, instantly passed to rare brightness. Between the spot on the highway where Chris met him and his arrival at home, the youth enjoyed half a lifetime of glorious hopes and ambitions; but a cloud indeed shadowed all this overwhelming joy in that the event responsible for his change of fortune was itself sad.

While yet twenty yards from her brother Chris cried the news to him.

“He’s dead—Uncle—he went quite sudden at the end; an’ he’m to lie to Chagford wi’ gran’faither an’ gran’mother.”

“Dead! My God! An’ I never seed un more! The best friend to me ever I had—-leastways I thought so till this marnin’.”

“You may think so still.”

“Ess, so I do. A kind man inside his skin. I knawed un better’n most people—an’ he meant well when he married me, out of pure love to us both.”

“He’s left nobody no money but Mrs. Watson and you.”

“If ’tis five pound, ‘tis welcome to-day; an’ if ‘tis five shillin’, I’ll thank un an’ spend it ’pon a ring to wear for un. He was a gude auld blid, an’ I’m sorry he’s gone.”

“Will, Uncle’s left ’e a thousand pound!”

“What! You’m jokin’.”

“Solemn truth. ’Tis in mother’s letter.”

A rush of joy lighted up the young man’s face. He said not a word; then his eyes grew moist.

“To think as he could have loved a daft fule like me so well as that! Me—that never done nothin’—no, not so much as to catch a dish of trout for un, now an’ again, when he was here.”

“You couldn’t, bein’ water-keeper.”

“What matter for that? I ought to have poached for un, seein’ the manner of man he was.”

He kept silence for a while, then burst out—

“I’ll buy the braavest marble stone can be cut. Nobody shall do it but me, wi’ doves or anchors or some such thing on it, to make it a fine sight so long as the world goes on.”

Page 96

“Theer’s plenty room ’pon the auld slate, for that matter,” said Chris.

“Damn the auld slate! The man shall have white marble carvings, I tell ’e, if I’ve got to spend half the money buying ’em. He b’lieved in me; he knawed I’d come to gude; an’ I’m grateful to un.”

During the evening Will was unusually silent and much busied with thought. He knew little of the value of money, and a thousand pounds to his mind represented possibilities wholly beyond the real power of that sum to achieve. Chris presently visited the vicarage, and after their supper, brother and sister sat late and discussed the days to come. When the girl retired, Will’s thoughts for a moment concerned themselves with the immediate past rather than the future; and then it was that he caught himself blankly before his own argument of the morning. To him the force of the contention, now that his position was magically changed, appeared strong as before. A little sophistry had doubtless extricated him from this dilemma, but his nature was innocent of it, and his face grew longer as the conclusion confronting him became more clear. From his own logic—a mysterious abstraction, doubtless—he found it difficult to escape without loss of self-respect. He still held that the deed, impossible to him as a pauper, might be performed without sacrifice of dignity or importance by a man of his present fortune. So the muddle-headed youth saw his duty straight ahead of him; and he regretted it heartily, but did not attempt to escape from it.

Ten minutes later, in his working clothes, he set out to Monks Barton, carrying an old horn lantern that had swung behind his father’s caravan twenty years before. At the farm all lights were out save one in the kitchen; but Will went about his business as silently as possible, and presently found the spade where he had flung it, the barrow where he had overthrown it in the morning. So he set to work, his pipe under his nose, his thoughts afar off in a golden paradise built of Uncle Ford’s sovereigns.

Billy Blee, whose attic window faced out upon the northern side of the farm, had gone to bed, but he was still awake, and the grunt of a wheelbarrow quickly roused him. Gazing into the night he guessed what was doing, dragged on his trousers, and hurried down-stairs to his master.

The miller sat with his head on his hand. His pipe was out and the “night-cap” Phoebe had mixed for him long ago, remained untasted.

“Guy Fawkes an ’angels! here’s a thing! If that Jack-o’-lantern of a bwoy ban’t back again. He’m delvin’ theer, for all the world like a hobgoblin demon, red as blood in the flicker of the light. I fancied’t was the Dowl hisself. But ’t is Blanchard, sure. Theer’s some dark thought under it, I’ll lay, or else he wants to come around ’e again.”

His master doubted not that Billy was dreaming, but he went aloft and looked to convince himself. In silence and darkness they watched Will at work. Then Mr. Blee asked a question as the miller turned to go.

Page 97

“What in thunder do it mean?”

“God knaws, I doan’t. The man or bwoy, or whatever you call un, beats me. I ban’t built to tackle such a piece as him. He’s took a year off my life to-day. Go to your bed, Billy, an’ let un bide.”

“Gormed if I wouldn’t like to slip down an’ scat un ower the head for what he done to me this marnin’. Such an auld man as me, tu! weak in the hams this ten year.”

“But strong in the speech. Maybe you pricked him with a bitter word, an’—theer, theer, if I ban’t standin’ up for the chap now! Yet if I’ve wished un dead wance, I have fifty times since I first heard tell of un. Get to bed. I s’pose us’ll knaw his drift come to-morrow.”

Mr. Lyddon and Billy retired, and both slept ere Will Blanchard’s work was done. Upon its completion he sought the cold nocturnal waters of the river, and then did a thing he had planned an hour before. Entering the farmyard, he flung a small stone at Phoebe’s window in the thatch, then another. But the first had roused his wife, for she lay above in wakefulness and sorrow. She peeped out, saw Blanchard, knew him in the lantern light, and opened the window.

“Will, my awn Will!” she said, with a throbbing voice.

“Ess fay, lovey! I knawed you’d sleep sweeter for hearin’ tell I’ve done the work.”

“Done it?”

“Truth.”

“It was a cruel, wicked shame; an’ the blame’s Billy Blee’s, an’ I’ve cried my eyes out since I heard what they set you to do; an’ I’ve said what I thought; an’ I’m sorry to bitterness about this marnin’, dear Will.”

“’T is all wan now. I’ve comed into a mort of money, my Uncle Ford bein’ suddenly dead.”

“Oh, Will, I could a’most jump out the window!”

“’T would be easier for me to come up-long.”

“No, no; not for the world, Will!”

“Why for not? An’ you that lovely, twinklin’ in your white gownd, an’ me your lawful husband, an’ a man o’ money! Damned if I ain’t got a mind to climb up by the pear-tree!”

“You mustn’t, you mustn’t! Go away, dear, sweet Will. An’ I’m so thankful you’ve forgiven me for being so wicked, dear heart.”

“Everybody’ll ax to be forgiven now, I reckon; but you—theer ban’t nothin’ to forgive you for. You can tell your faither I’ve forgived un to-morrow, an’ tell un I’m rich, tu. ‘T will ease his mind. Theer, an’ theer, an theer!”

Will kissed his hand thrice, then vanished, and his wife shut her window and, kneeling, prayed out thankful prayers.

As her husband crossed Rushford Bridge, his thought sped backward through the storm and sunshine of past events. But chiefly he remembered the struggle with John Grimbal and its sequel. For a moment he glanced below into the dark water.

“‘T is awver an’ past, awver an’ past,” he said to himself. “I be at the tail of all my troubles now, for theer’s nought gude money an’ gude sense caan’t do between ’em.”

Page 98

BOOK II

HIS ENTERPRISE

CHAPTER I

SPRINGTIME

Nature, waking at the song of woodland birds to find herself naked, fashioned with flying fingers such a robe of young green and amber, hyacinth and pearl as only she can weave or wear. A scent of the season rose from multitudinous “buds, and bells, and stars without a name”; while the little world of Devon, vale and forest, upland and heathery waste, rejoiced in the new life, as it rang and rippled with music and colour even to the granite thrones of the Moor. Down by the margin of Teign, where she murmured through a vale of wakening leaves and reflected asphodels bending above her brink, the valley was born again in a very pageant of golden green that dappled all the grey woods, clothed branch and bough anew, ran flower-footed over the meadow, hid nests of happy birds in every dell and dingle, and spread luxuriant life above the ruin of the year that was gone. A song of hope filled each fair noon; no wasted energy, no unfulfilled intent as yet saddened the eye; no stunted, ruined nursling of Nature yet spoke unsuccess; no canker-bitten bud marked the cold finger of failure; for in that first rush of life all the earthborn host had set forth, if not equal, at least together. The primroses twinkled true on downy coral stems and the stars of anemone, celandine, and daisy opened perfect. Countless consummate, lustrous things were leaping, mingling, and uncurling, aloft and below, in the mazes of the wood, at the margins of the water. Verdant spears and blades expanded; fair fans opened and tendrils twined; simultaneous showers of heart-shaped, arrow-shaped, flame-shaped foliage, all pure emerald and translucent beryl, made opulent outpouring of that new life which now pulsed through the Mother’s million veins. Diaphanous mist wreaths and tender showers wooed the Spring; under silver gauze of vernal rain rang wild rapture of thrushes, laughter of woodpeckers, chime and chatter of jackdaws from the rock, secret crooning of the cushat in the pines. From dawn till dusk the sweet air was winnowed by busy wings; from dawn till dusk the hum and murmur of life ceased not. Infinite possibility, infinite promise, marked the time; and man shared a great new hope with the beasts and birds, and wild violet of the wood. Blood and sap raced gloriously together, while a chorus of conscious and unconscious creation sang the anthem of the Spring in solemn strophe and antistrophe.

As life’s litany rises once again, and before the thunder of that music rolling from the valleys to the hills, human reason yearly hesitates for a moment, while hope cries out anew above the frosty lessons of experience. For a brief hour the thinker, perhaps

wisely, turns from memory, as from a cloud that blots the present with its shadow, and spends a little moment in this world of opal lights and azure

Page 99

shades. He forgets that Nature adorned the bough for other purpose than his joy; forgets that strange creatures, with many legs and hungry mouths, will presently tatter each musical dome of rustling green; forgets that he gazes upon a battlefield awaiting savage armies, which will fill high Summer with ceaseless war, to strew the fair earth with slain. He suffers dead Winter to bury her dead, seeks the wine of life that brims in the chalices of Spring flowers: plucks blade and blossom, and is a child again, if Time has so dealt with him that for a little he can thus far retrace his steps; and, lastly, he turns once more to the Mother he has forgotten, to find that she has not forgotten him. The whisper of her passing in a greenwood glade is the murmur of waters invisible and of life unseen; the scent of her garment comes sweet on the bloom of the blackthorn; high heaven and lowly forget-me-not alike mirror the blue of her wonderful eyes; and the gleam of the sunshine on rippling rivers and dreaming clouds reflects the gold of her hair. She moves a queen who, passing through one fair corner of her world-wide kingdom, joys in it. She, the sovereign of the universe, reigns here too, over the buds and the birds, and the happy, unconsidered life of weald and wold. Each busy atom and unfolding frond is dear to her; each warm nest and hidden burrow inspires like measure of her care and delight; and at this time, if ever, we may think of Nature as forgetting Death for one magic moment, as sharing the wide joy of her wakening world, as greeting the young mother of the year's hopes, as pressing to her bosom the babes of Spring with many a sunny smile and rainbowed tear.

Through the woods in Teign Valley passed Clement Hicks and his sweetheart about a fortnight after Lawyer Ford had been laid to rest in Chagford Churchyard. Chris talked about her brother and the great enterprise he had determined upon. She supported Will and spoke with sanguine words of his future; but Clement regarded the project differently.

"To lease Newtake Farm is a fool's trick," he said. "Everybody knows the last experiments there. The place has been empty for ten months, and those who touched it in recent years only broke their hearts and wasted their substance."

"Well, they weern't such men as Will. Theer's a fitness about it, tu; for Will's awn gran'faither prospered at Newtake; an' if he could get a living, another may. Mother do like the thought of Will being there somehow."

"I know it. The sentiment of the thing has rather blinded her natural keen judgment. Curious that I should criticise sentiment in another person; but it 's like my cranky, contrary way. Only I was thinking of Will's thousand pounds. Newtake will suck it out of his pocket quicker than Cranmere sucks up a Spring shower."

"Well, I'm more hopeful. He knows the value of money; an' Phoebe will help him when she comes up. The months slip by so quickly. By the time I've got the cobwebs out of

the farm an' made the auld rooms water-sweet, I dare say theer'll be talk of his wife joining him."

Page 100

“You going up! This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“I meant to tell ’e to-day. Mother is willing and I’m awnly tu glad. A man’s a poor left-handed thing ’bout a house. I’d do more ’n that for Will.”

“Pity he doesn’t think and do something for you. Surely a little of this money—?”

“Doan’t ’e touch on that, Clem. Us had a braave talk ’pon it, for he wanted to make over two hundred pound to me, but I wouldn’t dream of it, and you wouldn’t have liked me tu. You ’m the last to envy another’s fair fortune.”

“I do envy any man fortune. Why should I starve, waiting for you, and—?”

“Hush!” she said, as though she had spoken to a little child. “I won’t hear no wild words to-day in all this gude gold sunshine.”

“God damn everything!” he burst out. “What a poor, impotent wretch He’s made me—a thing to bruise its useless hands beating the door that will never open! It maddens me—especially when all the world’s happy, like to-day—all happy but me. And you so loyal and true! What a fool you are to stick to me and let me curse you all your life!”

“Doan’t ’e, doan’t ’e, Clem,” said Chris wearily. She was growing well accustomed to these ebullitions. “Doan’t grudge Will his awn. Our turn will come, an’ perhaps sooner than we think for. Look round ’pon the sweet fresh airth an’ budding flowers. Spring do put heart into a body. We ’m young yet, and I’ll wait for ’e if ‘t is till the crack o’ doom.”

“Life’s such a cursed short thing at best—just a stormy day between two nights, one as long as past time, the other all eternity. Have you seen a mole come up from the ground, wallow helplessly a moment or two, half blind in the daylight, then sink back into the earth, leaving only a mound? That’s our life, yours and mine; and Fate grudges that even these few poor hours, which make the sum of it, should be spent together. Think how long a man and woman can live side by side at best. Yet every Sunday of your life you go to church and babble about a watchful, loving Maker!”

“I doan’t know, Clem. You an’ me ban’t everybody. You’ve told me yourself as God do play a big game, and it doan’t become this man or that woman to reckon their-selves more important than they truly be.”

“A great game, yes; but a cursed poor game—for a God. The counters don’t matter, I know; they’ll soon be broken up and flung away; and the sooner the better. It’s living hell to be born into a world where there’s no justice—none for king or tinker.”

“Sit alongside of me and smell the primrosen an’ watch thicky kingfisher catching the li’l trout. I doan’t like ’e in these bitter moods, Clem, when your talk’s all dead ashes.”

He sat by her and looked out over the river. It was flooded in sunlight, fringed with uncurling green.

“I’m sick and weary of life without you. ’Conscious existence is a failure,’ and the man who found that out and said it was wise. I wish I was a bird or beast—or nothing. All the world is mating but you and me. Nature hates me because I survive from year to year, not being fit to. The dumb things do her greater credit than ever I can. The—”

Page 101

“Now, I’ll go—on my solemn word, I’ll go—if you grumble any more! Essterday you was so different, and said you’d fallen in love with Miss Spring, and pretended to speak to her and make me jealous. You didn’t do that, but you made me laugh. An’ you promised a purty verse for me. Did ’e make it up after all? I lay not.”

“Yes, I did. I wasted two or three hours over it last night.”

“Might ‘e get ten shillings for it, like t’ other?”

“It’s not worth the paper it’s on, unless you like it. Your praise is better than money to me. Nobody wants any thoughts of mine. Why should they?”

“Not when they ‘m all sour an’ poor, same as now; but essterday you spoke like to a picture-book. Theer’s many might have took gude from what you said then.”

He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and flung it into her lap.

“I call it ‘Spring Rain,’” he said. “Yesterday the world was grey, and I was happy; to-day the world is all gold, and I’m finding life harder and heavier than usual. Read it out slowly to me. It was meant to be read to the song of the river, and never a prettier voice read a rhyme than yours.”

Chris smoothed the paper and recited her lover’s lyrics. They had some shadow of music in them and echoed Clem’s love of beautiful things; but they lacked inspiration or much skill.

“’Neath unnumbered crystal arrows—
Crystal arrows from the quiver
Of a cloud—the waters shiver
In the woodland’s dim domain;
And the whispering of the rain
Tinkles sweet on silver Teign—
Tinkles on the river.

“Through unnumbered sweet recesses—
Sweet recesses soft in lining
Of green moss with ivy twining—
Daffodils, a sparkling train,
Twinkle through the whispering rain,
Twinkle bright by silver Teign,
With a starry shining.

“’Mid unnumbered little leaf-buds—
Little leaf-buds surely bringing
Spring once more—song birds are winging;

And their mellow notes again
Throb across the whispering rain,
Till the banks of silver Teign
Echo with their singing."

Chris, having read, made customary cheerful comment according to her limitations.

"'T is just like essterday—butivul grawing weather, but 'pears to me it's plain facts more 'n poetry. Anybody could come to the streamside and see it all for themselves."

"Many are far away, pent in bricks and mortar, yearning deep to see the dance of the Spring, and chained out of sight of it. This might bring one glimpse to them."

"An' so it might, if you sold it for a bit of money. Then it could be printed out for 'em like t'other was."

"You don't understand—you won't understand—even you."

"I caan't please 'e to-day. I likes the li'l verses ever so. You do make such things seem butivul to my ear—an' so true as a photograph."

Clem shivered and stretched his hand for the paper. Then, in a moment, he had torn it into twenty pieces and sent the fragments afloat.

Page 102

“There! Let her take them to the sea with her. She understands. Maybe she’ll find a cool corner for me too before many days are passed.”

Chris began to feel her patience failing.

“What, in God’s name, have I done to ’e you should treat me like this?” she asked, with fire in her eyes.

“Been fool enough to love me,” he answered. “But it’s never too late for a woman to change her mind. Leave a sinking ship, or rather a ship that never got properly launched, but, sticking out of its element, was left to rot. Why don’t you leave me, Chris?”

She stroked his hand, then picked it up and laid her soft cheek against it.

“Not till the end of the world comes for wan of us, Clem. I’ll love ’e always, and the better and deeper ’cause you ‘m so wisht an’ unlucky somehow. But you ’m tu wise to be miserable all your time.”

“You ought to make me a man if anything could. I burn away with hopes and hopes, and more hopes for the future, and miss the paltry thing at hand that might save me.”

“Then miss it no more, love; seek closer, an’ seek sharper. Maybe gude work an’ gude money ‘s awnly waitin’ for ’e to find it. Doan’t look at the moon an’ stars so much; think of me, an’ look lower.”

Slowly the beauty of the hour and the sweet-hearted girl at his elbow threw some sunshine into Clement’s moody heart. For a little while the melancholy and shiftless dreamer grew happier. He promised renewed activity in the future, and undertook, as a first step towards Martin Grimbal, to inform the antiquary of that great fact which his foolish whim had thus far concealed.

“Chance might have got it to his ears through more channels than one, you would have thought; but he’s a taciturn man, asks no questions, and invites no confidences. I like him the better for it. Next week, come what may, I’ll speak to him and tell him the truth, like a plain, blunt man.”

“Do ’e that very thing,” urged Chris. “Say we’m lovers these two year an’ more; an’ that you’d be glad to wed me if your way o’ life was bettered. Ban’t beggin’, as he knaws, for nobody doubts you’m the most book-learned man in Chagford after parson.”

Together they followed the winding of the river and proceeded through the valley, by wood, and stile, and meadow, until they reached Rushford Bridge. Here they delayed a moment at the parapet and, while they did so, John Grimbal passed on foot alone.

“His house is growing,” said Clement, as they proceeded to Mrs. Blanchard’s cottage.

“Aye, and his hearth will be as cold as his heart—the wretch! Well he may turn his hard face away from me and remember what fell out on this identical spot! But for God’s gude grace he’d have been hanged to Exeter ’fore now.”

“You can’t put yourself in his shoes, Chris; no woman can. Think what the world looked like to him after his loss. The girl he wanted was so near. His hands were stretched out for her; his heart was full of her. Then to see her slip away.”

Page 103

“An’ quite right, tu; as you was the first to say at the time. Who’s gwaine to pity a thief who loses the purse he’s stole, or a poacher that fires ‘pon another man’s bird an’ misses it?”

“All the same, I doubt he would have made a better husband for Phoebe Lyddon than ever your brother will.”

His sweetheart gasped at criticism so unexpected.

“You—you to say that! You, Will’s awn friend!”

“It’s true; and you know it as well as anybody. He has so little common sense.”

But Chris flamed up in an instant. Nothing the man’s cranky temper could do had power to irritate her long. Nothing he might say concerning himself or her annoyed her for five minutes; but, upon the subject of her brother, not even from Clem did Chris care to hear a disparaging word or unfavourable comment. And this criticism, of all others, levelled against Will angered her to instant bitter answer before she had time to measure the weight of her words.

“‘Common sense’! Perhaps you’ll be so kind as to give Will Blanchard a li’l of your awn—you being so rich in it. Best look at home, and see what you can spare!”

So the lovers’ quarrel which had been steadily brewing under the sunshine now bubbled over and lowered thunder-black for the moment, as such storms will.

Clement Hicks, perfectly calm now that his sweetheart’s temper was gone, marched off; and Chris, slamming the cottage door, vanished, without taking any further leave of him than that recorded in her last utterance.

CHAPTER II

NEWTAKE FARM

Clement Hicks told the truth when he said that Mrs. Blanchard fell something short of her usual sound judgment and sagacity in the matter of Will’s enterprise. The home of childhood is often apt enough to exercise magic, far-reaching attraction, and even influence a mind for the most part unsentimental. To Damaris the thought of her son winning his living where her father had done so was pleasant and in accordance with eternal fitness. Not without emotion did she accompany Will to Newtake Farm while yet the proposed bargain awaited completion; not without strange awakenings in the dormant recesses of her memory did Will’s mother pass and pass again through the scenes of her earliest days. From the three stone steps, or “upping stock,” at the farmhouse door, whereat a thousand times she had seen her father mount his horse, to

the environment of the farmyard; from the strange, winding staircase of solid granite that connected upper and lower storeys, to each mean chamber in Newtake, did Mrs. Blanchard's eyes roam thoughtfully amid the ghosts of recollections. Her girl's life returned and the occasional bright days gleamed forth again, vivid by contrast with the prevailing grey. So active became thought that to relieve her mind she spoke to Will.

Page 104

“The li’l chamber over the door was mine,” she said; “an’ your poor uncle had the next. I can just mind him, allus at his books, to his faither’s pride. Then he went away to Newton to join some lawyer body an’ larn his business. An’ I mind the two small maids as was my elder sisters and comed betwixt me an’ Joel. Both died—like candles blawed out roughly by the wind. They wasn’t made o’ the stuff to stand Dartymoor winters.”

She paused for a few moments, then proceeded:

“Theer, to west of the yard, is a croft as had corn in it wan year, though ’tis permanent grass now, seemin’ly. Your faither corned through theer like a snake by night more’n wance; an’ oftentimes I crept down house, shivering wi’ fear an’ love, to meet him under moonlight while the auld folks slept. Tim he’d grawed to a power wi’ the gypsy people by that time; but faither was allus hard against un. He hated wanderers in tents or ’pon wheels, or even sea-gwaine sailor-men—he carried it that far. Then comed a peep o’ day when Tim’s bonny yellow caravan ’peared around the corner of that windin’ road what goes all across the Moor. At the first stirring of light, I was ready an’ skipped out; an’, to this hour, I mind the last thing as touched me kindly was the red tongue of the sheep-dog. He ran a mile after the van, unhappy-like; then Tim ordered un away, an’ he stood in the white road an’ held up his paw an’ axed a question as plain as a human. So Tim hit un hard wi’ a gert stone, an’ he yelped an’ gived me up for lost, an’ bolted home wi’ his tail between his legs an’ his eye thrawed back full of sadness over his shoulder. Ess fay! I can see the dust puffin’ up under his pads in the grey dawn so clear as I can see you.”

Again she stopped, but only for breath.

“They never answered my writings. Faither wouldn’t an’ mother didn’t dare. But when I was near my time, Timothy, reckoning they’d yield then if ever, arranged to be in Chagford when I should be brought to bed. Yet ‘twas ordained differ’nt, an’ the roundy-poundy, wheer the caravan was drawed up when the moment corned, be just round theer on Metherill hill, as you knaws. So it happened right under the very walls of Newtake. In the stone circle you comed; an’ by night arterwards, sweatin’ for terror, your gran’mother, as had heard tell of it, sneaked from Newtake to kiss me an’ press you to her body. Faither never knawed till long arter; an’ though mother used to say she heard un forgive me on his death-bed, ’twas her awn pious wish echoing in her awn ears I reckon. But that’s all awver an’ done.”

Mrs. Blanchard now sank into silent perambulation of the deserted chambers. In the kitchen the whitewash was grimy, the ceiling and windows unclean. Ashes of a peat fire still lay upon the cracked hearthstone, and a pair of worn-out boots, left by a tramp or the last tenant, stood on the window-sill. Dust and filth were everywhere, but no indication of dampness or decay.

Page 105

“A proper auld rogue’s-roost of dirt ’tis just now,” said Will; “but a few pound spent in the right way will do a deal for it.”

“An’ soap an’ water more,” declared Mrs. Blanchard, escaping from her reverie. “What’s to be spent landlord must spend,” she continued. “A little whitewash, and some plaster to fill them holes wheer woodwork’s poking through the ceiling, an’ you’ll be vitty again. ’Tis lonesome-like now, along o’ being deserted, an’ you’ll hear the rats galloping an’ gallyarding by night, but ’twill soon be all it was again—a dear li’l auld plaace, sure enough!”

She eyed the desolation affectionately.

“Theer’s money in it, any way, for what wan man can do another can.”

“Aye, I hope so, I b’lieve ‘tis so; but you’ll have to live hard, an’ work hard, an’ be hard, if you wants to prosper here. Your gran’faither stood to the work like a giant, an’ the sharpest-fashion weather hurt him no worse than if he’d been a granite tor. Steel-built to his heart’s core, an’ needed to be.”

“An’ I be a stern, far-seein’ man, same as him. ’Tis generally knawn I’m no fule; and my heart’s grawed hard, tu of late days, along wi’ the troubles life’s brought.”

She shook her head.

“You’m your faither’s son, not your gran’faither’s. Tim was flesh an’ blood, same as you. T’other was stone. Stone’s best, when you’ve got to fight wi’ stone; but if flesh an’ blood suffers more, it joys more, tu. I wouldn’t have ’e differ’nt—not to them as loves ’e, any way.”

“I sha’n’t change; an’ if I did to all the world else, ’twouldn’t be to you, mother. You knaw that, I reckon. I’m hopeful; I’m more; I’m ’bout as certain of fair fortune as a man can be. Venwell rights[6] be mine, and theer’s no better moorland grazing than round these paarts. The farm-land looks a bit foul, along o’ being let go to rack, but us’ll soon have that clean again, an’ some gude stuff into it, tu. My awn work’ll be staring me in the faace before summer; an’ by the time Phoebe do come to be mistress, nobody’ll knaw Newtake, I promise ’e.”

[6] *Venwell rights* = Venville rights.

Mrs. Blanchard viewed with some uneasiness the spectacle of valley-born and valley-nurtured Phoebe taking up her abode on the high lands. For herself she loved them well, and the Moor possessed no terrors for her; but she had wit to guess that her daughter-in-law would think and feel differently. Indeed, neither woman nor man might reasonably be blamed for viewing the farm without delight when first brought within the radius of its influence.

Page 106

Newtake stood, a squat and unlovely erection, under a tar-pitched roof of slate. Its stone walls were coated with a stucco composition, which included tallow as an ingredient and ensured remarkable warmth and dryness. Before its face there stretched a winding road of white flint, that climbed from the village, five miles distant, and soon vanished amid the undulations of the hills; while, opposite, steep heathery slopes and grassy coombs ascended abruptly to masses of weathered granite; and at the rear a hillside, whereon Metherill's scattered hut-circles made incursions even into the fields of the farm, fell to the banks of Southern Teign where she babbled between banks of brake-fern and heather. Swelling and sinking solemnly along the sky, Dartmoor surrounded Newtake. At the entrance of the yard stood a broken five-barred gate between twin masses of granite; then appeared a ragged outbuilding or two, with roofs of lichen-covered slate; and upon one side, in a row, grew three sycamores, bent out of all uprightness by years of western winds, and coated as to their trunks with grey lichen. Behind a cowyard of shattered stone pavement and cracked mud stood the farm itself, and around it extended the fields belonging thereto. They were six or seven in number, and embraced some five-and-fifty acres of land, mostly indifferent meadow.

Seen from the winding road, or from the bird's-eye elevation of the adjacent tor, Newtake, with its mean ship-pens and sties, outbuildings and little crofts, all huddled together, poverty-stricken, time-fretted, wind-worn, and sad of colour, appeared a mere forlorn fragment of civilisation left derelict upon the savage bosom of an untamable land. It might have represented some forsaken, night-foundered abode of men, torn by earthquake or magic spell from a region wholly different, and dropped and stranded here. It sulked solitary, remote, and forgotten; its black roof frowned over its windows, and green tears, dribbling down its walls in time past, had left their traces, as though even spring sunlight was powerless to eradicate the black memories of winters past, or soften the bitter certainty of others yet to come. The fields, snatched from the Moor in time long past, now showed a desire to return to their wild mother again. The bars of cultivation were broken and the land struggled to escape. Scabious would presently throw a mauve pallor over more than one meadow croft; in another, waters rose and rushes and yellow iris flourished and defied husbandry; elsewhere stubble, left unploughed by the last defeated farmer, gleamed silver-grey through a growth of weeds; while at every point the Moor thrust forward hands laden with briar and heather. They surmounted the low stone walls and fed and flourished upon the clods and peat that crowned them. Nature waved early gold of the greater furze in the van of her oncoming, and sent her wild winds to sprinkle croft and hay-field, ploughed land and potato patch,

Page 107

with thistledown and the seeds of the knapweed and rattle and bracken fern. These heathen things and a thousand others, in all the early vigour of spring, rose triumphant above the meek cultivation. They trampled it, strangled it, choked it, and maddened the agriculturist by their sturdy and stubborn persistence. A forlorn, pathetic blot upon the land of the mist was Newtake, seen even under conditions of sunlight and fair weather; but beheld beneath autumnal rains, observed at seasons of deep snow or in the dead waste of frozen winters, its apparition rendered the most heavy-hearted less sad before the discovery that there existed a human abode more hateful, a human outlook more oppressive, than their own.

To-day heavy moorland vapours wrapped Newtake in ghostly raiment, yet no forlorn emotions clouded the survey of those who now wandered about the lifeless farm. In the mind of one, here retracing the course of her maidenhood, this scene, if sad, was beautiful. The sycamores, whose brown spikes had burst into green on a low bough or two, were the trees she loved best in the world; the naked field on the hillside, wherein a great stone ring shone grey through the silver arms of the mist, represented the theatre of her life's romance. There she had stolen oftentimes to her lover, and in another such, not far distant, had her son been born. Thoughts of little sisters rose in the naked kitchen, with the memory of a flat-breasted, wild-eyed mother, who did man's work; of a father, who spoke seldom and never twice—a father whose heavy foot upon the threshold sent his children scuttling like rabbits to hidden lairs and dens. She remembered the dogs; the bright gun-barrel above the chimney-piece; the steam of clothes hung to dry after many a soaking in "soft" weather; the reek of the peat; the brown eyes and steaming nostrils of the bullocks, that sometimes looked through the kitchen window in icy winter twilights, as though they would willingly change their byres for the warmth within.

Mrs. Blanchard enjoyed the thought that her son should reanimate these scenes of her own childhood; and he, burning with energy and zeal, and not dead to his own significance as a man of money, saw promises of prosperity on either hand. It lay with him, he told his heart, to win smiling fatness from this hungry region. Right well he knew how it came about that those who had preceded him had failed, missed their opportunities, fooled themselves, and flung away their chances. Evidences of their ignorance stared at him from the curtains of the mist, but he knew better; he was a man who had thought a bit in his time and had his head screwed on the right way, thank God. These facts he poured into his mother's ear, and she smiled thoughtfully, noted the changes time had wrought, and indicated to him those things the landlord might reasonably be expected to do before Will should sign and seal.

Page 108

The survey ended, her son helped Damaris into a little market-cart, which he had bought for her upon coming into his fortune. A staid pony, also his purchase, completed the equipage, and presently Mrs. Blanchard drove comfortably away; while Will, who yet proposed to tramp, for the twentieth time, each acre of Newtake land, watched her depart, then turned to continue his researches. A world of thought rested on his brown face. Arrived at each little field, he licked his pencil, and made notes in a massive new pocketbook. He strode along like a conqueror of kingdoms, frowned and scratched his curly head as problem after problem rose, smiled when he solved them, and entered the solution in his book. For the wide world was full of young green, and this sanguine youth soared lark-high in soul under his happy circumstances. Will breathed out kindness to all mankind just at present, and now before that approaching welfare he saw writ largely in beggarly Newtake, before the rosy dawn which Hope spread over this cemetery of other men's dead aspirations, he felt his heart swell to the world. Two clouds only darkened his horizon then. One was the necessity of beginning the new life without his life's partner; while the other, formerly tremendous enough, had long since shrunk to a shadow on the horizon of the past. His secret still remained, but that circumstance was too remote to shadow the new enterprise. It existed, however, and its recurrence wove occasional gloomy patterns into the web of Will Blanchard's thought.

CHAPTER III

OVER A RIDING-WHIP

Will completed his survey and already saw, in his mind's eye, a brave masque of autumn gold spreading above the lean lands of Newtake. From this spectacle to that of garnered harvests and great gleaming stacks bursting with fatness the transition was natural and easy. He pictured kine in the farmyard, many sheep upon the hills, and Phoebe with such geese, ducks, and turkeys as should make her quite forget the poultry of Monks Barton. Then, having built castles in the air until his imagination was exhausted, Will shut the outer gate with the touch of possession, turned a moment to see how Newtake looked from the roadway, found only the shadow of it looming through the mist, and so departed, whistling and slapping his gaiters with an ash sapling.

It happened that beside a gate which closed the moorland precincts to prevent cattle from wandering, a horseman stood, and as the pedestrian passed him in the gathering gloaming, he dropped his hunting-stock while making an effort to open the gate without dismounting.

"Bide wheer you be!" said Will; "I'll pick un up an' ope the gate for 'e."

He did so and handed the whip back to its owner. Then each recognised the other, and there was a moment of silence.

“’Tis you, Jan Grimbal, is it?” asked the younger. “I didn’t knaw ’e in the dimpsy light.”

Page 109

He hesitated, and his words when they came halted somewhat, but his meaning was evident.

“I’m glad you’m back to home. I’ll forget all what’s gone, if you will. ‘Twas give an’ take, I s’pose. I took my awn anyway, an’ you comed near killing me for’t, so we’m upsides now, eh? We’m men o’ the world likewise. So—so shall us shake hands an’ let bygones be, Jan Grimbal?”

He half raised his hand, and looked up, with a smile at the corner of his lip ready to jump into life if the rider should accept his friendship. But Grimbal’s response was otherwise.

To say little goodness dwelt in this man had been untrue, but recent events and the first shattering reverse that life brought him proved sufficient to sour his very soul and eclipse a sun which aforetime shone with great geniality because unclouded. Fate hits such men particularly hard when her delayed blow falls. Existences long attuned to success and level fortune; lives which have passed through five-and-thirty years of their allotted span without much sorrow, without sharp thorns in the flesh, without those carking, gnawing trials of mind and body which Time stores up for all humanity—such feel disaster when it does reach them with a bitterness unknown by those who have been in misery’s school from youth. Poverty does not bite the poor as it bites him who has known riches and afterwards fights destitution; feeble physical circumstances do not crush the congenital invalid, but they often come near to break the heart of a man who, until their black advent, has known nothing but rude health; great reverses in the vital issues of life and fortune fail to obliterate one who knows their faces of old, but the first enemy’s cannon on Time’s road must ever bring ugly shock to him who has advanced far and happily without meeting any such thing.

Grimbal’s existence had been of a rough-and-ready sort shone over by success. Philosophy he lacked, for life had never turned his mind that way; religion was likewise absent from him; and his recent tremendous disappointment thus thundered upon a mind devoid of any machinery to resist it. The possession of Phoebe Lyddon had come to be an accepted and accomplished fact; he chose her for his own, to share the good things Fortune had showered into his lap—to share them and be a crowning glory of them. The overthrow of this scheme at the moment of realisation upset his estimate of life in general and set him adrift and rudderless, in the hurricane of his first great reverse. Of selfish temperament, and doubly so by the accident of consistent success, the wintry wind of this calamity slew and then swept John Grimbal’s common sense before it, like a dead leaf. All that was worst in him rose to the top upon his trouble, and since Will’s marriage the bad had been winning on the good and thrusting it deeper and deeper out of sight or immediate possibility of recovery. At all times John Grimbal’s inferior characteristics

Page 110

were most prominently displayed, and superficial students of character usually rated him lower than others really worse than himself, but who had wit to parade their best traits. Now, however, he rode and strode the country a mere scowling ruffian, with his uppermost emotions still stamped on his face. The calamity also bred an unsuspected sensitiveness in him, and he smarted often under the reflection of what others must be thinking. His capability towards vindictiveness proved very considerable. Formerly his anger against his fellow-men had been as a thunder-storm, tremendous but brief in duration; now, before this bolt of his own forging, a steady, malignant activity germinated and spread through the whole tissue of his mind.

Those distractions open to a man of Grimbal's calibre presently blunted the edge of his loss, and successful developments of business also served to occupy him during the visit he paid to Africa; but no interests as yet had arisen to obscure or dull his hatred of Will Blanchard. The original blaze of rage sank to a steady, abiding fire, less obviously tremendous than that first conflagration, but in reality hotter. In a nature unsubtle, revenge will not flourish as a grand passion for any length of time. It must reach its outlet quickly and attain to its ambition without overmuch delay, else it shrivels and withers to a mere stubborn, perhaps lifelong, enmity—a dwarfish, mulish thing, devoid of any tragic splendour. But up to the point that John Grimbal had reached as yet, his character, though commonplace in most affairs, had unexpectedly quickened to a condition quite profound where his revenge was concerned.

He still cherished the certainty of a crushing retaliation. He was glad he had not done Blanchard any lifelong injury; he was glad the man yet lived for time and him to busy themselves about; he was even glad (and herein appeared the unsuspected subtlety) that Will had prospered and come by a little show of fortune. Half unconsciously he hoped for the boy something of his own experiences, and had determined with himself—in a spirit very melodramatic but perfectly sincere at present—to ruin his enemy if patience and determination could accomplish it.

In this mood, with his wrongs sharpened by return to Chagford and his purposes red-hot, John Grimbal now ran against his dearest foe, received the horsewhip from him, and listened to his offer of peace.

He still kept silence and Will lowered the half-lifted arm and spoke again.

"As you please. I can bide very easy without your gude word."

"That's well, then," said the other, in his big voice, as his hands tightened. "We've met again. I'm glad I didn't break your neck, for your heart's left to break, and by the living God I'll break it! I can wait. I'm older than you, but young enough. Remember, I'll run you down sooner or later. I've hunted most things, and men aren't the cleverest

Page 111

beasts and you're not the cleverest man I've bested in my time. You beat me—I know it—but it would have been better for you if you hadn't been born. There's the truth for your country ears, you damned young hound. I'll fight fair and I'll fight to the finish. Sport—that's what it is. The birds and the beasts and the fish have their close time; but there won't be any close time for you, not while I can think and work against you. So now you know. D' you hear me?"

"Ess," said Will, meeting the other's fierce eyes; "I hear 'e, an' so might the dead in Chagford buryin'-ground. You hollers loud enough. I ban't 'feared of nothing a hatch-mouthed,[7] crooked-minded man, same as you be, can do. An' if I'm a hound, you 'm a dirty red fox, an' everybody knaws who comes out top when they meet. Steal my gal, would 'e? Gaw your ways, an' mend your ways, an' swallow your bile. I doan't care a flicker o' wildfire for 'e!"

[7] *Hatch-mouthed* = foul mouthed; profane.

John Grimbal heard only the beginning of this speech, for he turned his back on Will and rode away while the younger man still shouted after him. Blanchard was in a rage, and would have liked to make a third trial of strength with his enemy on the spot, but the rider vanished and Will quickly cooled as he went down the hill to Chagford. The remembrance of this interview, for all his scorn, chilled him when he reflected on John Grimbal's threats. He feared nothing indeed, but here was another cloud, and a black one, blown violently back from below the horizon of his life to the very zenith. Malignity of this type was strange to him and differed widely from the petty bickerings, jealousies, and strifes of ordinary country existence. It discouraged him to feel in his hour of universal contentment that a strong, bitter foe would now be at hand, forever watching to bring ruin on him at the first opportunity. As he walked home he asked himself how he should feel and act in Grimbal's shoes, and tried to look at the position from his enemy's standpoint. Of course he told himself that he would have accepted defeat with right philosophy. It was a just fix for a man to find himself in,—a proper punishment for a mean act. Arguing thus, from the right side of the hedge, he forgot what wiser men have forgotten, that there is no disputing about man's affection for woman, there is no transposition of the standpoint, there is no looking through another's eyes upon a girl. Many have loved, and many have rendered vivid pictures of the emotion, touched with insight of genius and universally proclaimed true to nature from general experience; but no two men love alike, and neither you nor another man can better say how a third feels under the yoke, estimate his thrall, or foretell his actions, despite your own experience, than can one sufferer from gout, though it has torn him half a hundred times, gauge the qualities of another's torment under the same disease. Will could not guess what John Grimbal had felt for Phoebe; he knew nothing of the other's disposition, because, young in knowledge of the world and a boy still, despite his age, it was beyond him to

appreciate even remotely the mind of a man fifteen years older than himself—a man of very different temper and one whose life had been such as we have just described.

Page 112

Home went Blanchard, and kept his meeting secret. His mother, returning long before him, was already in some argument with Chris concerning the disposal of certain articles of furniture, the pristine splendour of which had been worn off at Newtake five-and-thirty years before. At Farmer Ford's death these things passed to his son, and he, not requiring them, had made them over to Damaris.

"They was flam-new when first my parents married and comed to Newtake, many a year ago; and now I want 'em to go back theer. They've seed three generations, an' I'd be well pleased that a fourth should kick its li'l boots out against them. They 'm stout enough yet. Sweat went to building of chairs an' tables in them days; now it's steam. Besides, 'twill save Will's pocket a tidy bit."

Chris, however, though she could deny Will nothing, was divided here, for why should her mother part from those trifles which contributed to the ample adornment of her cottage? Certain stout horsehair furniture and a piano were the objects Mrs. Blanchard chiefly desired should go to Newtake. The piano, indeed, had never been there before. It was a present to Damaris from her dead husband, who purchased the instrument second-hand for five pounds at a farm sale. Its wiry jingle spoke of evolution from harpsichord or spinet to the modern instrument; its yellow keys, from which the ivory in some cases was missing, and its high back, stained silk front, and fretted veneer indicated age; while above the keyboard a label, now growing indistinct, set forth that one "William Harper, of Red Lion Street, Maker of piano-fortes to his late Majesty" was responsible for the instrument very early in the century.

Now Will joined the discussion, but his mother would take no denial.

"These chairs and sofa be yours, and the piano's my present to Phoebe. She'll play to you of a Sunday afternoon belike."

"An' it's here she'll do it; for my Sundays'll be spent along with you, of coourse, 'cept when you comes up to my farm to spend 'em. That's what I hope'll fall out; an' I want to see Miller theer, tu, after he've found I'm right and he'm wrong."

But the event proved that, even in his new capacity as a man of money and a landholder, Will was not to win much ground with Mr. Lyddon. Two circumstances contributed to the continued conflict, and just as Phoebe was congratulating herself and others upon the increasing amity between her father and her husband matters fell out which caused the miller to give up all hope of Will for the hundredth time. First came the occupancy of Newtake at a rent Mr. Lyddon considered excessive; and then followed a circumstance that touched the miller himself, for, by the offer of two shillings more a week than he received at Monks Barton, Will tempted into his service a labourer held in great esteem by his father-in-law.

Page 113

Sam Bonus appeared the incarnation of red Devon earth, built up on solid beef and mutton. His tanned face was framed in crisp black hair that no razor had ever touched; his eyes were deep-set and bright; his narrow brow was wrinkled, not with thought, but as the ape's. A remarkably tall and powerful frame supported Sam's little head. He laboured like a horse and gave as little trouble, triumphed in feats of brute strength, laughed at a day's work, never knew ache or pain. He had always greatly admired Blanchard, and, faced with the tempting bait of a florin a week more than his present wage, abandoned Monks Barton and readily followed Will to the Moor. His defection was greatly deplored, and though Will told Mr. Blee what he intended beforehand, and made no secret of his design to secure Sam if possible, Billy discredited the information until too late. Then the miller heard of his loss, and, not unnaturally, took the business ill.

"Gormed if it ban't open robbery!" declared Mr. Blee, as he sat and discussed the matter with his master one evening, "an' the thankless, ill-convenient twoad to go to Blanchard, of all men!"

"He'll be out of work again soon enough. And he needn't come back to me when he is. I won't take him on no more."

"'Twould be contrary to human nature if you did."

"Human nature!" snapped the miller, with extreme irritation. "'Twould puzzle Solomon to say what's come over human nature of late days."

"'Tis a nut wi' a maggot in it," mused Billy: "three parts rotten, the rest sweet. An' all owing to fantastic inventions an' new ways of believin' in God wi'out church-gwaine, as parson said Sunday. Such things do certainly Play hell with human nature, in a manner o' speakin'. I reckon the uprising men an' women's wickeder than us, as sucked our mothers in quieter times afore the railroads."

"Bonus is such a fule!" said Mr. Lyddon, harking back to his loss. "Yet I thought he belonged to the gude old-fashioned sort."

"I told un he was out in his reckoning, that he'd be left in the cold bimebye, so sure as Blanchard was Blanchard and Newtake was Newtake; but he awnly girned his gert, ear-wide girn, an' said he knawed better."

"To think of more gude money bein' buried up theer! You've heard my view of all ground wi' granite under it. Such a deal ought to have been done wi' that thousand pound."

"Oughts are noughts, onless they've strokes to 'em," declared Billy. "'Tis a poor lookout, for he'm the sort as buys experience in the hardest market. Then, when it's got, he'll be a pauper man, with what he knaws useless for want o' what's spent gettin' it. Theer's

the thought o' Miss Phoebe, tu,—Mrs. Blanchard, I should say. Caan't see her biding up to Newtake nohow, come the hard weather."

"'Wedlock an' winter tames maids an' beastes,'" said Mr. Lyddon bitterly. "A true saw that."

"Ess; an' when 'tis wedlock wi' Blanchard, an' winter on Dartymoor, 'twould tame the daughter of the Dowl, if he had wan."

Page 114

Billy laughed at this thought. His back rounded as he sat in his chair, his head seemed to rise off his lower jaw, and the yellow frill of hair under his chin stood stiffly out.

“He’s my son-in-law; you ’pear to forget that, Blee,” said Mr. Lyddon; “I’m sure I wish I could, if ‘twas even now an’ again.”

Thereupon Billy straightened his face and cast both rancour and merriment to the winds.

“Why, so he be; an’ grey hairs should allus make allowance for the young youths; though I ain’t forgot that spadeful o’ muck yet, an’ never shall. But theer’s poison in bwoy’s blood what awnly works out of the brain come forty. I’m sure I wish nothing but well to un. He’s got his saving graces, same as all of us, if we could but see ’em; an’ come what may, God looks arter His awn chosen fules, so theer’s hope even for Blanchard.” “Cold consolation,” said Mr. Lyddon wearily; “but’t is all we’ve got. Two nights since I dreamt I saw un starvin’ on a dunghill. ’T was a parable, I judge, an’ meant Newtake Farm.”

CHAPTER IV

DEFEATED HOPES

Below Newtake Farm the river Teign wound, with many a foaming fall and singing rapid, to confluence with her twin sister in the valley beneath. Here, at a certain spot, above the forest and beneath the farm, stood Martin Grimbal on a bright afternoon in May. Over his head rose a rowan, in a soft cloud of serrated foliage, with clusters of grey-green flower buds already foretelling the crimson to come; about his feet a silver army of uncurling fronds brightened the earth and softened the sharp edges of the boulders scattered down the coomb. Here the lover waited to the music of a cuckoo, and his eyes ever turned towards a stile at the edge of the pine woods, two hundred yards distant from him.

The hour was one of tremendous possibilities, because Fate had been occupied with Martin through many days, and now he stood on the brink of great joy or sorrow. Clement Hicks had never spoken to him. During his quarrel with Chris, which lasted a fortnight, the bee-keeper purposely abstained from doing her bidding, while after their reconciliation every other matter in the world was swallowed up for a time in the delight of renewed love-making. The girl, assuming throughout these long weeks that Martin now knew all, had met him in frank and kindly spirit on those occasions when he planned to enjoy her society, and this open warmth awoke renewed heart for Grimbal, who into her genial friendship read promise and from it recruited hope. His love now dominated his spiritual being and filled his life. Grey granite was grey granite only, and no more. During his long walks by pillar-stone, remote row, and lonely circle, Chris, and

Chris alone, occupied his brain. He debated the advisability of approaching Will, then turned rather to the thought of sounding Mrs. Blanchard, and finally nerved himself to right action and determined to address Chris. He felt this present heart-shaking suspense must be laid at rest, for the peace of his soul, and therefore he took his courage in his hands and faced the ordeal.

Page 115

That day Chris was going up to Newtake. She had not yet settled there, though her brother and Sam Bonus were already upon the ground, but the girl came and went, busying her fingers with a hundred small matters that daily increased the comfort of the little farm. Her way lay usually by the coomb, and Martin, having learned that she was visiting Will on the occasion in question, set out before her and awaited her here, beside the river, in a lonely spot between the moorland above and the forest below. He felt physically nervous, yet hope brightened his mind, though he tried to strangle it. Worn and weary with his long struggle, he paced up and down, now looking to the stile, now casting dissatisfied glances upon his own person. Shaving with more than usual care, he had cut his chin deeply, and, though he knew it not, the wound had bled again since he left home and ruined both his collar and a new tie, put on for the occasion.

Presently he saw her. A sunbonnet bobbed at the stile and Chris appeared, bearing a roll of chintz for Newtake blinds. In her other hand she carried half a dozen bluebells from the woods, and she came with the free gait acquired in keeping stride through long tramps with Will when yet her frocks were short. Martin loved her characteristic speed in walking. So Diana doubtless moved. The spring sunshine had found Chris and the clear, soft brown of her cheek was the most beautiful thing in nature to the antiquary. He knew her face so well now: the dainty poise of her head, the light of her eyes, the dark curls that always clustered in the same places, the little updrawing at the corner of her mouth as she smiled, the sudden gleam of her teeth when she laughed, and the abrupt transitions of her expression from repose to gladness, from gladness back again into repose.

She saw the man before she reached him, and waved her bluebells to show that she had done so. Then he rose from his granite seat and took off his hat and stood with it off, while his heart thundered, his eye watered, and his mouth twitched. But he was outwardly calm by the time Chris reached him.

“What a surprise to find ’e here, Martin! Yet not much, neither, for wheer the auld stones be, theer you ’m to be expected.”

“How are you, Chris? But I needn’t ask. Yes, I’m fond of the stones.”

“Well you may be. They talk to ‘e like friends, seemingly. An’ even I knaw a sight more ’bout ’em now. You’ve made me feel so differ’nt to ’em, you caan’t think.”

“For that matter,” he answered, leaping at the chance, “you’ve made me feel different to them.”

“Why, how could I, Martin?”

“I’ll tell you. Would you mind sitting down here, just for a moment? I won’t keep you. I’ve no right to ask for a minute of your time; but there’s dry moss upon it—I mean the

stone; and I was waiting on purpose, if you'll forgive me for waylaying you like this. There's a little thing—a big thing, I mean—the biggest—too big for words almost, yet it wants words—and yet sometimes it doesn't—at least—I—would you sit here?"

Page 116

He was breathing rather hard, and his words were tripping. Managing his voice ill, the tones of it ran away from bass to shrill treble. She saw it all at a glance, and realised that Martin had been blundering on, in pure ignorance and pure love, all these weary weeks. She sat down silently and her mind moved like light along the wide gamut of fifty emotions in a second. Anger and sorrow strove together,—anger with Clem and his callous, cynic silence, sorrow for the panting wretch before her. Chris opened her mouth to speak, then realised where her flying thoughts had taken her and that, as yet, Martin Grimbal had said nothing. Her unmaidenly attitude and the sudden reflection that she was about to refuse one before he had asked her, awoke a hysteric inclination to laugh, then a longing to cry. But all the anxious-visaged man before her noted was a blush that waved like auroral light from the girl's neck to her cheek, from her cheek to her forehead. That he saw, and thought it was love, and thanked the Lord in his clumsy fashion aloud.

"God be praised! I do think you guess—I do think you guess! But oh, my dear, my dear, you don't know what 's in my heart for you. My little pearl of a Chris, can you care for such a bear of a man? Can you let me labour all my life long to make your days good to you? I love you so—I do. I never thought when the moment came I should find tongue to speak it, but I have; and now I could say it fifty thousand times. I'd just be proud to tie your shoe-string, Chris, my dear, and be your old slave and—Chris! my Chris! I've hurt you; I've made you cry! Was I—was I all wrong? Don't, don't—I'll go—-Oh, my darling one, God knows I wouldn't—"

He broke off blankly and stood half sorrowful, half joyous. He knew he had no right as yet to go to the comfort of the girl now sobbing beside him, but hope was not dead. And Chris, overcome by this outpouring of love, now suffered very deep sorrow, while she turned away from him and hid her face and wept. The poor distracted fool still failed to guess the truth, for he knew tint tears are the outcome of happiness as well as misery. He waited, open-mouthed, he murmured something—God knows what—then he went close and thought to touch her waist, but feared and laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Don't 'e!" she said; and he began to understand and to struggle with himself to lessen her difficulty.

"Forgive me—forgive me if you can, Chris. Was I all wrong? Then I ought to have known better—but even an old stick like me—before you, Chris. Somehow I—but don't cry. I wouldn't have brought the tears to your eyes for all the world—dense idiot I am—"

"No, no, no; no such thing 't all, Martin. 'Tis I was cruel not to see you didn't knaw. You've been treated ill, an' I'm cryin' that such a gude—gude, braave, big-hearted man as you, should be brought to this for a fule of a gal like me. I ban't worthy a handshake from 'e, or a kind word. An'—an'—Clem Hicks—Clem be tokened to me these two year an' more. He'm the best man in the world; an' I hate un for not tellin' 'e—an'—an'—"

Page 117

Chris sobbed herself to the end of her tears; and the man took his trial—like a man. His only thought was the sadness his blunder had brought with it for her. To misread her blush seemed in his humility a crime. His consistent unselfishness blinded him, for an instant at least, to his own grief. He blamed himself and asked pardon and prepared to get away out of her sight as soon as possible.

“Forgive me, Chris—I needn’t ask you twice, I know—such a stupid thing—I didn’t understand—I never observed: but more shame to me. I ought to have seen, of course. Anybody else would—any man of proper feeling.”

“How could ’e see it with a secret chap like him? He ought to have told ‘e; I bid un speak months since; an’ I thought he had; an’ I hate un for not doing it!”

“But you mustn’t. Don’t cry any more, and forget all about it. I could almost laugh to think how blind I’ve been. We’ll both laugh next time we meet. If you’re happy, then I’ll laugh always. That’s all I care for. Now I know you’re happy again, I’m happy, too, Chris—honour bright. And I’ll be a friend still—remember that—always—to you—to you and him.”

“I hate un, I say.”

“Why, he didn’t give me credit for being such a bat—such a mole. Now I must be away. We’ll meet pretty soon, I expect. Just forget this afternoon as though it had never been, even though it’s such a jolly sunny one. And remember me as a friend—a friend still for all my foolishness. Good-by for the present. Good-by.”

He nodded, making the parting a slight thing and not missing the ludicrous in his anxiety to spare her pain. He went down the valley, leaving her sitting alone. He assumed a jaunty air and did not look round, but hastened off to the stile. Never in his most light-hearted moments had he walked thus or struck right and left at the leaves and shrubs with such a clumsy affectation of nonchalance. Thus he played the fool until out of sight; then his head came down, and his feet dragged, and his walk and mien grew years older than his age. He stopped presently and stood still, staring upon the silence. Westering sunlight winnowed through the underwood, splashed into its sombre depths and brightened the sobriety of a grey carpet dotted with dead cones. Sweet scents floated downward upon the sad whisper that lives in every pine forest; then came suddenly a crisp rattle of little claws and a tiny barking, where two red squirrels made love, high aloft, amid the grey lichens and emerald haze of a great larch that gleamed like a green lamp through the night of the dark surrounding foliage.

Page 118

Martin Grimbal dropped his stick and flung down his body in the hushed and hidden dreamland of the wood. Now he knew that his hope had lied to him, that the judgment he prided himself upon, and which had prompted him to this great deed, was at fault. The more than common tact and delicacy of feeling he had sometimes suspected he possessed in rare, exalted moments, were now shown vain ideas born from his own conceit; and the event had proved him no more subtle, clever, or far-seeing than other men. Indeed, he rated himself as an abject blunderer and thought he saw how a great overwhelming fear, at the bottom of his worship of Chris, had been the only true note in all that past war of emotions. But he had refused to listen and pushed forward; and now he stood thus. Looking back in the light of his defeat, his previous temerity amazed him. His own ugliness, awkwardness, and general unfitness to be the husband of Chris were ideas now thrust upward in all honesty to the top of his mind. No mock modesty or simulated delicacy inspired them, for after defeat a man is frank with himself. Whatever he may have pretended before he puts his love to the test, however he may have blinded himself as to his real feelings and beliefs before he offers his heart, after the event has ended unfavourably his real soul stands naked before him and, according to his character, he decides whether himself or the girl is the fool. Grimbal criticised his own audacity with scanty compassion now; and the thought of the tears of Chris made him clench one hand and smash it hard again and again into the palm of the other. No passionate protest rose in his mind against the selfish silence of Clement Hicks; he only saw his own blindness and magnified it into an absolute offence against Chris. Presently, as the sunlight sank lower, and the straight stems of the pines glimmered red-gold against the deepening gloom, Martin retraced the scene that was past and recalled her words and actions, her tears, the trembling of her mouth, and that gesture when the wild flowers dropped from her hand and her fingers went up to cover her eyes. Then a sudden desire mastered him: to possess the purple of her bluebell bouquet. He knew she would not pick it up again when he was gone; so he returned, stood in that theatre of Fate beneath the rowan, saw where her body had pressed the grass, and found the fading flowers.

Then he turned to tramp home, with the truth gnawing his heart at last. The excitement was over, all flutter of hope and fear at rest. Only that bitter fact of failure remained, with the knowledge that one, but yesterday so essential and so near, had now vanished like a rainbow beyond his reach.

Martin's eyes were opened in the light of this experience. John came into his mind, and estimating his brother's sufferings by his own, the stricken man found room in his sad heart for pity.

CHAPTER V

Page 119

THE ZEAL OF SAM BONUS

Under conditions of spring and summer Newtake Farm flattered Will's hopes not a little. He worked like a giant, appropriated some of that credit belonging to fine weather, and viewed the future with very considerable tranquillity. Of beasts he purchased wisely, being guided in that matter by Mr. Lyddon; but for the rest he was content to take his own advice. Already his ambition extended beyond the present limits of his domain; already he contemplated the possibility of reclaiming some of the outlying waste and enlarging his borders. If the Duchy might spread greedy fingers and inclose "newtakes," why not the Venville tenants? Many besides Will asked themselves that question; the position was indeed fruitful of disputes in various districts, especially on certain questions involving cattle; and no moorland Quarter breathed forth greater discontent against the powers than that of which Chagford was the central parish.

Sam Bonus, inspired by his master's sanguine survey of life, toiled amain, believed all that Will predicted, and approved each enterprise he planned; while as for Chris, in due time she settled at Newtake and undertook woman's work there with her customary thoroughness and energy. To her lot fell the poultry, the pair of fox-hound puppies that Will undertook to keep for the neighbouring hunt, and all the interior economy and control of the little household.

On Sundays Phoebe heard of the splendid doings at Newtake; upon which she envied Chris her labours, and longed to be at Will's right hand. For the present, however, Miller Lyddon refused his daughter permission even to visit the farm; and she obeyed, despite her husband's indignant protests.

Thus matters stood while the sun shone brightly from summer skies. Will, when he visited Chagford market, talked to the grizzled farmers, elaborated his experience, shook his head or nodded it knowingly as they, in their turn, discussed the business of life, paid due respect to their wisdom, and offered a little of his own in exchange for it. That the older men lacked pluck was his secret conviction. The valley folk were braver; but the upland agriculturists, all save himself, went in fear. Their eyes were careworn, their caution extreme; behind the summer they saw another shadow forever moving; and the annual struggle with those ice-bound or water-logged months of the early year, while as yet the Moor had nothing for their stock, left them wearied and spiritless when the splendour of the summer came. They farmed furtively, snatching at such good as appeared, distrusting their own husbandry, fattening the land with reluctance, cowering under the shadow of withered hopes and disappointments too numerous to count. Will pitied this mean spirit and, unfamiliar with wet autumns and hard winters on the high land, laughed at his fellow-countrymen. But they were kind and bid him be cautious and keep his little nest-egg snug.

Page 120

“Tie it up in stout leather, my son,” said a farmer from Gidleigh. “Ay, an’ fasten the bag wi’ a knot as’ll take ‘e half an hour to undo; an’ remember, the less you open it, the better for your peace of mind.”

All of which good counsel Blanchard received with expressions of gratitude, yet secretly held to be but the croaking of a past generation, stranded far behind that wave of progress on which he himself was advancing crest-high.

It happened one evening, when Clement Hicks visited Newtake to go for a walk under the full moon with Chris, that he learnt she was away for a few days. This fact had been mentioned to Clement; but he forgot it, and now found himself here, with only Will and Sam Bonus for company. He accepted the young farmer’s invitation to supper, and the result proved unlucky in more directions than one. During this meal Clem railed in surly vein against the whole order of things as it affected himself, and made egotistical complaint as to the hardness of life; then, when his host began to offer advice, he grew savage and taunted Will with his own unearned good fortune. Blanchard, weary after a day of tremendous physical exertion, made sharp answer. He felt his old admiration for Clem Hicks much lessened of late, and it nettled him not a little that his friend should thus attribute his present position to the mere accident of a windfall. He was heartily sick of the other’s endless complaints, and now spoke roughly and to the point.

“What the devil’s the gude of this eternal bleat? You’m allus snarlin’ an’ gnashin’ your teeth ‘gainst God, like a rat bitin’ the stick that’s killin’ it.”

“And why should God kill me? You’ve grown so wise of late, perhaps you know.”

“Why shouldn’t He? Why shouldn’t He kill you, or any other man, if He wants the room of un for a better? Not that I believe parson’s stuff more ‘n you; but grizzlin’ your guts to fiddlestrings won’t mend your fortune. Best to put your time into work, ‘stead o’ talk—-same as me an’ Bonus. And as for my money, you knaw right well if theer’d been two thousand ’stead of wan, I’d have shared it with Chris.”

“Easy to say! If there had been two, you would have said, ’If it was only four’! That’s human nature.”

“Ban’t my nature, anyway, to tell a lie!” burst out Will.

“Perhaps it’s your nature to do worse. What were you about last Christmas?”

Blanchard set down knife and fork and looked the other in the face. None had heard this, for Bonus, his meal ended, went off to the little tallet over a cattle-byre which was his private apartment.

“You’d rip that up again—you, who swore never to open’ your mouth upon it?”

“You’re frightened now.”

“Not of you, anyway. But you’d best not to come up here no more. I’m weary of you; I don’t fear you worse than a blind worm; but such as you are, you’ve grawed against me since my luck comed. I wish Chris would drop you as easy as I can, for you’m teachin’ her to waste her life, same as you waste yours.”

Page 121

“Very well, I’ll go. We’re enemies henceforth, since you wish it so.”

“Blamed if you ban’t enough to weary Job! ‘Enemies’! It’s like a child talkin’. ‘Enemies’! D’you think I care a damn wan way or t’other? You’m so bad as Jan Grimbal wi’ his big play-actin’ talk. He’m gwaine to cut my tether some day. P’r’aps you’ll go an’ help un to do it! The past is done, an’ no man who weern’t devil all through would go back on such a oath as you sweared to me. An’ you won’t. As to what’s to come, you can’t hurt a straight plain-dealer, same as me, though you’m free an’ welcome to try if you please to.”

“The future may take care of itself; and for your straight speaking I’ll give you mine. Go your way and I’ll go my way; but until you beg my forgiveness for this night’s talk I’ll never cross your threshold again, or speak to you, or think of you.”

Clement rose from his unfinished food, picked up his hat, and vanished, and Will, dismissing the matter with a toss of his head and a contemptuous expiration of breath, gave the poet’s plate of cold potato and bacon to a sheep-dog and lighted his pipe.

Not ten hours later, while yet some irritation at the beekeeper’s spleen troubled Blanchard’s thoughts as he laboured upon his land, a voice saluted him from the highway and he saw a friend.

“An’ gude-marnin’ to you, Martin. Another braave day, sure ’nough. Climb awver the hedge. You’m movin’ early. Ban’t eight o’clock.”

“I’m off to the ‘Grey Wethers,’ those old ruined circles under Sittaford Tor, you know. But I meant a visit to you as well. Bonus was in the farmyard and brought me with him.”

“Ess fay, us works, I tell ‘e. We’m fightin’ the rabbits now. The li’l varmints have had it all theer way tu long; but this wire netting’ll keep ’em out the corn next year an’ the turnips come autumn. How be you fearin’? I aint seen ’e this longful time.”

“Well, thank you; and as busy as you in my way. I’m going to write a book about the Dartmoor stones.”

“’S truth! Be you? Who’ll read it?”

“Don’t know yet. And, after all, I have found out little that sharper eyes haven’t discovered already. Still, it fills my time. And it is that I’m here about.”

“You can go down awver my land to the hut-circles an’ welcome whenever you mind to.”

“Sure of it, and thank you; but it’s another thing just now—your brother-in-law to be. I think perhaps, if he has leisure, he might be useful to me. A very clever fellow, Hicks.”

But Will was in no humour to hear Clement praised just then, or suggest schemes for his advancement.

“He’m a weak sapling of a man, if you ax me. Allus grumblin’, an’ soft wi’ it—as I knaw—none better,” said Blanchard, watching Bonus struggle with the rabbit netting.

“He’s out of his element, I think—a student—a bookish man, like myself.”

“As like you as chalk’s like cheese—no more. His temper, tu! A bull in spring’s a fule to him. I’m weary of him an’ his cleverness.”

Page 122

“You see, if I may venture to say so, Chris—”

“I knaw all ’bout that. ‘Tis like your gudeness to try an’ put a li’l money in his pocket wi’out stepping on his corns. They ’m tokened. Young people ‘s so muddle-headed. Bees indeed! Nice things to keep a wife an’ bring up a fam’ly on! An’ he do nothin’ but write rhymes, an’ tear ’em up again, an’ cuss his luck, wi’out tryin’ to mend it. I thought something of un wance, when I was no more ’n a bwoy, but as I get up in years I see the emptiness of un.”

“He would grow happy and sweeter-hearted if he could marry your sister.”

“Not him! Of course, if it’s got to be, it will be. I ban’t gwaine to see Chris graw into an auld maid. An’ come bimebye, when I’ve saved a few hunderd, I shall set ’em up myself. But she’s makin’ a big mistake, an’, to a friend, I doan’t mind tellin’ ’e ’tis so.”

“I hope you’re wrong. They’ll be happy together. They have great love each for the other. But, of course, that’s nothing to do with me. I merely want Hicks to undertake some clerical work for me, as a matter of business, and I thought you might tell me the best way to tackle him without hurting his feelings. He’s a proud man, I fancy.”

“Ess; an’ pride’s a purty fulish coat for poverty, ban’t it? I’ve gived that man as gude advice as ever I gived any man; but what’s well-thought-out wisdom to the likes of him? Get un a job if you mind to. I shouldn’t—not till he shaws better metal and grips the facts o’ life wi’ a tighter hand.”

“I’ll sound him as delicately as I can. It may be that his self-respect would strengthen if he found his talents appreciated and able to command a little money. He wants something of that sort—eh?”

“Doan’t knaw but what a hiding wouldn’t be so gude for un as anything,” mused Will. There was no animosity in the reflection. His ill-temper had long since vanished, and he considered Clement as he might have considered a young, wayward dog which had erred and brought itself within reach of the lash.

“I was welted in my time hard an’ often, an’ be none the worse,” he continued.

Martin smiled and shook his head.

“Might have served him once; too late now for that remedy, I fear.”

There was a brief pause, then Will changed the conversation abruptly.

“How’s your brother Jan?” he asked.

“He’s furnishing his new house and busy about the formation of a volunteer corps. I met him not long since in Fingle Gorge.”

“Be you friends now, if I may ax?”

“I tried to be. We live and learn. Things happened to me a while ago that taught me what I didn’t know. I spoke to him and reminded him of the long years in Africa. Blood’s thicker than water, Blanchard.”

“So ’tis. What did he make of it?”

“He looked up and hesitated. Then he shook his head and set his face against me, and said he would not have my friendship as a gift.”

Page 123

“He’s a gude hater.”

“Time will bring the best of him to the top again some day. I understand him, I think. We possess more in common than people suppose. We feel deeply and haven’t a grain of philosophy between us.”

“Well, I reckon I’ve allus been inclined to deep ways of thought myself; and work up here, wi’ nothing to break your thoughts but the sight of a hawk or the twinkle of a rabbit’s scut, be very ripening to the mind. If awnly Phoebe was here! Sometimes I’m in a mood to ramp down-long an’ hale her home, whether or no. But I sweats the longing out o’ me wi’ work.”

“The day will soon come. Time drags with me just now, somehow, but it races with you, I’ll warrant. I must get on with my book, and see Hicks and try and persuade him to help me.”

“’Tis like your big nature to put it that way. You’rn tu soft-hearted a man to dwell in a house all alone. Let the dead stones bide, Martin, an’ look round for a wife. Theer’s more gude advice. Blamed if I doan’t advise everybody nowadays! Us must all come to it. Look round about an’ try to love a woman. ’T will surprise ‘e an’ spoil sleep if you can bring yourself to it. But the cuddlin’ of a soft gal doan’t weaken man’s thews and sinews neither. It hardens ’em, I reckon, an’ puts fight in the most poor-spirited twoad as ever failed in love. ’Tis a manly thing, an’ ‘boldens the heart like; an’, arter she’s said ‘Yes’ to ’e, you’ll find a wonnerful change come awver life. ’Tis all her, then. The most awnself[8] man feels it more or less, an’ gets shook out of his shell. You’ll knaw some day. Of course I speaks as wan auld in love an’ married into the bargain.”

[8] *Awnself*=selfish.

“You speak from experience, I know. And is Phoebe as wise as you, Will?”

“Waitin’ be harder for a wummon. They’ve less to busy the mind, an’ less mind to busy, for that matter.”

“That’s ungallant.”

“I doan’t knaw. ‘Tis true, anyway. I shouldn’t have failed in love wi’ her if she’d been cleverer’n me.”

“Or she with you, perhaps?”

“P’r’aps not. Anyway as it stands we’m halves of a whole: made for man and wife. I reckon I weern’t wan to miss my way in love like some poor fules, as wastes it wheer they might see’t wasn’t wanted if they’d got eyes in their heads.”

“What it is to be so wise!”

Will laughed joyously in his wisdom.

“Very gude of ’e to say that. ’Tis a happy thing to have sense enough. Not but we larn an’ larn.”

“So we should. Well, I must be off now. I’m safe on the Moor to-day!”

“Ess, by the looks of it. Theer’ll likely come some mist after noon, but shouldn’t be very thick.”

Page 124

So they parted, Blanchard having unconsciously sown the seed of an ugly crop that would take long in reaping. His remarks concerning Clement Hicks were safe enough with Martin, but another had heard them as he worked within earshot of his master. Bonus, though his judgment was scanty, entertained a profound admiration for Will; and thus it came about, that a few days later, when in Chagford, he called at the "Green Man" and made some grave mischief while he sang his master's praises. He extolled the glorious promise of Newtake, and the great improvements already visible thereon; he reflected not a little of Will's own flamboyant manner to the secret entertainment of those gathered in the bar, and presently he drew down upon himself some censure.

Abraham Chown, the police inspector, first shook his head and prophesied speedy destruction of all these hopes; and then Gaffer Lezzard criticised still more forcibly.

"All this big-mouthed talk's cracklin' of thorns under a potsherd," hesaid. "You an' him be just two childern playin' at shop in the gutter, an' the gutter's wheer you'll find yourselves 'fore you think to. What do the man *knaw?* Nothin'."

"Blanchard's a far-seein' chap," answered Sam Bonus stoutly. "An' a gude master; an' us'll stick together, fair or foul."

"You may think it, but wait," said a small man in the corner. Charles Coomstock, nephew of the widow of that name already mentioned, was a wheelwright by trade and went lame, owing to an accident with hot iron in youth.

"Ax Clem," continued Mr. Coomstock. "For all his cranky ways he knaws Blanchard better'n most of us, an' I heard un size up the chap t'other day in a word. He said he hadn't wit enough to keep his brains sweet."

"He'm a braave wan to talk," fired back Bonus. "Him! A poor luny as caan't scrape brass to keep a wife on. Blanchard, or me either, could crack un in half like a dead stick."

"Not that that's anything for or against," declared Gaffer Lezzard. "Power of hand's nought against brain."

"It gaws a tidy long way 'pon Dartymoor, however," declared Bonus. "An' Blanchard doan't set no 'mazin' store on Hicks neither, if it comes to words. I heard un say awnly t'other forenoon that the man was a weak saplin', allus grumblin', an' might be better for a gude hiding."

Now Charles Coomstock did not love his cousin Clement. Indeed, none of those who had, or imagined they had, any shadow of right to a place in Mary Coomstock's will cared much for others similarly situated; but the little wheelwright was by nature a spreader of rumours and reports—an intelligencer, malignant from choice. He treasured

this assertion, therefore, together with one or two others. Sam, now at his third glass, felt his heart warm to Will. He would have fought with tongue or fist on his behalf, and presently added to the mischief he had already done.

Page 125

“To shaw ’e, neighbours, just the man he is, I may tell ’e that a larned piece like Martin Grimbal ackshually comed all the way to Newtake not long since to ax advice of un. An’ ’twas on the identical matter of this same Hicks. Mr. Grimbal wanted to give un some work to do, ’bout a book or some such item; an’ Will he ups and sez, ‘Doan’t,’ just short an’ straight like that theer. ‘Doan’t,’ he sez. ’Let un shaw what’s in un first’; an’ t’other nodded when he said it.”

Having now attested his regard for the master of Newtake, Sam jogged off. He was pleased with himself, proud of having silenced more than one detractor, and as his little brain turned the matter over, his lips parted in a grin.

Coomstock meanwhile had limped into the cottage where Clement lived with his mother. He did not garble his news, for it needed no artistic touch; and, with nice sense of his perfect and effective instrument, he realised the weapon was amply sharp enough without whetting, and employed the story as it came into his hand. But Mr. Coomstock was a little surprised and disappointed at his cousin’s reserve and self-restraint. He had hoped for a hearty outburst of wrath and the assurance of wide-spreading animosity, yet no such thing happened, and the talebearer presently departed in some surprise. Mrs. Hicks, indeed, had shrilled forth a torrent of indignation upon the sole subject equal to raising such an emotion in her breast, for Clem was her only son. The man, however, took it calmly, or appeared to do so; and even when Charles Coomstock was gone he refused to discuss the matter more.

But had his cousin, with Asmodeus-flight, beheld Clement during the subsequent hours which he spent alone, it is possible that the wheelwright had felt amply repaid for his trouble. Not until dawn stole grey along the village street; not until sparrows in the thatch above him began their salutation to the morning; not until Chagford rookery had sent forth a harmonious multitude to the hills and valleys did Clement’s aching eyes find sleep. For hours he tossed and turned, now trembling with rage, now prompted by some golden thread in the tangled mazes of his mind to discredit the thing reported. Blanchard, as it seemed, had come deliberately and maliciously between him and an opportunity to win work. He burnt to know what he should do; and, like a flame of forked light against the sombre background of his passion, came the thought of another who hated Blanchard too. Will’s secret glowed and gleamed like the writing on the wall; looking out, Hicks saw it stamped on the dark earth and across the starry night; and he wished to God that the letters might so remain to be read by the world when it wakened. Finally he slept and dreamed that he had been to the Red House, that he had spoken to John Grimbal, and returned home again with a bag of gold.

When his mother came to call him he was lying half uncovered in a wild confusion of scattered bed-clothes; and his arms and body were jerking as a dog’s that dreams. She saw a sort of convulsion pinch and pucker his face; then he made some inarticulate sounds—as it were a frantic negation; and then the noise of his own cry awakened him. He looked wildly round and lifted his hands as though he expected to find them full.

Page 126

“Where is it? Where is it? The bag of money? I won’t—I can’t—Where is it, I say?”

“I wish I knawed, lovey. Dream-gawld, I’m afeared. You’ve bin lying cold, an’ that do allus breed bad thoughts in sleep. ’Tis late; I done breakfast an hour ago. An’ Okehampton day, tu. Coach’ll be along in twenty minutes.”

He sighed and dragged the clothes over himself.

“You’d best go to-day, mother. The ride will do you good, and I have plenty to fill my time at home.”

Mrs. Hicks brightened perceptibly before this prospect. She was a little, faded woman, with a brown face and red-rimmed, weak eyes, washed by many years of sorrow to the palest nondescript colour. She crept through the world with no ambition but to die out of the poorhouse, no prayer but a petition that the parish might not bury her at the end, no joy save in her son. Life at best was a dreary business for her, and an occasional trip to Okehampton represented about the only brightness that ever crept into it. Now she bustled off full of excitement to get the honey, and, having put on a withered bonnet and black shawl, presently stood and waited for the omnibus.

Her son dwelt with his thoughts that day, and for him there was no peace or pleasure. Full twenty times he determined to visit Newtake at once and have it out with Will; but his infirmity of purpose acted like a drag upon this resolution, and his pride also contributed a force against it. Once he actually started, and climbed up Middledown to reach the Moor beyond; then he changed his mind again as new fires of enmity swept through it. His wrongs rankled black and bitter; and, faint under them, he presently turned and went home shivering though the day was hot.

CHAPTER VI

A SWARM OF BEES

Above Chagford rise those lofty outposts of Dartmoor, named respectively Nattadown and Middledown. The first lies nearer to the village, and upon its side, beneath a fir wood which crowns one spur, spread steep wastes of fern and furze. This spot was a favourite one with Clement Hicks, and a fortnight after the incidents last related he sat there smoking his pipe, while his eyes roved upon the scene subtended before him. The hill fell abruptly away, and near the bottom glimmered whitewashed cots along a winding road. Still lower down extended marshy common land, laced with twinkling watercourses and dotted with geese; while beyond, in many a rise and fall and verdant undulation, the country rolled onwards through Teign valley and upwards towards the Moor. The expanse seen from this lofty standpoint extended like a mighty map, here revealing a patchwork of multicoloured fields, here exhibiting tracts of wild waste and

wood, here beautifully indicating by a misty line, seen across ascending planes of forest, the course of the distant river, here revealing the glitter of remote waters damaskeened with gold. Little farms and outlying

Page 127

habitations were scattered upon the land; and beyond them, rising steadily to the sky-line, the regions of the Moor revealed their larger attributes, wider expanses, more savage and abrupt configurations of barren heath and weathered tor. The day passed gradually from gloom to brightness, and the distance, already bathed in light, gleamed out of a more sombre setting, where the foreground still reflected the shadows of departing clouds, like a picture of great sunshine framed in darkness. But the last vapours quickly vanished; the day grew very hot and, as the sky indicated noon, all things beneath Clement's eyes were soaked in a splendour of June sunlight. He watched a black thread lying across a meadow five miles away. First it stretched barely visible athwart the distance green; in half an hour it thickened without apparent means; within an hour it had absorbed an eighth part at least of the entire space. Though the time was very unusual for tilling of land, Hicks knew that the combined operations of three horses, a man, and a plough were responsible for this apparition, and he speculated as to how many tremendous physical and spiritual affairs of life are thus wrought by agents not visible to the beholder. Thus were his own thoughts twisted back to those speculations which now perpetually haunted them like the incubus of a dream. What would Will Blanchard say if he woke some morning to find his secret in John Grimbal's keeping? And, did any such thing happen, there must certainly be a mystery about it; for Blanchard could no more prove how his enemy came to learn his secret than might some urban stranger guess how the dark line grew without visible means on the arable ground under Gidleigh.

From these dangerous thoughts he was roused by the sight of a woman struggling up the steep hill towards him. The figure came slowly on, and moved with some difficulty. This much Hicks noted, and then suddenly realised that he beheld his mother. She knew his haunt and doubtless sought him now. Rising, therefore, he hastened to meet her and shorten her arduous climb. Mrs. Hicks was breathless when Clement reached her, and paused a while, with her hand pressed to her side, before she could speak. At length she addressed him, still panting between the syllables.

"My heart's a pit-pat! Hurry, hurry, for the Lard's sake! The bees be playin'[9] an' they'll call Johnson if you ban't theer directly minute!"

[9] *Playing* = swarming.

Johnson, a thatcher, was the only other man in Chagford who shared any knowledge of apiarian lore with Clement.

"Sorry you should have had the journey only for that, mother. 'Twas so unlikely a morning, I never thought to hear of a swarm to-day. I'll start at once, and you go home quietly. You're sadly out of breath. Where is it?"

“To the Red House—Mr. Grimbal’s. It may lead to the handlin’ of his hives for all us can say, if you do the job vitty, as you ’m bound to.”

Page 128

“John Grimbal’s!”

Hicks stood still as though this announcement had turned him into stone.

“Ess fay! Why do ‘e stand glazin’ like that? A chap rode out for ’e ’pon horseback; an’ a bit o’ time be lost a’ready. They ‘m swarmin’ in the orchard, an’ nobody knaws more ’n the dead what to be at.”

“I won’t go. Let them get Johnson.”

“‘Won’t go’! An’ five shillin’ hangin’ to it, an’ Lard knaws what more in time to come! ‘Won’t go’! An’ my poor legs throbbin’ something cruel with climbin’ for ’e!”

“I—I’m not going there—not to that man. I have reason.”

“O my gude God!” burst out the old woman, “what’ll ‘e do next? An’ me—as worked so hard to find ‘e—an’ so auld as I am! Please, please, Clem, for your mother—please. Theer’s bin so little money in the house of late days, an’ less to come. Doan’t, if you love me, as I knaws well you do, turn your back ‘pon the scant work as falls in best o’ times.”

The man reflected with troubled eyes, and his mother took his arm and tried to pull him down the hill.

“Is John Grimbal at home?” he asked.

“How shude I knaw? An’ what matter if he is? Your business is with the bees, not him. An’ you’ve got no quarrel with him because that Blanchard have. After what Will done against you, you needn’t be so squeamish as to make his enemies yourn.”

“My business is with the bees—as you say, mother,” he answered slowly, repeating her words.

“Coourse ’tis! Who knaws a half of what you knaw ’bout ’em? That’s my awn braave Clem! Why, there might be a mort o’ gude money for a man like you at the Red House!”

“I’ll go. My business is with the bees. You walk along slowly, or sit down a while and get your breath again. I’ll hurry.”

She praised him and blessed him, crying after him as he departed,—“You’ll find all set out for ‘e—veil, an’ gloves, an’ a couple of bee-butts to your hand.”

The man did not reply, but soon stumbled down the steep hill and vanished; then five-and-twenty minutes later, with the implements of his trade, he stood at the gate of the Red House, entered, and hastened along the newly planted avenue.

John Grimbal had not yet gone into residence, but he dwelt at present in his home farm hard by; and from this direction he now appeared to meet the bee-keeper. The spectacle of Grimbal, stern, grave, and older of manner than formerly, impressed Hicks not a little. In silence, after the first salutation, they proceeded towards an adjacent orchard; and from here as they approached arose an extravagant and savage din, as though a dozen baited dogs, each with a tin kettle at his tail, were madly galloping down some stone-paved street, and hurtling one against the other as they ran.

“They can stop that row,” said Hicks. “’Tis an old-fashioned notion that it hurries swarming, but I never found it do so.”

Page 129

“You know best, though beating on tin pots and cans at such a time’s a custom as old as the hills.”

“And vain as many others equally old. I have a different method to hurry swarming.”

Now they passed over the snows of a million fallen petals, while yet good store of flowers hung upon the trees. June basked in the heart of the orchard and a delicious green sweetness and freshness marked the moment. Crimson and cream, all splashed with sunlight, here bloomed against a sky of summer blue, here took a shade from the new-born leaves and a shadow from branch and bough. To the eye, a mottled, dimpled glory of apple-blossom spread above grey trunks and twisted branches, shone through deep vistas of the orchard, brightened all the distance; while upon the ear, now growing and deepening, arose one sustained and musical susurration of innumerable wings.

“You will be wise to stay here,” said Hicks. He himself stopped a moment, opened his bag, put on his veil and gloves, and tucked his trousers inside his stockings.

“Not I. I wish to see the hiving.”

Twenty yards distant a play of light and glint and twinkle of many frantic bees converged upon one spot, as stars numerically increase towards the heart of a cluster. The sky was full of flying insects, and their wings sparkled brightly in the sun; though aloft, with only the blue for background, they appeared as mere dark points filling the air in every direction. The swarm hung at the very heart of a little glade. Here two ancient apple-trees stood apart, and from one low bough, stretched at right angles to the parent stem, and not devoid of leaves and blossoms, there depended a grey-brown mass from which a twinkling, flashing fire leaped forth as from gems bedded in the matrix. Each transparent wing added to the dazzle under direct sunlight; the whole agglomeration of life was in form like a bunch of grapes, and where it thinned away to a point the bees dropped off by their own weight into the grass below, then rose again and either flew aloft in wide and circling flight or rushed headlong upon the swarm once more. Across the iridescent cluster passed a gleam and glow of peacock and iris, opal and mother-of-pearl; while from its heart ascended a deep murmur, telling of tremendous and accumulated energy suddenly launched into this peaceful glade of apple-blossom and ambient green. The frenzy of the moment held all that little laborious people. There was none of the concerted action to be observed at warping, or simultaneous motion of birds in air and fishes in water; but each unit of the shining army dashed on its own erratic orbit, flying and circling, rushing hither and thither, and sooner or later returning to join the queen upon the bough.

Page 130

The glory of the moment dominated one and all. It was their hour—a brief, mad ecstasy in short lives of ceaseless toil. To-day they desisted from their labours, and the wild-flowers of the waste places, and the old-world flowers in cottage gardens were alike forgotten. Yet their year had already seen much work and would see more. Sweet pollen from many a bluebell and anemone was stored and sealed for a generation unborn; the asphodels and violets, the velvet wallflower and yellow crocuses had already yielded treasure; and now new honey jewels were trembling in the trumpets of the honeysuckle, at the heart of the wild rose, within the deep cups of the candid and orange lilies, amid the fairy caps of columbines, and the petals of clove-pinks. There the bees now living laboured, and those that followed would find their sweets in the clover,—scarlet and purple and white,—in the foxgloves, in the upland deserts of the heather with their oases of euphrasy and sweet wild thyme.

“Is it a true swarm or a cast?” inquired John Grimbal.

“A swarm, without much question, though it dawned an unlikely day for an old queen to leave the hive. Still, the weather came over splendid enough by noon, and they knew it was going to. Where are your butts? You see, young maiden queens go further afield than old ones. The latter take but a short flight for choice.”

“There they are,” said Grimbal, pointing to a row of thatched hives not far off. “So that should be an old queen, by your showing. Is she there?”

“I fancy so by the look of them. If the queen doesn’t join, the bees break up, of course, and go back to the butt. But I’ve brought a couple of queens with me.”

“I’ve seen a good few drones about the board lately.”

“Sure sign of swarming at this season. Inside, if you could look, you’d find plenty of queen cells, and some capped over. You’d come across a murder or two as well. The old queens make short work of the young ones sometimes.”

“Woman-like.”

Hicks admitted the criticism was just. Then, being now upon his own ground, he continued to talk, and talk well, until he won a surly compliment from his employer.

“You’re a bee-master, in truth! Nobody’ll deny you that.”

Clement laughed rather bitterly.

“Yes, a king of bees. Not a great kingdom for man to rule.”

The other studied his dark, unhappy face. Trouble had quickened Grimbal's own perceptions, and made him a more accurate judge of sorrow when he saw it than of yore.

"You've tried to do greater things and failed, perhaps," he said.

"Why, perhaps I have. A man's a hive himself, I've thought sometimes—a hive of swarming, seething thoughts and experiences and passions, that come and go as easily as any bees, and store the heart and brain."

"Not with honey, I'll swear."

"No—gall mostly."

"And every hive's got a queen bee too, for that matter," said Grimbal, rather pleased at his wit responsible for the image.

Page 131

“Yes; and the queens take each other’s places quick enough, for we’re fickle brutes.”

“A strange swarm we hive in our hearts, God knows.”

“And it eats out our hearts for our pains.”

“You’ve found out that, have you?” asked John curiously.

“Long ago.”

“Everybody does, sooner or later.”

There was a pause. Overhead the multitude dwindled while the great glimmering cluster on the tree correspondingly increased, and the fierce humming of the bees was like the sound of a fire. Clement feared nothing, but he had seen few face a hiving without some distrust. The man beside him, however, stood with his hands in his pockets, indifferent and quite unprotected.

“You will be wiser to stand farther away, Mr. Grimbal. You’re unlikely to come off scot-free if you keep so close.”

“What do I care? I’ve been stung by worse than insects.”

“And I also,” answered Clement, with such evident passion that the other grew a little interested. He had evidently pricked a sore point in this moody creature.

“Was it a woman stung you?”

“No, no; don’t heed me.”

Clement was on guard over himself again. “Your business is with bees”—his mother’s words echoed in his mind to the pulsing monotone of the swarm. He tried to change the subject, sent for a pail of water, and drew a large syringe from his bag, though the circumstances really rendered this unnecessary. But John Grimbal, always finding a sort of pleasure in his own torment, took occasion to cross-question Clement.

“I suppose I’m laughed at still in Chagford, am I not? Not that it matters to me.”

“I don’t think so; an object of envy, rather, for good wives are easier to get than great riches.”

“That’s your opinion, is it? I’m not so sure. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Going to be, I’ll wager, if you think good wives can be picked off blackberry bushes.”

“I don’t say that at all. But I am going to be married certainly. I’m fortunate and unfortunate. I’ve won a prize, but—well, honey’s cheap. I must wait.”

“D’ you trust her? Is waiting so easy?”

“Yes, I trust her, as I trust the sun to swing up out of the east to-morrow, to set in the west to-night. She’s the only being of my own breed I do trust. As for the other question, no—waiting isn’t easy.”

“Nor yet wise. I shouldn’t wait. Tell me who she is. Women interest me, and the taking of ’em in marriage.”

Hicks hesitated. Here he was drifting helpless under this man’s hard eyes—helpless and yet not unwilling. He told himself that he was safe enough and could put a stop on his mouth when he pleased. Besides, John Grimbal was not only unaware that the bee-keeper knew anything against Blanchard, but had yet to learn that anybody else did,—-that there even existed facts unfavourable to him. Something, however, told Hicks that mention of the common enemy would result from this present meeting, and the other’s last word brought the danger, if danger it might be, a step nearer. Clement hesitated before replying to the question; then he answered it.

Page 132

“Chris Blanchard,” he said shortly, “though that won’t interest you.”

“But it does—a good deal. I’ve wondered, some time, why I didn’t hear my own brother was going to marry her. He got struck all of a heap there, to my certain knowledge. However, he ’s escaped. The Lord be good to you, and I take my advice to marry back again. Think twice, if she’s made of the same stuff as her brother.”

“No, by God! Is the moon made of the same stuff as the marsh lights?”

Concentrated bitterness rang in the words, and a man much less acute than Grimbal had guessed he stood before an enemy of Will. John saw the bee-keeper start at this crucial moment; he observed that Hicks had said a thing he much regretted and uttered what he now wished unspoken. But the confession was torn bare and laid out naked under Grimbal’s eyes, and he knew that another man besides himself hated Will. The discovery made his face grow redder than usual. He pulled at his great moustache and thrust it between his teeth and gnawed it. But he contrived to hide the emotion in his mind from Clement Hicks, and the other did not suspect, though he regretted his own passion. Grimbals next words further disarmed him. He appeared to know nothing whatever about Will, though his successful rival interested him still.

“They call the man Jack-o’-Lantern, don’t they? Why?”

“I can’t tell you. It may be, though, that he is erratic and uncertain in his ways. You cannot predict what he will do next.”

“That’s nothing against him. He’s farming on the Moor now, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Where did he come from when he dropped out of the clouds to marry Phoebe Lyddon?”

The question was not asked with the least idea of its enormous significance. Grimbal had no notion that any mystery hung over that autumn time during which he made love to Phoebe and Will was absent from Chagford. He doubted not that for the asking he could learn how Will had occupied himself; but the subject did not interest him, and he never dreamed the period held a secret. The sudden consternation bred in Hicks by this question astounded him not a little. Indeed, each man amazed the other, Grimbal by his question, Hicks by the attitude which he assumed before it.

“I’m sure I haven’t the least idea,” he answered; but his voice and manner had already told Grimbal all he cared to learn at the moment; and that was more than his wildest hopes had even risen to. He saw in the other’s face a hidden thing, and by his demeanour that it was an important one. Indeed, the bee-keeper’s hesitation and evident alarm before this chance question proclaimed the secret vital. For the present, and before Clement’s evident alarm, Grimbal dismissed the matter lightly; but he chose

to say a few more words upon it, for the express purpose of setting Hicks again at his ease.

“You don’t like your future brother-in-law?”

Page 133

“Yes, yes, I do. We’ve been friends all our lives—all our lives. I like him well, and am going to marry his sister—only I see his faults, and he sees mine—that’s all.”

“Take my advice and shut your eyes to his faults. That’s the best way if you are marrying into his family. I’ve got cause to think ill enough of the scamp, as you know and everybody knows; but life’s too short for remembering ill turns.”

A weight rolled off Clement’s heart. For a moment he had feared that the man knew something; but now he began to suspect Grimbal’s question to be what in reality it was—casual interrogation, without any shadow of knowledge behind it. Hicks therefore breathed again and trusted that his own emotion had not been very apparent. Then, taking the water, he shot a thin shower into the air, an operation often employed to hasten swarming, and possibly calculated to alarm the bees into apprehension of rain.

“Do wasps ever get into the hives?” asked Mr. Grimbal abruptly.

“Aye, they do; and wax-moths and ants, and even mice. These things eat the honey and riddle and ruin the comb. Then birds eat the bees, and spiders catch them. Honey-bees do nothing but good that I can see, yet Nature ’s pleased to fill the world with their enemies. Queen and drone and the poor unsexed workers—all have their troubles; and so has the little world of the hive. Yet during the few weeks of a bee’s life he does an amount of work beyond imagination to guess at.”

“And still finds time to steal from the hives of his fellows?”

“Why, yes, if the sweets are exposed and can be tasted for nothing. Most of us might turn robbers on the same terms. Now I can take them, and a splendid swarm, too—-finest I’ve seen this year.”

The business of getting the glittering bunch of bees into a hive was then proceeded with, and soon Clement had shaken the mass into a big straw butt, his performance being completely successful. In less than half an hour all was done, and Hicks began to remove his veil and shake a bee or two off the rim of his hat.

John Grimbal rubbed his cheek, where a bee had stung him under the eye, and regarded Hicks thoughtfully.

“If you happen to want work at any time, it might be within my power to find you some here,” he said, handing the bee-master five shillings. Clement thanked his employer and declared he would not forget the offer; he then departed, and John Grimbal returned to his farm.

CHAPTER VII

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

Billy Blee, who has appeared thus far as a disinterested spectator of other people's affairs, had yet his own active and personal interests in life. Them he pursued, at odd times, and in odd ways, with admirable pertinacity; and as a crisis is now upon him and chance knits the outcome of it into the main fabric of this narrative, Billy and his actions command attention.

Page 134

Allusion has already been made, and that frequently, to one Widow Coomstock, whose attractions of income, and the ancillary circumstance of an ample though elderly person, had won for her certain admirers more ancient than herself. Once butt-woman, or sextoness, of Chagford Church, the lady had dwelt alone, as Miss Mary Reed, for fifty-five years—not because opportunity to change her state was denied her, but owing to the fact that experience of life rendered her averse to all family responsibilities. Mary Reed had seen her sister, the present Mrs. Hicks, take a husband, had watched the result of that step; and this, with a hundred parallel instances of misery following on matrimony, had determined her against it. But when old Benjamin Coomstock, the timber merchant and coal-dealer, became a widower, this ripe maiden, long known to him, was approached before his wife's grave became ready for a stone. To Chagford's amazement he so far bemeaned himself as to offer the sextoness his hand, and she accepted it. Then, left a widow after two years with her husband, Mary Coomstock languished a while, and changed her methods of life somewhat. The roomy dwelling-house of her late partner became her property and a sufficient income went with it. Mr. Coomstock's business had been sold in his lifetime; the money was invested, and its amount no man knew, though rumour, which usually magnifies such matters, spoke of a very handsome figure; and Mrs. Coomstock's lavish manner of life lent confirmation to the report. But though mundane affairs had thus progressed with her, the woman's marriage was responsible for very grave mental and moral deterioration. Prosperity, and the sudden exchange of a somewhat laborious life for the ease and comfort of independence, played havoc with Widow Coomstock. She grew lax, gross in habit and mind, self-indulgent, and ill-tempered. When her husband died her old friends lost sight of her, while only those who had reason to hope for a reward still kept in touch with her, and indeed forced themselves upon her notice. Everybody predicted she would take another husband; but, though it was now nearly eight years since Mr. Coomstock's death, his widow still remained one. Gaffer Lezzard and Billy Blee had long pursued her with varying advantage, and the latter, though his proposals were declined, yet saw in each refusal an indication to encourage future hope.

Now, urged thereto by whispers that Mr. Lezzard had grown the richer by three hundred pounds on the death of a younger brother in Australia, Billy determined upon another attack. He also was worth something—less indeed than three hundred pounds; though, seeing that he had been earning reasonably good wages for half a century, the fact argued but poor thrift in Mr. Blee. Of course Gaffer Lezzard's alleged legacy could hardly be a sum to count with Mrs. Coomstock, he told himself; yet his rival was a man of wide experience and an oily tongue: while, apart from any question

Page 135

of opposition, he felt that another offer of marriage might now be made with decorum, seeing that it was a full year since the last. Mr. Blee therefore begged for a half-holiday, put on his broadcloth, blacked his boots, anointed his lion-monkey fringe and scanty locks with pomatum, and set forth. Mrs. Coomstock's house stood on the hill rising into the village from Chagford Bridge. A kitchen garden spread behind it; in front pale purple poppies had the ill-kept garden to themselves.

As he approached, Mr. Blee felt a leaden weight about his newly polished boots, and a distinct flutter at the heart, or in a less poetical portion of his frame.

"Same auld feeling," he reflected. "Gormed if I ban't gettin' sweaty 'fore the plaace comes in sight! 'Tis just the sinkin' at the navel, like what I had when I smoked my first pipe, five-and-forty years agone!"

The approach of another man steadied Billy, and on recognising him Mr. Blee forgot all about his former emotions and gasped in the clutch of a new one. It was Mr. Lezzard, evidently under some impulse of genial exhilaration. There hung an air of aggression about him, but, though he moved like a conqueror, his gait was unsteady and his progress slow. He had wit to guess Billy's errand, however, for he grinned, and leaning against the hedge waved his stick in the air above his head.

"Aw, Jimmery! if it ban't Blee; an' prinked out for a weddin', tu, by the looks of it!"

"Not yourn, anyway," snapped back the suitor.

"Well, us caan't say 'zactly—world 's full o' novelties."

"Best pull yourself together, Gaffer, or bad-hearted folks might say you was bosky-eyed. [10] That ban't no novelty anyway, but 't is early yet to be drunk—just three o'clock by the church."

[10] *Bosky-eyed* = intoxicated.

Mr. Blee marched on without waiting for a reply. He knew Lezzard to be more than seventy years old and usually regarded the ancient man's rivalry with contempt; but he felt uneasy for a few moments, until the front door of Mrs. Coomstock's dwelling was opened to him by the lady herself.

"My stars! You? What a terrible coorious thing!" she said.

"Why for?"

"Come in the parlour. Theer! coorious ban't the word!"

She laughed, a silly laugh and loud. Then she shambled before him to the sitting-room, and Billy, familiar enough with the apartment, noticed a bottle of gin in an unusual position upon the table. The liquor stood, with two glasses and a jug of water, between the Coomstock family Bible, on its green worsted mat, and a glass shade containing the stuffed carcass of a fox-terrier. The animal was moth-eaten and its eyes had fallen out. It could be considered in no sense decorative; but sentiment allowed the corpse this central position in a sorry scheme of adornment, for the late timber merchant had loved it. Upon Mrs. Coomstock's parlour walls hung Biblical German prints in frames of sickly yellow wood; along the window-ledge geraniums and begonias flourished, though gardeners had wondered to see their luxuriance, for the windows were seldom opened.

Page 136

"'It never rains but it pours,'" said Widow Coomstock. She giggled again and looked at Billy. She was very fat, and the red of her face deepened to purple unevenly about the sides of her nose. Her eyes were bright and black. She had opened a button or two at the top of her dress, and her general appearance, from her grey hair to her slattern heels, was disordered. Her cap had fallen off on to the ground, and Mr. Blee noticed that her parting was as a broad turnpike road much tramped upon by Time. The room smelt stuffy beyond its wont and reeked not only of spirits but tobacco. This Billy sniffed inquiringly, and Mrs. Coomstock observed the action. "'Twas Lezzard," she said. "I like to see a man in comfort. You can smoke if you mind to. Coomstock always done it, and a man's no man without, though a dirty habit wheer they doan't use a spittoon."

She smiled, but to herself, and was lost in thought a moment. He saw her eyes very bright and her head wagging. Then she looked at him and laughed again.

"You'm a fine figure of a man, tu," she said, apropos of nothing in particular. But the newcomer understood. He rumpled his hair and snorted and frowned at the empty glasses.

"Have a drop?" suggested Mrs. Coomstock; but Billy, of opinion that his love had already enjoyed refreshment sufficient for the time, refused and answered her former remark.

"A fine figure?—yes, Mary Coomstock, though not so fine for a man as you for a woman. Still, a warm-blooded chap an' younger than my years."

"I've got my share o' warm blood, tu, Billy."

It was apparent. Mrs. Coomstock's plump neck bulged in creases over the dirty scrap of white linen that represented a collar, while her massive bust seemed bursting through her apparel.

"Coourse," said Mr. Blee, "an' your share, an' more 'n your share o' brains, tu. He had bad luck—Coomstock—the worse fortune as ever fell to a Chaggyford man, I reckon."

"How do 'e come at that, then?"

"To get 'e, an' lose 'e again inside two year. That's ill luck if ever I seen it. Death's a envious twoad. Two short year of you; an' then up comes a tumour on his neck unbeknawnst, an' off he goes, like a spring lamb."

"An' so he did. I waked from sleep an' bid un rise, but theer weern't no more risin' for him till the Judgment."

“Death’s no courtier. He’ll let a day-labourer go so peaceful an’ butivul as a child full o’ milk goes to sleep; while he’ll take a gert lord or dook, wi’ lands an’ moneys, an’ strangle un by inches, an’ give un the hell of a twistin’. You caan’t buy a easy death seemin’ly.”

“A gude husband he was, but jealous,” said Mrs. Coomstock, her thoughts busy among past years; and Billy immediately fell in with this view.

“Then you’m well rid of un. Theer’s as gude in the world alive any minute as ever was afore or will be again.”

“Let ’em stop in the world then. I doan’t want ’em.”

Page 137

This sentiment amused the widow herself more than Billy. She laughed uproariously, raised her glass to her lips unconsciously, found it empty, grew instantly grave upon the discovery, set it down again, and sighed.

“It’s a wicked world,” she said. “Sure as men’s in a plaace they brings trouble an’ wickedness. An’ yet I’ve heard theer’s more women than men on the airth when all’s said.”

“God A’mighty likes ’em best, I reckon,” declared Mr. Blee.

“Not but what ’t would be a lonesome plaace wi’out the lords of creation,” conceded the widow.

“Ess fay, you ’m right theer; but the beauty of things is that none need n’t be lonely, placed same as you be.”

“‘Once bit twice shy,’” said Mrs. Coomstock. Then she laughed again. “I said them very words to Lezzard not an hour since.”

“An’ what might he have answered?” inquired Billy without, however, showing particular interest to know.

“He said he wasn’t bit. His wife was a proper creature.”

“Bah! second-hand gudes—that’s what Lezzard be—a widow-man an’ eighty if a day. A poor, coffin-ripe auld blid, wi’ wan leg in the graave any time this twenty year.”

Mrs. Coomstock’s frame heaved at this tremendous criticism. She gurgled and gazed at Billy with her eyes watering and her mouth open.

“You say that! Eighty an’ coffin-ripe!”

“Ban’t no ontruth, neither. A man ’s allus ready for his elm overcoat arter threescore an’ ten. I heard the noise of his breathin’ paarts when he had brown kitty in the fall three years ago, an’ awnly thrawed it off thanks to the gracious gudeness of Miller Lyddon, who sent rich stock for soup by my hand. But to hear un, you might have thought theer was a wapsies’ nest in the man’s lungs.”

“I doan’t want to be nuss to a chap at my time of life, in coourse.”

“No fay; ’t is the man’s paart to look arter his wife, if you ax me. I be a plain bachelor as never thought of a female serious ’fore I seed you. An’ I’ve got a heart in me, tu. Ban’t no auld, rubbishy, worn-out thing, neither, but a tough, love-tight heart—at least so ’t was till I seed you in your weeds eight year agone.”

“Eight year a widow! An’ so I have been. Well, Blee, you’ve got a powerful command of words, anyways. That I’ll grant you.”

“’T is the gert subject, Mary.”

He moved nearer and put down his hat and stick; she exhibited trepidation, not wholly assumed. Then she helped herself to more spirits.

“A drop I must have to steady me. You men make a woman’s heart go flutterin’ all over her buzzom, like a flea under her—”

Page 138

She stopped and laughed, then drank. Presently setting down the glass again, she leered in a manner frankly animal at Mr. Blee, and told him to say what he might have to say and be quick about it. He fired a little at this invitation, licked his lips, cleared his throat, and cast a nervous glance or two at the window. But nobody appeared; no thunder-visaged Lezzard frowned over the geraniums. Gaffer indeed was sound asleep, half a mile off, upon one of those seats set in the open air for the pleasure and convenience of wayfarers about the village. So Billy rose, crossed to the large sofa whereon Mrs. Coomstock sat, plumped down boldly beside her and endeavoured to get his arm round the wide central circumference of her person. She suffered this courageous attempt without objection. Then Billy gently squeezed her, and she wriggled and opened her mouth and shut her eyes.

“Say the word and do a wise thing,” he urged. “Say the word, Mary, an’ think o’ me here as master, a-keeping all your damn relations off by word of command.”

She laughed.

“When I be gone you’ll see some sour looks, I reckon.”

“Nothing doan’t matter then; ’t is while you ’m here I’d protect ’e ’gainst ’em. Look, see! ban’t often I goes down on my knees, ’cause a man risin’ in years, same as me, can pray to God more dignified sittin’; but now I will.” He slid gingerly down, and only a tremor showed the stab his gallantry cost him.

“You ’m a masterful auld shaver, sure ’nough!” said Mrs. Coomstock, regarding Billy with a look half fish like, half affectionate.

“Rise me up, then,” he said. “Rise me up, an’ do it quick. If you love me, as I see you do by the faace of you, rise me up, Mary, an’ say the word wance for all time. I’ll be a gude husband to ‘e an’ you’ll bless the day you took me, though I sez it as shouldn’t.”

She allowed her fat left hand, with the late Mr. Coomstock’s wedding-ring almost buried in her third finger, to remain with Billy’s; and by the aid of it and the sofa he now got on his legs again. Then he sat down beside her once more and courageously set his yellow muzzle against her red cheek. The widow remained passive under this caress, and Mr. Blee, having kissed her thrice, rubbed his mouth and spoke.

“Theer! ‘T is signed and sealed, an’ I’ll have no drawin’ back now.”

“But—but—Lezzard, Billy. I do like ’e—I caan’t hide it from ’e, try as I will—but him—”

“I knawed he was t’other. I tell you, forget un. His marryin’ days be awver. Dammy, the man’s ‘most chuckle headed wi’ age! Let un go his way an’ say his prayers ‘gainst the trump o’ God. An’ it’ll take un his time to pass Peter when all ’s done—a bad auld chap in his day. Not that I’d soil your ears with it.”

“He said much the same ’bout you. When you was at Drewsteignton, twenty year agone—”

“A lie—a wicked, strammin’, gert lie, with no more truth to it than a auld song! He ’m a venomous beast to call home such a thing arter all these years.”

Page 139

“If I did take ‘e, you’d be a gude an’ faithful husband, Billy, not a gad-about?”

“Cut my legs off if I go gaddin’ further than to do your errands.”

“An’ you’ll keep these here buzzin’ parties off me? Cuss ’em! They make my life a burden.”

“Doan’t fear that. I’ll larn ’em!”

“Theer ‘s awnly wan I can bide of the whole lot—an’ that’s my awn nephew, Clem Hicks. He’ll drink his drop o’ liquor an’ keep his mouth shut, an’ listen to me a-talkin’ as a young man should. T’others are allus yelpin’ out how fond they be of me, and how they’d go to the world’s end for me. I hate the sight of ’em.”

“A time-servin’ crew, Mary; an’ Clement Hicks no better ’n the rest, mark my word, though your sister’s son. ‘T is cupboard love wi’ all. But money ban’t nothin’ to me. I’ve been well contented with enough all my life, though ’t is few can say with truth that enough satisfies ’em.”

“Lezzard said money was nothin’ to him neither, having plenty of his awn. ’T was my pusson, not my pocket, as he’d falled in love with.”

“Burnish it all! Theer ’s a shameful speech! ‘Your pusson’! Him! I’ll tell you what Lezzard is—just a damn evil disposition kep’ in by skin an’ bones—that’s Lezzard. ’Your pusson’!”

“I’m afraid I’ve encouraged him a little. You’ve been so backward in mentioning the subject of late. But I’m sure I didn’t knaw as he’d got a evil disposition.”

“Well, ‘t is so. An’ ’t is awnly your bigness of heart, as wouldn’t hurt a beetle, makes you speak kind of the boozy auld sweep. I’ll soon shaw un wheer he’s out if he thinks you ’m tinkering arter him!”

“He couldn’t bring an action for breach, or anything o’ that, could he?”

“At his time of life! What Justice would give ear to un? An’ the shame of it!”

“Perhaps he misunderstood. You men jump so at a conclusion.”

“Leave that to me. I’ll clear his brains double-quick; aye, an’ make un jump for somethin’!”

“Then I suppose it’s got to be. I’m yourn, Billy, an’ theer needn’t be any long waitin’ neither. To think of another weddin’ an’ another husband! Just a drop or I shall cry. It’s such a supporting thing to a lone female.”

Whether Mrs. Coomstock meant marriage or Plymouth gin, Billy did not stop to inquire. He helped her, filled Lezzard's empty glass for himself, and then, finding his future wife thick of speech, bleared of eye, and evidently disposed to slumber, he departed and left her to sleep off her varied emotions.

"I'll mighty soon change all that," thought Mr. Blee. "To note a fine woman in liquor 's the frightfullest sight in all nature, so to say. Not but what with Lezzard a-pawin' of her 't was enough to drive her to it."

That night the lover announced his triumph, whereon Phoebe congratulated him and Miller Lyddon shook his head.

"'T is an awful experiment, Billy, at your age," he declared.

Page 140

“Why, so ’t is; but I’ve weighed the subject in my mind for years and years, an ’t wasn’t till Mary Coomstock comed to be widowed that I thought I’d found the woman at last. ‘T was lookin’ tremendous high, I knaw, but theer ’t is; she’ll have me. She ’m no young giglet neither, as would lead me a devil’s dance, but a pusson in full blooth with ripe mind.”

“She drinks. I doan’t want to hurt your feelings; but everybody says it is so,” declared the miller.

“What everybody sez, nobody did ought to believe,” returned Mr. Blee stoutly. “She ’m a gude, lonely sawl, as wants a man round the house to keep off her relations, same as us has a dog to keep down varmints in general. Theer ‘s the Hickses, an’ Chowns, an’ Coomstocks all a-stickin’ up theer tails an’ a-purrin’ an’ a-rubbin’ theerselves against the door-posts of the plaace like cats what smells feesh. I won’t have none of it. I’ll dwell along wi’ she an’ play a husband’s part, an’ comfort the decline of her like a man, I warn ’e.”

“Why, Mrs. Coomstock ’s not so auld as all that, Billy,” said Phoebe. “Chris has often told me she’s only sixty-two or three.”

But he shook his head.

“Ban’t a subject for a loving man to say much on, awnly truth ’s truth. I seed it written in the Coomstock Bible wan day. Fifty-five she were when she married first. Well, ban’t in reason she twald the naked truth ‘bout it, an’ who’d blame her on such a delicate point? No, I’d judge her as near my awn age as possible; an’ to speak truth, not so well preserved as what I be.”

“How’s Monks Barton gwaine to fare without ’e, Blee?” whined the miller.

“As to that, be gormed if I knaw how I’ll fare wi’out the farm. But love—well, theer ’t is. Theer ’s money to it, I knaw, but what do that signify? Nothin’ to me. You’ll see me frequent as I ride here an’ theer—horse, saddle, stirrups, an’ all complete; though God He knaws wheer my knees’ll go when my boots be fixed in stirrups. But a man must use ’em if theer ’s the dignity of money to be kept up. ’T is just wan of them oncomfortable things riches brings with it.”

While Miller Lyddon still argued with Billy against the step he now designed, there arrived from Chagford the stout Mr. Chappie, with his mouth full of news.

“More weddin’s,” he said. “I comed down-long to tell ’e, lest you shouldn’t knaw till to-morrow an’ so fall behind the times. Widow Coomstock ’s thrawed up the sponge and gived herself to that importuneous auld Lezzard. To think o’ such a Methuselah as him—aulder than the century—fillin’ the eye o’ that full-bodied—”

“It’s a black lie—blacker ‘n hell—an’ if’t was anybody but you brought the news I’d hit un awver the jaw!” burst out Mr. Blee, in a fury.

“He tawld me hisself. He’s tellin’ everybody hisself. It comed to a climax to-day. The auld bird’s hoppin’ all awver the village so proud as a jackdaw as have stole a shiny button. He’m bustin’ wi’ it in fact.”

Page 141

“I’ll bust un! An’ his news, tu. An’ you can say, when you’m axed, ’t is the foulest lie ever falled out of wicked lips.”

Billy now took his hat and stick from their corner and marched to the door without more words.

“No violence, mind now, no violence,” begged Mr. Lyddon. “This love-making ’s like to wreck the end of my life, wan way or another, yet. ’T is bad enough with the young; but when it comes to auld, bald-headed fules like you an’ Lezzard—”

“As to violence, I wouldn’t touch un wi’ the end of a dung-fork—I wouldn’t. But I’m gwaine to lay his lie wance an’ for all. I be off to parson this instant moment. An’ when my banns of marriage be hollered out next Sunday marnin’, then us’ll knaw who ’m gwaine to marry Mother Coomstock an’ who ban’t. I can work out my awn salvation wi’ fear an’ tremblin’ so well as any other man; an’ you’ll see what that God-forsaken auld piece looks like come Sunday when he hears what’s done an’ caan’t do nought but just swallow his gall an’ chew ’pon it.”

CHAPTER VIII

MR. BLEE FORGETS HIMSELF

The Rev. James Shorto-Champernowne made no difficulty about Billy’s banns of marriage, although he doubtless held a private opinion upon the wisdom of such a step, and also knew that Mrs. Coomstock was now a very different woman from the sextoness of former days. He expressed a hope, however, that Mr. Blee would make his future wife become a regular church-goer again after the ceremony; and Billy took it upon himself to promise as much for her. There the matter ended until the following Sunday, when a sensation, unparalleled in the archives of St. Michael’s, awaited the morning worshippers.

Under chiming of bells the customary congregation arrived, and a perceptible wave of sensation swept from pew to pew at the appearance of more than one unfamiliar face. Of regular attendants we may note Mrs. Blanchard and Chris, Martin Grimbal, Mr. Lyddon, and his daughter. Mr. Blee usually sat towards the back of the church at a point immediately behind those benches devoted to the boys. Here he kept perfect order among the lads, and had done so for many years. Occasionally it became necessary to turn a youngster out of church, and Billy’s procedure at such a time was masterly; but of opinion to-day that he was a public character, he chose a more conspicuous position, and accepted Mr. Lyddon’s invitation to take a seat in the miller’s own pew. He felt he owed this prominence, not only to himself, but to Mrs. Coomstock. She, good soul, had been somewhat evasive and indefinite in her manner since accepting Billy, and her condition of nerves on Sunday morning proved such that she found herself quite unable

to attend the house of prayer, although she had promised to do so. She sent her two servants, however, and, spending the time in private between spirtual and spirituous consolations of Bible and bottle, the widow soon passed into a temporary exaltation ending in unconsciousness. Thus her maids found her on returning from church.

Page 142

Excitement within the holy edifice reached fever-heat when a most unwonted worshipper appeared in the venerable shape of Mr. Lezzard. He was supported by his married daughter and his grandson. They sought and found a very prominent position under the lectern, and it was immediately apparent that no mere conventional attendance for the purpose of praising their Maker had drawn Mr. Lezzard and his relations. Indeed he had long been of the Baptist party, though it derived but little lustre from him. Much whispering passed among the trio. Then his daughter, having found the place she sought in a prayer-book, handed it to Mr. Lezzard, and he made a big cross in pencil upon the page and bent the volume backwards so that its binding cracked very audibly. Gaffer then looked about him with a boldness he was far from feeling; but the spectacle of Mr. Blee, hard by, fortified his spirit. He glared across the aisle and Billy glared back.

Then the bells stopped, the organ droned, and there came a clatter of iron nails on the tiled floor. Boys and men proceeded to the choir stalls and Mr. Shorto-Champernowne fluttered behind, with his sermon in his hand. Like a stately galleon of the olden time he swept along the aisle, then reached his place, cast one keen glance over the assembled congregation, and slowly sinking upon his hassock enveloped his face and whiskers in snowy lawn and prayed a while.

The service began and that critical moment after the second lesson was reached with dreadful celerity. Doctor Parsons, having read a chapter from the New Testament, which he emerged from the congregation to do, and which he did ill, though he prided himself upon his elocution, returned to his seat as the Vicar rose, adjusted his double eyeglasses and gave out a notice as follows:

“I publish the banns of marriage between William Blee, Bachelor, and Mary Coomstock, Widow, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is for the first time of asking.”

There was a momentary pause. Then, nudged by his daughter, who had grown very pale, Gaffer Lezzard rose. His head shook and he presented the appearance of a man upon the verge of palsy. He held up his hand, struggled with his vocal organs and at last exploded these words, sudden, tremulous, and shrill:

“I deny it an’ I defy it! The wummon be mine!”

Mr. Lezzard succumbed instantly after this effort. Indeed, he went down as though shot through the head. He wagged and gasped and whispered to his grandson,—

“Wheer’s the brandy to?”

Whereupon this boy produced a medicine bottle half full of spirits, and his grandfather, with shaking fingers, removed the cork and drank the contents. Meantime the Vicar had begun to speak; but he suffered another interruption. Billy, tearing himself from the miller's restraining hand, leapt to his feet, literally shaking with rage. He was dead to his position, oblivious of every fact save that his banns of marriage had been forbidden before the assembled Christians of Chagford. He had waited to find a wife until he was sixty years old—for this!

Page 143

"You—*you* to do it! You to get up afore this rally o' gentlefolks an' forbid my holy banns, you wrinkled, crinkled, baggering auld lizard! Gormed if I doan't wring your—"

"Silence in the house of God!" thundered Mr. Shorto-Champernowne, with tones so resonant that they woke rafter echoes the organ itself had never roused. "Silence, and cease this sacrilegious brawling, or the consequences will be unutterably serious! Let those involved," he concluded more calmly, "appear before me in the vestry after divine service is at an end."

Having frowned, in a very tragic manner, both on Mr. Blee and Mr. Lezzard, the Vicar proceeded with the service; but though Gaffer remained in his place Billy did not. He rose, jammed on his hat, glared at everybody, and assumed an expression curiously similar to that of a stone demon which grinned from the groining of two arches immediately above him. He then departed, growling to himself and shaking his fists, in another awful silence; for the Vicar ceased when he rose, and not until Billy disappeared and his footfall was heard no more did the angry clergyman proceed.

A buzz and hubbub, mostly of laughter, ascended when presently Mr. Shorto-Champernowne's parishioners returned to the air; and any chance spectator beholding them had certainly judged he stood before an audience now dismissed from a theatre rather than the congregation of a church.

"Glad Will weern't theer, I'm sure," said Mrs. Blanchard. "He'd 'a' laughed out loud an' made bad worse. Chris did as 't was, awnly parson's roarin' luckily drowned it. And Mr. Martin Grimbal, whose eye I catched, was put to it to help smilin'."

"Ban't often he laughs, anyway," said Phoebe, who walked homewards with her father and the Blanchards; whereon Chris, from being in a boisterous vein of merriment, grew grave. Together all returned to the valley. Will was due in half an hour from Newtake, and Phoebe, as a special favour, had been permitted to dine at Mrs. Blanchard's cottage with her husband and his family. Clement Hicks had also promised to be of the party; but that was before the trouble of the previous week, and Chris knew he would not come.

Meantime, Gaffer Lezzard, supported by two generations of his family, explained his reasons for objecting to Mr. Blee's proposed marriage.

"Mrs. Coomstock be engaged, right and reg'lar, to me," he declared. "She'd gived me her word 'fore ever Blee axed her. I seed her essterday, to hear final 'pon the subjec', an' she tawld me straight, bein' sober as you at the time, as 't was *me* she wanted an' meant for to have. She was excited t' other day an' not mistress of herself ezacally; an' the crafty twoad took advantage of it, an' jawed, an' made her drink an' drink till her didn't knaw what her was sayin' or doin'. But she'm mine, an' she'll tell 'e same as what I do; so theer's an end on 't."

“I’ll see Mrs. Coomstock,” said the Vicar. “I, myself will visit her to-morrow.”

Page 144

“Canst punish this man for tryin’ to taake her from me?”

“Permit yourself no mean desires in the direction of revenge. For the present I decline to say more upon the subject. If it were possible to punish, and I am not prepared to say it is not, it would be for brawling in the house of God. After an experience extending over forty years, I may declare that I never saw any such disreputable and horrifying spectacle.”

So the Lezzard family withdrew and, on the following day, Mrs. Coomstock passed through most painful experiences.

To the clergyman, with many sighs and tears, she explained that Mr. Lezzard’s character had been maligned by Mr. Blee, that before the younger veteran she had almost feared for her life, and been driven to accept him out of sheer terror at his importunity. But when facts came to her ears afterwards, she found that Mr. Lezzard was in reality all he had declared himself to be, and therefore returned to him, threw over Mr. Blee, and begged the other to forbid the banns, if as she secretly learnt, though not from Billy himself, they were to be called on that Sunday. The poor woman’s ears tingled under Mr. Shorto-Champernowne’s sonorous reproof; but he departed at last, and by the time that Billy called, during the same day, she had imbibed Dutch courage sufficient to face him and tell him she had changed her mind. She had erred—she confessed it. She had been far from well at the time and, upon reconsideration of the proposal, had felt she would never be able to make Mr. Blee happy, or enjoy happiness with him.

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Coomstock had accepted both suitors on one and the same afternoon. First Gaffer, who had made repeated but rather vague allusion to a sum of three hundred pounds in ready money, was taken definitely; while upon his departure, the widow, only dimly conscious of what was settled with her former admirer, said, “Yes” to Billy in his turn. Had a third suitor called on that event-ful afternoon, it is quite possible Mrs. Coomstock would have accepted him also.

The conversation with Mr. Blee was of short duration, and ended by Billy calling down a comprehensive curse on the faithless one and returning to Monks Barton. He had attached little importance to Lezzard’s public protest, upon subsequent consideration and after the first shock of hearing it; but there was no possibility of doubting what he now learned from Mrs. Coomstock’s own lips. That she had in reality changed her mind appeared only too certain.

So he went home again in the last extremity of fury, and Phoebe, who was alone at the time, found herself swept by the hurricane of his wrath. He entered snorting and puffing, flung his hat on the settle, his stick into the corner; then, dropping into a seat by the fire, he began taking off his gaiters with much snuffling and mumbling and repeated

inarticulate explosions of breath. This cat-like splutter always indicated deep feeling in Mr. Blee, and Phoebe asked with concern what was the matter now.

Page 145

“Matter? Tchut—Tchut—Theer ban’t no God—that’s what’s the matter!”

“Billy! How can you?”

“She’m gwaine to marry t’other, arter all! From her awn lips I’ve heard it! That’s what I get for being a church member from the womb! That’s my reward! God, indeed! Be them the ways o’ a plain-dealin’ God, who knaws what’s doin’ in human hearts? No fay! Bunkum an’ rot! I’ll never lift my voice in hymn nor psalm no more, nor pray a line o’ prayer again. Who be I to be treated like that? Drunken auld cat! I cussed her—I cussed her! Wouldn’t marry her now if she axed wi’ her mouth in the dirt. Wheer’s justice to? Tell me that. Me in church, keepin’ order ’mong the damn boys generation arter generation, and him never inside the door since he buried his wife. An’ parson siding wi’ un, I’ll wager. Mother Coomstock ’ll give un hell’s delights, that’s wan gude thought. A precious pair of ’em! Tchut! Gar!”

“I doan’t really think you could have loved Mrs. Coomstock overmuch, Billy, if you can talk so ugly an’ crooked ’bout her,” said Phoebe.

“I did, I tell ‘e—for years an’ years. I went down on my knees to the bitch—I wish I hadn’t; I’ll be sorry for that to my dying day. I kissed her, tu,—s’ elp me, I did. You mightn’t think it, but I did—a faace like a frost-bitten beetroot, as ’t is!”

“Doan’t ’e, please, say such horrible things. You must be wise about it. You see, they say Mr. Lezzard has more money than you. At least, so Mrs. Coomstock told her nephew, Clement Hicks. Every one of her relations is savage about it.”

“Well they may be. Why doan’t they lock her up? If she ban’t mad, nobody ever was. ‘Money’! Lezzard! Lying auld—auld—Tchut! Not money enough to pay for a graave to hide his rotten bones, I lay. Oh, ’t is enough to—theer, what ‘s the use of talkin’? Tchut—Tchut!”

At this point Phoebe, fearing even greater extravagances in Mr. Blee’s language, left him to consider his misfortunes alone. Long he continued in the profoundest indignation, and it was not until Miller Lyddon returned, heard the news, and heartily congratulated Billy on a merciful escape, that the old man grew a little calmer under his disappointment, and moderated the bitterness and profanity of his remarks.

CHAPTER IX

A DIFFERENCE WITH THE DUCHY

Newtake Farm, by reason of Will’s recent occupancy, could offer no very considerable return during his first year as tenant; but that he understood and accepted, and the tribulation which now fell upon him was of his own making. To begin with, Sam Bonus

vanished from the scene. On learning, soon after the event, that Bonus had discussed Hicks and himself at Chagford, and detailed his private conversation with Martin Grimbal, Blanchard, in a fury, swept off to the loft where his man slept, roused him from rest, threw down the balance of his wages, and dismissed him on the

Page 146

spot. He would hear no word in explanation, and having administered a passionate rebuke, departed as he had come, like a whirlwind. Sam, smarting under this injustice, found the devil wake in him through that sleepless night, and had there stood rick or stack within reach of revenge, he might have dealt his master a return blow before morning. As usual, after the lapse of hours, Will cooled down, modified his first fiery indignation, and determined, yet without changing his mind, to give Bonus an opportunity of explaining the thing he had done. Chris had brought the news from Clement himself, and Will, knowing that his personal relations with Clement were already strained, felt that in justice to his servant he must be heard upon the question. But, when he sought Sam Bonus, though still the dawn was only grey, he found the world fuller for him by another enemy, for the man had taken him at his word and departed. During that day and the next Will made some effort to see Bonus, but nothing came of it, so, dismissing the matter from his mind, he hired a new labourer—one Teddy Chown, son of Abraham Chown, the Inspector of Police—and pursued his way.

Then his unbounded energy led him into difficulties of a graver sort. Will had long cast covetous eyes on a tract of moorland immediately adjoining Newtake, and there being little to do at the moment, he conceived the adventurous design of reclaiming it. The patch was an acre and a half in extent—a beggarly, barren region, where the heather thinned away and the black earth shone with water and disintegrated granite. Quartz particles glimmered over it; at the centre black pools of stagnant water marked an abandoned peat cutting; any spot less calculated to attract an agricultural eye would have been hard to imagine; but Blanchard set to work, began to fill the greedy quag in the midst with tons of soil, and soon caused the place to look business-like—at least in his own estimation. As for the Duchy, he did not trouble himself. The Duchy itself was always reclaiming land without considering the rights and wrongs of the discontented Venville tenants, and Will knew of many a “newtake” besides this he contemplated. Indeed, had not the whole farm, of which he was now master, been rescued from the Moor in time past? He worked hard, therefore, and his new assistant, though not a Bonus, proved stout and active. Chris, who still dwelt with her brother, was sworn to secrecy respecting Will’s venture; and so lonely a region did the farm occupy that not until he had put a good month of work into the adjacent waste were any of those in authority aware of the young farmer’s performance.

A day came when the new land was cleaned, partly ploughed, and wholly surrounded by a fence of split stumps, presently to be connected by wires. At these Chown was working, while Will had just arrived with a load of earth to add to the many tons already poured upon that hungry central patch. He held the tailboard of the cart in his hand and was about to remove it; when, looking up, his heart fluttered a moment despite his sturdy consciousness of right. On the moor above him rode grey old Vogwell, the Duchy’s man. His long beard fluttered in the wind, and Will heard the thud of his horse’s

hoofs as he cantered quickly to the scene, passed between two of the stakes, and drew up alongside Blanchard.

Page 147

“Marnin’, Mr. Vogwell! Fine weather, to be sure, an’ gude for the peat next month; but bad for roots, an’ no mistake. Will ’e have a drink?”

Mr. Vogwell gazed sternly about him, then fixed his little bright eyes on the culprit.

“What do this mean, Will Blanchard?”

“Well, why not? Duchy steals all the gude land from Venwell men; why for shouldn’t us taake a little of the bad? This here weern’t no gude to man or mouse. Ban’t ’nough green stuff for a rabbit ’pon it. So I just thought I’d give it a lick an’ a promise o’ more later on.”

“‘A lick an’ a promise’! You’ve wasted a month’s work on it, to the least.”

“Well, p’raps I have—though ban’t wasted. Do ’e think, Mr. Vogwell, as the Duchy might be disposed to give me a hand?”

Will generally tackled difficulties in this audacious fashion, and a laugh already began to brighten his eye; but the other quenched it.

“You fool! You knawed you was doin’ wrong better’n I can tell you—an’ such a plaace! A babe could see you ‘m workin’ awver living springs. You caan’t fill un even now in the drouth, an’ come autumn an’ rain ’t will all be bog again.”

“Nothing of the sort,” flamed out Will, quite forgetting his recent assertion as to the poverty of the place. “Do ’e think, you, as awnly rides awver the Moor, knaws more about soil than I as works on it? ’Twill be gude proofy land bimebye—so good as any Princetown way, wheer the prison men reclaim, an’ wheer theer’s grass this minute as carries a bullock to the acre. First I’ll plant rye, then swedes, then maybe more swedes, then barley; an’, with the barley, I’ll sow the permanent grass to follow. That’s gude rotation of crops for Dartymoor, as I knaw an’ you doan’t; an’ if the Duchy encloses the best to rob our things[11], why for shouldn’t we—”

[11] *Things* = beasts; sheep and cattle.

“That’ll do. I caan’t bide here listenin’ to your child’s-talk all the marnin’. What Duchy does an’ doan’t do is for higher ’n you or me to decide. If this was any man’s work but yours I’d tell Duchy this night; but bein’ you, I’ll keep mute. Awnly mind, when I comes this way a fortnight hence, let me see these postes gone an’ your plough an’ cart t’ other side that wall. An’ you’ll thank me, when you’ve come to more sense, for stoppin’ this wild-goose chase. Now I’ll have a drop o’ cider, if it’s all the same to you.”

Will opened a stone jar which lay under his coat at hand, and answered as he poured cider into a horn mug for Mr. Vogwell—

“Here’s your drink; but I won’t take your orders, so I tell ’e. Damn the Duchy, as steals moor an’ common wheer it pleases an’ then grudges a man his toil.”

Page 148

“That’s the spirit as’ll land ’e in the poorhouse, Will Blanchard,” said Mr. Vogwell calmly; “and that’s such a job as might send ’e to the County Asylum,” he added, pointing to the operations around him. “As to damning Duchy,” he continued, “you might as well damn the sun or moon. They’d care as little. Theer ’m some varmints so small that, though they bite ‘e with all their might, you never knaw it; an’ so ‘t is wi’ you an’ Duchy. Mind now, a fortnight. Thank ’e—so gude cider as ever I tasted; an’ doan’t ‘e tear an’ rage, my son. What’s the use?”

“’Twould be use, though, if us all raged together.”

“But you won’t get none to follow. ’Tis all talk. Duchy haven’t got no bones to break or sawl to lose; an’ moormen haven’t got brains enough to do aught in the matter but jaw.”

“An’ all for a royal prince, as doan’t knaw difference between yether an’ fuzz, I lay,” growled Will. “Small blame to moormen for being radical-minded these days. Who wouldn’t, treated same as us?”

“Best not talk on such high subjects, Will Blanchard, or you might get in trouble. A fortnight, mind. Gude marnin’ to ’e.”

The Duchy’s man rode off and Will stood angry and irresolute. Then, seeing Mr. Vogwell was still observing him, he ostentatiously turned to the cart and tipped up his load of earth. But when the representative of power had disappeared—his horse and himself apparently sinking into rather than behind a heather ridge—Will’s energy died and his mood changed. He had fooled himself about this enterprise until the present, but he could no longer do so. Now he sat down on the earth he had brought, let his horse drag the cart after it, as it wandered in search of some green thing, and suffered a storm of futile indignation to darken his spirit.

Blanchard’s unseasoned mind had, in truth, scarcely reached the second milestone upon the road of man’s experience. Some arrive early at the mental standpoint where the five senses meet and merge in that sixth or common sense, which may be defined as an integral of the others, and which is manifested by those who possess it in a just application of all the experience won from life. But of common sense Will had none. He could understand laziness and wickedness being made to suffer; he could read Nature’s more self-evident lessons blazoned across every meadow, displayed in every living organism—that error is instantly punished, that poor food starves the best seed, that too much water is as bad as too little, that the race is to the strong, and so forth; but he could not understand why hard work should go unrewarded, why good intentions should breed bad results, why the effect of energy, self-denial, right ambitions, and other excellent qualities is governed by chance; why the prizes in the great lottery fall to the wise, not to the well-meaning. He knew himself for a hard worker and a man who accomplished, in all honesty, the best within his power. What his hand found

Page 149

to do he did with his might; and the fact that his head, as often as not, prompted his hand to the wrong thing escaped him. He regarded his life as exemplary, felt that he was doing all that might in reason be demanded, and confidently looked towards Providence to do the rest. To find Providence unwilling to help him brought a wave of riotous indignation through his mind on each occasion of making that discovery. These waves, sweeping at irregular intervals over Will, left the mark of their high tides, and his mind, now swinging like a pendulum before this last buffet dealt by Fate in semblance of the Duchy's man, plunged him into a huge discontent with all things. He was ripe for mischief and would have quarrelled with his shadow; but he did worse—he quarrelled with his mother.

She visited him that afternoon, viewed his shattered scheme, and listened as Will poured the great outrage upon her ear. Coming up at his express invitation to learn the secret, which he had kept from her that her joy might be the greater, Mrs. Blanchard only arrived in time to see his disappointment. She knew the Duchy for a bad enemy, and perhaps at the bottom of her conservative heart felt no particular delight at the spectacle of Newtake enlarging its borders. She therefore held that everything was for the best, and counselled patience; whereupon her son, with a month's wasted toil staring him in the face, rebelled and took her unconcerned demeanour ill. Damaris also brought a letter from Phoebe, and this added fuel to the flame. Will dwelt upon his wife's absence bitterly.

"Job's self never suffered that, for I read 'bout what he went through awnly last night, for somethin' to kill an hour in the evenin'. An' I won't suffer it. It's contrary to nature, an' if Phoebe ban't here come winter I'll go down an' bring her, willy-nilly."

"Time'll pass soon enough, my son. Next summer will be here quick. Then her'll have grawin' corn to look at and fine crops risin', an' more things feedin' on the Moor in sight of her eyes. You see, upland farms do look a little thin to them who have lived all their time in the fatness of the valleys."

"If I was bidin' in one of them stone roundy-poundies, with nothin' but a dog-kennel for a home, she ought to be shoulder to shoulder wi' me. Did you leave my faither cause other people didn't love un?"

"That was differ'nt. Theer s Miller Lyddon. I could much wish you seed more of him an' let un come by a better 'pinion of 'e. 'T s awnly worldly wisdom, true; but—"

"I'm sick to death o' worldly wisdom! What's it done for me? I stand to work nine an' ten hour a day, an' not wi'out my share o' worldly wisdom, neither. Then I'm played with an' left to whistle, I ban't gwaine to think so much, I tell 'e. It awnly hurts a man's head, an'

keeps him wakin' o' nights. Life's guess-work, by the looks of it, an' a fule's so like to draw a prize as the wisest."

Page 150

“That’s not the talk as’ll make Newtake pay, Will. You ’m worse than poor Blee to Monks Barton. He’s gwaine round givin’ out theer ban’t no God ’t all, ’cause Mrs. Coomstock took auld Lezzard ’stead of him.”

“You may laugh if you like, mother. ’Tis the fashion to laugh at me seemin’ly. But I doan’t care. Awnly you’ll be sorry some day, so sure as you sit in thicky chair. Now, as you’ve nothin’ but blame, best to go back home. I’ll put your pony in the shafts. ’Twas a pity you corned so far for so little.”

He went off, his breast heaving, while the woman followed him with her eyes and smiled when he was out of sight. She knew him so well, and already pictured her repentant son next Sunday. Then Will would be at his mother’s cottage, and cut the bit of beef at dinner, and fuss over her comfort according to his custom.

She went into the farmyard and took the pony from him and led it back into the stall. Then she returned to him and put her arm through his and spoke.

“Light your pipe, lovey, an’ walk a li’l way along down to the stones on the hill, wheer you was born. Your auld mother wants to talk to ’e.”

CHAPTER X

CONNECTING LINKS

Spaces of time extending over rather more than a year may now be dismissed in a chapter.

Chris Blanchard, distracted between Will and her lover, stayed on at Newtake after the estrangement, with a hope that she might succeed in healing the breach between them; but her importunity failed of its good object, and there came an August night when she found her own position at her brother’s farm grow no longer tenable.

The blinds were up, and rays from the lamp shot a broad band of light into the farmyard, while now and again great white moths struck soft blows against the closed window, then vanished again into the night. Will smoked and Chris pleaded until a point, beyond which her brother’s patience could not go, was reached. Irritation grew and grew before her ceaseless entreaty on Clement’s behalf; for the thousandth time she begged him to write a letter of apology and explanation of the trouble bred by Sam Bonus; and he, suddenly rising, smashed down his clay pipe and swore by all his gods he would hear the name of Hicks mentioned in his house no more. Thus challenged to choose between her lover and her brother, the girl did not hesitate. Something of Will’s own spirit informed her; she took him at his word and returned home next morning, leaving him to manage his own household affairs henceforth as best he might.

Upon the way to Chagford Chris chanced to meet with Martin Grimbal, and, having long since accepted his offer of friendship, she did not hesitate to tell him of her present sorrow and invite his sympathy. From ignorance rather than selfishness did Chris take Martin literally when he had hoped in the past they might remain friends, and their intercourse was always maintained by her when chance put one in the other's way—at a cost to the man beyond her power to guess.

Page 151

Now he walked beside her, and she explained how only a word was wanting between Will and Clement which neither would speak. Hicks had forgiven Will, but he refused to visit Newtake until he received an apology from the master of it; and Blanchard bore no ill-will to Clement, but declined to apologise for the past. These facts Martin listened to, while the blood beat like a tide within his temples, and a mist dimmed his eyes as the girl laid her brown hand upon his arm now and again, to accentuate a point. At such moments the truth tightened upon his soul and much distressed him.

The antiquary had abandoned any attempt to forget Chris, or cease from worshipping her with all his heart and soul; but the emotion now muzzled and chained out of sight he held of nobler composition than that earlier love which yearned for possession. Those dreary months that dragged between the present and his first disappointment had served as foundations for new developments of character in the man. He existed through a period of unutterable despair and loneliness; then the fruits of bygone battles fought and won came to his aid, and long-past years of self-denial and self-control fortified his spirit. The reasonableness of Martin Grimbal lifted him slowly but steadily from the ashes of disappointment; even his natural humility helped him, and he told himself he had no more than his desert. Presently, with efforts the very vigour of which served as tonic to character, he began to wrestle at the granite again and resume his archaeologic studies. Speaking in general terms, his mind was notably sweetened and widened by his experience; and, resulting from his own failure to reach happiness, there awoke in him a charity and sympathy for others, a fellow-feeling with humanity, remarkable in one whose enthusiasm for human nature was not large, whose ruling passion, until the circumstance of love tinctured it, had led him by ways which the bulk of men had pronounced arid and unsatisfying. Now this larger insight was making a finer character of him and planting, even at the core of his professional pursuits, something deeper than is generally to be found there. His experience, in fact, was telling upon his work, and he began slowly to combine with the labour of the yard-measure and the pencil, the spade and the camera, just thoughts on the subject of those human generations who ruled the Moor aforetime, who lived and loved and laboured there full many a day before Saxon keel first grated on British shingle.

To Chris did Martin listen attentively. Until the present time he had taken Will's advice and made no offer of work to Clement; but now he determined to do so, although he knew this action must mean speedy marriage for Chris. Love, that often enough can shake a lifetime of morality, that can set ethics and right conduct and duty playing a devil's dance in the victim's soul, that can change the practised customs of a man's life and send cherished opinions,

Page 152

accepted beliefs, and approved dogmas spinning into chaos before its fiery onslaught —love did not thus overpower Martin Grimbal. His old-fashioned mind was no armour against it, and in that the passion proved true; religion appeared similarly powerless to influence him; yet now his extreme humility, his natural sense of justice and the dimensions of his passion itself combined to lead him by a lofty road. Chris desired another man, and Martin Grimbal, loving her to that point where her perfect happiness dominated and, indeed, became his own, determined that his love should bear fruit worthy of its object.

This kindly design was frustrated, however, and the antiquary himself denied power to achieve the good action that he proposed, for on visiting Clement in person and inviting his aid in the clerical portions of a considerable work on moorland antiquities, the poet refused to assist.

“You come too late,” he said coldly. “I would not help you now if I could, Martin Grimbal. Don’t imagine pride or any such motive keeps me from doing so. The true reason you may guess.”

“Indeed! I can do nothing of the sort. What reason is there against your accepting an offer to do remunerative and intellectual work in your leisure hours—work that may last ten years for all I can see to the contrary?”

“The reason is that you invited another man’s judgment upon me, instead of taking your own. Better follow Will Blanchard’s advice still. Don’t think I’m blind. It is Chris who has made you do this.”

“You’re a very difficult man to deal with, really. Consider my suggestion, Hicks, and all it might mean. I desire nothing but your welfare.”

“Which is only to say you are offering me charity.”

Martin looked at the other quietly, then took his hat and departed. At the door he said a last word.

“I don’t want to think this is final. You would be very useful to me, or I should not have asked you to aid my labour. Let me hear from you within a week.”

But Clement was firm in his folly; while, although they met on more than one occasion, and John Grimbal repeated his offer of regular work, the bee-keeper refused that proposal, also. He made some small sums out of the Red House hives, but would not undertake any regular daily labour there. Clement’s refusal of Martin resulted from his own weak pride and self-conscious stupidity; but a more subtle tangle of conflicting motives was responsible for his action in respect of the elder Grimbal’s invitation. Some

loyalty to the man whom he so cordially disliked still inhabited his mind, and with it a very considerable distrust of himself. He partly suspected the reason of John Grimbal's offer of work, and the possibility of sudden temptation provoking from him utterance of words best left unsaid could not be ignored after his former experience at the hiving of the swarm.

Page 153

So he went his way and told nobody—not even Chris—of these opportunities and his action concerning them. Such reticence made two women sad. Chris, after her conversation with Martin, doubted not but that he would make some effort, and, hearing nothing as time passed, assumed he had changed his mind; while Mrs. Hicks, who had greatly hoped that Clement's visit to the Red House might result in regular employment, felt disappointed when no such thing occurred.

The union of Mr. Lezzard and Mrs. Coomstock was duly accomplished to a chorus of frantic expostulation on the part of those interested in the widow's fortune. Mr. Shorto-Champernowne, having convinced himself that the old woman was in earnest, could find no sufficient reason for doing otherwise than he was asked, and finally united the couple. To Newton Abbot they went for their honeymoon, and tribulation haunted them from the first. Mrs. Lezzard refused her husband permission to inquire any particulars of her affairs from her lawyer—a young man who had succeeded Mr. Joel Ford—while the Gaffer, on his side, parried all his lady's endeavours to learn more of the small fortune concerning which he had spoken not seldom before marriage. Presently they returned to Chagford, and life resolved itself into an unlovely thing for both of them. Time brought no better understanding or mutual confidence; on the contrary, they never ceased from wrangling over money and Mrs. Lezzard's increasing propensity towards drink. The old man suffered most, and as his alleged three hundred pounds did not appear, being, indeed, a mere lover's effort of imagination, his wife bitterly resented marriage under such false pretences, and was never weary of protesting. Of her own affairs she refused to tell her husband anything, but as Mr. Lezzard was found to possess no money at all, it became necessary to provide him with a bare competence for the credit of the family. He did his best to win a little more regard and consideration, in the hope that when his wife passed away the reward of devotion might be reaped; but she never forgave him, expressed the conviction that she would outlive him by many years, and exhausted her ingenuity to make the old man rue his bargain. Only one experience, and that repeated as surely as Mr. Blee met Mr. Lezzard, was more trying to the latter than all the accumulated misfortune of his sorry state—Gaffer's own miseries appeared absolutely trivial by comparison with Mr. Blee's comments upon them.

With another year Blanchard and Hicks became in some sort reconciled, though the former friendship was never renewed. The winter proved a severe one, and Will experienced a steady drain on his capital, but he comforted himself in thoughts of the spring, watched his wheat dapple the dark ground with green, and also foretold exceptional crops of hay when summer should return. The great event of his wife's advent at Newtake occupied most of his reflections; while as for Phoebe herself the matter was never out of her mind. She lived for the day in June that should see her by her husband's side; but Miller Lyddon showed no knowledge of the significance of Phoebe's twenty-first birthday; and when Will brought up the matter, upon an occasion of meeting with his father-in-law, the miller deprecated any haste.

Page 154

“Time enough—time enough,” he said. “You doan’t want no wife to Newtake these years to come, while I *do* want a darter to home.”

So Phoebe, albeit the course of operations was fully planned, forbore to tell her father anything, and suffered the day to drift nearer and nearer without expressly indicating the event it was to witness.

CHAPTER XI

TOGETHER

Though not free from various temporal problems that daily demanded solution, Will very readily allowed his mind a holiday from all affairs of business during the fortnight that preceded his wife’s arrival at Newtake. What whitewash could do was done; a carpet, long since purchased but not laid down till now, adorned the miniature parlour; while out of doors, becoming suddenly conscious that not a blossom would greet Phoebe’s eyes, Will set about the manufacture of a flower-bed under the kitchen window, bound the plat with neat red tiles, and planted therein half a dozen larkspurs—Phoebe’s favourite flower—with other happy beauties of early summer. The effort looked raw and unhappy, however, and as ill luck would have it, these various plants did not take kindly to their changed life, and greeted Phoebe with hanging heads.

But the great morning came at last, and Will, rising, with the curious thought that he would never sleep in the middle of his bed again, donned his best dark-brown velveteens and a new pair of leathern gaiters, then walked out into the air, where Chown was milking the cows. The day dawned as brightly as the events it heralded, and Will, knowing that his mother and Chris would be early at Newtake, strolled out to meet them. Over against the farm rose moorland crowned by stone, and from off their granite couches grey mists blushing to red now rose with lazy deliberation and vanished under the sun’s kiss. A vast, sweet, diamond-twinkling freshness filled the Moor; blue shadows lay in the dewy coombs, and sun-fires gleamed along the heather ridges. No heath-bell as yet had budded, but the flame of the whins splashed many undulations, and the tender foliage of the whortleberry, where it grew on exposed granite, was nearly scarlet and flashed jewel-bright in the rich texture of the waste. Will saw his cattle pass to their haunts, sniffed the savour of them on the wind, and enjoyed the thought of being their possessor; then his eyes turned to the valley and the road which wound upwards from it under great light. A speck at length appeared three parts of a mile distant and away started Blauchard, springing down the hillside to intercept it. His heart sang within him; here was a glorious day that could never come again, and he meant to live it gloriously.

“Marnin’, mother! Marnin’, Chris! Let me get in between ’e. Breakfast will be most ready by time we’m home. I knawed you d keep your word such a rare fashion day!”

Will soon sat between the two women, while Mrs. Blanchard's pony regulated its own pace and three tongues chattered behind it. A dozen brown paper parcels occupied the body of the little cart, for Damaris had insisted that the wedding feast should be of her providing. It was proposed that Chris and her mother should spend the day at Newtake and depart after drinking tea; while Phoebe was to arrive in a fly at one o'clock.

Page 155

After breakfast Chris busied herself indoors and occupied her quick fingers in putting a dozen finishing touches; while Mrs. Blanchard walked round the farm beside Will, viewed with outspoken approval or secret distrust those evidences of success and failure spread about her, and passed the abandoned attempt to reclaim land without a word or sign that she remembered. Will crowed like a happy child; his mother poured advice into his unheeding ears; and then a cart lumbered up with a great surprise in it. True to her intention Mrs. Blanchard had chosen the day of Phoebe 's arrival to send the old piano to Newtake, and now it was triumphantly trundled into the parlour, while Will protested and admired. It added not a little to the solid splendour of the apartment, and Mrs. Blanchard viewed it with placid but genuine satisfaction. Its tarnished veneer and red face looked like an old honest friend, so Will declared, and he doubted not that his wife would rejoice as he did.

Presently the cart destined to bring Phoebe's boxes started for Chagford under Ted Chown's direction. It was a new cart, and the owner hoped that sight of it, with "William Blanchard, Newtake," nobly displayed on the tail-board, would please his father-in-law.

Meantime, at Monks Barton the great day had likewise dawned, but Phoebe, from cowardice rather than philosophy, did not mention what was to happen until the appearance of Chown made it necessary to do so.

Mr. Blee was the first to stand bewildered before Ted's blunt announcement that he had come for Mrs. Blanchard's luggage.

"What luggage? What the douce be talkin' 'bout?" he asked.

"Why, everything, I s'pose. She 'm comin' home to-day—that's knawn, ban't it?"

"Gormed if 'tis! Not by me, anyways—nor Miller, neither."

Then Phoebe appeared and Billy heard the truth.

"My! An' to keep it that quiet! Theer'll be a tidy upstore when Miller comes to hear tell —"

But Mr. Lyddon was at the door and Phoebe answered his questioning eyes.

"My birthday, dear faither. You must remember—why, you was the first to give me joy of it! Twenty-one to-day, an' I must go—I must—'tis my duty afore everything."

The old man's jaw fell and he looked the picture of sorrowful surprise.

"But—but to spring it like this! Why to-day? Why to-day? It's madness and it's cruelty to fly from your home the first living moment you've got the power. I'd counted on a merry evenin,' tu, an' axed more 'n wan to drink your gude health."

“Many’s the merry evenings us’ll have, dear faither, please God; but a husband’s a husband. He’ve been that wonnerful patient, tu, for such as him. ‘T was my fault for not remindin’ you. An’ yet I did, now an’ again, but you wouldn’t see it. Yet you knawed in your heart, an’ I didn’t like to pain ‘e dwellin’ on it overmuch.”

“How did I knaw? I didn’t knaw nothin’ ’t all ’bout it. How should I? Me grawin’ aulder an’ aulder, an’ leanin’ more an’ more ’pon ’e at every turn. An’ him no friend to me—he ’s never sought to win me—he ’s—”

Page 156

“Doan’t ’e taake on ’bout Will, dearie; you’ll come to knaw un better bimebye. I ban’t gwaine so far arter all; an’ it’s got to be.”

Then the miller worked himself into a passion, dared Chown to take his daughter’s boxes, and made a scene very painful to witness and quite futile in its effect. Phoebe could be strong at times, and a life’s knowledge of her father helped her now. She told Chown to get the boxes and bade Billy help him; she then followed Mr. Lyddon, who was rambling away, according to his custom at moments of great sorrow, to pour his troubles into any ear that would listen. She put her arm through his, drew him to the riverside and spoke words that showed she had developed mentally of late. She was a woman with her father, cooed pleasantly to him, foretold good things, and implored him to have greater care of his health and her love than to court illness by this display of passion. Such treatment had sufficed to calm the miller in many of his moods, for she possessed great power to soothe him, and Mr. Lyddon now set increased store upon his daughter’s judgment; but to-day, before this dreadful calamity, every word and affectionate device was fruitless and only made the matter worse. He stormed on, and Phoebe’s superior manner vanished as he did so, for she could only play such a part if quite unopposed in it. Now her father silenced her, frightened her, and dared her to leave him; but his tragic temper changed when they returned to the farm and he found his daughter’s goods were really gone. Then the old man grew very silent, for the inexorable certainty of the thing about to happen was brought home to him at last.

Before a closed hackney carriage from the hotel arrived to carry Phoebe to Newtake, Miller Lyddon passed through a variety of moods, and another outburst succeeded his sentimental silence. When the vehicle was at the gate, however, his daughter found tears in his eyes upon entering the kitchen suddenly to wish him “good-by.” But he brushed them away at sight of her, and spoke roughly and told her to be gone and find the difference between a good father and a bad husband.

“Go to the misery of your awn choosin’; go to him an’ the rubbish-heap he calls a farm! Thankless an’ ontrue,—go,—an’ look to me in the future to keep you out of the poorhouse and no more. An’ that for your mother’s sake—not yourn.”

“Oh, Faither!” she cried, “doan’t let them be the last words I hear ’pon your lips. ’T is cruel, for sure I’ve been a gude darter to ’e, or tried to be—an’—an’—please, dear faither, just say you wish us well—me an’ my husband. Please say that much. I doan’t ax more.”

But he rose and left her without any answer. It was then Phoebe’s turn to weep, and blinded with tears she slipped and hurt her knee getting into the coach. Billy thereupon offered his aid, helped her, handed her little white fox terrier m after her, and saw that the door was properly closed.

Page 157

“Be o’ good cheer,” he said, “though I caan’t offer ’e much prospects of easy life in double harness wi’ Will Blanchard. But, as I used to say in my church-gwaine days, ‘God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.’ Be it as ’twill, I dare say theer ‘s many peaceful years o’ calm, black-wearin’ widowhood afore ’e yet, for chaps like him do shorten theer days a deal by such a tearin’, high-coloured, passionate way of life.”

Mr. Blee opened the gate, the maids waved their handkerchiefs and wept, and not far distant, as he heard the vehicle containing his daughter depart, Mr. Lyddon would have given half that he had to recall the spoken word. Phoebe once gone, his anger vanished and his love for her won on him like sunshine after storm. Angry, indeed, he still was, but with himself.

For Phoebe, curiosity and love dried her tears as she passed upward towards the Moor. Then, the wild land reached, she put her head out of the window and saw Newtake beech trees in the distance. Already the foliage of them seemed a little tattered and thin, and their meagreness of vesture and solitary appearance depressed the spectator again before she arrived at them.

But the gate, thrown widely open, was reached at last, and there stood Will and Mrs. Blanchard, Chris, Ted Chown, and the great bobtailed sheep-dog, “Ship,” to welcome her. With much emotion poor Phoebe alighted, tottered and fell into the bear-hug of her husband, while the women also kissed her and murmured over her in their sweet, broad Devon tongue. Then something made Will laugh, and his merriment struck the right note; but Ship fell foul of Phoebe’s little terrier and there was a growl, then a yelp and a scuffling, dusty battle amid frightened fowls, whose protests added to the tumult. Upon this conflict descended Will’s sapling with sounding thuds administered impartially, and from the skirmish the smaller beast emerged lame and crying, while the sheep-dog licked the blood off his nose and went to heel with a red light glimmering through his pale blue eyes.

Happiness returned indoors and Phoebe, all blushes and praises, inspected her new home and the preparations made within it for her pleasure. Perhaps she simulated more joy than the moment brought, for such a day, dreamed of through years, was sure in its realisation to prove something of an anti-climax after the cruel nature of all such events. Despite Chris and her ceaseless efforts to keep joy at the flood, a listlessness stole over the little party as the day wore on. Phoebe found her voice not to be relied upon and felt herself drifting into that state between laughter and tears which craves solitude for its exhibition. The cows came home to be milked, and there seemed but few of them after the great procession at Monks Barton. Yet Will demanded her separate praises for each beast. In the little garden he had made, budding flowers, untimely transplanted, hung their heads. But she admired with extravagant adjectives, and picked a blossom

Page 158

and set it in her dress. Anon the sun set, with no soft lights and shadows amidst the valley trees she knew, when sunset and twilight played hide-and-seek beside the river, but slowly, solemnly, in hard, clean, illimitable glory upon horizons of granite and heather. The peat glowed as though it were red-hot, and night brooded on the eastern face of every hill. Only a jangling bell broke the startling stillness then, and, through long weeks afterwards the girl yearned for the song of the river, as one who has long slept by another's side sadly yearns for the sound of their breathing by night, when they are taken away. Phoebe had little imagination, but she guessed already that the life before her must differ widely from that spent under her father's roof. Despite the sunshine of the time and the real joy of being united to her husband at last, she saw on every side more evidences of practical life than she had before anticipated. But these braced her rather than not, and she told herself truly that the sadness at bottom of her heart just then was wholly begotten of the past and her departure from home. Deep unrest came upon her as she walked with her husband and listened to his glad voice. She longed greatly to be alone with him that her heart might be relieved. She wanted his arms round her; she wanted to cry and let him kiss the tears away.

Damaris Blanchard very fully understood much that was passing through her daugher-in-law's mind, and she hastened her departure after an early cup of tea. She took a last look at all the good things she had provided for the wedding supper—a meal she declared must not be shared with Will and Phoebe—and so made ready to depart. It was then her turn, and her bosom throbbed with just one dumb, fleeting shadow of fear that found words before her second thought had time to suppress them.

"You won't love me no less, eh, Will?" she whispered, holding his hand between hers; and he saw her grey eyes almost frightened in the gloaming.

"My God, no! No, mother; a man must have a dirty li'l heart in un if it ban't big enough to hold mother an' wife."

She gripped his hand tighter.

"Ess fay, I knaw, I knaw; but doan't 'e put your mother first now,—ban't nature. God bless an' keep the both of 'e. 'Twill allus be my prayer."

The cart rattled away, Chris driving, and such silence as Phoebe had never known held the darkening land. She noted a yellow star against the sombre ridge of the world, felt Will's arm round her and turned to him, seeking that comfort and support her nature cried out for.

Infinitely tender and loving was her husband then, and jubilant, too, at first; but a little later, when Chown had been packed off to his own apartment, with not a few delicacies he had never bargained for, the conversation flagged and the banquet also.

Page 159

The table was laden with two capons, a ham, a great sugared cake, a whole Dutch cheese, an old-fashioned cut-glass decanter containing brown sherry, and two green wine-glasses for its reception; yet these luxuries tempted neither husband nor wife to much enjoyment of them. Indeed Phoebe's obvious lowness of spirits presently found its echo in Will. The silences grew longer and longer; then the husband set down his knife and fork, and leaving the head of the table went round to his wife's side and took her hand and squeezed it, but did not speak. She turned to him and he saw her shut her eyes and give a little shiver. Then a tear flashed upon her lashes and twinkled boldly down, followed by another.

"Phoebe! My awn li'l wummon! This be a wisht home-comin'! What the plague's the matter wi' us?"

"Doan't 'e mind, dear heart. I'm happy as a bird under these silly tears. But 'twas the leavin' o' faither, an' him so hard, an' me lovin' him so dear, an'—an'—"

"Doan't 'e break your heart 'bout him. He'll come round right enough. 'Twas awnly the pang o' your gwaine away, like the drawin' of a tooth."

"Everybody else in the world knaws I ought to be here," sobbed Phoebe, "but faither, he won't see it. An' I caan't get un out of my mind to-night, sitting that mournfui an' desolate, wi' his ear deaf to Billy's noise an' his thoughts up here."

"If he won't onderstand the ways of marriage, blessed if I see how we can make him. Surely to God, 'twas time I had my awn?"

"Ess, dear Will, but coming to-day, 'pon top of my gert joy, faither's sorrow seemed so terrible-like."

"He'll get awver it, an' so will you, bless you. Drink up some of this braave stuff mother left. Sherry 't is, real wine, as will comfort 'e, my li'l love. 'Tis I be gwaine to make your happiness henceforward, mind; an' as for Miller, he belongs to an auld-fashioned generation of mankind, and it's our place to make allowances. Auld folk doan't knaw an' won't larn. But he'll come to knaw wan solid thing, if no more; an' that is as his darter'll have so gude a husband as she've got faither, though I sez it."

"'Tis just what he said I shouldn't, Will."

"Nevermind, forgive un, an' drink up your wine; 'twill hearten 'e."

A dog barked, a gate clinked, and there came the sound of a horse's hoofs, then of a man dismounting.

Will told the rest of the story afterwards to Mrs. Blanchard.

“‘’Tis faither,’ cries Phoebe, an’ turns so pale as a whitewashed wall in moonlight. ‘Never!’ I sez. But she knawed the step of un, an’ twinkled up from off her chair, an’ ’fore ever the auld man reached the door, ‘t was awpen. In he comed, like a lamb o’ gentleness, an’ said never a word for a bit, then fetched out a little purse wi’ twenty gawld sovereigns in it. An’ us all had some fine talk for more’n an hour, an’ he was proper faither to me, if you’ll credit it; an’ he drinked a glass o’ your wine, mother, an’ said he never tasted none better and not much so gude. Then us seed un off, an’ Phoebe cried again, poor twoad, but for sheer happiness this time. So now the future’s clear as sunlight, an’ we’m all friends—’cept here an’ theer.”

Page 160

CHAPTER XII

THROUGH ONE GREAT DAY

Just within the woods of Teign Valley, at a point not far distant from that where Will Blanchard met John Grimbal for the first time, and wrestled with him beside the river, there rises a tall bank, covered with fern, shadowed by oak trees. A mossy bridle-path winds below, while beyond it, seen through a screen of wych-elms and hazel, extend the outlying meadows of Monks Barton.

Upon this bank, making "sunshine in a shady place," reclined Chris, beneath a harmony of many greens, where the single, double, and triple shadows of the manifold leaves above her created a complex play of light and shade all splashed and gemmed with little sun discs. Drowsy noon-day peace marked the hour; Chris had some work in her hand, but was not engaged upon it; and Clement, who lolled beside her, likewise did nothing. His eyes were upon a mare and foal in the meadow below. The matron proceeded slowly, grazing as she went, while her lanky youngster nibbled at this or that inviting tuft, then raced joyously in wide circles and, returning, sought his mother's milk with the selfish roughness of youth.

"Happy as birds, they be," said Chris, referring to the young pair at Newtake. "It do make me long for us to be man an' wife, Clem, when I see 'em."

"We're that now, save for the hocus-pocus of the parsons you set such store by."

"No, I'll never believe it makes no difference."

"A cumbrous, stupid, human contrivance like marriage! Was ever man and woman happier for being bound that way? Can free things feel their hearts beat closer because they are chained to one another by an effete dogma?"

"I doan't onderstand all that talk, sweetheart, an' you knaw I don't; but till some wise body invents a better-fashion way of joining man an' maid than marriage, us must taake it as 'tis."

"There is a better way—Nature's."

She shook her head.

"If us could dwell in a hole at a tree-root, an' eat roots an' berries; but we'm thinking creatures in a Christian land."

She stretched herself out comfortably and smiled up at him where he sat with his chin in his hands. Then, looking down, he saw the delicious outline of her and his eyes grew hot.

“God’s love! How long must it be?” he cried; then, before she could speak, he clipped her passionately to him and hugged her closely.

“Dearie, you’m squeezin’ my breath out o’ me!” cried Chris, well used to these sudden storms and not averse to them. “We must bide patient an’ hold in our hearts,” she said, lying in his arms with her face close to his. “’Twill be all the more butivul when we’m mated. Ess fay! I love ’e allus, but I love ’e better in this fiery mood than on the ice-cold days when you won’t so much as hold my hand.”

“The cold mood’s the better notwithstanding, and colder yet would be better yet, and clay-cold best of all.”

Page 161

But he held her still, and pressed his beard against her brown neck. Then the sound of a trotting horse reached his ears, he started up, looked below, and saw John Grimbal passing by. Their eyes met, for the horseman chanced to glance up as Clement thrust his head above the fern; but Chris was invisible and remained so.

Grimbal stopped and greeted the bee-keeper.

“Have you forgotten your undertaking to see my hives once a month?”

“No, I meant coming next week.”

“Well, as it happens I want to speak with you, and the present time’s as good as another. I suppose you were only lying there dreaming?”

“That’s all. I’ll come and walk along beside your horse.”

He squeezed his sweetheart’s hand, whispered a promise to return immediately, then rose and stumbled down the bank, leaving Chris throned aloft in the fern. For a considerable time John Grimbal said nothing, then he began suddenly,—

“I suppose you know the Applebirds are leaving my farm?”

“Yes, Mrs. Applebird told my mother. Going to Sticklepath.”

“Not easy to get a tenant to take their place.”

“Is it not? Such a farm as yours? I should have thought there need be no difficulty.”

“There are tenants and tenants. How would you like it—you and your mother? Then you could marry and be comfortable. No doubt Chris Blanchard would make a splendid farmer’s wife.”

“It would be like walking into paradise for me; but—”

“The rent needn’t bother you. My first care is a good tenant. Besides, rent may take other shapes than pounds, shillings, and pence.”

Hicks started.

“I see,” he said; “you can’t forget the chance word I spoke in anger so long ago.”

“I can’t, because it happened to be just the word I wanted to hear. My quarrel with Will Blanchard’s no business of yours. The man’s your enemy too; and you’re a fool to stand in your own light, You know something that I don’t know, concerning those weeks

during which he disappeared. Well, tell me. You can only live your life once. Why let it run to rot when the Red House Farm wants a tenant? A man you despise, too."

"No. I promised. Besides, you wouldn't be contented with the knowledge; you'd act on it."

Grimbal showed a lightning-quick perception of this admission; and Hicks, too late, saw that the other had realised its force. Then he made an effort to modify his assertion.

"When I say 'you'd act on it,' I mean that you might try to, though I much doubt really if anything I could tell you would damage Blanchard."

"If you think that, then there can be no conscientious objection to telling me. Besides, I don't say I should act on the knowledge. I don't say I shall or I shall not. All you ve got to do is to say whether you'll take the Red House Farm at a nominal rent from Michaelmas."

"No, man, no. You've met me in a bad moment, too, if you only knew. But think of it—-brother and sister; and I, in order to marry the woman, betray the man. That's what it comes to. Such things don't happen."

Page 162

“You re speaking plainly, at any rate. We ought to understand each other to-day, if ever. I’ll make you the same offer for less return. Tell me where he was during those weeks—that’s all. You needn’t tell what he was doing.”

“If you knew one, you’d find out the other. Once and for all, I’ll tell you nothing. By an accidental question you discovered that I knew something. That was not my fault. But more you never will know from me—farm or no farm.”

“You’re a fool for your pains. And the end will be the same. The information must reach me. You’re a coward at heart, for it’s fear, not any tomfoolery of morals, that keeps your mouth shut. Don’t deceive yourself. I’ve often talked with you before to-day, and I know you think as I do.”

“What’s that to do with it?”

“Everything. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are only two words, and what is man’s good and what is man’s evil takes something cleverer than man to know. It’s no nonsense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that’s keeping you from a happy home and a wife. What is it then?”

Hicks was silent a moment, then made answer.

“I don’t know. I don’t know any more than you do. Something has come over me; I can’t tell you what. I’m more surprised than you are at my silence; but there it is. Why the devil I don’t speak I don’t know. I only know I’m not going to. Our characters are beyond our own power to understand.”

“If you don’t know, I’ll tell you. You’re frightened that he will find out. You’re afraid of him.”

“It’s vain trying to anger me into speaking,” answered the other, showing not a little anger the while; “I’m dumb henceforward.”

“I hope you’ll let your brain influence you towards reason. ’Tis a fool’s trick to turn your back on the chance of a lifetime. Better think twice. And second thoughts are like to prove best worth following. You know where to find me at any rate. I’ll give you six weeks to decide about it.”

John Grimbal waited, hoping that Hicks might yet change his mind before he took his leave; but the bee-keeper made no answer. His companion therefore broke into a sharp trot and left him. Whereupon Clement stood still a moment, then he turned back and, forgetting all about Chris, proceeded slowly homewards to Chagford, deep in thought and heartily astonished at himself. No one could have prompted his enemy to a more critical moment for this great attack; no demon could have sent the master of the Red House with a more tempting proposal; and yet Hicks found himself resisting the lure without any particular effort or struggle. On the one side this man had offered him all

the things his blood and brain craved; on the other his life still stretched drearily forward, and nothing in it indicated he was nearer his ambition by a hair's-breadth than a year before. Yet he refused to pay the price. It amazed him to find his determination so fixed against betrayal of Will. He honestly wondered at himself.

Page 163

The decision was bred from a curious condition of mind quite beyond his power to comprehend. He certainly recoiled from exposure of Blanchard's secret, yet coldly asked himself what unsuspected strand of character held him back. It was not fear and it was not regard for his sweetheart's brother; he did not know what it was. He scoffed at the ideas of honour or conscience. These abstractions had possessed weight in earlier years, but not now. And yet, while he assured himself that no tie of temporal or eternal interest kept him silent, the temptation to tell seemed much less on this occasion than in the past when he took a swarm of John Grimbal's bees. Then, indeed, his mind was aflame with bitter provocation. He affected a cynical attitude to the position and laughed without mirth at a theory that suddenly appeared in his mind. Perchance this steadfastness of purpose resulted, after all, from that artificial thing, "conscience," which men catch at the impressionable age when they have infantile ailments and pray at a mother's knee. If so, surely reason must banish such folly before another dawn and send him hot-foot at daybreak to the Red House. He would wait and watch himself and see.

His reflections were here cut short, for a shrill voice broke in upon them, and Clement, now within a hundred yards of his own cottage door, saw Mr. Lezzard before him.

"At last I've found 'e! Been huntin' this longful time, tu. The Missis wants 'e—your aunt I should say."

"Wants me?"

"Ess. 'T is wan o' her bad days, wi' her liver an' lights a bitin' at her like savage creatures. She'm set on seein' you, an' if I go home-along without 'e, she'll awnly cuss."

"What can she want me for?"

"She 's sick 'n' taken a turn for the wuss, last few days. Doctor Parsons doan't reckon she can hold out much longer. 'Tis the drink—she'm soaked in it, like a sponge."

"I'll come," said Hicks, and half an hour later he approached his aunt's dwelling and entered it.

Mrs. Lezzard was now sunk into a condition of chronic crapulence which could only end in one way. Her husband had been ordered again and again to keep all liquor from her, but, truth to tell, he made no very sustained effort to do so. The old man was sufficiently oppressed by his own physical troubles, and as the only happiness earth now held for him must depend on the departure of his wife, he watched her drinking herself to death without concern and even smiled in secret at the possibility of some happy, quiet, and affluent years when she was gone.

Mrs. Lezzard lay on the sofa in her parlour, and a great peony-coloured face with coal-black eyes in it greeted Clement. She gave him her hand and bid her husband be gone. Then, when Gaffer had vanished, his wife turned to her nephew.

Page 164

“I’ve sent for you, Clem Hicks, for more reasons than wan. I be gwaine down the hill fast, along o’ marryin’ this cursed mommet[12] of a man, Lezzard. He lied about his money—him a pauper all the time; and now he waits and watches me o’ nights, when he thinks I’m drunk or dreamin’ an’ I ban’t neither. He watches, wi’ his auld, mangy poll shakin’, an’ the night-lamp flingin’ the black shadow of un ‘gainst the bed curtain an’ shawin’ wheer his wan front tooth sticks up like a yellow stone in a charred field. Blast un to hell! He’m waitin’ for my money, an’ I’ve told un he’s to have it. But ’twas only to make the sting bite deeper when the time comes. Not a penny—not a farthing—him or any of ’em.”

[12] *Mommet* = scarecrow.

“Don’t get angry with him. He’s not worth it. Tell me if I can help you and how. You’ll be up and about again soon, I hope.”

“Never. Not me. Doctor Parsons be to blame. I hate that man. He knawed it was weakness of heart that called for drink after Coonistock died; an’ he let me go on an’ on—just to gain his own dark ends. You’ll see, you’ll see. But that reminds me. Of all my relations you an’ your mother’s all I care for; because you’m of my awn blood an’ you’ve let me bide, an’ haven’t been allus watchin’ an’ waitin’ an’ divin’ me to the bottle. An’ the man I was fule enough to take in his dotage be worst of all.”

“Forget about these things. Anger’s bad for you.”

“Forget! Well, so I will forget, when I ve told ’e. I had the young man what does my business, since old Ford died, awver here last week, an’ what there is will be yourn—-every stiver yourn. Not the business, of course; that was sold when Coonistock died; but what I could leave I have. You expected nothin,’ an’ by God! you shall have all!”

She saw his face and hastened to lessen the force of the announcement in some degree.

“Ban’t much, mind, far less than you might think for—far less. Theer’s things I was driven to do—a lone woman wi’out a soul to care. An’ wan was—but you’ll hear in gude time, you’ll hear. It concerns Doctor Parsons.”

“I can’t believe my senses. If you only knew what happened to me this morning. And if you only knew what absolute paupers we are—mother and I. Not that I would confess it to any living soul but you. And how can I thank you? Words are such vain things.”

“Ban’t no call to thank me. ‘Tis more from hatred of t’ others than love of you, when all’s said. An’ it ban’t no gert gold mine. But I’d like to be laid along wi’ Coomstock; an’ doan’t, for God’s love, bury Lezzard wi’ me; an’ I want them words on auld George Mundy’s graave set ’pon mine—not just writ, but cut in a slate or some such lasting

thing. 'Tis a tidy tomb he've got, wi' a cherub angel, an' I'd like the same. You'll find a copy o' the words in the desk there. My maid took it down last Sunday. I minded the general meaning, but couldn't call home the rhymes. Read it out, will 'e?"

Page 165

Clement opened the desk, and found and read the paper. It contained a verse not uncommon upon the tombstones of the last rural generation in Devon:

"Ye standers-by, the thread is spun;
All pomp and pride I e'er did shun;
Rich and poor alike must die;
Peasants and kings in dust must lie;
The best physicians cannot save
Themselves or patients from the Grave."

"Them's the words, an' I've chose 'em so as Doctor Parsons shall have a smack in the faace when I'm gone. Not that he's wan o' the 'best physicians' by a mighty long way; but he'll knaw I was thinking of him, an' gnash his teeth, I hope, every time he sees the stone. I owe him that—an' more 'n that, as you'll see when I'm gone."

"You mustn't talk of going, aunt—not for many a day. You're a young woman for these parts. You must take care—that's all."

But he saw death in her face while he spoke, and could scarcely hide the frantic jubilation her promise had awakened in him. The news swept him along on a flood of novel thoughts. Coming as it did immediately upon his refusal to betray Will Blanchard, the circumstance looked, even in the eyes of Hicks, like a reward, an interposition of Providence on his behalf. He doubted not but that the bulk of mankind would so regard it. There arose within him old-fashioned ideas concerning right and wrong—clear notions that brought a current of air through his mind and blew away much rotting foliage and evil fruit. This sun-dawn of prosperity transformed the man for a moment, even awoke some just ethical thoughts in him.

His reverie was interrupted, for, on the way from Mrs. Lezzard's home, Clement met Doctor Parsons himself and asked concerning his aunt's true condition.

"She gave you the facts as they are," declared the medical man. "Nothing can save her. She's had *delirium tremens* Lord knows how often. A fortnight to a month—that's all. Nature loves these forlorn hopes and tinkers away at them in a manner that often causes me to rub my eyes. But you can't make bricks without straw. Nature will find the game 's up in a few days; then she'll waste no more time, and your aunt will be gone."

Home went Clement Hicks, placed his mother in a whirl of mental rejoicing at this tremendous news, then set out for Chris. Their compact of the morning—that she should await his return in the woods—he quite forgot; but Mrs. Blanchard reminded him and added that Chris had returned in no very good humour, then trudged up to Newtake to see Phoebe. Cool and calm the widow stood before Clement's announcement, expressed her gratification, and gave him joy of the promised change in his life.

“Glad enough am I to hear tell of this. But you’ll act just—eh? You won’t forget that poor auld blid, Lezzard? If she’m gwaine to leave un out the account altogether, he’ll be worse off than the foxes. His son’s gone to foreign paarts an’ his darter’s lyin’-in—not that her husband would spare a crust o’ bread for auld Lezzard, best o’ times.”

Page 166

“Trust me to do what’s right. Now I’ll go and see after Chris.”

“An’ make it up with Will while sun shines on ’e. It’s so easy, come gude fortune, to feel your heart swellin’ out to others.”

“We are good friends now.”

“Do’e think I doan’t knaw better? Your quarrel’s patched for the sake of us women. Have a real make-up, I mean.”

“I will, then. I’ll be what I was to him, if he’ll let me. I’ll forgive everything that’s past—-everything and every body.”

“So do. An’ doan’t ’e tell no more of them hard sayings ’gainst powers an’ principalities an’ Providence. Us be all looked arter, ’cording to the unknawn planning of God. How’s Mrs. Lezzard?”

“She’ll be dead in a fortnight—perhaps less. As likely as not I might marry Chris before the next new moon.”

“Doan’t think ‘pon that yet. Be cool, an’ keep your heart in bounds. ’T is allus the way wi’ such as you, who never hope nothing. Theer comes a matter as takes ’em out of themselves, then they get drunk with hope, all of a sudden, an’ flies higher than the most sanguine folks, an’ builds castles ‘pon clouds. Theer’s the diggin’ of a graave between you and Chris yet. Doan’t forget that.”

“You can’t evade solid facts.”

“No, but solid facts, seen close, often put on a differ’nt faace to what they did far-ways off.”

“You won’t dishearten me, mother; I’m a happy man for once.”

“Be you? God forbid I should cloud ’e then; awnly keep wise as well as happy, an’ doan’t fill Chris with tu gert a shaw of pomps an’ splendours. Put it away till it comes. Our dreams ’bout the future ’s allus a long sight better or worse than the future itself.”

“Don’t forbid dreaming. That’s the sole happiness I’ve ever had until now.”

“Happiness, you call it? ‘T is awnly a painted tinsel o’ the mind, and coming from it into reality is like waking arter tu much drink. So I’ve heard my husband say scores o’ times—him bein’ a man much given to overhopefulness in his younger days—same as Will is now.”

Clement departed, and presently found himself with the cooler breezes of the high lands upon his hot forehead. They put him in mind of Mrs. Blanchard again, and their tendency, as hers had been, was to moderate his ardour; but that seemed impossible just now. Magnificent sunshine spread over the great wastes of the Moor; and through it, long before he reached Newtake, Clement saw his sweetheart returning. For a little time he seemed intoxicated and no longer his own master. The fires of the morning woke in him again at sight of her. They met and kissed, and he promised her some terrific news, but did not tell it then. He lived in the butterfly fever of the moment, and presently imparted the fever to her. They left the road and got away into the lonely heather; then he told her that they would be man and wife within a fortnight.

They sat close together, far from every eye, in the shade of a thorn bush that rose beside a lonely stone.

Page 167

“Within the very shadow of marriage, and you are frightened of me still! Frightened to let me pick an apple over the orchard wall when I am going through the gate for my own the next moment! Listen! I hear our wedding bells!”

Only the little lizard and the hovering hawk with gold eyes saw them.

“Our wedding bells!” said Chris.

Towards set of sun Hicks saw his sweetheart to her mother’s cottage. His ecstatic joys were sobered now, and his gratitude a little lessened.

“To think what marvels o’ happiness be in store for us, Clem, my awn!”

“Yes—not more than we deserve, either. God knows, if there ’s any justice, it was your turn and mine to come by a little of the happiness that falls to the lot of men and women.”

“I doan’t see how highest heaven’s gwaine to be better than our married life, so long as you love me.”

“Heaven! Don’t compare them. What’s eternity if you’re half a ghost, half a bird? That’s the bribe thrown out,—to be a cold-blooded, perfect thing, and passionless as a musical box. Give me hot blood that flows and throbs; give me love, and a woman’s breast to lean on. One great day on earth, such as this has been, is better than a million ages of sexless perfection in heaven. A vain reward it was that Christ offered. It seemed highest perfection to Him, doubtless; but He judged the world by Himself. The Camel-driver was wiser. He promised actual, healthy flesh in paradise—flesh that should never know an ache or pain—eternal flesh, and the joys of it. We can understand that, but where’s the joy of being a spirit? I cling to the flesh I have, for I know that Nature will very soon want back the dust she has lent me.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE WILL

Agreeably to the prediction of Doctor Parsons, Mrs. Lezzard’s journey was ended in less than three weeks of her conversation with Clement Hicks. Then came a night when she made an ugly end; and with morning a group of gossips stood about the drawn blinds, licked their lips over the details, and generally derived that satisfaction from death common to their class. Indeed, this ghoulish gusto is not restricted to humble folk alone. The instinct lies somewhere at the root of human nature, together with many another morbid vein and trait not readily to be analysed or understood. Only educated persons conceal it.

“She had deliriums just at the end,” said Martha, her maid. “She called out in a voice as I never heard afore, an’ mistook her husband for the Dowl.”

“Poor sawl! Death’s such a struggle at the finish for the full-blooded kind. Doctor tawld me that if she’d had the leastest bit o’liver left, he could ‘a’ saved her; but ’twas all soaked up by neat brandy, leaving nought but a vacuum or some such fatal thing.”

“Her hadn’t the use of her innards for a full fortnight! Think o’ that! Aw. dallybuttons! It do make me cream all awver to hear tell of!”

Page 168

So they piled horror upon horror; then came Clement Hicks, as one having authority, and bade them begone. The ill-omened fowls hopped off; relations began to collect; there was an atmosphere of suppressed electricity about the place, and certain women openly criticised the prominent attitude Hicks saw fit to assume. This, however, did not trouble him. He wrote to the lawyer at Newton, fixed a day for the funeral, and then turned his attention to Mr. Lezzard. The ancient resented Clement's interference not a little, but Hicks speedily convinced him that his animosity mattered nothing. The bee-keeper found this little taste of power not unpleasant. He knew that everything was his own property, and he enjoyed the hate and suspicion in the eyes of those about him. The hungry crowd haunted him, but he refused it any information. Mr. Lezzard picked a quarrel, but he speedily silenced the old man, and told him frankly that upon his good behaviour must depend his future position. Crushed and mystified, the widower whispered to those interested with himself in his wife's estate; and so, before the reading of the will, there slowly grew a very deep suspicion and hearty hatred of Clement Hicks. None had considered him in connection with Mrs. Lezzard's fortune, for he always kept aloof from her; but women cannot easily shut their lips over such tremendous matters of news, and so it came about that some whisper from Chris or dark utterance from old Mrs. Hicks got wind, and a rumour grew that the bee-keeper was the dead woman's heir.

Facts contributed colour to the suspicion, for it was known that Clement had of late given Chris one or two pretty presents, and a ring that cost gold. His savings were suspected to justify 110 such luxuries; yet that a speedy change in his manner of life might be expected was also manifest from the fact that he had been looking into the question of a new stone cottage, on the edge of the Moor, where the heather in high summer would ripple to the very doors of his beehives.

The distrust created by these facts was quickly set at rest, for Mrs. Lezzard sank under ground within four days of her dissolution; then, after the eating of funeral baked meats, those interested assembled in the parlour to hear the will. The crowd whispered and growled, and looked gloomily across at Hicks and the little figure of his mother who had come in rusty black to witness his triumph. Then a young lawyer from Newton adjusted his spectacles, rustled his papers, and poured himself out a glass of grocer's port before proceeding. But his task involved no strain upon him, and was indeed completed within five minutes. Black disappointment, dismay, and despair were the seeds sown by that unimpassioned voice; and at his conclusion a silence as blank as any that reigned in the ears of the dead fell upon those who listened—on those who had hoped so much and were confronted with so little.

Page 169

“The will is remarkably concise. Mrs. Lezzard makes sundry bitter statements which I think none will blame me for not repeating, though all may see them here who desire so to do; she then constitutes Mr. Clement Hicks, her nephew, sole residuary legatee. There is no condition, no codicil; but I have regretfully to add that Mr. Hicks wins little but this barren expression of good-will from the testatrix; for the sufficient reason that she had nothing to leave. She laboured under various delusions, among others that her financial position was very different from what is the case. Upon her first husband’s death, Mrs. Coomstock, as she was then, made an arrangement with my late senior partner, Mr. Joel Ford, and purchased an annuity. This absorbed nearly all her capital; the rest she lost in an undesirable speculation of her own choosing. I am amazed at the present extent of her obligations. This dwelling-house, for instance, is mortgaged to her medical man, Doctor Parsons, of Chagford. There is barely money to meet the debts. Some fifty or sixty pounds in my hands will be absorbed by the calls of the estate. Mrs. Lezzard’s tastes—I sorrow to say it—were expensive in some directions. There is an item of ten pounds twelve shillings for—for brandy, if I may be pardoned for speaking plainly. The funeral also appears to have been conducted on a scale more lavish than circumstances warranted. However, there should be sufficient to defray the cost, and I am sure nobody will blame Mr. Hicks for showing this last respect to an amiable if eccentric woman. There is nothing to add except that I shall be delighted to answer any questions—any questions at all.”

A few moments later, the lawyer mounted his dog-cart and rattled off to enjoy a pleasant drive homeward.

Then the company spoke its mind, and Mary Lezzard’s clay might well have turned under that bitter hornet-buzz of vituperation. Some said little, but had not strength or self-command to hide tears; some cursed and swore. Mr. Lezzard wept unheeded; Mrs. Hicks likewise wept. Clement sat staring into the flushed faces and angry eyes, neither seeing the rage manifested before him, nor hearing the coarse volleys of reproach. Then in his turn he attracted attention; and hard words, wasted on the dead, hurtled like hail round his ears, with acid laughter, and bitter sneers at his own tremendous awakening. Stung to the quick, the lame wheelwright, Charles Coomstock, gloated on the spectacle of Clement’s dark hour, and heaped abuse upon his round-eyed, miserable mother. The raw of his own wound found a sort of salve in this attack; and all the other poor, coarse creatures similarly found comfort in their disappointment from a sight of more terrific mortification than their own. Venomous utterances fell about Clement Hicks, but he neither heard nor heeded: his mind was far away with Chris, and the small shot of the Coomstocks and the thunder of the Chowns alike flew harmlessly past him. He saw his sweetheart’s sorrow, and her grief, as yet unborn, was the only fact that much hurt him now. The gall in his own soul only began to sicken him when his eye rested on his mother. Then he rose and departed to his home, while the little, snuffling woman ran at his heels, like a dog.

Page 170

Not until he had escaped the tempest of voices, and was hidden from the world, did the bee-keeper allow his own cruel disappointment to appear. Then, while his mother wept, he lifted up his voice and cursed God. As his relations had won comfort by swearing at him, so now he soothed his soul unconsciously in blasphemies. Then followed a silence, and his mother dared to blame him and remind him of an error.

“You wouldn’t turn the bee-butts when she died, though I begged and prayed of ‘e. Oh, if you’d awnly done what an auld woman, an’ she your mother, had told ’e! Not so much as a piece of crape would ’e suffer me to tie ’pon ’em. An’ I knawed all the while the hidden power o’ bees.”

Presently he left her, and went to tell Chris. She greeted him eagerly, then turned pale and even terrified as she saw the black news in his face.

“Just a gull and laughing-stock for the gods again, that’s all, Chris. How easily they fool us from their thrones, don’t they? And our pitiful hopes and ambitions and poor pathetic little plans for happiness shrivel and die, and strew their stinking corpses along the road that was going to be so gorgeous. The time to spill the cup is when the lip begins to tremble and water for it—not sooner—the gods know! And now all’s changed—-excepting only the memory of things done that had better been left undone.”

“But—but we shall be married at once, Clem?”

He shook his head.

“How can you ask it? My poor little all—twenty pounds—is gone on twopenny-halfpenny presents during the past week or two. It seemed so little compared to the fortune that was coming. It’s all over. The great day is further off by twenty pounds than it was before that poor drunken old fool lied to me. Yet she didn’t lie either; she only forgot; you can’t swim in brandy for nothing.”

Fear, not disappointment, dominated the woman before him as she heard. Sheer terror made her grip his arm and scream to him hysterically. Then she wept wild, savage tears and called to God to kill her quickly. For a time she parried every question, but an outburst so strangely unlike Chris Blanchard had its roots deeper than the crushing temporary disaster which he had brought with him. Clement, suspecting, importuned for the truth, gathered it from her, then passed away into the dusk, faced with the greatest problem that existence had as yet set him. Crushed, and crushed unutterably, he returned home oppressed with a biting sense of his own damnable fate. He moved as one distracted, incoherent, savage, alone. The glorious palace he had raised for his happiness crumbled into vast ruins; hope was dead and putrid; and only the results of wild actions, achieved on false assumptions, faced him. Now, rising out of his brief midsummer madness, the man saw a ghost; and he greeted it with groan as bitter as ever wrung human heart.

Miller Lyddon sat that night alone until Mr. Blee returned to supper.

Page 171

“Gert news! Gert news!” he shouted, while yet in the passage; “sweatin’ for joy an’ haste, I be!”

His eyes sparkled, his face shone, his words tripped each other up by the heels.

“Be gormed if ban’t a ‘mazin’ world! She’ve left nought—dammy—less than nought, for the house be mortgaged sea-deep to Doctor, an’ theer’s other debts. Not a penny for nobody—nothin’ but empty bottles—an’ to think as I thought so poor o’ God as to say theer weern’t none! What a ramshackle plaace the world is!”

“No money at all? Mrs. Lezzard—it can’t be!” declared Mr. Lyddon.

“But it is, by gum! A braave tantara ’mongst the fam’ly, I tell ’e. Not a stiver—all ate up in a ‘nuity, an’ her—artful limb!—just died on the last penny o’ the quarter’s payment. An’ Lezzard left at the work’us door—poor auld zawk! An’ him fourscore an’ never been eggicated an’ never larned nothin’!”

“To think it might have been your trouble, Blee!”

“That’s it, that’s it! That’s what I be full of! Awnly for the watchin’ Lard, I’d been fixed in the hole myself. Just picture it! Me a-cussin’ o’ Christ to blazes an’ lettin’ on theer wasn’t no such Pusson; an’ Him, wide awake, a-keepin’ me out o’ harm’s way, even arter the banns was called! Theer’s a God for ‘e! Watchin’ day an’ night to see as I comed by no harm! That’s what ‘t is to have laid by a tidy mort o’ righteousness ’gainst a evil hour!”

“You ’m well out of it, sure enough.”

“Ess, ‘t is so. I misjudged the Lard shocking, an’ I’m man enough to up and say it, thank God. He was right an’ I was wrong; an’ lookin’ back, I sees it. So I’ll come back to the fold, like the piece of silver what was lost; an’ theer’ll be joy in heaven, as well theer may be. Burnish it all! I’ll go along to church ’fore all men’s eyes next Lard’s Day ever is.”

“A gude thought, tu. Religion’s a sort of benefit society, if you look at it, an’ the church be the bank wheer us pays in subscriptions Sundays.”

“An’ blamed gude interest us gets for the money,” declared Mr. Blee. “Not but what I’ve drawed a bit heavy on my draft of late, along o’ pretendin’ to heathen ways an’ thoughts what I never really held with; but ‘t is all wan now an’ I lay I’ll soon set the account right, wi’ a balance in my favour, tu. Seein’ how shameful I was used, ban’t likely no gert things will be laid against me.”

“And auld Lezzard will go to the Union?”

“A very fittin’ plaace for un, come to think on ’t. Awver-balanced for sheer greed of gawld he was. My! what a wild-goose chase! An the things he’ve said to me! Not that I’d allow myself—awuly from common humanity I must see un an’ let un knaw I bear no more malice than a bird on a bough.”

They drank, Billy deeper than usual. He was marvellously excited and cheerful. He greeted God like an old friend returned to him from a journey; and that night before retiring he stood stiffly beside his bed and covered his face in his hands and prayed a prayer familiar among his generation.

Page 172

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
Bless the bed that I lie on,
Four cornders to my bed,
Four angels overspread
Two tu foot an' two tu head,
An' all to carry me when I'm dead.
An' when I'm dead an' in my graave,
An' all my bones be rotten.
The greedy worms my flaish shall ate,
An' I shall be forgotten;
For Christ's sake. Amen."

Having sucked from repetition of this ancient twaddle exactly that sort of satisfaction the French or Roman peasant wins from a babble of a dead language over beads, Billy retired with many a grunt and sigh of satisfaction.

"It do hearten the spirit to come direct to the Throne," he reflected; "an' the wonder is how ever I could fare for near two year wi'out my prayers. Yet, though I got my monkey up an' let Jehovah slide, He knawed of my past gudeness, all set down in the Book o' Life. An' now I've owned up as I was wrong; which is all even the saints can do; 'cause Judgment Day, for the very best of us, will awnly be a matter o' owning up."

CHAPTER XIV

A HUNDRED POUNDS

The maddening recollection of things done wrought upon Clement Hicks until it bred in him a distracted frenzy and blinded his judgment. He lost all sense of proportion in his endeavour to come at a right course of action, and a mind long inclined towards one road now readily drifted upon it. To recover the position had been quite possible, and there were not wanting those ready and eager to assist him; but at this crisis in his fortune the man lost all power of reflection or self-control. The necessity for instant action clamoured to him through daylight and darkness; delay drove him hourly into a hysterical condition approaching frenzy, and every road to escape save one appeared bolted and barred against him. But, try as he might, his miseries could not be hidden, and Will Blanchard, among others, sympathised very heartily with the great disappointment that had now fallen upon Chris and her sweetheart. His sister's attitude had astonished both him and his mother. They fancied that Blanchards were made of sterner stuff; but Chris went down before the blow in a manner very unexpected. She seemed dazed and unable to recover from it. Her old elastic spirit was crushed, and a great sorrow looked from her eyes.

Neither Will nor her mother could rouse her, and so it came about that thinking how best he could play a brother's part, the master of Newtake decided on a notable deed and held that the hour for it must be delayed no longer. He debated the circumstance from every point of view, examined his accounts, inspected the exact figures represented by the remainder of his uncle's legacy and then broke the matter to Phoebe. To his mother he had already spoken concerning the intention, and she approved it, though without knowing particulars. Phoebe, however,

Page 173

happened to be quite as familiar with Will's affairs as Will himself, and while his determination to give Clement and Chris a hundred pounds was easily come at and most cheering to his heart, the necessity of breaking the news to his wife appeared not so easy or pleasant. Indeed, Will approached the task with some trepidation, for a recent event made it doubly difficult. They sat together one night, after six weeks of married life, and he plunged into the matter.

"'Tis sad them two being kept apart like this," he said abruptly.

"'Tis so. Nobody feels it more'n me. Matters was hard with us, and now they 'm all smooth and the future seems fairly bright, tu."

"Very bright," he said stoutly. "The hay's best ever come off my ground, thanks to the manure from Monks Barton; and look at the wurzels! Miller hisself said he've never seed a more promising crop, high or low. An' the things be in prime kelter, tu; an' better than four hunderd pound of uncle's money still left."

"Long may it be left, I'm sure. 'Tis terrible work dipping into it, an' I looks at both sides of a halfpenny 'fore I spend it. Wish you would. You'm tu generous, Will. But accounts are that difficult."

This was not the spirit of the hour, however.

"I was gwaine to say that out of all our happiness an' fortune we might let a little bubble awver for Chris—eh? She'm such a gude gal, an' you love her so dearly as what I do a'most."

Phoebe read the project in a flash, but yet invited her husband to explain.

"What d'you mean?" she asked distrustfully and coldly.

"I can see in your face you knaw well enough. That four-hunderd-odd pound. I've sometimes thought I should have given Chris a bit of the windfall when first it comed. But now—well, theer's this cruel coil failed on 'em. You knaw the hardness of waiting. 'Twould be a butivul thing to let 'em marry an' feel't was thanks to us."

"You want to go giving them money?"

"Not 'give' 'zactly. Us'll call it a loan, till the time they see their way clearer."

Phoebe sighed and was silent for a while.

“Poor dears,” she said at length. “I feel for ’em in my heart, same as you do; yet somehow it doan’t look right.”

“Not right, Phoebe?”

“Not wise, then. Remember what you say the winters be up here—such dreary months with no money coming in and all gwaine out to keep life in the things.”

“‘Tis a black, bitin’ business on the high farms—caan’t deny that.”

“Money flies so.”

“Then let some fly to a gude end. You knaw I’m a hard, keen man where other people be concerned, most times.”

His wife laughed frankly, and he grew red.

“Damn it, Phoebe, doan’t you take me like that else you’ll get the rough edge of my tongue. ’Tis for you to agree with what I’m pleased to say, not contradict it. I *be* a hard, keen man, and knaws the value of money as well as another. But Chris is my awn sister, an’ the long an’ the short is, I’m gwaine to give Clem Hicks a hunderd pound.”

Page 174

“Will! It’s not reasonable, it’s not fair—us working so hard an’—an’—”

“They ’m to have it, anyway.”

Her breath caught in a little, helpless gasp. Without a word she picked up the material in her hands, huddled it up, and thrust it across the table towards him. Then the passion faded out of his face, his eyes softened and grew dreamy, he smiled, and rubbed his brown cheek with the flannel.

“My awn, li’l clever woman, as have set about the fashioning of a bairn so soon! God bless ‘e, an’ bless ‘e an’ be gude to ‘e, an’ the wee thing coming!”

He put his arm round her and patted her hair and purred softly to her; whereupon she relented and kissed him.

“You knaw best, Will, dearie; you nearly allus knaw best; but your heart’s bigger ‘n your pocket—an’ a li’l child do call so loud for the spendin’ o’ money.”

“Aye, I knaw, I knaw; ’tis a parent’s plaace to stand up for his offspring through fire an’ water; an’ I reckon I won’t be the worst faither as ever was, either. I can mind the time when I was young myself. Stern but kind’s the right rule. Us’ll bring un up in the proper way, an’ teach un to use his onderstandin’ an’ allus knuckle down ’fore his elders. To tell ’e truth, Phoebe, I’ve a notion I might train up a cheel better’n some men.”

“Yes, Will, I think so, tu. But ‘tis food an’ clothes an’ li’l boots an’ such-like comes first. A hunderd pounds be such a mort o’ money.”

“’Twill set ’em up in a fair way.”

“Fifty wouldn’t hardly do, p’r’aps?”

“Hardly. I like to carry a job through clean an’ vitty while I’m on it.”

“You’ve got such a big spirit.”

“As to that, money so spent ban’t lost—’tis all in the fam’ly.”

“Of course ’tis a gude advertisement for you. Folk’ll think you’m prosperin’ an’ look up to you more.”

“Well, some might, though I doan’t ’zactly mean it like that. Yet the putting out o’ three figures o’ money must make neighbours ope their eyes. Not that I want anybody to knaw either.”

So, against her judgment, Phoebe was won over, and presently she and her husband made merry at prospect of the great thing contemplated. Will imitated Clement's short, glum, and graceless manner before the gift; Phoebe began to spend the money and plan the bee-keeper's cottage when Chris should enter it as a bride; and thus, having enjoyed an hour of delight the most pure and perfect that can fall to human lot, the young couple retired.

Elsewhere defeat and desolation marked the efforts of the luckless poet to improve his position. All thoughts drifted towards the Red House, and when, struggling from this dark temptation, he turned to Martin Grimbal rather than his brother, Fate crushed this hope also. The antiquary was not in Chagford, and Clement recollected that Martin had told him he designed some visits to the doom rings of Iceland, and other contemporary remains of primeval man in Brittany and in Ireland. To find him at present was impossible, for he had left no address, and his housekeeper only knew that he would be out of England until the autumn.

Page 175

Now the necessity for action gained gigantically upon Hicks, and spun a net of subtle sophistry that soon had the poor wretch enmeshed beyond possibility of escape. He assured himself that the problem was reduced to a mere question of justice to a woman. A sacrifice must be made between one whom he loved better than anything in the world, and one for whom he cared not at all. That these two persons chanced to be brother and sister was an unfortunate accident, but could not be held a circumstance strong enough to modify his determination. He had, indeed, solemnly sworn to Will to keep his secret, but what mattered that before this more crushing, urgent duty to Chris? His manhood cried out to him to protect her. Nothing else signified in the least; the future—the best that he could hope for—might be ashy and hopeless now; but it was with the immediate present and his duty that he found himself concerned. There remained but one grim way; and, through such overwhelming, shattering storm and stress as falls to the lot of few, he finally took it. To marry at any cost and starve afterwards if necessary, had been the more simple plan; and that course of action must first have occurred to any other man but this; to him, however, it did not occur. The crying, shrieking need for money was the thing that stunned him and petrified him. Shattered and tossed to the brink of aberration, stretched at frightful mental tension for a fortnight, he finally succumbed, and told himself that his defeat was victory.

He wrote to John Grimbal, explained that he desired to see him on the morrow, and the master of the Red House, familiar with recent affairs, rightly guessed that Hicks had changed his mind. Excited beyond measure, the victor fixed a place for their conversation, and it was a strange one.

“Meet me at Oke Tor,” he wrote. “By an accident I shall be in the Taw Marshes to-morrow, and will ride to you some time in the afternoon.—J.G.”

Thus, upon a day when Will Blanchard called at Mrs. Hicks’s cottage, Clement had already started for his remote destination on the Moor. With some unconscious patronage Will saluted Mrs. Hicks and called for Clement. Then he slapped down a flat envelope under the widow’s eyes.

“Us have thought a lot about this trouble, mother, an’ Phoebe’s hit on as braave a notion as need be. You see, Clem’s my close friend again now, an’ Chris be my sister; so what’s more fittin’ than that I should set up the young people? An’ so I shall, an’ here’s a matter of Bank of England notes as will repay the countin’. Give ’em to Clem wi’ my respects.”

Then Will suffered a surprise. The little woman before him swelled and expanded, her narrow bosom rose, her thin lips tightened, and into her dim eyes there came pride and brightness. It was her hour of triumph, and she felt a giantess as she stood regarding the envelope and Will. Him she had never liked since his difference with her son concerning Martin Grimbal, and now, richer for certain news of that morning, she gloried to throw the gift back.

Page 176

“Take your money again, bwoy. No Hicks ever wanted charity yet, least of all from a Blanchard. Pick it up; and it’s lucky Clement ban’t home, for he’d have said some harsh words, I’m thinking. Keep it ’gainst the rainy days up to Newtake. And it may surprise ’e to knaw that my son’s worth be getting found out at last. It won’t be so long ’fore he takes awver Squire Grimbal’s farm to the Red House. What do ‘e think o’ that? He’ve gone to see un this very day ’bout it.”

“Well, well! This be news, and no mistake—gude news, tu, I s’pose. Jan Grimbal! An’ what Clem doan’t knaw ‘bout farmin’, I’ll be mighty pleased to teach un, I’m sure.”

“No call to worry yourself; Clem doan’t want no other right arm than his awn.”

“Chris shall have the money, then; an’ gude luck to ’em both, say I.”

He departed, with great astonishment the main emotion of his mind. Nothing could well have happened to surprise him more, and now he felt that he should rejoice, but found it difficult to do so.

“Braave news, no doubt,” he reflected, “an’ yet, come to think on it, I’d so soon the devil had given him a job as Grimbal. Besides, to choose him! What do Clement knaw ‘bout farmin’? Just so much as I knaw ’bout verse-writin’, an’ no more.”

CHAPTER XV

“THE ANGEL OF THE DARKER DRINK”

Patches of mist all full of silver light moved like lonely living things on the face of the high Moor. Here they dispersed and scattered, here they approached and mingled together, here they stretched forth pearly fingers above the shining granite, and changed their shapes at the whim of every passing breeze; but the tendency of each shining, protean mass was to rise to the sun, and presently each valley and coomb lay clear, while the cool vapours wound in luminous and downy undulations along the highest points of the land before vanishing into air.

A solitary figure passed over the great waste. He took his way northward and moved across Scorhill, leaving Wattern Tor to the left. Beneath its ragged ridges, in a vast granite amphitheatre, twinkled the cool birth-springs of the little Wallabrook, and the water here looked leaden under shade, here sparkled with silver at the margin of a cloud shadow, here shone golden bright amid the dancing heads of the cotton-grass under unclouded sunlight. The mist wreaths had wholly departed before noon, and only a few vast mountains of summer gold moved lazily along the upper chambers of the air. A huge and solitary shadow overtook the man and spread itself directly about him, then swept onwards; infinite silence encompassed him; once from a distant hillside a voice cried to him, where women and children moved like drab specks and gathered the ripe

whortleberries that now wove purple patterns into the fabric of the Moor; but he heeded not the cry; and other sound there was none save the occasional

Page 177

and mournful note of some lonely yellowhammer perched upon a whin. Into the prevalent olive-brown of the heath there had now stolen an indication of a magic change at hand, for into the sober monotone crept a gauzy shadow, a tremor of wakening flower-life, half pearl, half palest pink, yet more than either. Upon the immediate foreground it rippled into defined points of blossom, which already twinkled through all the dull foliage; in the middle distance it faded; afar off it trembled as a palpable haze of light under the impalpable reeling of the summer air. A week or less would see the annual miracle peformed again and witness that spacious and solemn region in all the amethystine glories of the ling. Fiercely hot grew the day, and the distances, so distinct through mist rifts and wreaths in the clearness of early morning, now retreated—-mountain upon mountain, wide waste on waste—as the sun climbed to the zenith. Detail vanished, the Moor stretched shimmering to the horizon; only now and again from some lofty point of his pilgrimage did the traveller discover chance cultivation through a dip in the untamed region he traversed. Then to the far east and north, the map of fertile Devon billowed and rolled in one enormous misty mosaic,—billowed and rolled all opalescent under the dancing atmosphere and July haze, rolled and swept to the sky-line, where, huddled by perspective into the appearance of density, hung long silver tangles of infinitely remote and dazzling cloud against the blue.

From that distant sponge in the central waste, from Cranmere, mother of moorland rivers, the man presently noted wrinkles of pure gold trickling down a hillside two miles off. Here sunshine touched the river Taw, still an infant thing not far advanced on the journey from its fount; but the play of light upon the stream, invisible save for this finger of the sun, indicated to the solitary that he approached his destination. Presently he stood on the side of lofty Steeperton and surveyed that vast valley known as Taw Marsh, which lies between the western foothills of Cosdon Beacon and the Belstone Tors to the north. The ragged manes of the latter hills wind through the valley in one lengthy ridge, and extend to a tremendous castellated mass of stone, by name Oke Tor.

This erection, with its battlements and embrasures, outlying scarps and counterscarps, remarkably suggests the deliberate and calculated creation of man. It stands upon a little solitary hill at the head of Taw Marsh, and wins its name from the East Okement River which runs through the valley on its western flank. Above wide fen and marsh it rises, yet seen from Steeperton’s vaster altitude, Oke Tor looks no greater than some fantastic child-castle built by a Brobding-nagian baby with granite bricks. Below it on this July day the waste of bog-land was puckered with brown tracts of naked soil, and seamed and scarred with peat-cuttings. Here and there drying turfs were propped in pairs and dotted the

Page 178

hillsides; emerald patches of moss jewelled the prevailing sobriety of the valley, a single curlew, with rising and falling crescendos of sound, flew here and there under needless anxiety, and far away on White Hill and the enormous breast of Cosdon glimmered grey stone ghosts from the past,—track-lines and circles and pounds,—the work of those children of the mist who laboured here when the world was younger, whose duty now lay under the new-born light of the budding heath. White specks dotted the undulations where flocks roamed free; in the marsh, red cattle sought pasture, and now was heard the jingle-jangle of a sheep-bell, and now the cry of bellowing kine.

Like a dark incarnation of suffering over this expansive scene passed Clement Hicks to the meeting with John Grimbal. His unrest was accentuated by the extreme sunlit peace of the Moor, and as he sat on Steeperton and gazed with dark eyes into the marshes below, there appeared in his face the battlefield of past struggles, the graves of past hopes. A dead apathy of mind and muscle succeeded his mental exertion and passion of thought. Increased age marked him, as though Time, thrusting all at once upon him bitter experiences usually spread over many years of a man's life, had weighed him down, humped his back, thinned his hair, and furrowed his forehead under the load. Within his eyes, behind the reflected blue of the sky, as he raised them to it, sat mad misery; and an almost tetanic movement of limb, which rendered it impossible for him to keep motionless even in his present recumbent position, denoted the unnatural excitation of his nerves. The throb and spasm of the past still beat against his heart. Like a circular storm in mid-ocean, he told himself that the tempest had not wholly ended, but might reawaken, overwhelm him, and sweep him back into the turmoil again. As he thought, and his eye roved for a rider on a brown horse, the poor wretch was fighting still. Yesterday fixed determination marked his movements, and his mind was made up; to-day, after a night not devoid of sleep, it seemed that everything that was best in him had awakened refreshed, and that each mile of the long tramp across Dartmoor had represented another battle fought with his fate. Justice, Justice for himself and the woman he loved, was the cry raised more than once aloud in sharp agony on that great silence. And only the drone of the shining-winged things and the dry rustle of the grasshoppers answered him.

Like the rest of the sore-smitten and wounded world, he screamed to the sky for Justice, and, like the rest of the world, forgot or did not know that Justice is only a part of Truth, and therefore as far beyond man's reach as Truth itself. Justice can only be conceived by humanity, and that man should even imagine any abstraction so glorious is wonderful, and to his credit. But Justice lies not only beyond our power to mete to our fellows; it forms no part of the Creator's methods with us or this particular

Page 179

mote in the beam of the Universe. Man has never received Justice, as he understands it, and never will; and his own poor, flagrant, fallible travesty of it, erected to save him from himself, and called Law, more nearly approximates to Justice than the treatment which has ever been apportioned to humanity. Before this eternal spectacle of illogical austerity, therefore, man, in self-defence and to comfort his craving and his weakness, has clung to the cheerful conceit of immortality; has pathetically credited the First Cause with a grand ultimate intention concerning each suffering atom; has assured himself that eternity shall wipe away all tears and blood, shall reward the actors in this puppet-show with golden crowns and nobler parts in a nobler playhouse. Human dreams of justice are responsible for this yearning towards another life, not the dogmas of religion; and the conviction undoubtedly has to be thanked for much individual right conduct. But it happens that an increasing number of intellects can find solace in these theories no longer; it happens that the liberty of free thought (which is the only liberty man may claim) will not longer be bound with these puny chains. Many detect no just argument for a future life; they admit that adequate estimate of abstract Justice is beyond them; they suspect that Justice is a human conceit; and they see no cause why its attributes should be credited to the Creator in His dealings with the created, for the sufficient reason that Justice has never been consistently exhibited by Him. The natural conclusion of such thought need not be pursued here. Suffice it that, taking their stand on pure reason, such thinkers deny the least evidence of any life beyond the grave; to them, therefore, this ephemeral progression is the beginning and the end, and they live every precious moment with a yearning zest beyond the power of conventional intellects to conceive.

Of such was Clement Hicks. And yet in this dark hour he cried for Justice, not knowing to whom or to what he cried. Right judgment was dead at last. He rose and shook his head in mute answer to the voices still clamouring to his consciousness. They moaned and reverberated and mingled with the distant music of the bellwether, but his mind was made up irrevocably now; he had determined to do the thing he had come to do. He told himself nothing much mattered any more; he laughed as he rose and wiped the sweat off his face, and passed down Steeperton through debris of granite. “Life’s only a breath and then—Nothing,” he thought; “but it will be interesting to see how much more bitterness and agony those that pull the strings can cram into my days. I shall watch from the outside now. A man is never happy so long as he takes a personal interest in life. Henceforth I’ll stand outside and care no more, and laugh and laugh on through the years. We’re greater than the Devil that made us; for we can laugh at all his cursed cruelty—we can laugh, and we can die laughing, and we can die when we please. Yes, that’s one thing he can’t do—torment us an hour more than we choose.”

Page 180

Suicide was always a familiar thought with this man, but it had never been farther from his mind than of late. Cowardly in himself, his love for Chris Blanchard was too great to suffer even the shadow of self-slaughter to tempt him at the present moment. What might happen in the future, he could not tell; but while her happiness was threatened and her life's welfare hung in the balance, his place was by her side. Then he looked into Will Blanchard's future and asked himself what was the worst that could result from his pending treachery. He did not know and wished time had permitted him to make inquiries. But his soul was too weary to care. He only looked for the ordeal to be ended; his aching eyes, now bent on his temporal environment, ranged widely for the spectacle of a rider on a brown horse.

A red flag flapped from a lofty pole at the foot of Steeperton, but Hicks, to whom the object and its significance were familiar, paid no heed and passed on towards Oke Tor. On one side the mass rose gradually up by steps and turrets; on the other, the granite beetled into a low cliff springing abruptly from the turf. Within its clefts and crannies there grew ferns, and to the north-east, sheltered under ledges from the hot sun, cattle and ponies usually stood or reclined upon such a summer day as this, and waited for the oncoming cool of evening before returning to pasture. On the present occasion, however, no stamp of hoof, snort of nostril, whisk of tail, and hum of flies denoted the presence of beasts. For some reason they had been driven elsewhere. Clement climbed the Tor, then stood upon its highest point, and turning his back to the sun, scanned the wide rolling distances over which he had tramped, and sought fruitlessly for an approaching horseman. But no particular hour had been specified, and he knew not and cared not how long he might have to wait.

In a direction quite contrary to that on which the eyes of Hicks were set, sat John Grimbal upon his horse and talked with another man. They occupied a position at the lower-most end of Taw Marsh, beneath the Belstones; and they watched some seventy artillerymen busily preparing for certain operations of a nature to specially interest the master of the Red House. Indeed the pending proceedings had usually occupied his mind, to total exclusion of all other affairs; but to-day even more momentous events awaited him in the immediate future, and he looked from his companion along the great valley to where Oke Tor appeared, shrunk to a mere grey stone at the farther end. Of John Grimbal's life, it may now be said that it drifted into a confirmed and bitter misogyny. He saw no women, spoke of the sex with disrespect, and chose his few friends among men whose sporting and warlike instincts chimed with his own. Sport he pursued with dogged pertinacity, but the greater part of his leisure was devoted to the formation of a yeomanry corps at Chagford, and in this design he had made

Page 181

good progress. He still kept his wrongs sternly before his mind, and when the old bitterness began to grow blunted, deliberately sharpened it again, strangling alike the good work of time and all emotions of rising contentment and returning peace. Where was the wife whose musical voice and bright eyes should welcome his daily home-coming? Where were the laughing and pattering-footed little ones? Of these priceless treasures the man on the Moor had robbed him. His great house was empty and cheerless. Thus he could always blow the smouldering fires into active flame by a little musing on the past; but how long it might be possible to sustain his passion for revenge under this artificial stimulation of memory remained to be seen. As yet, at any rate, the contemplation of Will Blanchard's ruin was good to Grimbal, and the accident of his discovery that Clement Hicks knew some secret facts to his enemy's disadvantage served vastly to quicken the lust for a great revenge. From the first he had determined to drag Clement's secret out of him sooner or later, and had, until his recent offer of the Red House Farm, practised remarkable patience. Since then, however, a flicker of apparent prosperity which overtook the bee-keeper appeared to diminish Grimbal's chances perceptibly; but with the sudden downfall of Clement's hopes the other's ends grew nearer again, and at the last it had scarcely surprised him to receive the proposal of Hicks. So now he stood within an hour or two of the desired knowledge, and his mind was consequently a little abstracted from the matter in hand.

The battery, consisting of four field-guns, was brought into action in the direction of the upper end of the valley, while Major Tremayne, its commanding officer and John Grimbal's acquaintance, explained to the amateur all that he did not know. During the previous week the master of the Red House and other officers of the local yeomanry interested in military matters had dined at the mess of those artillery officers then encamped at Okehampton for the annual practice on Dartmoor; and the outcome of that entertainment was an invitation to witness some shooting during the forthcoming week.

The gunners in their dark blue uniforms swarmed busily round four shining sixteen-pounders, while Major Tremayne conversed with his friend. He was a handsome, large-limbed man, with kindly eyes.

"Where's your target?" asked Grimbal, as he scanned the deep distance of the valley.

"Away there under that grey mass of rock. We've got to guess at the range as you know; then find it. I should judge the distance at about two miles—an extreme limit. Take my glass and you'll note a line of earthworks thrown up on this side of the stone. That is intended to represent a redoubt and we're going to shell it and slay the dummy men posted inside."

"I can see without the glass. The rock is called Oke Tor, and I'm going to meet a man there this afternoon."

Page 182

“Good; then you’ll be able to observe the results at close quarters. They’ll surprise you. Now we are going to begin. Is your horse all right? He looks shifty, and the guns make a devil of a row.”

“Steady as time. He’s smelt powder before to-day.”

Major Tremayne now adjusted his field-glasses, and carefully inspected distant earthworks stretched below the northern buttresses of Oke Tor. He estimated the range, which he communicated to the battery; then after a slight delay came the roar and bellow of the guns as they were fired in slow succession.

But the Major’s estimate proved too liberal, for the ranging rounds fell far beyond the target, and dropped into the lofty side of Steeperton.

The elevation of the guns was accordingly reduced, and Grimbal noted the profound silence in the battery as each busy soldier performed his appointed task.

At the next round shells burst a little too short of the earthworks, and again a slight modification in the range was made. Now missiles began to descend in and around the distant redoubt, and each as it exploded dealt out shattering destruction to the dummy men which represented an enemy. One projectile smashed against the side of Oke Tor, and sent back the ringing sound of its tremendous impact.

Subsequent practice, now that the range was found, produced results above the average in accuracy, and Major Tremayne’s good-humour increased.

“Five running plump into the redoubt! That’s what we can do when we try,” he said to Grimbal, while the amateur awarded his meed of praise and admiration.

Anon the business was at an end; the battery limbered up; the guns, each drawn by six stout horses, disappeared with many a jolt over the uneven ground, as the soldiers clinked and clashed away to their camp on the high land above Okehamptou.

Under the raw smell of burnt powder Major Tremayne took leave of Grimbal and the rest; each man went his way; and John, pursuing a bridle-path through the marshes of the Taw, proceeded slowly to his appointment.

An unexpected spring retarded Grimbal’s progress and made a considerable detour necessary. At length, however, he approached Oke Tor, marked the tremendous havoc of the firing, and noted a great grey splash upon the granite, where one shell had abraded its weathered face.

John Grimbal dismounted, tied up his horse, then climbed to the top of the Tor, and searched for an approaching pedestrian. Nobody was visible save one man only; amounted soldier riding round to strike the red warning flags posted widely about the

ranges. Grimbal descended and approached the southern side, there to sit on the fine intermingled turf and moss and smoke a cigar until his man should arrive. But rounding the point of the low cliff, he found that Hicks was already there.

Clement, his hat off, reclined upon his back with his face lifted to the sky. Where his head rested, the wild thyme grew, and one great, black bumble-bee boomed at a deaf ear as it clumsily struggled in the purple blossoms. He lay almost naturally, but some distortion of his neck and a film upon his open eyes proclaimed that the man neither woke nor slept.

Page 183

His lonely death was on this wise. Standing at the edge of the highest point of Oke Tor, with his back to the distant guns, he had crowned the artillerymen's target, himself invisible. At that moment firing began, and the first shell, suddenly shrieking scarcely twenty yards above his head, had caused Hicks to start and turn abruptly. With this action he lost his balance; then a projection of the granite struck his back as he fell and brought him heavily to the earth upon his head.

Now the sun, creeping westerly, already threw a ruddiness over the Moor, and this warm light touching the dead man's cheek brought thither a hue never visible in life, and imparted to the features a placidity very startling by contrast with the circumstances of his sudden and violent end.

CHAPTER XVI

BEFORE THE DAWN

It proclaims the attitude of John Grimbal to his enemy that thus suddenly confronted with the corpse of a man whom he believed in life, his first emotion should have betokened bitter disappointment and even anger. Will Blanchard's secret, great or small, was safe enough for the present; and the hand stretched eagerly for revenge clutched air.

Convincing himself that Hicks was dead, Grimbal galloped off towards Belstone village, the nearest centre of civilisation. There he reported the facts, directed police and labourers where to find the body and where to carry it, and subsequently rode swiftly back to Chagford. Arrived at the market-place, he acquainted Abraham Chown, the representative of the Devon constabulary, with his news, and finally writing a brief statement at the police station before leaving it, Grimbal returned home.

Not until after dark was the impatient mother made aware of her son's end, and she had scarcely received the intelligence before he came home to her—with no triumphant news of the Red House Farm, but dead, on a sheep-hurdle. Like summer lightning Clement's fate leapt through the length and breadth of Chagford. It penetrated to the vicarage; it reached outlying farms; it arrived at Monks Barton, was whispered near Mrs. Blanchard's cottage by the Teign, and, in the early morning of the following day, reached Newtake.

Then Will, galloping to the village while dawn was yet grey, met Doctor Parsons, and heard the truth of these uncertain rumours which had reached him.

"It seems clear enough when Grimbal's statement comes to be read," explained the medical man. "He had arranged a meeting with poor Hicks on Oke Tor, and, when he went to keep his appointment, found the unfortunate man lying under the rocks quite

dead. The spot, I must tell you, was near a target of the soldiers at Okehampton, and John Grimbal first suspected that Hicks, heedless of the red warning flags, had wandered into the line of fire and been actually slain by a projectile. But nothing of that sort happened. I have seen him. The unfortunate man evidently slipped and fell from some considerable height upon his head. His neck is dislocated and the base of the skull badly fractured."

Page 184

“Have you seen my poor sister?”

“I was called last night while at Mrs. Hicks’s cottage, and went almost at once. It’s very terrible—very. She’ll get brain fever if we’re not careful. Such a shock! She was walking alone, down in the croft by the river—all in a tremendously heavy dew too. She was dry-eyed and raved, poor girl. I may say she was insane at that sad moment. ’Weep for yourself!’ she said to me. ’Let this place weep for itself, for there’s a great man has died. He was here and lived here and nobody knew—nobody but his mother and I knew what he was. He had to beg his bread almost, and God let him; but the sin of it is on those around him—you and the rest.’ So she spoke, poor child. These are not exactly her words, but something like them. I got her indoors to her mother and sent her a draught. I’ve just come from confining Mrs. Woods, and I’ll walk down and see your sister now before I go home if you like. I hope she may be sleeping.”

Will readily agreed to this suggestion; and together the two men proceeded to the valley.

But many things had happened since the night. When Doctor Parsons left Mrs. Blanchard, she had prevailed upon Chris to go to bed, and then herself departed to the village and sat with Mrs. Hicks for an hour. Returning, she found her daughter apparently asleep, and, rather than wake her, left the doctor’s draught unopened; yet Chris had only simulated slumber, and as soon as her mother retreated to her own bed, she rose, dressed, crept from the house, and hastened through the night to where her lover lay.

The first awful stroke had fallen, but the elasticity of the human mind which at first throws off and off such terrible shocks, and only after the length of many hours finally accepts them as fact, saved Chris Blanchard from going mad. Happily she could not thus soon realise the truth. It recurred, like the blows of a sledge, upon her brain, but between these cruel reminders of the catastrophe, the knowledge of Clement’s death escaped her memory entirely, and more than once, while roaming the dew alone, she asked herself suddenly what she was doing and why she was there. Then the mournful answer knelled to her heart, and the recurrent spasms of that first agony slowly, surely settled into one dead pain, as the truth was seared into her knowledge. A frenzied burst of anger succeeded, and under its influence she spoke to Doctor Parsons, who approached her beside the river and with tact and patience at length prevailed upon her to enter her home. She cursed the land that had borne him, the hamlet wherein he had dwelt; and her mother, not amazed at her fierce grief, found each convulsive ebullition of sorrow natural to the dark hour, and soothed her as best she could. Then the elder woman departed a while, not knowing the truth and feeling such a course embraced the deeper wisdom.

Page 185

Left alone, her future rose before Chris, as she sat upon her bed and saw the time to come glimmer out of the night in colours more ashy than the moonbeams on the cotton blind. Yet, as she looked her face burned, and one flame, vivid enough, flickered through all the future; the light on her own cheeks. Her position as it faced her from various points of view acted upon her physical being—suffocated her and brought a scream to her lips. There was nobody to hear it, nobody to see the girl tear her hair, rise from her couch, fall quivering, face downward, on the little strip of carpet beside her bed. Who could know even a little of what this meant to her? Women had often lost the men they loved, but never, never like this. So she assured herself. Past sorrows and fears dwindled to mere shadows now; for the awful future—the crushing months to come, rose grim and horrible on the horizon of Time, laden with greater terrors than she could face and live.

Alone, Chris told herself she might have withstood the oncoming tribulation—struggled through the storms of suffering and kept her broken heart company as other women had done before and must again; but she would not be alone. A little hand was stretching out of the loneliness she yearned for; a little voice was crying out of the solitude she craved. The shadows that might have sheltered her were full of hard eyes; the secret places would only echo a world's cruel laughter now—that world which had let her loved one die uncared for, that world so pitiless to such as she. Her thoughts were alternately defiant and fearful; then, before the picture of her mother and Will, her emotions dwindled from the tragic and became of a sort that weeping could relieve. Tears, now mercifully released from their fountains, softened her bruised soul for a time and moderated the physical strain of her agony. She lay long, half-naked, sobbing her heart out. Then came the mad desire to be back with Clement at any cost, and profound pity for him overwhelmed her mind to the exclusion of further sorrow for herself. She forgot herself wholly in grief that he was gone. She would never hear him speak or laugh again; never again kiss the trouble from his eyes; never feel the warm breath of him, the hand-grip of him. He was dead; and she saw him lying straight and cold in a padded coffin, with his hands crossed and cerecloth stiffly tying up his jaws. He would sink into the silence that dwelt under the roots of the green grass; while she must go on and fight the world, and in fighting it, bring down upon his grave bitter words and sharp censures from the lips of those who did not understand.

Page 186

Before which reflection Death came closer and looked kind; and the thought of his hand was cool and comforting, as the hand of a grey moor mist sweeping over the heath after fiery days of cloudless sun. Death stood very near and beckoned at the dark portals of her thought. Behind him there shone a great light, and in the light stood Clem; but the Shadow filled all the foreground. To go to her loved one, to die quickly and take their mutual secret with her, seemed a right and a precious thought just then; to go, to die, while yet he lay above the earth, was a determination that had even a little power to solace her agony. She thought of meeting him standing alone, strange, friendless on the other side of the grave; she told herself that actual duty, if not the vast love she bore him, pointed along the unknown road he had so recently followed. It was but justice to him. Then she could laugh at Time and Fate and the juggling unseen Controller who had played with him and her, had wrecked their little lives, forced their little passions under a sham security, then snapped the thread on which she hung for everything, killed the better part of herself, and left her all alone without a hand to shield or a heart to pity. In the darkness, as the moon stole away and her chamber window blackened, she sounded all sorrow's wide and solemn diapason; and the living sank into shadows before her mind's accentuated and vivid picture of the dead. Future life loomed along one desolate pathway that led to pain and shame and griefs as yet untasted. The rocks beside the way hid shadowy shapes of the unfriendly; for no mother's kindly hand would support her, no brother's stout arm would be lifted for her when they knew. No pure, noble, fellow-creature might be asked for aid, not one might be expected to succour and cherish in the great strait sweeping towards her. Some indeed there were to look to for the moment, but their voices and their eyes would harden presently, when they knew.

She told herself they must never know; and the solution to the problem of how to keep her secret appeared upon the threshold of the unknown road her lover had already travelled. Now, at the echo of the lowest notes, while she lay with uneven pulses and shaking limbs, it seemed that she was faced with the parting of the ways and must make instant choice. Time would not wait for her and cared nothing whether she chose life or death for her road. She struggled with red thoughts, and fever burnt her lips and stabbed her forehead. Clement was gone. In this supreme hour no fellow-creature could fortify her courage or direct her tottering judgment. Once she thought of prayer and turned from it shuddering with a passionate determination to pray no more. Then the vision of Death shadowed her and she felt his brief sting would be nothing beside the endless torment of living. Dangerous thoughts developed quickly in her and grew to giants. Something clamoured to her and cried that delay, even of hours, was impossible and must be fatal to secrecy. A feverish yearning to get it over, and that quickly, mastered her, and she began huddling on some clothes.

Page 187

Then it was that the sudden sound of the cottage door being shut and bolted reached her ear. Mrs. Blanchard had returned and knowing that she would approach in a moment, Chris flung herself on the bed and pretended to be sleeping soundly. It was not until her mother withdrew and herself slumbered half an hour later that the distracted woman arose, dressed herself, and silently left the house as we have said.

She heard the river calling to her, and through its murmur sounded the voice of her loved one from afar. The moon shone clear and the valley was full of vapoury gauze. A wild longing to see him once more in the flesh before she followed him in the spirit gained upon Chris, and she moved slowly up the hill to the village. Then, as she went, born of the mists upon the meadows, and the great light and the moony gossamers diamonded with dew, there rose his dear shape and moved with her along the way. But his face was hidden, and he vanished at the first outposts of the hamlet as she passed into Chagford alone. The cottage shadows fell velvety black in a shining silence; their thatches were streaked, their slates meshed with silver; their whitewashed walls looked strangely awake and alert and surrounded the woman with a sort of blind, hushed stare. One solitary patch of light peered like a weary eye from that side of the street which lay in shadow, and Chris, passing through the unbolted cottage door, walked up the narrow passage within and softly entered.

Condolence and tears and buzz of sorrowful friends had passed away with the stroke of midnight. Now Mrs. Hicks sat alone with her dead and gazed upon his calm features and vaguely wondered how, after a life of such disappointment and failure and bitter discontent, he could look so peaceful. She knew every line that thought and trouble had ruled upon his face; she remembered their coming; and now, between her fits of grief, she scanned him close and saw that Death had wiped away the furrows here and there, and smoothed his forehead and rolled back the years from off him until his face reminded her of the strange, wayward child who was wont to live a life apart from his fellows, like some wild wood creature, and who had passed almost friendless through his boyhood. Fully he had filled her widowed life, and been at least a loving child, a good son. On him her withered hopes had depended, and, even in their darkest hours, he had laughed at her dread of the workhouse, and assured her that while head and hands remained to him she need not fear, but should enjoy the independence of a home. Now this sole prop and stay was gone—gone, just as the black cloud had broken and Fate relented.

The old woman sat beside him stricken, shrivelled, almost reptilian in her red-eyed, motionless misery. Only her eyes moved in her wrinkled, brown face, and reflected the candle standing on the mantelpiece above his head. She sat with her hands crooked over one another in her lap, like some image wrought of ebony and dark oak. Once a large house-spider suddenly and silently appeared upon the sheet that covered the breast of the dead. It flashed along for a foot or two, then sat motionless; and she, whose inclination was to loathe such things unutterably, put forth her hand and caught it without a tremor and crushed it while its hairy legs wriggled between her fingers.

Page 188

To the robbed mother came Chris, silent as a ghost. Only the old woman's eyes moved as the girl entered, fell down by the bier, and buried her face in the pillow that supported her lover's head. Thus, in profound silence, both remained awhile, until Chris lifted herself and looked in the dead face and almost started to see the strange content stamped on it.

Then Mrs. Hicks began to speak in a high-pitched voice which broke now and again as her bosom heaved after past tears.

"The awnly son of his mother, an' she a widow wummon; an' theer 's no Christ now to work for the love of the poor. I be shattered wi' many groans an' tears, Chris Blanchard, same as you be. You knawed him—awnly you an' me; but you 'm young yet, an' memory's so weak in young brains that you'll outlive it all an' forget."

"Never, never, mother! Theer 's no more life for me—not here. He's callin' to me—-callin' an' callin' from yonder."

"You'll outlive an' forget," repeated the other. "I cannot, bein' as I am. An', mind this, when you pray to Heaven, ax for gold an' diamonds, ax for houses an' lands, ax for the fat of the airth; an' ax loud. No harm in axin'. Awnly doan't pitch your prayers tu dirt low, for ban't the hardness of a thing stops God. You 'm as likely or onlikely to get a big answer as a little. See the blessin' flowin' in streams for some folks! They do live braave an' happy, with gude health, an' gude wives, an' money, an' the fruits of the land; they do get butivul childer, as graws up like the corners of the temple; an' when they come to die, they shut their eyes 'pon kind faaces an' lie in lead an' oak under polished marble. All that be theers; an' what was his—my son's?"

"God forgot him," sobbed Chris, "an' the world forgot him—all but you an' me."

The old woman shifted her hands wearily.

"Theer's a mort for God to bear in mind, but 't is hard, here an' there, wheer He slips awver some lowly party an' misses a humble whisper. Clamour if you want to be heard; doan't go with bated breath same as I done. 'T was awnly a li'l thing I axed, an' axed it twice a day on my knees, ever since my man died twenty-three year agone. An' often as not thrice Sundays, so you may count up the number of times I axed if you mind to. Awnly a li'l rubbishy thing you might have thought: just to bring his fair share o' prosperity to Clem an' keep my bones out the poorhouse at the end. But my bwoy 's brawk his neck by a cruel death, an' I must wear the blue cotton."

"No, no, mother."

"Ess. Not that it looks so hard as it did. This makes it easy—" and she put her hand on her son's forehead and left it there a moment.

Presently she continued:

“I axed Clem to turn the bee-butts at my sister’s passing—Mrs. Lezzard. But he wouldn’t; an’ now they’ll be turned for him. Wise though the man was, he set no store on the dark, hidden meaning of honey-bees at times of death. Now the creatures be masterless, same as you an’ me; an’ they’ll knaw it; an’ you’ll see many an’ many a-murmuring on his graave ’fore the grass graws green theer; for they see more ’n what we can.”

Page 189

She relapsed into motionless silence and, herself now wholly tearless, watched the tears of Chris, who had sunk down on the floor between the mother and son.

“Why for do *you* cry an’ wring your hands so hard?” she asked suddenly. “You’m awnly a girl yet—young an’ soft-cheeked wi’ braave bonny eyes. Theer’ll be many a man’s breast for you to comfort your head on. But me! Think o’ what’s tearin’ my auld heart to tatters—me, so bleared an’ ugly an’ lonely. God knaws God’s self couldn’t bring no balm to me—none, till I huddle under the airth arter un; but you—your wound won’t show by time the snaw comes again.”

“You forget when you loved a man first if you says such a thing as that.”

“Theer’s no eternal, lasting fashion o’ love but a mother’s to her awn male childer,” croaked the other. “Sweethearts’ love is a thing o’ the blood—a trick o’ Nature to tickle us poor human things into breeding ’gainst our better wisdom; but what a mother feels doan’t hang on no such broken reed. It’s deeper down; it’s hell an’ heaven both to wance; it’s life; an’ to lose it is death. See! Essterday I’d ‘a’ fought an’ screamed an’ took on like a gude un to be fetched away to the Union; but come they put him in the ground, I’ll go so quiet as a lamb.”

Another silence followed; then the aged widow pursued her theme, at first in the same dreary, cracked monotone, then deepening to passion.

“I tell you a gude wife will do ‘most anything for a husband an’ give her body an’ soul to un; but she expects summat in return. She wants his love an’ worship for hers; but a mother do give all—all—all—an’ never axes nothin’ for it. Just a kiss maybe, an’ a brightening eye, or a kind word. That’s her pay, an’ better’n gawld, tu. She’m purty nigh satisfied wi’ what would satisfy a dog, come to think on it. ’T is her joy to fret an’ fume an’ pine o’ nights for un, an’ tire the A’mighty’s ear wi’ plans an’ suggestions for un; aye, think an’ sweat an’ starve for un all times. ’T is her joy, I tell ‘e, to smooth his road, an’ catch the brambles by his way an’ let ’em bury their thorns in her flesh so he shaa’n’t feel ’em; ‘t is her joy to hear him babble of all his hopes an’ delights; an’ when the time comes she’ll taake the maid of his heart to her awn, though maybe ‘t is breakin’ wi’ fear that he’ll forget her in the light of the young eyes. Ax your awn mother if what I sez ban’t God’s truth. We as got the bwoys be content wi’ that little. We awnly want to help theer young shoulders wi’ our auld wans, to fight for ’em to the last. We’ll let theer wives have the love, we will, an’ ax no questions an’—an’ we’ll break our hearts when the cheel ‘s took out o’ his turn—break our hearts by inches—same as I be doin’ now.”

“An’ doan’t I love, tu? Weern’t he all the world to me, tu? Isn’t my heart broken so well as yours?” sobbed Chris.

Page 190

“Hear this, you wummon as talks of a broken heart,” answered the elder almost harshly. “Wait—wait till you ’m the mother of a li’l man-cheel, an’ see the shining eyes of un a-lookin’ into yourn while your nipple’s bein’ squeezed by his naked gums, an’ you laugh at what you suffered for un, an’ hug un to you. Wait till he’m grawed from baby to bwoy, from bwoy to man; wait till he’m all you’ve got left in the cold, starved winter of a sorrowful life; an’ wait till he’m brought home to ’e like this here, while you’ve been sittin’ laughin’ to yourself an’ countin’ dream gawld. Then turn about to find the tears that’ll comfort ‘e, an’ the prayers that’ll soothe ’e, and the God that’ll lift ’e up; but you won’t find ’em, Chris Blanchard.”

The girl listened to this utterance, and it filled her with a sort of weird wonder as at a revelation of heredity. Mrs. Hicks had ever been taciturn before her, and now this rapid outpouring of thoughts and phrases echoed like the very speech of the dead. Thus had Clement talked, and the girl dimly marvelled without understanding. The impression passed, and there awoke in Chris a sudden determination to whisper to this bereaved woman what she could not even tell her own mother. A second thought had probably changed her intention, but she did not wait for any second thought. She acted on impulse, rose, put her arms round the widow, and murmured her secret. The other started violently and broke her motionless posture before this intelligence.

“Christ! And he knawed—my son?”

“He knawed.”

“Then you needn’t whisper it. There’s awnly us three here.”

“An’ no others must knaw. You’ll never tell—never? You swear that?”

“Me tell! No, no. To think! Then theer’s real sorrow for you, tu, poor soul—real, grawin’ sorrow tu. Differ’nt from mine, but real enough. Yet—”

She relapsed into a stone-like repose. No facial muscle moved, but the expression of her mind appeared in her eyes and there gradually grew a hungry look in them—as of a starving thing confronted with food. The realisation of these new facts took a long time. No action accompanied it; no wrinkle deepened; no line of the dejected figure lifted; but when she spoke again her voice had greatly changed and become softer and very tremulous.

“O my dear God! ’t will be a bit of Clement! Had ‘e thought o’ that?”

Then she rose suddenly to her feet and expression came to her face—a very wonderful expression wherein were blended fear, awe, and something of vague but violent joy—as though one suddenly beheld a loved ghost from the dead.

“’T is as if all of un weern’t quite lost! A li’l left—a cheel of his! Wummon! You’m a holy thing to me—a holy thing evermore! You’m bearin’ sunshine for your summertime and my winter—if God so wills!”

Then she lifted up her voice and cried to Chris with a strange cry, and knelt down at her feet and kissed her hands and stroked them.

Page 191

“Go to un,” she said, leaping up; “go to Clem, an’ tell un, in his ear, that I knaw. It’ll reach him if you whisper it. His soul ban’t so very far aways yet. Tell un I knaw, tu—you an’ me. He’d glory that I knawed. An’ pray henceforrard, as I shall, for a bwoy. Ax God for a bwoy—ax wi’out ceasin’ for a son full o’ Clem. Our sorrows might win to the Everlasting Ear this wance. But, for Christ’s sake, ax like wan who has a right to, not fawning an’ humble.”

The woman was transfigured as the significance of this news filled her mind. She wept before a splendid possibility. It fired her eyes and straightened her shrivelled stature. For a while her frantic utterances almost inspired Chris with the shadow of similar emotions; but another side of the picture knew no dawn. This the widow ignored—-indeed it had not entered her head since her first comment on the confession. Now, however, the girl reminded her,—

“You forget a little what this must be to me, mother.”

“Light in darkness.”

“I hadn’t thought that; an the gert world won’t pity me, as you did when I first told you.”

“You ban’t feared o’ the world, be you? The world forgot un. ’T was your awn word. What’s the world to you, knawin’ what you knaw? Do ’e want to be treated soft by what was allus hell-hard to him? Four-and-thirty short years he lived, then the world beginned to ope its eyes to his paarts, an’ awnly then—tu late, when the thread of his days was spun. What’s the world to you and why should you care for its word, Chris Blanchard?”

“Because I am Chris Blanchard,” she said. “I was gwaine to kill myself, but thought to see his dear face wance more before I done it. Now—”

“Kill yourself! God’s mercy! ’T will be killing Clem again if you do! You caan’t; you wouldn’t dare; theer’s black damnation in it an’ flat murder now. Hear me, for Christ’s sake, if that’s the awful thought in you: you’m God’s chosen tool in this—chosen to suffer an’ bring a bwoy in the world—Clem’s bwoy. Doan’t you see how’t is? ‘Kill yourself’! How can ’e dream it? You’ve got to bring a bwoy, I tell ’e, to keep us from both gwaine stark mad. ’T was foreordained he should leave his holy likeness. God’s truth! You should be proud ‘stead o’ fearful—such a man as he was. Hold your head high an’ pray when none’s lookin’, pray through every wakin’ hour an’ watch yourself as you’d watch the case of a golden jewel. What wise brain will think hard of you for followin’ the chosen path? What odds if a babe’s got ringless under the stars or in a lawful four-post bed? Who married Adam an’ Eve? You was the wife of un ‘cordin’ to the first plan o’ the livin’ God; an’ if He changed His lofty mind when’t was tu late, blame doan’t fall on you or the dead. Think of a baaby—his baaby—under your breast! Think

of meetin' him in time to come, wi' another soul got in sheer love! Better to faace the people an' let the bairn

Page 192

come to fulness o' life than fly them an' cut your days short an' go into the next world empty-handed. Caan't you see it? What would Clem say? He'd judge you hard—such a lover o' li'l childer as him. 'T is the first framework of an immortal soul you've got unfoldin', like a rosebud hid in the green, an' ban't for you to nip that life for your awn whim an' let the angels in heaven be fewer by wan. You must live. An' the bwoy'll graw into a tower of strength for 'e—a tower of strength an' a glass belike wheer you'll see Clem rose again."

"The shame of it. My mother and Will—Will who's a hard judge, an' such a clean man."

"'Clean'! Christ A'mighty! You'd madden a saint of heaven! Weern't Clem clean, tu? If God sends fire-fire breaks out—sweet, livin' fire. You must go through with it—aye, an' call the bwoy Clem, tu. Be you shamed of him as he lies here? Be you feared of anything the airth can do to you when you look at him? Do 'e think Heaven's allus hard? No, I tell 'e, not to the young—not to the young. The wind's mostly tempered to the shorn lamb, though the auld ewe do oftentimes sting for it, an' get the seeds o' death arter shearing. Wait, and be strong, till you feel Clem's baaby in your arms. That'll be reward enough, an' you won't care no more for the world then. His son, mind; who be you to take life, an' break the buds of Clem's plantin'? Worse than to go in another's garden an' tear down green fruit."

So she pleaded volubly, with an electric increase of vitality, and continued to pour out a torrent of words, until Chris solemnly promised, before God and the dead, that she would not take her life. Having done so, some new design informed her.

"I must go," she said; "the moon has set and dawn is near. Dying be so easy; living so hard. But live I will; I swear it, though theer's awnly my poor mad brain to shaw how."

"Clem's son, mind. An' let me be the first to see it, for I feel't will be the gude pleasure of God I should."

"An' you promise to say no word, whatever betides, an' whatever you hear?"

"Dumb I'll be, as him theer—dumb, countin' the weeks an' months."

"Day's broke, an' I must go home-along," said Chris. She repeated the words mechanically, then moved away without any formal farewell. At the door she turned, hastened back, kissed the dead man's face again, and then departed, while the other woman looked at her but spoke no more.

Alone, with the struggle over and her object won, the mother shrank and dwindled again and grew older momentarily. Then she relapsed into the same posture as before, and anon, tears bred of new thoughts began to trickle painfully from their parched fountains.

She did not move, but let them roll unwiped away. Presently her head sank back, her cap fell off and white hair dropped about her face.

Fingers of light seemed lifting the edges of the blind. They gained strength as the candle waned, and presently at cock-crow, when unnumbered clarions proclaimed morning, grey dawn with golden eyes brightened upon a dead man and an ancient woman fast asleep beside him.

Page 193

CHAPTER XVII

MISSING

John Grimbal, actuated by some whim, or else conscious that under the circumstances decorum demanded his attendance, was present at the funeral of Clement Hicks. Some cynic interest he derived from the spectacle of young Blanchard among the bearers; and indeed, as may be supposed, few had felt this tragic termination of his friend's life more than Will. Very genuine remorse darkened his days, and he blamed himself bitterly enough for all past differences with the dead. It was in a mood at once contrite and sorrowful that he listened to the echo of falling clod, and during that solemn sound mentally traversed the whole course of his relations with his sister's lover. Of himself he thought not at all, and no shadowy suspicion of relief crossed his mind upon the reflection that the knowledge of those fateful weeks long past was now unshared. In all his quarrels with Clement, no possibility of the man breaking his oath once troubled Will's mind; and now profound sorrow at his friend's death and deep sympathy with Chris were the emotions that entirely filled the young farmer's heart.

Grimbal watched his enemy as the service beside the grave proceeded. Once a malignant thought darkened his face, and he mused on what the result might be if he hinted to Blanchard the nature of his frustrated business with Hicks at Oke Tor. All Chagford had heard was that the master of the Red House intended to accept Clement Hicks as tenant of his home farm. The fact surprised many, but none looked behind it for any mystery, and Will least of all. Grimbal's thoughts developed upon his first idea; and he asked himself the consequence if, instead of telling Blanchard that he had gone to learn his secret, he should pretend that it was already in his possession. The notion shone for a moment only, then went out. First it showed itself absolutely futile, for he could do no more than threaten, and the other must speedily discover that in reality he knew nothing; and secondly, some shadow of feeling made Grimbal hesitate. His desire for revenge was now developing on new lines, and while his purpose remained unshaken, his last defeat had taught him patience. Partly from motives of policy, partly, strange as it may seem, from his instincts as a sportsman, he determined to let the matter of Hicks lie buried. For the dead man's good name he cared nothing, however, and victory over Will was only the more desired for this postponement. His black tenacity of purpose won strength from the repulse, but the problem for the time being was removed from its former sphere of active hatred towards his foe. How long this attitude would last, and what idiosyncrasy of character led to it, matters little. The fact remained that Grimbal's mental posture towards Blanchard now more nearly resembled that which he wore to his other interests in life. The circumstance still stood first, but partook of the nature of his emotions towards matters of sport. When a heavy trout had beaten him more than once, Grimbal would repair again and again to its particular haunt and leave no legitimate plan for its destruction untried. But any unsportsmanlike

method of capturing or slaying bird, beast, or fish enraged him. So he left the churchyard with a sullen determination to pursue his sinister purpose straightforwardly.

Page 194

All interested in Clement Hicks attended the funeral, including his mother and Chris. The last had yielded to Mrs. Blanchard's desire and promised to stop at home; but she changed her mind and conducted herself at the ceremony with a stoic fortitude. This she achieved only by an effort of will which separated her consciousness entirely from her environment and alike blinded her eyes and deafened her ears to the mournful sights and sounds around her. With her own future every fibre of her mind was occupied; and as they lowered her lover's coffin into the earth a line of action leapt into her brain.

Less than four-and-twenty hours later it seemed that the last act of the tragedy had begun. Then, hoarse as the raven that croaked Duncan's coming, Mr. Blee returned to Monks Barton from an early visit to the village. Phoebe was staying with her father for a fortnight, and it was she who met the old man as he paddled breathlessly home.

"More gert news!" he gasped; "if it ban't too much for wan in your way o' health."

"Nothing wrong at Newtake?" cried Phoebe, turning pale.

"No, no; but family news for all that."

The girl raised her hand to her heart, and Miller Lyddon, attracted by Billy's excited voice, hastened to his daughter and put his arm round her.

"Out with it," he said. "I see news in 'e. What's the worst or best?"

"Bad, bad as heart can wish. A peck o' trouble, by the looks of it. Chris Blanchard be gone—vanished like a dream! Mother Blanchard called her this marnin', an' found her bed not so much as creased. She've flown, an' there's a braave upstore 'bout it, for every Blanchard's wrong in the head more or less, beggin' your pardon, missis, as be awnly wan by marriage."

"But no sign? No word or anything left?"

"Nothing; an' theer's a purty strong faith she'm in the river, poor lamb. Theer's draggin' gwaine to be done in the ugly bits. I heard tell of it to the village, wheer I'd just stepped up to see auld Lezzard moved to the work'ouse. A wonnerful coorious, rackety world, sure 'nough! Do make me giddy."

"Does Will know?" asked Mr. Lyddon.

"His mother's sent post-haste for un. I doubt he 'm to the cottage by now. Such a gude, purty gal as she was, tu! An' so mute as a twoad at the buryin', wi' never a tear to soften the graave dust. For why? She knawed she'd be alongside her man again 'fore the moon waned. An' I hope she may be. But 't was cross-roads an' a hawthorn stake in my young days. Them barbarous ancient fashions be awver, thank God, though

whether us lives in more religious times is a question, when you see the things what happens every hour on the twenty-four."

"I must go to them," cried Phoebe.

"I'll go; you stop at home quietly, and don't fret your mind," answered her father.

"Us must all do what us can—every manjack. I be gwaine corpse-searchin' down valley wi' Chapple, an' that 'mazin' water-dog of hisn; an' if 't is my hand brings her out the Teign, 't will be done in a kind, Christian manner, for she's in God's image yet, same as us; an' ugly though a drownin' be, it won't turn me from my duty."

Page 195

BOOK III

HIS GRANITE CROSS

CHAPTER I

BABY

Succeeding upon the tumultuous incidents of Clement's death and Chris Blanchard's disappearance, there followed a period of calm in the lives of those from whom this narrative is gleaned. Such transient peace proved the greater in so far as Damaris and her son were concerned, by reason of an incident which befell Will on the evening of his sister's departure. Dead she certainly was not, nor did she mean to die; for, upon returning to Newtake after hours of fruitless searching, Blanchard found a communication awaiting him there, though no shadow of evidence was forthcoming to show how it had reached the farm. Upon the ledge of the window he discovered it when he returned, and read the message at a glance:

"Don't you nor mother fear nothing for me, nor seek me out, for it would be vain. I'm well, and I'm so happy as ever I shall be, and perhaps I'll come home-along some day. —CHRIS."

On this challenge Will acted, ignored his sister's entreaty to attempt no such thing, and set out upon a resolute search of nearly two months' duration. He toiled amain into the late autumn, but no hint or shadow of her rewarded the quest, and sustained failure in an enterprise where his heart was set, for his mother's sake and his own, acted upon the man's character, and indeed wrought marked changes in him. Despite the letter of Chris, hope died in Will, and he openly held his sister dead; but Mrs. Blanchard, while sufficiently distressed before her daughter's flight, never feared for her life, and doubted not that she would return in such time as it pleased her to do so.

"Her nature be same as yours an' your faither's afore you. When he'd got the black monkey on his shoulder he'd oftentimes leave the vans for a week and tramp the very heart o' the Moor alone. Fatigue of body often salves a sore mind. He loved thunder o' dark nights—my husband did—and was better for it seemin'ly. Chris be safe, I do think, though it's a heart-deep stroke this for me, 'cause I judge she caan't 'zactly love me as I thought, or else she'd never have left me. Still, the cold world, what she knaws so little 'bout, will drive her back to them as love her, come presently."

So, with greater philosophy than her son could muster, Damaris practised patience; while Will, after a perambulation of the country from north to south, from west to east, after weeks on the lonely heaths and hiding-places of the ultimate Moor, after visits to remote hamlets and inquiries at a hundred separate farmhouses, returned to Newtake,

worn, disappointed, and gloomy to a degree beyond the experience of those who knew him. Neither did the cloud speedily evaporate, as was most usual with his transient phases of depression. Circumstances combined to deepen it, and as the winter crowded down more quickly than usual, its leaden months of scanty daylight and cold rains left their mark on Will as time had never done before.

Page 196

During those few and sombre days which represented the epact of the dying year, Martin Grimbal returned to Chagford. He had extended his investigations beyond the time originally allotted to them, and now came back to his home with plenty of fresh material, and even one or two new theories for his book. He had received no communications during his absence, and the news of the bee-keeper's death and his sweetheart's disappearance, suddenly delivered by his housekeeper, went far to overwhelm him. It danced joy up again through the grey granite. For a brief hour splendid vistas of happiness reopened, and his laborious life swept suddenly into a bright region that he had gazed into longingly aforetime and lost for ever. He fought with himself to keep down this rosy-fledged hope; but it leapt in him, a young giant born at a word. The significance of the freedom of Chris staggered him. To find her was the cry of his heart, and, as Will had done before him, he straightway set out upon a systematic attempt to discover the missing girl. Of such uncertain temper was Blanchard's mind at this season, however, that he picked a quarrel out of Martin's design, and questioned the antiquary's right to busy himself upon an undertaking which the brother of Chris had already failed to accomplish.

"She belonged to me, not to you," he said, "an' I done all a man could do to find her. See her again we sha'n't, that's my feelin', despite what she wrote to me and left so mysterious on the window. Madness comed awver her, I reckon, an' she've taken her life, an' theer ban't no call for you or any other man to rip up the matter again. Let it bide as 't is. Such black doin's be best set to rest."

But, while Martin did not seek or desire Will's advice in the matter, he was surprised at the young farmer's attitude, and it extracted something in the nature of a confession from him, for there was little, he told himself, that need longer be hidden from the woman's brother.

"I can speak now, at least to you, Will," he said. "I can tell you, at any rate. Chris was all the world to me—all the world, and accident kept me from knowing she belonged to another man until too late. Now that he has gone, poor fellow, she almost seems within reach again. You know what it is to love. I can't and won't believe she has taken her life. Something tells me she lives, and I am not going to take any man's word about it. I must satisfy myself."

Thereupon Blanchard became more reasonable, withdrew his objections and expressed a very heartfelt hope that Martin might succeed where he had failed. The lover entered methodically upon his quest and conducted the inquiry with a rigorous closeness and scrupulous patience quite beyond Will's power despite his equally earnest intentions. For six months Martin pursued his hope, and few saw or heard anything of him during that period.

Once, during the early summer, Will chanced upon John Grimbal at the first meeting of the otter hounds in Teign Vale; but though the younger purposely edged near his enemy

where he stood, and hoped that some word might fall to indicate their ancient enmity dead, John said nothing, and his blue eyes were hard and as devoid of all emotion as turquoise beads when they met the farmer's face for one fraction of time.

Page 197

Before this incident, however, there had arisen upon Will's life the splendour of paternity. A time came when, through one endless night and silver April morning, he had tramped his kitchen floor as a tiger its cage, and left a scratched pathway on the stones. Then his mother hasted from aloft and reported the arrival of a rare baby boy.

"Phoebe 's doin' braave, an' she prays of 'e to go downlong fust thing an' tell Miller all 's well. Doctor Parsons hisself says 't is a 'mazing fine cheel, so it ban't any mere word of mine as wouldn't weigh, me bein' the gran'mother."

They talked a little while of the newcomer, then, thankful for an opportunity to be active after his long suspense, the father hurried away, mounted a horse, and soon rattled down the valleys into Chagford, at a pace which found his beast dead lame on the following day. Mighty was the exhilaration of that wild gallop as he sped past cot and farm under morning sunshine with his great news. Labouring men and chance wayfarers were overtaken from time to time. Some Will knew, some he had never seen, but to the ear of each and all without discrimination he shouted his intelligence. Not a few waved their hats and nodded and remembered the great day in their own lives; one laughed and cried "Bravo!" sundry, who knew him not, marvelled and took him for a lunatic.

Arrived at Chagford, familiar forms greeted Will in the market-place, and again he bawled his information without dismounting.

"A son 'tis, Chapple—comed an hour ago—a brave li'l bwoy, so they tell!"

"Gude luck to it, then! An' now you'm a parent, you must—"

But Will was out of earshot, and Mr. Chapple wasted no more breath.

Into Monks Barton the farmer presently clattered, threw himself off his horse, tramped indoors, and shouted for his father-in-law in tones that made the oak beams ring. Then the miller, with Mr. Blee behind him, hastened to hear what Will had come to tell.

"All right, all right with Phoebe?" were Mr. Lyddon's first words, and he was white and shaking as he put the question.

"Right as ninepence, faither—gran'faither, I should say. A butivul li'l man she've got—-out o' the common fine, Parsons says, as ought to knaw—fat as a slug wi' 'mazin' dark curls on his wee head, though my mother says 'tis awnly a sort o' catch-crop, an' not the lasting hair as'll come arter."

"A bwoy! Glory be!" said Mr. Blee. "If theer's awnly a bit o' the gracious gudeness of his gran'faither in un, 'twill prove a prosperous infant."

“Thank God for a happy end to all my prayers,” said Mr. Lyddon. “Billy, get Will something to eat an’ drink. I guess he’s hungry an’ starved.”

“Caan’t eat, Miller; but I’ll have a drop of the best, if it’s all the same to you. Us must drink their healths, both of ’em. As for me ’tis a gert thing to be the faither of a cheel as’ll graw into a man some day, an’ may even be a historical character, awnly give un time.”

Page 198

“So ’tis a gert thing. Sit down; doan’t tramp about. I lay you’ve been on your feet enough these late hours.”

Will obeyed, but proceeded with his theme, and though his feet were still his hands were not.

“Us be faced wi’ the upbringing an’ edication of un. I mean him to be brought up to a power o’ knowledge, for theer’s nothin’ like it. Doan’t you think I be gwaine to shirk doin’ the right thing by un’, Miller, ’cause it aint so. If ‘twas my last fi’-pun’ note was called up for larnin’ him, he’d have it.”

“Theer’s no gert hurry yet,” declared Billy. “Awnly you’m right to look in the future and weigh the debt every man owes to the cheel he gets. He’ll never cost you less thought or halfpence than he do to-day, an’, wi’out croakin’ at such a gay time, I will say he’ll graw into a greater care an’ trouble, every breath he draws.”

“Not him! Not the way I’m gwaine to bring un up. Stern an’ strict an’ no nonsense, I promise ’e”

“That’s right. Tame un from the breast. I’d like for my paart to think as the very sapling be grawin’ now as’ll give his li’l behind its fust lesson in the ways o’ duty,” declared Mr. Blee. “Theer ’s certain things you must be flint-hard about, an’ fust comes lying. Doan’t let un lie; flog it out of un; an’ mind, ’tis better for your arm to ache than for his soul to burn.”

“You leave me to do right by un. You caan’t teach me, Billy, not bein’ a parent; though I allow what you say is true enough.”

“An’ set un to work early; get un into ways o’ work so soon as he’s able to wear corduroys. An’ doan’t never let un be cruel to beastes; an’ doan’t let un—”

“Theer, theer!” cried Mr. Lyddon. “Have done with ’e! You speak as fules both, settin’ out rules o’ life for an hour-old babe. You talk to his mother about taming of un an’ grawing saplings for his better bringing-up. She’ll tell ‘e a thing or two. Just mind the slowness o’ growth in the human young. ’T will be years before theer’s enough of un to beat.”

“They do come very gradual to fulness o’ body an’ reason,” admitted Billy; “and ’t is gude it should be so; ‘t is well all men an’ women ’s got to be childer fust, for they brings brightness an’ joy ’pon the earth as babies, though ’t is mostly changed when they ’m grawed up. If us could awnly foretell the turnin’ out o’ childern, an’ knaw which ’t was best to drown an’ which to save in tender youth, what a differ’nt world this would be!”

“They ’m poor li’l twoads at fust, no doubt,” said Will to his father-in-law.

“Ess, indeed they be. ’T is a coorious circumstance, but generally allowed, that humans are the awnly creatures o’ God wi’ understandin’, an’ yet they comes into the world more helpless an’ brainless, an’ bides longer helpless an’ brainless than any other beast knawn.”

“Shouldn’t call ’em ‘beastes’ ‘zactly, seem’ they’ve got the Holy Ghost from the church font ever after,” objected Billy. “’T is the differ’nce between a babe an’ a pup or a kitten. The wan gets God into un at christenin’, t’ other wouldn’t have no Holy Ghost in un if you baptised un over a hunderd times. For why? They ’m not built in the Image.”

Page 199

“When all’s said, you caan’t look tu far ahead or be tu forehanded wi’ bwoys,” resumed Will. “Gallopin’ down-long I said to myself, ’Theer’s things he may do an’ things he may not do. He shall choose his awn road in reason, but he must be guided by me in the choice.’ I won’t let un go for a sailor—never. I’ll cut un off wi’ a shillin’ if he thinks of it.”

“Time enough when he can walk an’ talk, I reckon,” said Billy, who, seeing how his master viewed the matter, now caught Mr. Lyddon’s manner.

“Ess, that’s very well,” continued Will, “but time flies that fast wi’ childer. Then I thought, ‘He’ll come to marry some day, sure’s Fate.’ Myself, I believe in tolerable early marryin’s.”

“By God! I knaw it!” retorted Mr. Lyddon, with an expression wherein appeared mingled feelings not a few; “Ess, fay! You’m right theer. I should take Time by the forelock if I was you, an’ see if you can find a maiden as’ll suit un while you go back-along through the village.”

“Awnly, as ’tis better for the man to number more years than the wummon,” added Billy, “it might be wise to bide a week or two, so’s he shall have a bit start of his lady.”

“Now, you’m fulin me! An’ I caan’t stay no more whether or no, ’cause I was promised to see Phoebe an’ my son in the arternoon. Us be gwaine to call un Vincent William Blanchard, arter you an’ me, Miller; an’ if it had been a gal, us meant to call un arter mother; an’ I do thank God ’bout the wee bwoy in all solemn soberness, ’cause ’tis the fust real gude thing as have falled to us since the gwaine of poor Chris. ’Twill be a joy to my mother an’ a gude gran’son to you, I hope.”

“Go home, go home,” said Mr. Lyddon. “Get along with ‘e this minute, an’ tell your wife I’m greatly pleased, an’ shall come to see her mighty soon. Let us knaw every day how she fares—an’—an’—I’m glad as you called the laddie arter me. ’Twas a seemly thought.”

Will departed, and his mind roamed over various splendid futures for his baby. Already he saw it a tall, straight, splendid man, not a hair shorter than his own six feet two inches. He hoped that it would possess his natural wisdom, augmented by Phoebe’s marvellous management of figures and accounts. He also desired for it a measure of his mother’s calm and stately self-possession before the problems of life, and he had no objection that his son should reflect Miller Lyddon’s many and amiable virtues.

He returned home, and his mother presently bid him come to see Phoebe. Then a sudden nervousness overtook Will, tough though he was. The door shut, and husband and wife were alone together, for Damaris disappeared. But where were all those great and splendid pictures of the future? Vanished, vanished in a mist. Will’s breast heaved;

he saw Phoebe's star-bright eyes peeping at him, and he touched the treasure beside her—oh, so small it was!

He bent his head low over them, kissed his wife shyly, and peeped with proper timidity under the flannel.

Page 200

“Look, look, Will, dearie! Did ‘e ever see aught like un? An’ come evenin’, he ’m gwaine to have his fust li’l drink!”

CHAPTER II

THE KNIGHT OF FORLORN HOPES

The child brought all a child should bring to Newtake, though it could not hide the fact that Will Blanchard drifted daily a little nearer to the end of his resources. But occasional success still flattered his ambition, and he worked hard and honestly. In this respect at least the man proved various fears unfounded, yet the result of his work rarely took shape of sovereigns. He marvelled at the extraordinary steadiness with which ill-fortune clung to Newtake and cursed when, on two quarter-days out of the annual four, another dip had to be made into the dwindling residue of his uncle’s bequest. Some three hundred pounds yet remained when young Blanchard entered upon a further stage of his career,—that most fitly recorded as happening within the shadow of a granite cross.

After long months of absence from home, Martin Grimbal returned, silent, unsuccessful, and sad. Upon the foundations of facts he had built many tentative dwelling-places for hope; but all had crumbled, failure crowned his labours, and as far from the reach of his discovery seemed the secret of Chris as the secrets of the sacred circles, stone avenues, and empty, hypaethral chambers of the Moor. Spiritless and bitterly discouraged, he returned after such labours as Will had dreamed not of; and his life, succeeding upon this deep disappointment, seemed far advanced towards its end in Martin’s eyes—a journey whose brightest incidents, happiest places of rest, most precious companions were all left behind. This second death of hope aged the man in truth and sowed his hair with grey. Now only a melancholy memory of one very beautiful and very sad remained to him. Chris indeed promised to return, but he told himself that such a woman had never left an unhappy mother for such period of time if power to come home still belonged to her. Then, surveying the past, he taxed himself heavily with a deliberate and cruel share in it. Why had he taken the advice of Blanchard and delayed his offer of work to Hicks? He told himself that it was because he knew such a step would definitely deprive him of Chris for ever; and therein he charged himself with offences that his nature was above committing. Then he burst into bitter blame of Will, and at a weak moment—for nothing is weaker than the rare weakness of a strong man—he childishly upbraided the farmer with that fateful advice concerning Clement, and called down upon his head deep censure for the subsequent catastrophe. Will, as may be imagined, proved not slow to resent such an attack with heart and voice. A great heat of vain recrimination followed, and the men broke into open strife.

Page 201

Sick with himself at this pitiable lapse, shaken in his self-respect, desolate, unsettled, and uncertain of the very foundations on which he had hitherto planted his life, the elder man existed through a black month, then braced himself again, looked out into the world, set his dusty desk in order, and sought once more amidst the relics of the past for comfort and consolation. He threw himself upon his book and told himself that it must surely reward his pains; he toiled mightily at his lonely task, and added a little to man's knowledge.

Once it happened that the Rev. Shorto-Champernowne met Martin. Riding over the Moor after a visit to his clerical colleague of Gidleigh, the clergyman trotted through Scorhill Circle, above northern Teign, and seeing a well-known parishioner, drew up a while.

"How prosper your profound studies?" he inquired. "Do these evidences of aboriginal races lead you to any conclusions of note? For my part, I am not wholly devoid of suspicion that a man might better employ his time, though I should not presume to make any such suggestion to you."

"You may be right; but one is generally unwise to stamp on his ruling passion if it takes him along an intellectual road. These cryptic stones are my life. I want to get the secret of them or find at least a little of it. What are these lonely rings? Where are we standing now? In a place of worship, where men prayed to the thunder and the sun and stars? Or a council chamber? Or a court of justice, that has seen many a doom pronounced, much red blood flow? Or is it a grave? 'T is the fashion to reject the notion that they represent any religious purpose; yet I cannot see any argument against the theory. I go on peeping and prying after a spark of truth. I probe here, and in the fallen circle yonder towards Cosdon; I follow the stone rows to Fernworthy; I trudge again and again to the Grey Wethers—that shattered double ring on Sittaford Tor. I eat them up with my eyes and repeople the heath with those who raised them. Some clay a gleam of light may come. And if it does, it will reach me through deep study on those stone men of old. It is along the human side of my investigations I shall learn, if I learn anything at all."

"I hope you may achieve your purpose, though the memoranda and data are scanty. Your name is mentioned in the *Western Morning News* as a painstaking inquirer."

"Yet when theories demand proof—that's the rub!"

"Yes, indeed. You are a knight of forlorn hopes, Grimbal," answered the Vicar, alluding to Martin's past search for Chris as much as to his present archaeologic ambitions. Then he trotted on over the river, and the pedestrian remained as before seated upon a recumbent stone in the midst of the circle of Scorhill. Silent he sat and gazed into the lichens of grey and gold that crowned each rude pillar of the lonely ring. These, as it seemed, were the very eyes of the granite, but to Martin they represented but the cloak

of yesterday, beneath which centuries of secrets were hidden. Only the stones and the eternal west wind, that had seen them set up and still blew over them, could tell him anything he sought to know.

Page 202

“A Knight of Forlorn Hopes,” mused the man. “So it is, so it is. The grasshopper, rattling his little kettledrum there, knows nearly as much of this hoary secret as I do; and the bird, that prunes his wing on the porphyry, and is gone again. Not till some Damnonian spirit rises from the barrow, not till some chieftain of these vanished hosts shall take shape out of the mists and speak, may we glean a grain of this buried knowledge. And who to-day would believe ten thousand Damnonian ghosts, if they stirred here once again and thronged the Moor and the moss and the ruined stone villages with their moonbeam shapes?

“Gone for ever; and she—my Chris—my dear—is she to dwell in the darkness for all time, too? O God, I would rather hear one whisper of her voice, feel one touch of her brown hand, than learn the primal truth of every dumb stone wonder in the world!”

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING THE GATE-POST

So that good store of roots and hay continue for the cattle during those months of early spring while yet the Moor is barren; so that the potato-patch prospers and the oats ripen well; so that neither pony nor bullock is lost in the shaking bogs, and late summer is dry enough to allow of ample peat-storing—when all these conditions prevail, your moorman counts his year a fat one. The upland farmers of Devon are in great measure armed against the bolts of chance by the nature of their lives, the grey character of even their most cheerful experiences and the poverty of their highest ambitions. Their aspirations, becoming speedily cowed by ill-requited toil and eternal hardship, quickly dwarf and shrink, until even the most sanguine seldom extend hope much beyond necessity.

Will grumbled, growled, and fought on, while Phoebe, who knew how nobly the valleys repaid husbandry, mourned in secret that his energetic labours here could but produce such meagre results. Very gradually their environment stamped its frosty seal on man and woman; and by the time that little Will was two years old his parents viewed life, its good and its evil, much as other Moor folks contemplated it. Phoebe’s heart was still sweet enough, but she grew more selfish for herself and her own, more self-centred in great Will and little Will. They filled her existence to the gradual exclusion of wider sympathies. Miller Lyddon had given his grandson a silver mug on the day he was baptised, though since that time the old man held more aloof from the life of Newtake than Phoebe understood. Sometimes she wondered that he had never offered to assist her husband practically, but Will much resented the suggestion when Phoebe submitted it to him. There was no need for any such thing, he declared. As for him, transitory ambitions and hopes gleamed up in his career as formerly, though less often. So man and wife found their larger natures somewhat crushed by the various immediate

Page 203

problems that each day brought along with it. Beyond the narrow horizon of their own concerns they rarely looked, and Chagford people, noting the change, declared that life at Newtake was tying their tongues and lining their foreheads. Will certainly grew more taciturn, less free of advice, perhaps less frank than formerly. A sort of strangeness shadowed him, and only his mother or his son could dispel it. The latter soon learnt to understand his father's many moods, and would laugh or cry, show joy or fear, according to the tune of the man's voice.

There came an evening in mid-September when Will sat at the open hearth and smoked, with his eyes fixed on a fire of scads.[13] He remained very silent, and Phoebe, busy about a small coat of red cloth, to keep the cold from her little son's bones during the coming winter, knew that it was not one of her husband's happiest evenings. His eyes were looking through the fire and the wall behind it, through the wastes and wildernesses beyond, through the granite hills to the far-away edge of the world, where Fate sat spinning the threads of the lives of his loved ones. Threads they looked, in his gloomy survey of that night, much deformed with knot and tangle, for the Spinner cared nothing at all about them. She suffered each to wind heedlessly away; she minded not that they were ugly; she spared no strand of gold or silver from her skein of human happiness to brighten the grey fabric of them. So it seemed to Will, and his temper chimed with the rough night. The wind howled and growled down the chimney, uttered many a sudden yell and ghostly moan, struck with claws invisible at the glowing heart of the peat fire, and sent red sparks dancing from a corona of faint blue flame.

[13] *Scad* = the outer rind of the peat, with ling and grass still adhering to it.

"Winter's comin' quick," said Phoebe, biting her thread.

"Ess, winter's allus comin' up here. The fight begins again so soon as ever 't is awver—again and again and again, 'cordin' to the workin' years of a man's life. Then he turns on his back for gude an' all, an' takes his rest, wheer theer's no more seasons, nor frost, nor sunshine, in the world under."

"You'm glumpy, dear heart. What's amiss? What's crossed 'e? Tell me, an' I lay I'll find a word to smooth it away. Nothin' contrary happened to market?"

"No, no—awnly my nature. When the wind's spelling winter in the chimbley, an' the yether's dead again, 't is wisht lookin' forrard. The airth 's allus dyin', an' the life of her be that short, an' grubbing of bare food an' rent out of her is sour work after many years. Thank God I'm a hopeful, far-seem' chap, an' sound as a bell; but I doan't make money for all my sweat, that's the mystery."

“You will some day. Luck be gwaine to turn ‘fore long, I hope. An’ us have got what’s better ’n money, what caan’t be bought.”

“The li’l bwoy?”

Page 204

“Aye; if us hadn’t nothin’ but him, theer’s many would envy our lot.”

“Childer’s no such gert blessin’, neither.”

“Will! How can you say it?”

“I do say it. We ‘m awnly used to keep up the breed, then thrawed o’ wan side. I’m sick o’ men an’ women folks. Theer’s too many of ’em.”

“But childer—our li’l Will. The moosic of un be sweeter than song o’ birds all times, an’ you’d be fust to say so if you wasn’t out of yourself.”

“He ’m a braave, small lad enough; but theer again! Why should he have been pitched into this here home? He might have been put in a palace just as easy, an’ born of a royal queen mother, ‘stead o’ you; he might have opened his eyes ‘pon marble walls an’ jewels an’ precious stones, ‘stead of whitewash an’ a peat fire. Be that baaby gwaine to thank us for bringing him in the world, come he graw up? Not him! Why should he?”

“But he will. We ‘m his faither an’ mother. Do ’e love your mother less for bearin’ you in a gypsy van? Li’l Will’s to pay us noble for all our toil some day, an’ be a joy to our grey hairs an’ a prop to our auld age, please God.”

“Ha, ha!—story-books! Gi’ me a cup o’ milk; then us’ll go to bed.”

She obeyed; he piled turf upon the hearth, to keep the fire alight until morning, then took up the candle and followed Phoebe through another chamber, half-scullery, half-storehouse, into which descended the staircase from above. Here hung the pale carcase of a newly slain pig, suspended by its hind legs from a loop in the ceiling; and Phoebe, many of whose little delicacies of manner had vanished of late, patted the carcase lovingly, like the good farmer’s wife she was.

“Wish theer was more so big in the sties,” she said.

Arrived at her bedside, the woman prayed before sinking to rest within reach of her child’s cot; while Will, troubling Heaven with no petition or thanksgiving, was in bed five minutes sooner than his wife.

“Gude-night, lad,” said Phoebe, as she put the candle out, but her husband only returned an inarticulate grunt for answer, being already within the portal of sleep.

A fair morning followed on the tempestuous night, and Winter, who had surely whispered her coming under the darkness, vanished again at dawn. The Moor still provided forage, but all light was gone out of the heather, though the standing fern shone yellow under the sun, and the recumbent bracken shed a rich russet in broad patches over the dewy green where Will had chopped it down and left it to dry for winter

fodder. He was very late this year in stacking the fern, and designed that labour for his morning's occupation.

Ted Chown chanced to be away for a week's holiday, so Will entered his farmyard early. The variable weather of his mind rarely stood for long at storm, but, unlike the morning, he had awakened in no happy mood.

A child's voice served for a time to smooth his brow, now clouded from survey of a broken spring in his market-cart; then came the lesser Will with a small china mug for his morning drink. Phoebe watched him sturdily tramp across the yard, and the greater Will laughed to see his son's alarm before the sudden stampede of a belated heifer, which now hastened through the open gate to join its companions on the hillside.

Page 205

“Cooshey, cooshey won’t hurt ’e, my li’l bud!” cried Phoebe, as Ship jumped and barked at the lumbering beast. Then the child doubled round a dung-heap and fled to his father’s arms. From the byre a cow with a full udder softly lowed, and now small Will had a cup of warm milk; then, with his red mouth like a rosebud in mist and his father’s smile magically and laughably reproduced upon his little face, he trotted back to his mother.

A moment later Will, still milking, heard himself loudly called from the gate. The voice he knew well enough, but it was pitched unusually high, and denoted a condition of excitement and impatience very seldom to be met with in its possessor. Martin Grimbal, for it was he, did not observe Blanchard, as the farmer emerged from the byre. His eye was bent in startled and critical scrutiny of a granite post, to which the front gate of Newtake latched, and he continued shouting aloud until Will stood beside him. Then he appeared on his hands and knees beside the gate-post. He had flung down his stick and satchel; his mouth was slightly open; his cap rested on the side of his head; his face seemed transfigured before some overwhelming discovery.

Relations were still strained between these men; and Will did not forget the fact, though it had evidently escaped Martin in his present excitement.

“What the deuce be doin’ now?” asked Blanchard abruptly.

“Man alive! A marvel! Look here—to think I have passed this stone a hundred times and never noticed!”

He rose, brushed his muddy knees, still gazing at the gate-post, then took a trowel from his bag and began to cut away the turf about the base of it.

“Let that bide!” called out the master sharply. “What be ’bout, delving theer?”

“I forgot you didn’t know. I was coming to see you on my way to the Moor. I wanted a drink and a handshake. We mustn’t be enemies, and I’m heartily sorry for what I said—heartily. But here’s a fitting object to build new friendship on. I just caught sight of the incisions through a fortunate gleam of early morning light. Come this side and see for yourself. To think you had what a moorman would reckon good fortune at your gate and never guessed it!”

“Fortune at my gate? Wheer to? I aint heard nothin’ of it.”

“Here, man, here! D’ you see this post?”

“Not bein’ blind, I do.”

“Yet you were blind, and so was I. There ’s excuse for you—none for me. It’s a cross! Yes, a priceless old Christian cross, buried here head downward by some profane soul

in the distant past, who found it of size and shape to make a gate-post. They are common enough in Cornwall, but very rare in Devon. It's a great—a remarkable discovery in fact, and I'm right glad I found it on your threshold; for we may be friends again beside this symbol fittingly enough—eh, Will?"

"Bother your rot," answered the other coldly, and quite unimpassioned before Martin's eloquence. "You doubted my judgment not long since and said hard things and bad things; now I take leave to doubt yours. How do 'e knaw this here 's a cross any more than t' other post the gate hangs on?"

Page 206

Martin, recalled to reality and the presence of a man till then unfriendly, blushed and shrank into himself a little. His voice showed that he suffered pain.

“I read granite as you read sheep and soil and a crop ripening above ground or below—it’s my business,” he explained, not without constraint, while the enthusiasm died away out of his voice and the fire from his face. “See now, Will, try and follow me. Note these very faint lines, where the green moss takes the place of the lichen. These are fretted grooves—you can trace them to the earth, and on a ‘rubbing,’ as we call it, they would be plainer still. They indicate to me incisions down the sides of a cross-shaft. They are all that many years of weathering have left. Look at the shape too: the stone grows slightly thinner every way towards the ground. What is hidden we can’t say yet, but I pray that the arms may be at least still indicated. You see it is the base sticking into the air, and more’s the pity, a part has gone, for I can trace the incisions to the top. God knows the past history of it, but—”

“Perhaps He do and perhaps He doan’t,” interrupted the farmer. “Perhaps it weer a cross an’ perhaps it weern’t; anyway it’s my gate-post now, an’ as to diggin’ it up, you may be surprised to knaw it, Martin Grimbal, but I’ll see you damned fust! I’m weary of all this bunkum ‘bout auld stones an’ circles an’ the rest; I’m sick an’ tired o’ leavin’ my work a hunderd times in summer months to shaw gaping fules from Lunnon an’ Lard knaws wheer, them roundy-poundies ’pon my land. ‘Tis all rot, as every moorman knaws; yet you an’ such as you screams if us dares to put a finger to the stone nowadays. Ban’t the granite ours under Venwell? You knaw it is; an’ because dead-an’-gone folk, half-monkeys belike, fashioned their homes an’ holes out of it, be that any cause why it shouldn’t be handled to-day? They’ve had their use of it; now ’tis our turn; an ’tis awnly such as you be, as comes here in shining summer, when the land puts on a lying faace, as though it didn’t knaw weather an’ winter—’tis awnly such as you must cry out against us of the soil if we dares to set wan stone ’pon another to make a wall or to keep the blasted rabbits out the young wheat.”

“Your attitude is one-sided, Will,” said Martin Grimbal gently; “besides, remember this is a cross. We’re dealing with a relic of our faith, take my word for it.”

“Faith be damned! What’s a cross to me? ‘Tisdoin’ more gude wheer’t is than ever it done afore, I’ll swear.”

“I hope you’ll live to see you’re wrong, Blanchard. I’ve met you in an evil hour it seems. You’re not yourself. Think about it. There’s no hurry. You pride yourself on your common sense as a rule. I’m sure it will come to your rescue. Granted this discovery is nothing to you, yet think what it means to me. If I’d found a diamond mine I couldn’t be better pleased—not half so pleased as now.”

Page 207

Will reflected a moment; but the other had not knowledge of character to observe or realise that he was slowly becoming reasonable.

“So I do pride myself on my common sense, an’ I’ve some right to. A cross is a cross—I allow that—and whatever I may think, I ban’t so small-minded as to fall foul of them as think differ’nt. My awn mother be a church-goer for that matter, an’ you’ll look far ways for her equal. But of coourse I knaw what I knaw. Me an’ Hicks talked out matters of religion so dry as chaff.”

“Yet a cross means much to many, and always will while the land continues to call itself Christian.”

“I knaw, I knaw. ‘Twill call itself Christian long arter your time an’ mine; as to bein’ Christian—that’s another story. Clem Hicks lightened such matters to me—fule though he was in the ordering of his awn life. But s’pose you digs the post up, for argeyment’s sake. What about me, as have to go out ‘pon the Moor an’ blast another new wan out the virgin granite wi’ gunpowder? Do’e think I’ve nothin’ better to do with my time than that?”

Here, in his supreme anxiety and eagerness, forgetting the manner of man he argued with, Martin made a fatal mistake.

“That’s reasonable and business-like,” he said. “I wouldn’t have you suffer for lost time, which is part of your living. I’ll give you ten pounds for the stone, Will, and that should more than pay for your time and for the new post.”

He glanced into the other’s face and instantly saw his error. The farmer’s countenance clouded and his features darkened until he looked like an angry Redskin. His eyes glinted steel-bright under a ferocious frown; the squareness of his jaw became much marked.

“You dare to say that, do’e? An’ me as good a man, an’ better, than you or your brother either! Money—you remind me I’m—Theer! You can go to blue, blazin’ hell for your granite crosses—that’s wheer you can go—you or any other poking, prying pelican! Offer money to me, would ’e? Who be you, or any other man, to offer me money for wasted time? As if I was a road scavenger or another man’s servant! God’s truth! you forget who you’m talkin’ to!”

“This is to purposely misunderstand me, Blanchard. I never, never, meant any such thing. Am I one to gratuitously insult or offend another? Typical this! Your cursed temper it is that keeps you back in the world and makes a failure of you,” answered the student of stones, his own temper nearly lost under exceptional provocation.

“Who says I be a failure?” roared Will in return. “What do you know, you grey, dreamin’ fule, as to whether I’m successful or not so? Get you gone off my land or—”

“I’ll go, and readily enough. I believe you’re mad. That’s the conclusion I’m reluctantly driven to—mad. But don’t for an instant imagine your lunatic stupidity is going to stand between the world and this discovery, because it isn’t.”

Page 208

He strapped on his satchel, picked up his stick, put his hat on straight, and prepared to depart, breathing hard.

“Go,” snorted Will; “go to your auld stones—they ’m the awnly fit comp’ny for ’e. Bruise your silly shins against ’em, an’ ax ’em if a moorman’s in the right or wrong to paart wi’ his gate-post to the fust fule as wants it!”

Martin Grimbal strode off without replying, and Will, in a sort of grim good-humour at this victory, returned to milking his cows. The encounter, for some obscure reason, restored him to amiability. He reviewed his own dismal part in it with considerable satisfaction, and, after going indoors and eating a remarkably good breakfast, he lighted his pipe and, in the most benignant of moods, went out with a horse and cart to gather withered fern.

CHAPTER IV

MARTIN’S RAID

Mrs. Blanchard now dwelt alone, and all her remaining interests in life were clustered about Will. She perceived that his enterprise by no means promised to fulfil the hopes of those who loved him, and realised too late that the qualities which enabled her father to wrest a living from the moorland farm were lacking in her son. He, of course, explained it otherwise, and pointed to the changes of the times and an universal fall in the price of agricultural produce. His mother cast about in secret how to help him, but no means appeared until, upon an evening some ten days after Blanchard’s quarrel with Grimbal over the gate-post, she suddenly determined to visit Monks Barton and discuss the position with Miller Lyddon.

“I want to have a bit of a tell with ’e,” she said, “’pon a matter so near to your heart as mine. Awnly you’ve got power an’ I haven’t.”

“I knaw what you’m come about before you speak,” answered the other.” Sit you down an’ us’ll have a gude airing of ideas. But I’m sorry we won’t get the value o’ Billy Blee’s thoughts ’pon the point, for he’s away to-night.”

Damaris rather rejoiced than sorrowed in this circumstance, but she was too wise to say so.

“A far-thinkin’ man, no doubt,” she admitted.

“He is; an’ ‘t is straange your comin’ just this night, for Blee’s away on a matter touching Will more or less, an’ doan’t reckon to be home ’fore light.”

“What coorious-fashion job be that then?”

“Caan’t tell ’e the facts. I’m under a promise not to open my mouth, but theer’s no gert harm. Martin Grimbal’s foremost in the thing so you may judge it ban’t no wrong act, and he axed Billy to help him at my advice. You see it’s necessary to force your son’s hand sometimes. He’m that stubborn when his mind’s fixed.”

“A firm man, an’ loves his mother out the common well. A gude son, a gude husband, a gude faither, a hard worker. How many men’s all that to wance, Miller?”

“He is so—all—an’ yet—the man have got his faults, speaking generally.”

Page 209

“That’s awnly to say he be a man; an’ if you caan’t find words for the faults, ’t is clear they ban’t worth namin’.”

“I can find words easy enough, I assure ’e; but a man’s a fule to waste breath criticising the ways of a son to his mother—if so be he’s a gude son.”

“What fault theer is belongs to me. I was set on his gwaine to Newtake as master, like his gran’faither afore him. I urged the step hot, and I liked the thought of it.”

“So did he—else he wouldn’t have gone.”

“You caan’t say that. He might have done different but for love of me. ’T is I as have stood in his way in this thing.”

“Doan’t fret yourself with such a thought, Mrs. Blanchard; Will’s the sort as steers his awn ship. Theer’s no blame ‘pon you. An’ for that matter, if your faither saved gude money at Newtake, why caan’t Will?”

“Times be changed. You’ve got to make two blades o’ grass graw wheer wan did use, if you wants to live nowadays.”

“Hard work won’t hurt him.”

“But it will if he reckons’t is all wasted work. What’s more bitter than toiling to no account, an’ *knawin* all the while you be?”

“Not all wasted work, surely?”

“They wouldn’t allow it for the world. He’s that gay afore me, an’ Phoebe keeps a stiff upper lip, tu; but I go up unexpected now an’ again an’ pop in unawares an’ sees the truth. You with your letter or message aforehand, doan’t find out nothing, an’ won’t.”

“He’m out o’ luck, I allow. What’s the exact reason?”

“You’ll find it in the Book, same as I done. I knaw you set gert store ’pon the Word. Well, then, ‘them the Lard loveth He chasteneth.’ That’s why Will’s languishin’ like. ’T won’t last for ever.”

“Ah! But theer’s other texts to other purpose. Not that I want ’e to dream my Phoebe’s less to me than your son to you. I’ve got my eye on ‘em, an’ that’s the truth; an’ on my li’l grandson, tu.”

“Theer’s gert things buddin’ in that bwoy.”

“I hope so. I set much store on him. Doan’t you worrit, mother, for the party to Newtake be bound up very close wi’ my happiness, an’ if they was wisht, ban’t me as would long be merry. I be gwaine to give Master Will rope enough to hang himself, having a grudge or two against him yet; then, when the job’s done, an’ he’s learnt the hard lesson to the dregs, I’ll cut un down in gude time an’ preach a sarmon to him while he’s in a mood to larn wisdom. He’s picking up plenty of information, you be sure—things that will be useful bimebye: the value of money, the shortness o’ the distance it travels, the hardness o’ Moor ground, an’ men’s hearts, an’ such-like branches of larning. Let him bide, an’ trust me.”

The mother was rendered at once uneasy and elated by this speech. That, if only for his wife and son’s sake, Will would never be allowed to fail entirely seemed good to know; but she feared, and, before the patronising manner of the old man, felt alarm for the future. She well knew how Will would receive any offer of assistance tendered in this spirit.

Page 210

“Like your gude self so to promise; but remember he ’m of a lofty mind and fiery.”

“Stiff-necked he be, for certain; but he may graw quiet ’fore you think it. Nothing tames a man so quick as to see his woman and childer folk hungry—eh? An’ specially if ’t is thanks to his awn mistakes.”

Mrs. Blanchard flushed and felt a wave of anger surging through her breast. But she choked it down.

“You ’m hard in the grain, Lyddon—so them often be who’ve lived over long as widow men. Theer ‘s a power o’ gude in my Will, an’ your eyes will be opened to see it some day. He ‘m young an’ hopeful by nature; an’ such as him, as allus looks up to gert things, feels a come down worse than others who be content to crawl. He ‘m changing, an’ I knaw it, an’ I’ve shed more ‘n wan tear awver it, bein’ on the edge of age myself now, an’ not so strong-minded as I was ’fore Chris went. He ’m changing, an’ the gert Moor have made his blood beat slower, I reckon, an’ froze his young hope a bit.”

“He ’s grawiug aulder, that’s all. ’T is right as he should chatter less an’ think more.”

“I suppose so; yet a mother feels a cold cloud come awver her heart to watch a cheel fighting the battle an’ not winning it. Specially when she can awnly look on an’ do nothin’.”

“Doan’t you fear. You ’m low in spirit, else you’d never have spoke so open; but I thank you for tellin’ me that things be tighter to Newtake than I guessed. You leave the rest to me. I knaw how far to let ’em go; an’ if we doan’t agree ’pon that question, you must credit me with the best judgment, an’ not think no worse of me for helpin’ in my awn way an’ awn time.”

With which promise Mrs. Blanchard was contented. Surveying the position in the solitude of her home, she felt there was much to be thankful for. Yet she puzzled her heart and head to find schemes by which the miller’s charity might be escaped. She considered her own means, and pictured her few possessions sold at auction; she had already offered to go and dwell at Newtake and dispose of her cottage. But Will exploded so violently when the suggestion reached his ears that she never repeated it.

While the widow thus bent her thoughts upon her son, and gradually sank to sleep with the problems of the moment unsolved, a remarkable series of incidents made the night strange at Newtake Farm.

Roused suddenly a little after twelve o’clock by an unusual sound, Phoebe woke with a start and cried to her husband:

“Will—Will, do hark to Ship! He ‘m barkin’ that savage!”

Will turned and growled sleepily that it was nothing, but the bark continued, so he left his bed and looked out of the window. A waning moon had just thrust one glimmering point above the sombre flank of the hill. It ascended as he watched, dispensed a sinister illumination, and like some remote bale-fire hung above the bosom of the nocturnal Moor. His dog still barked, and in the silence Will could hear a clink and thud as it leapt to the limit of its chain. Then out of the night a lantern danced at Newtake gate, and Blanchard, his eyes now trained to the gloom, discovered several figures moving about it.

Page 211

“Baggered if it bau’t that damned Grimbal come arter my gate-post,” he gasped, launched instantly to high wakefulness by the suspicion. Then, dragging on his trousers, and thrusting the tail of his nightshirt inside them, he tumbled down-stairs, with passion truly formidable, and hastened naked footed through the farmyard.

Four men blankly awaited him. Ignoring their leader—none other than Martin himself—-he turned upon Mr. Blee, who chanced to be nearest, and struck from his hand a pick.

“What be these blasted hookem-snivey dealings, then?” Will thundered out, “an’ who be you, you auld twisted thorn, to come here stealin’ my stone in the dead o’ night?”

Billy’s little eyes danced in the lantern fire, and he answered hastily before Martin had time to speak.

“Well, to be plain, the moon and the dog’s played us false, an’ you’d best to knaw the truth fust as last. Mr. Grimbal’s writ you two straight, fair letters ‘bout this job, so he’ve explained to me, an’ you never so much as answered neither; so, seem’ this here’s a right Christian cross, ban’t decent it should bide head down’ards for all time. An’ Mr. Grimbal have brought up a flam-new granite post, hasp an’ all complete—’t is in the cart theer—an’ he called on me as a discreet, aged man to help un, an’ so I did; an’ Peter Bassett an’ Sam Bonus here corned likewise, by my engagement, to do the heavy work an’ aid in a gude deed.”

“Dig an inch, wan of ’e, and I’ll shaw what’s a gude deed! I doan’t want no talk with you or them hulking gert fules. ’T is you I’d ax, Martin Grimbal, by what right you’m here.”

“You wouldn’t answer my letters, and I couldn’t find it in my heart to leave an important matter like this. I know I wasn’t wise, but you don’t understand what a priceless thing this is. I thought you’d find the new one in the morning and laugh at it. For God’s sake be reasonable and sensible, Blanchard, and let me take it away. There’s a new post I’ll have set up. It’s here waiting. I can’t do more.”

“But you’ll do a darned sight less. Right’s right, an’ stealin’s stealin’. You wasn’t wise, as you say—far from it. You’m in the wrong now, an’ you knaw it, whatever you was before. A nice bobbery! Why doan’t he take my plough or wan of the bullocks? Damned thieves, the lot of’e!”

“Doan’t cock your nose so high, Farmer,” said Bonus, who had never spoken to Will since he left Newtake; “’t is very onhandsome of ’e to be tellin’ like this to gentle-folks.”

“Gentlefolks! Gentlefolks would ax your help, wouldn’t they? You, as be no better than a common poacher since I turned ’e off! You shut your mouth and go home-long, an’ mind your awn business, an’ keep out o’ the game preserves. Law’s law, as you’m like to find sooner’n most folks.”

This pointed allusion to certain rumours concerning the labourer's present way of life angered Bonus not a little, but it also silenced him.

Page 212

“Law’s law, as you truly say, Will Blanchard,” answered Mr. Blee, “an’ theer it do lie in a nutshell. A man’s gate-post is his awn as a common, natural gate-post; but bein’ a sainted cross o’ the Lard sticked in the airth upsy-down by some ancient devilry, ’t is no gate-post, nor yet every-day moor-stone, but just the common property of all Christian souls.”

“You’m out o’ bias to harden your heart, Mr. Blanchard, when this gentleman sez ’t is what ’t is,” ventured the man Peter Bassett, slowly.

“An’ so you be, Blanchard, an’ ‘t is a awful deed every ways, an’ you’ll larn it some day. You did ought to be merry an’ glad to hear such a thing ’s been found ‘pon Newtake. Think o’ the fortune a cross o’ Christ brings to ’e!”

“An’ how much has it brought, you auld fule?”

“Gude or bad, you’ll be a sight wuss off it you leave it wheer ’t is, now you knaw. Theer’ll be hell to pay if it’s let bide now, sure as eggs is eggs an’ winter, winter. You’ll rue it; you’ll gnash awver it; ’t will turn against ‘e an’ rot the root an’ blight the ear an’ starve the things an’ break your heart. Mark me, you’m doin’ a cutthroat deed an’ killin’ all your awn luck by leavin’ it here an hour longer.”

But Will showed no alarm at Mr. Blee’s predictions.

“Be it as ’t will, you doan’t touch my stone—cross or no cross. Damn the cross! An’ you tu, every wan of ’e, dirty night birds!”

Then Martin, who had waited, half hoping that Billy’s argument might carry weight, spoke and ended the scene.

“We’ll talk no more and we’ll do no more,” he said. “You’re wrong in a hundred ways to leave this precious stone to shut a gate and keep in cows, Blanchard. But if you wouldn’t heed my letters, I suppose you won’t heed my voice.”

“Why the devil should I heed your letters? I told ’e wance for all, didn’t I? Be I a man as changes my mind like a cheel?”

“Crooked words won’t help ’e, Farmer,” said the stolid Bassett. “You ’m wrong, an’ you knaw right well you ‘m wrong, an’ theer’ll come a day of reckoning for ’e, sure ’s we ’m in a Christian land.”

“Let it come, an’ leave me to meet it. An’ now, clear out o’ this, every wan, or I’ll loose the dog ’pon ’e!”

He turned hurriedly as he spoke and fetched the bobtailed sheep-dog on its chain. This he fastened to the stone, then watched the defeated raiders depart. Grimbal had

already walked away alone, after directing that a post which he had brought to supersede the cross, should be left at the side of the road. Now, having obeyed his command, Mr. Blee, Bonus, and Bassett climbed into the cart and slowly passed away homewards. The moon had risen clear of earth and threw light sufficient to show Bassett's white smock still gleaming through the night as Will beheld his enemies depart.

Ten minutes later, while he washed his feet, the farmer told Phoebe of the whole matter, including his earlier meeting with Martin, and the antiquary's offer of money. Upon this subject his wife found herself in complete disagreement with Blanchard, and did not hesitate to say so.

Page 213

“Martin Grimbal ‘s so gude a friend as any man could have, an’ you did n’t ought to have bullyragged him that way,” she declared.

“You say that! Ban’t a man to speak his mind to thieves an’ robbers?”

“No such thing. ‘T is a sacred stone an’ not your property at all. To refuse ten pound for it!”

“Hold your noise, then, an’ let me mind my business my awn way,” he answered roughly, getting back to bed; but Phoebe was roused and had no intention of speaking less than her mind.

“You ‘m a knaw-nought gert fule,” she said, “an’ so full of silly pride as a turkey-cock. What ‘s the stone to you if Grimbal wants it? An’ him taking such a mint of trouble to come by it. What right have you to fling away ten pounds like that, an’ what ’s the harm to earn gude money honest? Wonder you ban’t shamed to sell anything. ’T is enough these times for a body to say wan thing for you to say t’other.”

This rebuke from a tongue that scarcely ever uttered a harsh word startled Will not a little. He was silent for half a minute, then made reply.

“You can speak like that—you, my awn wife—you, as ought to be heart an’ soul with me in everything I do? An’ the husband I am to ’e. Then I should reckon I be fairly alone in the world, an’ no mistake—’cept for mother.”

Phoebe did not answer him. Her spark of anger was gone and she was passing quickly from temper to tears.

“’T is queer to me how short of friends I ’pear to be gettin’,” confessed Will gloomily. “I must be differ’nt to what I fancied for I allus felt I could do with a waggon-load of friends. Yet they ’m droppin’ off. Coourse I knaw why well enough, tu. They’ve had wind o’ tight times to Newtake, though how they should I caan’t say, for the farm ‘s got a prosperous look to my eye, an’ them as drops in dinnertime most often finds meat on the table. Straange a man what takes such level views as me should fall out wi’ his elders so much.”

“’T is theer fault as often as yours; an’ you’ve got me as well as your mother, Will; an’ you’ve got your son. Childern knaw the gude from the bad, same as dogs, in a way hid from grawn folks. Look how the li’l thing do run to ’e ’fore anybody in the world.”

“So he do; an’ if you ’m wise enough to see that, you ought to be wise enough to see I’m right ’bout the gate-post. Who ’s Martin Grimbal to offer me money? A self-made man, same as me. Yet he might have had it, an’ welcome if he’d axed proper.”

“Of course, if you put it so, Will.”

“Theer ’s no ways else to put it as I can see.”

“But for your awn peace of mind it might be wisest to dig the cross up. I listened by the window an’ heard Billy Blee tellin’ of awful cusses, an’ he ‘s wise wi’out knawin’ it sometimes.”

“That’s all witchcraft an’ stuff an’ nonsense, an’ you ought to knaw better, Phoebe. ‘T is as bad as setting store on the flight o’ magpies, or gettin’ a dead tooth from the churchyard to cure toothache, an’ such-like folly.”

Page 214

“Ban’t folly allus, Will; theer ’s auld tried wisdom in some ancient sayings.”

“Well, you guide your road by my light if you want to be happy. ’T is for you I uses all my thinking brain day an’ night—for your gude an’ the li’l man’s.”

“I knaw—I knaw right well ‘t is so, dear Will, an’ I’m sorry I spoke so quick.”

“I’ll forgive ’e before you axes me, sweetheart. Awnly you must larn to trust me, an’ theer ’s no call for you to fear. Us must speak out sometimes, an’ I did just now, an’ ’t is odds but some of them chaps, Grimbal included, may have got a penn’orth o’ wisdom from me.”

“So ‘t is, then,” she said, cuddling to him; “an’ you’ll do well to sleep now; an’—an’ never tell again, Will, you’ve got nobody but your mother while I’m above ground, ‘cause it’s against justice an’ truth an’ very terrible for me to hear.”

“‘T was a thoughtless speech,” admitted Will, “an’ I’m sorry I spake it. ‘T was a hasty word an’ not to be took serious.”

They slept, while the moon wove wan harmonies of ebony and silver into Newtake. A wind woke, proclaiming morning, as yet invisible; and when it rustled dead leaves or turned a chimney-cowl, the dog at the gate stirred and growled and grated his chain against the granite cross.

CHAPTER V

WINTER

As Christmas again approached, adverse conditions of weather brought like anxieties to a hundred moormen besides Will Blanchard, but the widespread nature of the trouble by no means diminished his individual concern. A summer of unusual splendour had passed unblessed away, for the sustained drought represented scanty hay and an aftermath of meagre description. Cereals were poor, with very little straw, and the heavy rains of November arrived too late to save acres of starved roots on high grounds. Thus the year became responsible for one prosperous product alone: rarely was it possible to dry so well those stores gathered from the peat beds. Huge fires, indeed, glowed upon many a hearth, but the glory of them served only to illumine anxious faces. A hard winter was threatened, and the succeeding spring already appeared as no vision to welcome, but a hungry spectre to dread.

Then, with the last week of the old year, winter swept westerly on hyperborean winds, and when these were passed a tremendous frost won upon the world. Day followed day of weak, clear sunshine and low temperature. The sun, upon his shortest journeys, showed a fiery face as he sulked along the stony ridges of the Moor, and gazed over the

ice-chained wilderness, the frozen waters, and the dark mosses that never froze, but lowered black, like wounds on a white skin. Dartmoor slept insensible under granite and ice; no sheep-bell made music; no flocks wandered at will; only the wind moaned in the dead bells of the heather; only the foxes slunk round cot and farm; only the shaggy ponies

Page 215

stamped and snorted under the lee of the tors and thrust their smoking muzzles into sheltered clefts and crannies for the withered green stuff that kept life in them. Snow presently softened the outlines of the hills, set silver caps on the granite, and brought the distant horizon nearer to the eye under crystal-clear atmosphere. Many a wanderer, thus deceived, plodded hopefully forward at sight of smoke above a roof-tree, only to find his bourne, that seemed so near, still weary miles away. The high Moors were a throne for death. Cold below freezing-point endured throughout the hours of light and grew into a giant when the sun and his winter glory had huddled below the hills.

Newtake squatted like a toad upon this weary waste. Its crofts were bare and frozen two feet deep; its sycamores were naked save for snow in the larger forks, and one shivering concourse of dead leaves, where a bough had been broken untimely, and thus held the foliage. Suffering almost animate peered from its leaded windows; the building scowled; cattle lowed through the hours of day, and a steam arose from their red hides as they crowded together for warmth. Often it gleamed mistily in the light of Will's lantern when at the dead icy hour before dawn he went out to his beasts. Then he would rub their noses, and speak to them cheerfully, and note their congealed vapours where these had ascended and frozen in shining spidery hands of ice upon the walls and rafters of the byre. Fowls, silver-spangled and black, scratched at the earth from habit, fought for the daily grain with a ferocity the summer never saw, stalked spiritless in puffed plumage about the farmyard and collected with subdued clucking upon their roosts in a barn above the farmyard carts as soon as the sun had dipped behind the hills. Ducks complained vocally, and as they slipped on the glassy pond they quacked out a mournful protest against the times.

The snow which fell did not melt, but shone under the red sunshine, powdered into dust beneath hoof and heel; every cart-rut was full of thin white ice, like ground window-glass, that cracked drily and split and tinkled to hobnails or iron-shod wheel. The snow from the house-top, thawed by the warmth within, ran dribbling from the eaves and froze into icicles as thick as a man's arm. These glittered almost to the ground and refracted the sunshine in their prisms.

Warm-blooded life suffered for the most part silently, but the inanimate fabric of the farm complained with many a creak and crack and groan in the night watches, while Time's servant the frost gnawed busily at old timbers and thrust steel fingers into brick and mortar. Only the hut-circles, grey glimmering through the snow on Metherill, laughed at those cruel nights, as the Neolithic men who built them may have laughed at the desperate weather of their day; and the cross beside Blanchard's gate, though an infant in age beside them, being fashioned of like material, similarly endured. Of more lasting substance was this stone than an iron tongue stuck into it to latch the gate, for the metal fretted fast and shed rust in an orange streak upon the granite.

Page 216

Where first this relic had risen, when yet its craftsman's work was perfect and before the centuries had diminished its just proportions, no living man might say. Martin Grimbal suspected that it had marked a meeting-place, indicated some Cistercian way, commemorated a notable deed, or served to direct the moorland pilgrim upon his road to that trinity of great monasteries which flourished aforetime at Plympton, at Tavistock, and at Buckland of the Monks; but between its first uprising and its last, a duration of many years doubtless extended.

The antiquary's purpose had been to rescue the relic, judge, by close study of the hidden part, to what date it might be assigned, then investigate the history of Newtake Farm, and endeavour to trace the cross if possible. After his second repulse, however, and following upon a conversation with Phoebe, whom he met at Chagford, Martin permitted the matter to remain in abeyance. Now he set about regaining Will's friendship'in a gradual and natural manner. That done, he trusted to disinter the coveted granite at some future date and set it up on sanctified ground in Chagford churchyard, if the true nature of the relic justified that course. For the present, however, he designed no step, for his purpose was to visit the Channel Islands early in the new year, that he might study their testimony to prehistoric times.

A winter, to cite whose parallel men looked back full twenty years, still held the land, though February had nearly run. Blanchard daily debated the utmost possibility of his resources with Phoebe, and fought the inclement weather for his early lambs. Such light as came into life at Newtake was furnished by little Will, who danced merrily through ice and snow, like a scarlet flower in his brilliant coat. The cold pleased him; he trod the slippery duck pond in triumph, his bread-and-milk never failed. To Phoebe her maternal right in the infant seemed recompense sufficient for all those tribulations existence just now brought with it; from which conviction resulted her steady courage and cheerfulness. Her husband's nebulous rationalism clouded Phoebe's religious views not at all. She daily prayed to Christ for her child's welfare, and went to church whenever she could, at the express command of her father. A flash of folly from Will had combined with hard weather to keep the miller from any visit to Newtake. Mr. Lyddon, on the beginning of the great frost, had sent two pairs of thick blankets from the Monks Barton stores to Phoebe, and Will, opening the parcel during his wife's absence, resented the gift exceedingly, and returned it by the bearer with a curt message of thanks and the information that he did not need them. Much hurt, the donor turned his face from Newtake for six weeks after this incident, and Phoebe, who knew nothing of the matter, marvelled at her father's lengthy and unusual silence.

Page 217

As for Will, during these black days, the steadfast good temper of his wife almost irritated him; but he saw the prime source of her courage, and himself loved their small son dearly. Once a stray journal fell into his hands, and upon an article dealing with emigration he built secret castles in the air, and grew more happy for the space of a week. His mother ailed a little through the winter, and he often visited her. But in her presence he resolutely put off gloom, spoke with sanguine tongue of the prosperity he foresaw during the coming spring, and always foretold the frost must break within four-and-twenty-hours. Damaris Blanchard was therefore deceived in some measure, and when Will spent five shillings upon a photograph of his son, she felt that the Newtake prospects must at least be more favourable than she feared, and let the circumstance of the picture be generally known.

Not until the middle of March came a thaw, and then unchained waters and melted snows roared and tumbled from the hills through every coomb and valley. Each gorge, each declivity contributed an unwonted torrent; the quaking bogs shivered as though beneath them monsters turned in sleep or writhed in agony; the hoarse cry of Teign betokened new tribulations to the ears of those who understood; and over the Moor there rolled and crowded down a sodden mantle of mist, within whose chilly heart every elevation of note vanished for days together. Wrapped in impenetrable folds were the high lands, and the gigantic vapour stretched a million dripping tentacles over forests and wastes into the valleys beneath. Now it crept even to the heart of the woods; now it stealthily dislimned in lonely places; now it redoubled its density and dominated all things. The soil steamed and exuded vapour as a soaked sponge, and upon its surcharged surface splashes and streaks and sheets of water shone pallid and ash-coloured, like blind eyes, under the eternal mists and rains. These accumulations threw back the last glimmer of twilight and caught the first grey signal of approaching dawn; while the land, contrariwise, had welcomed night while yet wan sunsets struggled with the rain, and continued to cherish darkness long after morning was in the sky. Every rut and hollow, every scooped cup on the tors was brimming now; springs unnumbered and unknown had burst their secret places; the water floods tumbled and thundered until their rough laughter rang like a knell in the ears of the husbandmen; and beneath crocketed pinnacles of half a hundred church towers rose the mournful murmur of prayer for fair weather.

There came an afternoon in late March when Mr. Blee returned to Monks Barton from Chagford, stamped the mud off his boots and leggings, shook his brown umbrella, and entered the kitchen to find his master reading the Bible.

“’Tis all set down, Blee,” exclaimed Mr. Lyddon with the triumphant voice of a discoverer. “These latter rains be displayed in the Book, according to my theory that everything ’s theer!”

Page 218

“Pity you didn’t find ’em out afore they comed; then us might have bought the tarpaulins cheap in autumn, ‘stead of payin’ through the nose for ’em last month. Now ’t is fancy figures for everything built to keep out rain. Rabbit that umberella! It’s springed a leak, an’ the water’s got down my neck.”

“Have some hot spirits, then, an’ listen to this—all set out in Isaiah forty-one—eighteen: ’I will open rivers in high places and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water.’ Theer! If that ban’t a picter of the present plague o’ rain, what should be?”

“So ‘t is; an’ the fountains in the midst of the valleys be the awfullest part. Burnish it all! The high land had the worst of the winter, but we in the low coombs be gwaine to get the worst o’ the spring—safe as water allus runs down-long.”

“’T will find its awn level, which the prophet knawed.”

“I wish he knawed how soon.”

“’T is in the Word, I’ll wager. I may come upon it yet.”

“The airth be damn near drowned, an’ the air’s thick like a washin’-day everywheers, an’ a terrible braave sight o’ rain unshed in the elements yet.”

“’T will pass, sure as Noah seed a rainbow.”

“Ess, ’t will pass; but Monks Barton’s like to be washed to Fingle Bridge fust. Oceans o’ work waitin’, but what can us be at? Theer ban’t a bit o’ land you couldn’t most swim across.”

“Widespread trouble, sure ‘nough—all awver the South Hams, high an’ low.”

“By the same token, I met Will Blanchard an hour agone. Gwaine in the dispensary, he was. The li’l bwoy’s queer—no gert ill, but a bit of a tisseck on the lungs. He got playin’ ’bout, busy as a rook, in the dirt, and catched cold.”

Miller Lyddon was much concerned at this bad news.

“Oh, my gude God!” he exclaimed, “that’s worse hearin’ than all or any you could have fetched down. What do Doctor say?”

“Wasn’t worth while to call un up, so Will thought. Ban’t nothin’ to kill a beetle, or I lay the mother of un would have Doctor mighty soon. Will reckoned to get un a dose of physic—an’ a few sweeties. Nature’s all for the young buds. He won’t come to no hurt.”

“Fust thing morning send a lad riding to Newtake,” ordered Mr. Lyddon. “Theer’s no sleep for me to-night, no, nor any more at all till I hear tell the dear tibby-lamb’s well again. ’Pon my soul, I wonder that headstrong man doan’t doctor the cheel hisself.”

“Maybe he will. Ban’t nothin ’s beyond him.”

“I’ll go silly now. If awnly Mrs. Blanchard was up theer wi’ Phoebe.”

“Doan’t you grizzle about it. The bwoy be gwaine to make auld bones yet—hard as a nut he be. Give un years an’ he’ll help carry you to the graave in the fulness of time, I promise ’e,” said Billy, in his comforting way.

CHAPTER VI

Page 219

THE CROSS UPREARED

Mr. Blee had but reported Will correctly, and it was not until some hours later that the child at Newtake caused his parents any alarm. Then he awoke in evident suffering, and Will, at Phoebe's frantic entreaty, arose and was soon galloping down through the night for Doctor Parsons.

His thundering knock fell upon the physician's door, and a moment later a window above him was opened.

"Why can't you ring the bell instead of making that fiendish noise, and waking the whole house? Who is it?"

"Blanchard, from Newtake."

"What's wrong?"

"'T is my bwoy. He've got something amiss with his breathing parts by the looks of it."

"Ah."

"Doan't delay. Gert fear comed to his mother under the darkness, 'cause he seemed nicely when he went to sleep, then woke up worse. So I felt us had better not wait till morning."

"I'll be with you in five minutes."

Soon the Doctor appeared down a lane from the rear of the house. He was leading his horse by the bridle.

"I'm better mounted than you," he said, "so I'll push forward. Every minute saved is gained."

Will thanked him, and Doctor Parsons disappeared. When the father reached home, it was to hear that his child was seriously ill, though nothing of a final nature could be done to combat the sickness until it assumed a more definite form.

"It's a grave case," said the physician, drearily in the dawn, as he pulled on his gloves and discussed the matter with Will before departing. "I'll be up again to-night. We mustn't overlook the proverbial vitality of the young, but if you are wise you will school your mind and your wife's to be resigned. You understand."

He stroked his peaked naval beard, shook his head, then mounted his horse and was gone.

From that day forward life stood still at Newtake, in so far as it is possible for life to do so, and a long-drawn weariness of many words dragged dully of a hundred pages would be necessary to reflect that tale of noctural terrors and daylight respites, of intermittent fears, of nerve-shattering suspense, and of the ebb and flow of hope through a fortnight of time. Overtaxed and overwrought, Phoebe ceased to be of much service in the sick-room after a week without sleep; Will did all that he could, which was little enough; but his mother took her place in the house unquestioned at this juncture, and ruled under Doctor Parsons. The struggle seemed to make her younger again, to rub off the slow-gathering rust of age and charm up all her stores of sense and energy.

So they battled for that young life. More than once a shriek from Phoebe would echo to the farm that little Will was gone; and yet he lived; many a time the child's father in his strength surveyed the perishing atom, and prayed to take the burden, all too heavy for a baby's shoulders. In one mood he supplicated, in another cursed Heaven for its cruelty.

Page 220

There came a morning in early April when their physician, visiting Newtake before noon, broke it to husband and wife that the child could scarcely survive another day. He promised to return in the evening, and left them to their despair. Mrs. Blanchard, however, refused to credit this assurance, and cried to them to be hopeful still.

In the afternoon Mr. Blee rode up from Monks Barton. Daily a messenger visited Newtake for Mr. Lyddon's satisfaction, but it was not often that Billy came. Now he arrived, however, entered the kitchen, and set down a basket laden with good things. The apartment lacked its old polish and cleanliness. The whitewash was very dirty; the little eight-day clock on the mantelpiece had run down; the begonias in pots on the window-ledge were at death's door for water. Between two of them a lean cat stretched in the sun and licked its paws; beside the fire lay Ship with his nose on the ground; and Will sat close by, a fortnight's beard upon his chin. He looked listlessly up as Mr. Blee entered and nodded but did not speak.

"Well, what 's the best news? I've brought 'e fair-fashioned weather at any rate. The air 's so soft as milk, even up here, an' you can see the green things grawin' to make up for lost time. Sun was proper hot on my face as I travelled along. How be the poor little lad?"

"Alive, that's all. Doctor's thrawed un awver now."

"Never! Yet I've knawed even Parsons to make mistakes. I've brought 'e a braave bunch o' berries, got by the gracious gudeness of Miller from Newton Abbot; also a jelly; also a bottle o' brandy—the auld stuff from down cellar—I brushed the Dartmoor dew, as 't is called, off the bottle myself; also a fowl for the missis."

"No call to have come. 'T is all awver bar the end."

"Never say it while the child's livin'! They 'm magical li'l twoads for givin' a doctor the lie. You 'm wisht an' weary along o' night watchings."

"Us must faace it. Ban't no oncommon thing. Hope's dead in me these many days; an' dying now in Phoebe—dying cruel by inches. She caan't bring herself to say 'gude-by' to the li'l darling bwoy."

"What mother could? What do Mrs. Blanchard the elder say?"

"She plucks up 'bout it. She 'm awver hopeful."

"Doan't say so! A very wise woman her."

Phoebe entered at this moment, and Mr. Blee turned from where he was standing by his basket.

“I be cheerin’ your gude man up,” he said.

She sighed, and sat down wearily near Will.

“I’ve brought ‘e a chick for your awn eatin’ an’—”

Here a scuffle and snarling and spitting interrupted Billy. The hungry cat, finding a fowl almost under its nose, had leapt to the ground with it, and the dog observed the action. Might is right in hungry communities; Ship asserted himself, and almost before the visitor realised what had happened, poor Phoebe’s chicken was gone.

Page 221

“Out on the blamed thieves!” cried Billy, astounded at such manners. He was going to strike the dog, but Will stopped him.

“Let un bide,” he said. “He didn’t take it, an’ since it weern’t for Phoebe, better him had it than the cat. He works for his livin’, she doan’t.”

“Such gwaines-on ‘mongst dumb beasts o’ the field I never seen!” protested Billy; “an’ chickens worth what they be this spring!”

Presently conversation drifted into a channel that enabled the desperate, powerless man to use his brains and employ his muscles; while for the mother it furnished a fresh gleam of hope built upon faith. Billy it was who brought about this consummation. Led by Phoebe he ascended to the sick-room and bid Mrs. Blanchard “good-day.” She sat with the insensible child on her lap by the fire, where a long-spouted kettle sent forth jets of steam.

“This here jelly what I’ve brought would put life in a corpse I do b’lieve; an’ them butivul grapes, tu,—they’ll cool his fever to rights, I should judge.”

“He ’m past all that,” said Phoebe.

“Never!” cried the other woman. “He’m a bit easier to my thinkin’.”

“Let me take un then,” said the mother. “You’m most blind for sleep.”

“Not a bit of it. I’ll have forty winks later, after Doctor’s been again.”

Will here entered, sat down by his mother, and stroked the child’s little limp hand.

“He ban’t fightin’ so hard, by the looks of it,” he said.

“No more he is. Come he sleep like this till dark, I lay he’ll do braave.”

Nobody spoke for some minutes, then Billy, having pondered the point in silence, suddenly relieved his mind and attacked Will, to the astonishment of all present.

“’Tis a black thought for you to knaw this trouble’s of your awn wicked hatching, Farmer,” he said abruptly; “though it ban’t a very likely time to say so, perhaps. Yet theer’s life still, so I speak.”

Will glared speechless; but Billy knew himself too puny and too venerable to fear rough handling. He regarded the angry man before him without fear, and explained his allusion.

“You may glaze ‘pon me, an’ stick your savage eyes out your head; but that doan’t alter truth. ’T ’as awnly a bit ago in the fall as I told un what would awvertake un,” he continued, turning to the women. “He left the cross what Mr. Grimbal found upsy-down in the airth; he stood up afore the company an’ damned the glory of all Christian men. Ess fay, he done that fearful thing, an’ if ’t weern’t enough to turn the Lard’s hand from un, what was? Snug an’ vitty he weer afore that, so far as anybody knawed; an’ since —why, troubles have tumbled ’pon each other’s tails like apple-dranes out of a nest.”

The face of Phoebe was lighted with some eagerness, some deep anxiety, and not a little passion as she listened to this harangue.

“You mean that gate-stone brought this upon us?” she asked.

Page 222

“No, no, never,” declared Damaris; “’t is contrary to all reason.”

“’T is true, whether or no; an’ any fule, let alone a man as knaws like I do, would tell ’e the same. ’T is common sense if you axes me. Your man was told ‘t was a blessed cross, an’ he flouted the lot of us an’ left it wheer ’t was. ’T is a challenge, if you come to think of it, a scoffin’ of the A’mighty to the very face of Un. I wouldn’t stand it myself if I was Him.”

“Will, do ’e hear Mr. Blee?” asked Phoebe.

“I hear un. ’T is tu late now, even if what he said was true, which it ban’t.”

“Never tu late to do a gude deed,” declared Billy; “an’ you’ll have to come to it, or you’ll get the skin cussed off your back afore you ’m done with. Gormed if ever I seed sich a man as you! Theer be some gude points about ’e, as everything must have from God A’mighty’s workshop, down to poisonous varmints. But certain sure am I that you don’t ought to think twice ’pon this job.”

“Do ‘e mean it might even make the differ’nee between life an’ death to the bwoy?” asked Phoebe breathlessly.

“I do. Just all that.”

“Will—for God’s love, Will!”

“What do ’e say, mother?”

“It may be truth. Strange things fall out. Yet it never hurted my parents in the past.”

“For why?” asked Billy. “’Cause they didn’t knaw ’t was theer, so allowance was made by the Watching Eye. Now ‘t is differ’nt, an’ His rage be waxing.”

“Your blessed God ‘s got no common sense, then—an’ that’s all I’ve got to say ’bout it. What would you have me do?”

Will put the question to Mr. Blee, but his wife it was who answered, being now worked up to a pitch of frenzy at the delay.

“Go! Dig—dig as you never digged afore! Dig the holy stone out the ground direckly minute! Now, now, Will, ’fore the life’s out of his li’l flutterin’ body. Lay bare the cross, an’ drag un out for God in heaven to see! Doan’t stand clackin’ theer, when every moment’s worth more’n gawld.”

“So like’s not He’ll forgive ’e if ’e do,” argued Mr. Blee. “Allowed the Lard o’ Hosts graws a bit short in His temper now an’ again, as with them gormed Israelites, an’ sich like, an’

small blame to Him; but He's all for mercy at heart, 'cordin' to the opinion of these times, so you'd best to dig."

"Why doan't he strike me down if I've angered Him—not this innocent cheel?"

"The sins of the fathers be visited—" began Mr. Blee glibly, when Mrs. Blanchard interrupted.

"Ban't the time to argue, Will. Do it, an' do it sharp, if't will add wan grain o' hope to the baaby's chance."

The younger woman's sufferings rose to a frantic half-hushed scream at the protracted delay.

"O Christ, why for do 'e hold back? Ban't anything worth tryin' for your awn son? I'd scratch the stone out wi' my raw, bleedin' finger-bones if I was a man. Do 'e want to send me mad? Do 'e want to make me hate the sight of 'e? Go—go for love of your mother, if not of me!"

Page 223

“An’ I’ll help,” said Billy, “an’ that chap messin’ about in the yard can lend a hand likewise. I be a cracked vessel myself for strength, an’ past heavy work, but my best is yours to call ’pon in this pass.”

Will turned and left the sick-room without more words, while Billy followed him.

The farmer fetched two picks and a shovel, called Ted Chown and a minute later had struck the first blow towards restoration of his granite cross. All laboured with their utmost power, and Will, who had flung off his coat and waistcoat, bared his arms, tightened his belt, and did the work of two men. The manual labour sweetened his mind a little, and scoured it of some bitterness. While Mr. Blee, with many a grunt and groan, removed the soil as the others broke it away, Blanchard, during these moments of enforced idleness, looked hungrily at the little window of the upper chamber where all his hopes and interests were centred. Then he swung his pick again.

Presently a ray of sunlight brightened Newtake, and contributed to soothe the toiling father. He read promise into it, and when three feet below the surface indications of cross-arms appeared upon the stone, Will felt still more heartened. Grimbal’s prediction was now verified; and it remained only to prove Billy’s prophecy also true. His tremendous physical exertions, the bright setting sunshine, and the discovery of the cross affected Will strangely. His mind swung round from frank irreligion, to a sort of superstitious credulity, awestricken yet joyful, that made him cling to the saving virtue of the stone. Because Martin had been right in his assertion concerning the gate-post, Blanchard felt a hazy conviction that Blee’s estimate of the stone’s virtue must also prove correct. He saw his wife at the window, and waved to her, and cried aloud that the cross was uncovered.

“A poor thing in holy relics, sure ’nough,” said Billy, wiping his forehead.

“But a cross—a clear cross? Keep workin’, Chown, will ’e? You still think ’twill serve, doan’t ’e, Blee?”

“No room for doubt, though woful out o’ repair,” answered Billy, occupied with the ancient monument. “Just the stumps o’ the arms left, but more’n enough to swear by.”

All laboured on; then the stone suddenly subsided and fell in such a manner that with some sloping of one side of the excavated pit they were able to drag it out.

“Something’s talking to me as us have done the wan thing needful,” murmured Will, in a subdued voice, but with more light than the sunset on his face. “Something’s hurting me bad that I said what I said in the chamber, an’ thought what I thought. God’s nigher than us might think, minding what small creatures we be. I hope He’ll forgive them words.”

“He’s a peacock for eyes, as be well knawn,” declared Mr. Blee. “An’ He’ve got His various manners an’ customs o’ handlin’ the human race. Some He softens wi’ gude things an’ gude fortune till they be bound to turn to Him for sheer shame; others He breaks ’pon the rocks of His wrath till they falls on their knees an’ squeals for forgiveness. I’ve seed it both ways scores o’ times; an’ if your little lad ’s spared to ’e, you’ll be brought to the Lard by a easier way than you deserve, Blanchard.”

Page 224

“I knaw, I knaw, Mr. Blee. He ’m surely gwaine to let us keep li’l Willy, an’ win us to heaven for all time.”

The cross now lay at their feet, and Billy was about to return to the house and see how matters prospered, when Will bade him stay a little longer.

“Not yet,” he said.

“What more’s to do?”

“I feel a kind o’ message like to set it plumb-true under the sky. Us caan’t lift it, but if I pull a plank or two out o’ the pig’s house an’ put a harrow chain round ’em, we could get the cross on an’ let a horse pull un up theer to the hill, and set un up. Then us would have done all man can.”

He pointed to the bosom of the adjacent hill, now glowing in great sunset light.

“Starve me! but you ’m wise. Us’ll set the thing up under the A’mighty’s eye. ’Twill serve—mark my words. ‘Twill turn the purpose of the Lard o’ Hosts, or I’m no prophet.”

“’Tis in my head you ’m right. I be lifted up in a way I never was.”

“The Lard ’s found ’e by the looks of it,” said Billy critically, “either that, or you ’m light-headed for want of sleep. But truly I think He’ve called ’e. Now ’t is for you to answer.”

They cleaned the cross with a bucket or two of water, then dragged it half-way up the hill, and, where a rabbit burrow lessened labour, raised their venerable monument under the afterglow.

“It do look as if it had been part o’ the view for all time,” declared Ted Chown, as the party retreated a few paces; and, indeed, the stone rose harmoniously upon its new site, and might have stood an immemorial feature of the scene.

Blanchard stayed not a moment when the work was done but strode to Newtake like a jubilant giant, while Mr. Blee and Chown, with the horse, tools, and rough sledge, followed more slowly.

The father proceeded homewards at tremendous speed; a glorious hope filled his heart, sharing the same with sorrow and repentance. He mumbled shamefaced prayers as he went, speaking half to himself, half to Heaven. He rambled on from a petition for forgiveness into a broken thanksgiving for the mercy he already regarded as granted. His labours, the glamour of the present achievement, and the previous long strain upon his mind and body, united to smother reason for one feverish hour. Will walked blindly forward, now with his eyes upon the window under Newtake’s dark roof below him, now turning to catch sight of the grey cross uplifted on the hill above. A great sweeping sea

of change was tumbling through his intellect, and old convictions with scraps of assured wisdom suffered shipwreck in it. His mind was exalted before the certainty of unutterable blessing; his soul clung to the splendid assurance of a Personal God who had wrought actively upon his behalf, and received his belated atonement.

Far behind, Mr. Blee was improving the occasion for benefit of young Ted Chown.

“See how he do stride the hill wi’ his head held high, same as Moses when he went down-long from the Mount. Look at un an’ do likewise, Teddy; for theer goes a man as have grasped God! ’Tis a gert, gay day in human life when it comes.”

Page 225

Will Blanchard hurried through the farm gate, where it swung idly with its sacred support gone forever; then he drew a great breath and glanced upwards before proceeding into the darkness of the unlighted house. As he did so wheels grated at the entrance, and he knew that Doctor Parsons must be just behind him. Above stairs the sick-room was still unlighted, the long-necked kettle still puffed steam, but the fire had shrunk, and Will's first word was a protest that it had been allowed to sink so low. Then he looked round, and the rainbow in his heart faded and died. Damaris sat like a stone woman by the window; Phoebe lay upon the bed and hugged a little body in a blanket. Her hair had fallen down; out of the great shadows he saw the white blur on her face, and heard her voice sound strange as she cried monotonously, in a tone from which the first passion had vanished through an hour of iteration.

"O God, give un back to me; O God, spare un; O kind God, give my li'l bwoy back."

CHAPTER VII

GREY TWILIGHT

In the soft earth they laid him, "the little child whose heart had fallen asleep," and from piling of a miniature mound, from a small brown tumulus, now quite hid under primroses, violets, and the white anemones of the woods, Will Blanchard and his mother slowly returned to Newtake. He wore his black coat; she was also dressed in black; the solitary mourning coach dragged slowly up the hill to the Moor, and elsewhere another like it conveyed Mr. Lyddon homeward.

Neither mother nor son had any heart to speak. The man's soul was up in arms; he had rebelled against his life, and since the death of his boy, while Phoebe remained inert in her desolation and languished under a mental and bodily paralysis wherein she had starved to death but for those about her, he, on the contrary, found muscle and mind clamouring for heroic movement. He was feverishly busy upon the farm, and ranged in thought with a savage activity among the great concerns of men. His ill-regulated mind, smarting under the blows of Chance, whirled from that past transient wave of superstitious emotion into an opposite extreme. Now he was ashamed of his weakness, and suffered convictions proper to the narrowness of an immature intellect to overwhelm him. He assured himself that his tribulations were not compatible with the existence of a Supreme Being. Like poor humanity the wide world over, his judgment became vitiated, his views distorted under the stroke of personal sorrow, and, beneath the pressure of that gigantic egotism which ever palsies the mind of man at sudden loss of what he holds dearest upon earth, poor Blanchard cried in his heart there was no God.

Page 226

Here we are faced with a curious parallel, offered within the limits of this narrative. As the old labourer, Blee, had arrived at the same conclusion, then modified it and returned to a creed in the light of subsequent events, so now Will had found himself, on the evening of his child's funeral, with fresh interests aroused and recent convictions shaken. An incipient negation of Deity, built upon the trumpery basis of his personal misfortunes, was almost shattered within the week that saw its first existence. A mystery developed in his path, and startling incidents awoke a new train of credulity akin to that already manifested over the ancient cross. The man's uneven mind was tossed from one extreme of opinion to the other, and that element of superstition, from which no untutored intellect in the lap of Nature is free, now found fresh food and put forth a strong root within him.

Returning home, Will approached Phoebe with a purpose to detail the sad, short scene in Chagford churchyard, but his voice rendered her hysterical, so he left her with his mother, put on his working clothes, and wandered out into the farmyard. Presently he found himself idly regarding a new gate-post: that which Martin Grimbal formerly brought and left hard by the farm. Ted Chown had occupied himself in erecting it during the morning.

The spectacle reminded Will of another, and he lifted his eyes to the cross on the undulation spread before him. As he did so some object appeared to flutter out of sight not far above it, among the rocks and loose 'clatters' beneath the summit of the tor. This incident did not hold Will's mind, but, prompted to motion, restless, and in the power of dark thoughts, he wandered up the Moor, tramped through the heather, and unwittingly passed within a yard of the monument he had raised upon the hill. He stood a moment and looked at the cross, then cursed and spat upon it. The action spoke definitely of a mental chaos unexampled in one who, until that time, had never lacked abundant self-respect. His deed done, it struck Will Blanchard like a blow; he marvelled bitterly at himself, he knew such an act was pitiful, and remembered that the brain responsible for it was his own. Then he clenched his hands and turned away, and stood and stared out over the world.

A wild, south-west wind blew, and fitful rain-storms sped separately across the waste. Over the horizon clouds massed darkly, and the wildernesses spread beneath them were of an inflamed purple. The seat of the sun was heavily obscured at this moment, and the highest illumination cast from sky to earth broke from the north. The effect thus imparted to the scene, though in reality no more than usual, affected the mind as unnatural, and even sinister in its operation of unwonted chiaro-oscuro. Presently the sullen clearness of the distance was swept and softened by a storm. Another, falling some miles nearer, became superimposed upon it. Immediately the darkness

Page 227

of the horizon lifted and light generally increased, though every outline of the hills themselves vanished under falling rain. The turmoil of the clouds proceeded, and after another squall had passed there followed an aerial battle amid towers and pinnacles and tottering precipices of sheer gloom. The centre of illumination wheeled swiftly round to the sun as the storm travelled north, then a few huge silver spokes of wan sunshine turned irregularly upon the stone-strewn desert.

Will watched this elemental unrest, and it served to soothe that greater storm of sorrows and self-condemnation then raging within him. His nature found consolation here, the cool hand of the Mother touched his forehead as she passed in her robe of rain, and for the first time since childhood the man hid his face and wept.

Presently he moved forward again, walked to the valleys and wandered towards southern Teign, unconsciously calmed by his own random movements and the river's song. Anon, he entered the lands of Metherill, and soon afterwards, without deliberate intention, moved through that Damnonian village which lies there. A moment later and he stood in the hut-circle where he himself had been born. Its double stone courses spread around him, hiding the burrows of the rabbits; and sprung from between two granite blocks, brave in spring verdure, with the rain twinkling in little nests of flower buds as yet invisible, there rose a hawthorn. Within the stones a ewe stood and suckled its young, but there was no other sign of life. Then Blanchard, sitting here to rest and turning his eyes whither he had come, again noticed some sudden movement, but, looking intently at the spot, he saw nothing and returned to his own thoughts. Sitting motionless Will retraced the brief course of his career through long hours of thought; and though his spirit bubbled to white heat more than once during the survey, yet subdued currents of sense wound amid his later reflections. Crushed for a moment under the heavy load of life and its lessons, he presented a picture familiar enough, desirable enough, necessary enough to all humanity, yet pathetic as exemplified in the young and unintelligent and hopeful. It was the picture of the dawn of patience—a patience sprung from no religious inspiration, but representing Will's tacit acknowledgment of defeat in his earlier battles with the world. The emotion did not banish his present rebellion against Fate and evil fortune undeserved; but it caused him to look upon life from a man's standpoint rather than a child's, and did him a priceless service by shaking to their foundations his self-confidence and self-esteem. Selfish at least he was not from a masculine standard, and now his thoughts returned to Phoebe in her misery, and he rose and retraced his steps with a purpose to comfort her if he could.

The day began to draw in. Unshed rains massed on the high tors, but towards the west one great band of primrose sky rolled out above the vanished sun and lighted a million little amber lamps in the hanging crystals of the rain. They twinkled on thorns and

briars, on the grass, the silver crosiers of uncurling ferns, and all the rusty-red young heather.

Page 228

Then it was that rising from his meditations and turning homeward, the man distinctly heard himself called from some distance. A voice repeated his name twice—in clear tones that might have belonged to a boy or a woman.

“Will! Will!”

Turning sharply upon a challenge thus ringing through absolute loneliness and silence, Blanchard endeavoured, without success, to ascertain from whence the summons came. He thought of his mother, then of his wife, yet neither was visible, and nobody appeared. Only the old time village spread about him with its hoary granite peering from under caps of heather and furze, ivy and upspringing thorn. And each stock and stone seemed listening with him for the repetition of a voice. The sheep had moved elsewhere, and he stood companionless in that theatre of vanished life. Trackways and circles wound grey around him, and the spring vegetation above which they rose all swam into one dim shade, yet moved with shadows under oncoming darkness. Attributing the voice to his own unsettled spirit, Blanchard proceeded upon his road to where the skeleton of a dead horse stared through the gloaming beside a quaking bog. Its bones were scattered by ravens, and Will used the bleached skull as a stepping stone. Presently he thought of the flame-tongues that here were wont to dance through warm summer nights. This memory recalled his own nickname in Chagford—“Jack-o’-Lantern”—and, for the first time in his life, he began to appreciate its significance. Then, being a hundred yards from his starting-place in the hut-circle, he heard the hidden voice again. Clear and low, it stole over the intervening wilderness, and between two utterances was an interval of some seconds.

“Will! Will!”

For one instant the crepitation of fear passed over Blanchard’s scalp and skin. He made an involuntary stride away from the voice; then he shook himself free of all alarm, and, not desirous to lose more self-respect that day, turned resolutely and shouted back,—

“I hear ‘e. What’s the business? I be comin’ to ’e if you’ll bide wheer you be.”

That some eyes were watching him out of the gathering darkness he did not doubt, and soon pushing back, he stood once more in the ruined citadel of old stones, mounted one, steadied himself by a young ash that rose beside it, and raised his voice again,—

“Now, then! I be here. What’s to do? Who’s callin’ me?”

An answer came, but of a sort widely different from what he expected. There arose, within twenty yards of him, a sound that might have been the cry of a child or the scream of a trapped animal. Assuming it to be the latter, Will again hesitated. Often enough he had laughed at the folk-tales of witch hares as among the most fantastic

fables of the old; yet at this present moment mystic legends won point from the circumstances in which he found himself. He hurried forward to the edge of a circle from which the sound proceeded. Then, looking before him, he started violently, sank to his knees behind a rock, and so remained, glaring into the ring of stones.

Page 229

* * * * *

In less than half an hour Blanchard, with his coat wrapped round some object that he carried, returned to Newtake and summoned assistance with a loud voice.

Presently his wife and mother entered the kitchen, whereupon Will discovered his burden and revealed a young child. Phoebe fainted dead away at sight of it, and while her husband looked to her Mrs. Blanchard tended the baby, which was hungry but by no means alarmed. As for Will, his altered voice and most unusual excitement of manner indicated something of the shock he had received. Having described the voice which called him, he proceeded after this fashion to detail what followed:

“I looked in the very hut-circle I was born, an’ I shivered all over, for I thought ’twas the li’l ghost of our wee bwoy—by God, I did! It sat theer all alone, an’ I stared an’ froze while I stared. Then it hollered like a gude un, an’ stretched out its arms, an’ I seed ’twas livin’ an’ never thought how it comed theer. He ‘in somethin’ smaller than our purty darling, yet like him in a way, onless I’m forgetting.”

“’Tis like,” said Damaris, dandling the child and making it happy. “’Tis a li’l bwoy, two year old or more, I should guess. It keeps crying ’Mam, mam,’ for its mother. God forgive the woman.”

“A gypsy’s baby, I reckon,” said Phoebe languidly.

“I doan’t think it,” answered her husband; “I’m most feared to guess what ‘tis. Wan thing’s sure; I was called loud an’ clear or I’d never have turned back; an’ yet, second time I was called, my flesh crept.”

“The little flannels an’ frock be thick an’ gude, but they doan’t shaw nought.”

“The thing’s most as easy to think a miracle as not. He looked up in my eyes as I brought un away, an’ after he’d got used to me he was quiet as a mouse an’ snuggled to me.”

“They’d have said ’twas a fairy changeling in my young days,” mused Mrs. Blanchard, “but us knaws better now. ’Tis a li’l gypsy, I’ll warn ’e, an’ some wicked mother’s dropped un under your nose to ease her conscience.”

“What will you do? Take un to the poorhouse?” asked Phoebe.

“‘Poorhouse’! Never! This be mine, tu. Mine! I was called to it, weern’t I? By a human voice or another, God knaws. Theer’s more to this than us can see.”

His women regarded him with blank amazement, and he showed considerable impatience tinder their eyes. It was clear he desired that they should dwell on no purely materialistic or natural explanation of the incident.

“Baan’t a gypsy baaby,” he said; “‘tis awnly the legs an’ arms of un as be brown. His body’s as white as curds, an’ his hair’s no darker than our awn Willy’s was.”

“If it ban’t a gypsy’s, whose be it?” said Phoebe, turning to the infant for the first time.

“Mine now,” answered Will stoutly. “‘Twas sent an’ give into my awn hand by one what knawed who ’twas they called. My heart warmed to un as he lay in my arms, an’ he’m mine hencefarrard.”

Page 230

“What do ’e say, Phoebe?” asked Mrs. Blanchard, somewhat apprehensively. She knew full well how any such project must have struck her if placed in the bereaved mother’s position. Phoebe, however, made no immediate answer. Her sorrowful eyes were fixed on the child, now sitting happily on the elder woman’s lap.

“A nice li’l thing, wi’ a wunnerful curly head—eh, Phoebe? Seems more ‘n chance to me, comin’ as it have on this night-black day. An’ like our li’l angel, tu, in a way?” asked Will.

“Like him—in a way, but more like you,” she answered; “more like you than your awn was—terrible straange that—the living daps o’ Will! Ban’t it?”

Damaris regarded her son and then the child.

“He be like—very,” she admitted. “I see him strong. An’ to think he found the bwoy ’pon that identical spot wheer he fust drawed breath himself!”

“‘Tis a thing of hidden meaning,” declared Will. “An’ he looked at me kindly fust he seed me; ‘twas awnly hunger made un shout—not no fear o’ me. My heart warmed to un as I told ‘e. An’ to come this day!”

Phoebe had taken the child, and was looking over its body in a half-dazed fashion for the baby marks she knew. Silently she completed the survey, but there was neither caress in her fingers nor softness in her eyes. Presently she put the child back on Mrs. Blanchard’s lap and spoke, still regarding it with a sort of dull, almost vindictive astonishment.

“Terrible coorious! Ban’t no child as ever I seed or heard tell of; an’ nothin’ of my dead lamb ’bout it, now I scans closer. But so like to Will! God! I can see un lookin’ out o’ its baaby eyes!”

BOOK IV

HIS SECRET

CHAPTER I

A WANDERER RETURNS

Ripe hay swelled in many a silver-russet billow, all brightened by the warm red of sorrel under sunshine. When the wind blew, ripples raced over the bending grasses, and from their midst shone out mauve scabious and flashed occasional poppies. The hot July air trembled agleam with shining insects, and drowsily over the hayfield, punctuated by

stridulation of innumerable grasshoppers, there throbbed one sustained murmur, like the remote and mellow music of wood and strings. A lark still sang, and the swallows, whose full-fledged young thrust open beaks from the nests under Newtake eaves, skimmed and twittered above the grass lands, or sometimes dipped a purple wing in the still water where the irises grew.

Blanchard and young Ted Chown had set about their annual labour of saving the hay, and now a rhythmic breathing of two scythes and merry clink of whetstones against steel sounded afar on the sleepy summer air. The familiar music came to Phoebe's ear where she sat at an open kitchen window of Newtake. Her custom was at times of hay harvest to assist in the drying of the grass, and few women handled a fork better; but there had recently reached the farm an infant girl, and the mother had plenty to do without seeking beyond her cradle.

Page 231

Phoebe made no demur about receiving Will's little foundling of the hut-circle. His heart's desire was usually her amibition also, and though Timothy, as the child had been called, could boast no mother's love, yet Phoebe proved a kind nurse, and only abated her attention upon the arrival of her own daughter. Then, as time softened the little mound in Chagford churchyard with young green, so before another baby did the mother's bereavement soften, sink deeper into memory, revive at longer intervals to conjure tears. Her character, as has been indicated, admitted of no supreme sustained sorrow. Suffer she did, and fiery was her agony; but another child brought occupation and new love; while her husband, after the first sentimental outburst of affection over the infant he had found at Metherill, settled into an enduring regard for him, associated him, by some mental process impossible of explanation, with his own lost one, and took an interest, blended of many curious emotions, in the child.

Drying hay soon filled the air with a pleasant savour, and stretched out grey-green ribbons along the emerald of the shorn meadows. Chown snuffled and sweated and sneezed, for the pollen always gave him hay fever; his master daily worked like a giant from dawn till the owl-light, drank gallons of cider, and performed wonders with the scythe. A great hay crop gladdened the moormen, and Will, always intoxicated by a little fair fortune, talked much of his husbandry, already calculated the value of the aftermath, and reckoned what number of beasts he might feed next winter.

"'Most looks as if I'd got a special gift wi' hay," he said to his mother on one occasion. She had let her cottage to holiday folk, and was spending a month on the Moor.

Mrs. Blanchard surveyed the scene from under her sunbonnet and nodded.

"Spare no trouble, no trouble, an' have it stacked come Saturday. Theer'll be thunder an' gert rains after this heat. Be the rushes ready for thatchin' of it?"

"Not yet; but that's not to say I've forgot."

"I'll cut some for 'e myself come the cool of the evenin'. An' you can send Ted with the cart to gather 'em up."

"No, no, mother. I'll make time to-morrow."

"'Twill be gude to me, an' like auld days, when I was a li'l maid. You sharp the sickle an' fetch the skeiner out, tu, for I was a quick hand at bindin' ropes o' rushes, an' have made many a yard of 'em in my time."

Then she withdrew from the tremendous sunshine, and Will, now handling a rake, proceeded with his task.

Two days later a rick began to rise majestically at the corner of Blanchard's largest field, while round about it was gathered the human life of the farm. Phoebe, with her baby,

sat on an old sheepskin rug in the shadow of the growing pile; little Tim rollicked unheeded with Ship in the sweet grass, and clamoured from time to time for milk from a glass bottle; Will stood up aloft and received the hay from Chown's fork, while Mrs. Blanchard, busy with the "skeiner" stuck into the side of the rick, wound stout ropes of rushes for the thatching.

Page 232

Then it was that Will, glancing out upon the Moor, observed a string of gypsy folk making slow progress towards Chagford. Among the various Romany cavalcades which thus passed Newtake in summer time this appeared not the least strange. Two ordinary caravans headed the procession. A man conducted each, a naked-footed child or two trotted beside them, and an elder boy led along three goats. The travelling homes were encumbered with osier-and cane-work, and following them came a little broken-down, open vehicle. This was drawn by two donkeys, harnessed tandem-fashion, and the chariot had been painted bright blue. A woman drove the concern, and in it appeared a knife-grinding machine and a basket of cackling poultry, while some tent-poles stuck out behind. Will laughed at this spectacle, and called his wife's attention to it, whereon Phoebe and Damaris went as far as the gate of the hayfield to win a nearer view. The gypsies, however, had already passed, but Mrs. Blanchard found time to observe the sky-blue carriage and shake her head at it.

"What gwaines-on! Theer's no master minds 'mongst them people nowadays," she said. "Your faither wouldn't have let his folk make a show of themselves like that."

"They 'm mostly chicken stealers nowadays," declared Will; "an' so surly as dogs if you tell 'em to go 'bout theer business."

"Not to none o' your name—never," declared his mother. "No gypsy's gwaine to forget my husband in his son's time. Many gude qualities have they got, chiefly along o' living so much in the awpen air."

"An' gude appetites for the same cause! Go after Tim, wan of 'e. He've trotted down the road half a mile, an' be runnin' arter that blue concern as if't was a circus. Theer! Blamed if that damned gal in the thing ban't stoppin' to let un catch up! Now he'm feared, an' have turned tail an' be coming back. 'Tis all right; Ship be wi' un."

Presently the greater of Will's two ricks approached completion, and all the business of thatch and spar gads and rush ropes began. At his mother's desire he wasted no time, and toiled on, long after his party had returned to Newtake; but with the dusk he made an end for that day, stood up, rested his back, and scanned the darkening scene before descending.

At eveningtide there had spread over the jagged western outlines of the Moor an orange-tawny sunset, whereon the solid masses of the hills burnt into hazy gold, all fairy-bright, unreal, unsubstantial as a cloud-island above them, whose solitary and striated shore shone purple through molten fire.

Page 233

Detail vanished from the Moor; dim and dimensionless it spread to the transparent splendour of the horizon, and its eternal attributes of great vastness, great loneliness, great silence reigned together unfretted by particulars. Gathering gloom diminished the wide glory of the sky, and slowly robbed the pageant of its colour. Then rose each hill and undulation in a different shade of night, and every altitude mingled into the outlines of its neighbour. Nocturnal mists, taking grey substance against the darkness of the lower lands, wound along the rivers, and defined the depths and ridges of the valleys. Moving waters, laden with a last waning gleam, glided from beneath these vapoury exhalations, and even trifling rivulets, now invisible save for chance splashes of light, lacked not mystery as they moved from darkness into darkness with a song. Stars twinkled above the dewy sleep of the earth, and there brooded over all things a prodigious peace, broken only by batrachian croakings from afar.

These phenomena Will Blanchard observed; then yellow candle fires twinkled from the dark mass of the farmhouse, and he descended in splendid weariness and strode to supper and to bed.

Yet not much sleep awaited the farmer, for soon after midnight a gentle patter of small stones at his window awakened him. Leaping from his bed and looking into the darkness he saw a vague figure that raised its hand and beckoned without words. Fear for the hay was Will's first emotion, but no indication of trouble appeared. Once he spoke, and as he did so the figure beckoned again, then approached the door. Blanchard went down to find a woman waiting for him, and her first whispered word made him start violently and drop the candle and matches that he carried. His ears were opened and he knew Chris without seeing her face.

"I be come back—back home-along, brother Will," she said, very quietly. "I looked for mother to home, but found she weern't theer. An' I be sorry to the heart for all the sorrow I've brought 'e both. But it had to be. Strange thoughts an' voices was in me when Clem went, an' I had to hide myself or drown myself—so I went."

"God's gudeness! Lucky I be made o' strong stuff, else I might have thought 'e a ghost an' no less. Come in out the night, an' I'll light a candle. But speak soft. Us must break this very gentle to mother."

"Say you'll forgive me, will 'e? Can 'e do it? If you knawed half you'd say 'yes.' I'm grawed a auld, cold-hearted woman, wi' a grey hair here an' theer a'ready."

"So've I got wan an' another, tu, along o' worse sorrow than yours. Leastways as bad as yourn. Forgive 'e? A thousand times, an' thank Heaven you'm livin'! Wheer ever have 'e bided? An' me an' Grimbal searched the South Hams, an' North, tu, inside out for 'e, an' he put notices in the papers—dozens of 'em."

“Along with the gypsy folk for more ’n three year now. ‘Twas the movin’ an’ rovin’, and the opening my eyes on new things that saved me from gwaine daft. Sometimes us coined through Chagford, an’ then I’d shut my eyes tight an’ lie in the van, so’s not to see the things his eyes had seen—so’s not to knaw when us passed the cottage he lived in. But now I’ve got to feel I could come back again.”

Page 234

“You might have writ to say how you was faring.”

“I didn’t dare. You’d bin sure to find me, an’ I didn’t want ’e to then. ‘Tis awver an’ done, an’ ’twas for the best.”

“You’m a woman, an’ can say them silly words, an’ think ’em true in your heart, I s’pose. ‘For the best!’ I caan’t see much that happens for the best under my eyes. Will ’e have bite or sup?”

“No, nothin’. You get back to your bed. Us’ll talk in the marnin’. I’ll bide here. You an’ Phoebe be well, an’—an’ dear mother?”

“We’m well. You doan’t ax me after the fust cheel Phoebe had.”

“I knaw. I put some violets theer that very night. We were camped just above Chagford, not far from here.”

“Theer’s a li’l gal now, an’ a bwoy as I’ll tell’e about bimebye. A sheer miracle’t was that falled out the identical day I buried my Willy. No natural fashion of words can explain it. But that’ll keep. Now let me look at’e. Fuller in the body seemin’ly, an’ gypsy-brown, by God! So brown as me, every bit. Well, well, I caan’t say nothin’. I’m carried off my legs wi’ wonder, an’ joy, tu, for that matter. Next to Phoebe an’ mother I allus loved ’e best. Gimme a kiss. What a woman, to be sure! Like a thief in the night you went; same way you’ve comed back. Why couldn’t ’e wait till marnin’?”

“The childer—they grawed to love me that dear—also the men an’ women. They’ve been gude to me beyond power o’ words for faither’s sake. They knawed I was gwaine, an’ I left ’em asleep. ’T was how they found me when I runned away. I falled asleep from weariness on the Moor, an’ they woke me, an’ I thrawed in my lot with them from the day I left that pencil-written word for ’e on the window-ledge.”

“Me bein’ in the valley lookin’ for your drowned body the while! Women ’mazes me more the wiser I graw. Come this way, to the linhay. There’s a sweet bed o’ dry fern in the loft, and you must keep out o’ sight till mother’s told cunning. I’ll hit upon a way to break it to her so soon as she’s rose. An’ if I caan’t, Phoebe will. Come along quiet. An’ I be gwaine to lock ’e in, Chris, if’t is all the same to you. For why? Because you might fancy the van folks was callin’ to ‘e, an’ grow hungry for the rovin’ life again.”

She made no objection, and asked one more question as they went to the building.

“How be Mrs. Hicks, my Clem’s mother?”

“Alive; that’s all. A poor auld bed-lier now; just fading away quiet. But weak in the head as a baaby. Mother sees her now an’ again. She never talks of nothin’ but snuff. ’T is the awnly brightness in her life. She’s forgot everythin’ ‘bout the past, an’ if you went to

see her, she'd hold out her hand an' say, 'Got a little bit o' snuff for a auld body, dearie? 'an' that's all."

They talked a little longer, while Will shook down a cool bed of dry fern—not ill-suited to the sultry night; then Chris kissed him again, and he locked her in and returned to Phoebe.

Page 235

Though the wanderer presently slept peacefully enough, there was little more repose that night for her brother or his wife. Phoebe herself became much affected by the tremendous news. Then they talked into the early dawn before any promising mode of presenting Chris to her mother occurred to them. At breakfast Will followed a suggestion of Phoebe's, and sensibly lessened the shock of his announcement.

"A 'mazin' wonnerful dream I had last night," he began abruptly. "I thought I was roused long arter midnight by a gert knocking, an' I went down house an' found a woman at the door. 'Who be you?' I sez. 'Why, I be Chris, brother Will,' she speaks back, 'Chris, come home-along to mother an' you.' Then I seed it was her sure enough, an' she telled me all about herself, an' how she'd dwelt wi' gypsy people. Natural as life it weer, I assure 'e."

This parable moved Mrs. Blanchard more strongly than Will expected. She dropped her piece of bread and dripping, grew pale, and regarded her son with frightened eyes. Then she spoke.

"Tell me true, Will; don't 'e play with a mother 'bout a life-an'-death thing like her cheel. I heard voices in the night, an' thought 't was a dream—but—oh, bwoy, not Chris, not our awn Chris!—'t would 'most kill me for pure joy, I reckon."

"Listen to me, mother, an' eat your food. Us won't have no waste here, as you knaw very well. I haven't tawld 'e the end of the story. Chris, 'pearin' to be back again, I thinks, 'this will give mother palpitations, though 't is quite a usual thing for a darter to come back to her mother,' so I takes her away to the linhay for the night an' locks her in; an' if 't was true, she might be theer now, an' if it weer n't—"

Damaris rose, and held the table as she did so, for her knees were weak under her.

"I be strong—strong to meet my awn darter. Gimme the key, quick—the key, Will—do 'e hear me, child?"

"I'll come along with 'e."

"No, I say. What! Ban't I a young woman still? 'T was awnly essterday Chris corned in the world. You just bide with Phoebe, an' do what I tell 'e."

Will handed over the key at this order, and Mrs. Blanchard, grasping it without a word, passed unsteadily across the farmyard. She fumbled at the lock, and dropped the key once, but picked it up quickly before Will could reach her, then she unfastened the door and entered.

CHAPTER II

HOPE RENEWED

Jon Grimbal's desires toward Blanchard lay dormant, and the usual interests of life filled his mind. The attitude he now assumed was one of sustained patience and observation; and it may best be described in words of his own employment.

Visiting Drewsteignton, about a month after the return of Chris Blanchard to her own, the man determined to extend his ride and return by devious ways. He passed, therefore, where the unique Devonian cromlech stands hard by Bradmere pool. A lane separates this granite antiquity from the lake below, and as John Grimbal rode between them, his head high enough to look over the hedge, he observed a ladder raised against the Spinsters' Rock, as the cromlech is called, and a man with a tape-measure sitting on the cover stone.

Page 236

It was the industrious Martin, home once again. After his difference with Blanchard, the antiquary left Devon for another tour in connection with his work, and had devoted the past six months to study of prehistoric remains in Guernsey, Herm, and other of the Channel Islands.

Before departing, he had finally regained his brother's friendship, though the close fraternal amity of the past appeared unlikely to return between them. Now John recognised Martin, and his first impulse produced pleasure, while his second was one of irritation. He felt glad to see his brother; he experienced annoyance that Martin should thus return to Chagford and not call immediately at the Red House.

"Hullo! Home again! I suppose you forgot you had a brother?"

"John, by all that's surprising! Forget? Was it probable? Have I so many flesh-and-blood friends to remember? I arrived yesterday and called on you this morning, only to find you were at Drewsteignton; so I came to verify some figures at the cromlech, hoping we might meet the sooner."

He was beside his brother by this time, and they shook hands over the hedge.

"I'll leave the ladder and walk by you and have a chat."

"It's too hot to ride at a walk. Come you here to Bradmere Pool. We can lie down in the shade by the water, and I'll tether my horse for half an hour."

Five minutes later the brothers sat under the shadow of oaks and beeches at the edge of a little tarn set in fine foliage.

"Pleasant to see you," said Martin. "And looking younger I do think. It's the open air. I'll wager you don't get slimmer in the waist-belt though."

"Yes, I'm all right."

"What's the main interest of life for you now?"

John reflected before answering.

"Not quite sure. Depends on my mood. Just been buying a greyhound bitch at Drewsteignton. I'm going coursing presently. A kennel will amuse me. I spend most of my time with dogs. They never change. I turn to them naturally. But they overrate humanity."

"Our interests are so different. Yet both belong to the fresh air and the wild places remote from towns. My book is nearly finished. I shall publish it in a year's time, or even less."

“Have you come back to stop?”

“Yes, for good and all now.”

“You have found no wife in your wanderings?”

“No, John. I shall never marry. That was a dark spot in my life, as it was in yours. We both broke our shins over that.”

“I broke nothing—but another man’s bones.”

He was silent for a moment, then proceeded abruptly on this theme.

“The old feeling is pretty well dead though. I look on and watch the man ruining himself; I see his wife getting hard-faced and thin, and I wonder what magic was in her, and am quite content. I wouldn’t kick him a yard quicker to the devil if I could. I watch him drift there.”

Page 237

“Don’t talk like that, dear old chap. You’re not the man you pretend to be, and pretend to think yourself. Don’t sour your nature so. Let the past lie and go into the world and end this lonely existence.”

“Why don’t you?”

“The circumstances are different. I am not a man for a wife. You are, if ever there was one.”

“I had him within a hair’s-breadth once,” resumed the other inconsequently. “Blanchard, I mean. There ’s a secret against him. You didn’t know that, but there is. Some black devilry for all I can tell. But I missed it. Perhaps if I knew it would quicken up my spirit and remind me of all the brute made me endure.”

“Yet you say the old feeling is dead!”

“So it is—starved. Hicks knew. He broke his neck an hour too soon. It was like a dream of a magnificent banquet I had some time ago. I woke with my mouth watering, just as the food was uncovered, and I felt so damned savage at being done out of the grub that I got up and went down-stairs and had half a pint of champagne and half a cold roast partridge! I watch Blanchard go down the hill—that’s all. If this knowledge had come to me when I was boiling, I should have used it to his utmost harm, of course. Now I sometimes doubt, even if I could hang the man, whether I should take the trouble to do it.”

“Get away from him and all thought of him.”

“I do. He never crosses my mind unless he crosses my eyes. I ride past Newtake occasionally, and see him sweating and slaving and fighting the Moor. Then I laugh, as you laugh at a child building sand castles against an oncoming tide. Poor fool!”

“If you pity, you might find it in your heart to forgive.”

“My attitude is assured. We will call it one of mere indifference. You made up that row over the gate-post when his first child died, didn’t you?”

“Yes, yes. We shall be friendly—we must be, if only for the sake of the memory of Chris. You and I are frank to-day. But you saw long ago what I tried to hide, so it is no news to you. You will understand. When Hicks died I thought perhaps after years—but that’s over now. She ’s gone.”

“Didn’t you know? She ’s back again.”

“Back! Good God!”

John laughed at his brother's profound agitation.

"Like as not you'd see her if you went over Rushford Bridge. She 's back with her mother. Queer devils, all of them; but I suppose you can have her for the asking now if you couldn't before. Damnably like her brother she is. She passed me two days ago, and looked at me as if I was transparent, or a mere shadow hiding something else."

A rush of feeling overwhelmed Martin before this tremendous news. He could not trust himself to speak. Then a great hope wrestled with him and conquered. In his own exaltation he desired to see all whom he loved equally lifted up towards happiness.

"I wish to Heaven you would open your eyes and raise them from your dogs and find a wife, John."

Page 238

“Ah! We all want the world to be a pretty fairy tale for our friends. You scent your own luck ahead, and wish me to be lucky too. I ought to thank you for that; but, instead, I’ll give you some advice. Don’t bother yourself with the welfare of others; to do that is to ruin your own peace of mind and court more trouble than your share. Every big-hearted man is infernally miserable—he can’t help it. The only philosopher’s stone is a stone heart; that is what the world ’s taught me.”

“Never! You’re echoing somebody else, not yourself, I’ll swear. I know you better. We must see much of each other in the future. I shall buy a little trap that I may drive often to the Red House. And I should like to dedicate my book to you, if you would take it as a compliment.”

“No, no; give it to somebody who may be able to serve you. I’m a fool in such things and know no more about the old stones than the foxes and rabbits that burrow among them. Come, I must get home. I’m glad you have returned, though I hated you when you supported them against me; but then love of family ’s a mere ghost against love of women. Besides, how seldom it is that a man’s best friend is one of his own blood.”

They rose and departed. John trotted away through Sandypark, having first made Martin promise to sup with him that night, and the pedestrian proceeded by the nearest road to Rushford Bridge.

Chris he did not see, but it happened that Mr. Lyddon met him just outside Monks Barton, and though Martin desired no such thing at the time, nothing would please the miller but that his friend should return to the farm for some conversation.

“Home again, an’ come to glasses, tu! Well, they clear the sight, an’ we must all wear ’em sooner or late. ’T is a longful time since I seed ’e, to be sure.”

“All well, I hope?”

“Nothing to grumble at. Billy an’ me go down the hill as gradual an’ easy as any man ‘s a right to expect. But he’s gettin’ so bald as a coot; an’ now the shape of his head comes to be knawed, theer ’s wonnerful bumps ‘pon it. Then your brother’s all for sport an’ war. A Justice of the Peace they’ve made un, tu. He’s got his volunteer chaps to a smart pitch, theer’s no gainsaying. A gert man for wild diversions he is. Gwaine coursin’ wi’ long-dogs come winter, they tell me.”

“And how are Phoebe and her husband?”

“A little under the weather just now; but I’m watchin’ ’em unbeknawnst. Theer’s a glimmer of hope in the dark if you’ll believe it, for Will ackshally comed to me esster-night to ax my advice—*my* advice—on a matter of stock! What do ’e think of that?”

“He was fighting a losing battle in a manly sort of way it seemed to me when last I saw him.”

“So he was, and is. I give him eighteen month or thereabout—then’ll come the end of it.”

“The ‘end’! What end? You won’t let them starve? Your daughter and the little children?”

Page 239

“You mind your awn business, Martin,” said Mr. Lyddon, with nods and winks. “No, they ban’t gwaine to starve, but my readin’ of Will’s carater has got to be worked out. Tribulation’s what he needs to sweeten him, same as winter sweetens sloes; an’ ’t is tribulation I mean him to have. If Phoebe’s self caan’t change me or hurry me ’t is odds you won’t. Theer’s a darter for ’e! My Phoebe. She’ll often put in a whole week along o’ me still. You mind this: if it’s grawn true an’ thrawn true from the plantin’, a darter’s love for a faither lasts longer ’n any mortal love at all as I can hear tell of. It don’t wear out wi’ marriage, neither, as I’ve found, thank God. Phoebe rises above auld age and the ugliness an’ weakness an’ bad temper of auld age. Even a poor, doddering ancient such as I shall be in a few years won’t weary her; she’ll look back’ards with butivul clear eyes, an’ won’t forget. She’ll see—not awnly a cracked, shrivelled auld man grizzling an’ grumbling in the chimbley corner, but what the man was wance—a faither, strong an’ lusty, as dandled her, an’ worked for, an’ loved her with all his heart in the days of his bygone manhood. Ess, my Phoebe’s all that; an’ she comes here wi’ the child; an’ it pleases me, for rightly onderstood, childern be a gert keeper-off of age.”

“I’m sure she’s a good daughter to you, Miller. And Will?”

“Doan’t you fret. We’ve worked it out in our minds—me an’ Billy; an’ if two auld blids like us can’t hatch a bit o’ wisdom, what brains is worth anything? We’m gwaine to purify the awdacious young chap ’so as by fire,’ in holy phrase.”

“You’re dealing with a curious temperament.”

“I’m dealing with a damned fule,” said Mr. Lyddon frankly; “but theer’s fules an’ fules, an’ this partickler wan’s grawed dear to me in some ways despite myself. ’T is Phoebe’s done it at bottom I s’pose. The man’s so full o’ life an’ hope. Enough energy in un for ten men; an’ enough folly for twenty. Yet he’ve a gude heart an’ never lied in’s life to my knawledge.”

“That’s to give him praise, and high praise. How’s his sister? I hear she’s returned after all.”

“Ess—naughty twoad of a gal—runned arter the gypsies! But she’m sobered now. Funny to think her mother, as seemed like a woman robbed of her right hand when Chris went, an’ beginned to graw into the sere onusual quick for a widow, took new life as soon as her gal comed back. Just shaws what strength lies in a darter, as I tell ’e.”

The old man’s garrulity gained upon him, and though Martin much desired to be gone, he had not the heart to hasten.

“A darter’s the thing an’—but’t is a secret yet—awnly you’ll see what you’ll see. Coourse Billy’s very well for gathered wisdom and high conversation ’bout the world to come; but he ban’t like a woman round the house, an’ for all his ripe larnin’ he’ll strike

fire sometimes—mostly when I gives him a bad beating at ‘Oaks’ of a evenin’. Then he’m so acid as auld rhubarb, an’ dots off to his bed wi’out a ‘gude-night.’”

Page 240

For another ten minutes Mr. Lyddon chattered, but at the end of that time Martin escaped and proceeded homewards. His head throbbed and his mind was much excited by the intelligence of the day. The yellow stubbles, the green meadows, the ploughed lands similarly spun before him and whirled up to meet the sky. As he re-entered the village a butcher's cart nearly knocked him down. Hope rose in a glorious new sunrise—the hope that he had believed was set for ever. Then, passing that former home of Clement Hicks and his mother, did Grimbal feel great fear and misgiving. The recollection of Chris and her love for the dead man chilled him. He remembered his own love for Chris when he thought she must be dead. He told himself that he must hope nothing; he repeated to himself how fulfilment of his desire, now revived after long sleep, might still be as remote as when Chris Blanchard said him nay in the spring wastes under Newtake five years and more ago. His head dinned this upon his heart; but his heart would not believe and responded with a sanguine song of great promise.

CHAPTER III

ANSWERED

At a spot in the woods some distance below Newtake, Martin Grimbal sat and waited, knowing she whom he sought must pass that way. He had called at the farm and been welcomed by Phoebe. Will was on the peat beds, and, asking after Chris, he learnt that she had gone into the valley to pick blackberries and dewberries, where they already began to ripen in the coombs.

Under aisles of woodland shadows he sat, where the river murmured down mossy stairs of granite in a deep dingle. Above him, the varying foliage of oak and ash and silver birch was already touched with autumn, and trembled into golden points where bosses of pristine granite, crowned with the rowan's scarlet harvest, arose above their luxuriance. The mellow splendour of these forests extended to the river's brink, along which towered noble masses of giant osmunda, capped by seed spears of tawny red. Here and there gilded lances splashed into the stream or dotted its still pools with scattered sequins of sunshine, where light winnowed through the dome of the leaves; and at one spot, on a wrinkled root that wound crookedly from the alder into the river, there glimmered a halcyon, like an opal on a miser's bony finger. From above the tree-tops there sounded cynic bird-laughter, and gazing upwards Martin saw a magpie flaunt his black and white plumage across the valley; while at hand the more musical merriment of a woodpecker answered him.

Then a little child's laugh came to his ear, rippling along with the note of the babbling water, and one moment later a small, sturdy boy appeared. A woman accompanied him. She had slipped a foot into the river, and thus awakened the amusement of her companion.

Chris steadied herself after the mishap, balanced her basket more carefully, then stooped down to pick some of the berries that had scattered from it on the bank. When she rose a man with a brown face and soft grey eyes gleaming through gold-rimmed spectacles appeared immediately before.

Page 241

“Thank God I see you alive again. Thank God!” he said with intense feeling, as he took her hand and shook it warmly. “The best news that ever made my heart glad, Chris.”

She welcomed him, and he, looking into her eyes, saw new knowledge there, a shadow of sobriety, less of the old dance and sparkle. But he remembered the little tremulous updrawing of her lip when a smile was born, and her voice rang fuller and sweeter than any music he had ever heard since last she spoke to him. A smile of welcome she gave him, indeed, and a pressure of his hand that sent magic messages with it to the very core of him. He felt his blood leap and over his glasses came a dimness.

“I was gwaine to write first moment I heard ‘e was home. An’ I wish I had, for I caan’t tell ’e what I feel. To think of ‘e searchin’ the wide world for such a good-for-nought! I thank you for your generous gudeness, Martin. I’ll never forget it—never. But I wasn’t worth no such care.”

“Not worth it! It proved the greatest, bitterest grief of all my life—but one—that I couldn’t find you. We grew by cruel stages to think—to think you were dead. The agony of that for us! But, thank God, it was not so. All at least is well with you now?”

“All ban’t never well with men an’ women. But I’m more fortunate than I deserve to be, and can make myself of use. I’ve lived a score of years since we met. An I’ve comed back to find’t is a difficult world for those I love best, unfortunately.”

Thus, in somewhat disjointed fashion, Chris made answer.

“Sit a while and speak to me,” replied Martin. “The laddie can play about. Look at him marching along with that great branch of king fern over his shoulder!”

“’T is an elfin cheel some ways. Wonnerful eyes he’ve got. They burn me if I look at’em close,” said Chris. She regarded Timothy without sentiment and her eyes were bright and hard.

“I hope he will turn out well. Will spoke of him the other day. He is very fond of the child. It is singularly like him, too—a sort of little pocket edition of him.”

“So I’ve heard others say. Caan’t see it at all myself. Look at the eyes of un.”

“Will believes the boy has got very unusual intelligence and may go far.”

“May go so far as the workhouse,” she answered, with a laugh. Then, observing that her reply pained Martin, Chris snatched up small Tim as he passed by and pressed him to her breast and kissed him.

“You like him better than you think, Chris—poor little motherless thing.”

“Perhaps I do. I wonder if his mother ever looks hungry towards Newtake when she passes by?”

“Perhaps others took him and told the mother that he was dead.”

“She’s dead herself more like. Else the thing wouldn’t have falled out.”

There was a pause, then Martin talked of various matters. But he could not fight for long against the desire of his heart and presently plunged, as he had done five years before, into a proposal.

Page 242

“He being gone—poor Clem—do you think—? Have you thought, I mean? Has it made a difference, Chris? ’T is so hard to put it into words without sounding brutal and callous. Only men are selfish when they love.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

A sudden inspiration prompted his reply. He said nothing for a moment, but with a hand that shook somewhat, drew forth his pocketbook, opened it, fumbled within, and then handed over to Chris the brown ruins of flowers long dead.

“You picked them,” he said slowly; “you picked them long ago and flung them away from you when you said ‘No’ to me—said it so kindly in the past. Take them in your hand again.”

“Dead bluebells,” she answered. “Ess, I can call home the time. To think you gathered them up!” She looked at him with something not unlike love in her eyes and fingered the flowers gently. “You’m a gude man, Martin —the husband for a gude lass. Best to find one if you can. Wish I could help’e.”

“Oh, Chris, there’s only one woman in the world for me. Could you—even now? Could you let me stand between you and the world? Could you, Chris? If you only knew what I cannot put into words. I’d try so hard to make you happy.”

“I knaw, I knaw. But theer’s no human life so long as the road to happiness, Martin. And yet—”

He took her hand and for a moment she did not resist him. Then little Tim’s voice chimed out merrily at the stream margin, and the music had instant effect upon Chris Blanchard.

She drew her hand from Martin and the next moment he saw his dead bluebells hurrying away and parting company for ever on the dancing water. Chris watched them until they vanished; then she turned and looked at him, to find that he grew very pale and agitated. Even his humility had hardly foreseen this decisive answer after the yielding attitude Chris first assumed when she suffered him to hold her hand. He looked into her face inquiring and frightened. The silence that followed was broken by continued laughter and shouting from Timothy. Then Martin tried to connect the child’s first merriment with the simultaneous change in the mood of the woman he worshipped, but failed to do so.

At that moment Chris spoke. She made utterance under the weight of great emotion and with evident desire to escape the necessity of a direct negative, while yet leaving her refusal of Martin’s offer implicit and distinct.

“I mind when a scatter of paper twinkled down this river just like them dead blossoms. Clem thrawed them, an’ they floated away to the sea, past daffadowndillies an’ budding lady-ferns an’ such-like. ’T was a li’l bit of poetry he’d made up to please me—and I, fule as I was, didn’t say the right thing when he axed me what I thought; so Clem tore the rhymes in pieces an’ sent them away. He said the river would onderstand. An’ the river onderstands why I dropped them dead blossoms in, tu. A wise, ancient stream, I doubt. An’ you ‘m wise, tu; an’ can take my answer wi’out any more words, as will awnly make both our hearts ache.”

Page 243

“Not even if I wait patiently? You couldn’t marry me, dear Chris? You couldn’t get to love me?”

“I couldn’t marry you. I’m a widow in heart for all time. But I thank God for the gude-will of such a man as you. I cherish it and ’t will be dear to me all my life. But I caan’t come to ’e, so doan’t ax it.”

“Yet you’re young to live for a memory, Chris.”

“Better ’n nothing. And listen; I’ll tell you this, if ’t will make my ‘No’ sound less hard to your ear. I loves you—I loves you better ’n any living man ‘cept Will, an’ not less than I love even him. I wish I could bring ‘e a spark of joy by marryin’ you, for you was allus very gude, an’ thought kindly of Clem when but few did. I’d marry you if ’t was awnly for that; yet it caan’t never be, along o’ many reasons. You must take that cold comfort, Martin.”

He sighed, then spoke.

“So be it, dear one. I shall never ask again. God knows what holds you back if you can even love me a little.”

“Ess, God knaws—everything.”

“I must not cry out against that. Yet it makes it all the harder. To think that you will dedicate all your beautiful life to a memory! it only makes my loss the greater, and shows the depths of you to me.”

She uttered a little scream and her cheek paled, and she put up her hands with the palms outward as though warding away his words.

“Doan’t ’e say things like that or give me any praise, for God’s sake. I caan’t bear it. I be weak, weak flesh an’ blood, weaker ’n water. If you could only see down in my heart, you’d be cured of your silly love for all time.”

He did not answer, but picked up her basket and proceeded with her out of the valley. Chris gave a hand to the child, and save for Tim’s prattle there was no speaking.

At length they reached Newtake, when Martin yielded up the basket and bade Chris “good-night.” He had already turned, when she called him back in a strange voice.

“Kiss the li’l bwoy, will ’e? I want ‘e to. I’m that fond of un. An’ he ’peared to take to ‘e; an’ he said ‘By-by’ twice to ’e, but you didn’t hear un.”

Then the man kissed Tim on a small, purple-stained mouth, and saw his eyes very lustrous with sleep, for the day was done.

Woman and child disappeared; the sacking nailed along the bottom of Newtake Gate to keep the young chicks in the farmyard rustled over the ground, and Martin, turning his face away, moved homewards.

But the veil was not lifted for him; he did not understand. A secret, transparent enough to any who regarded Chris Blanchard and her circumstances from a point without the theatre of action, still remained concealed from all who loved her.

CHAPTER IV

THE END OF THE FIGHT

Will Blanchard was of the sort who fight a losing battle,

> "Still puffing in the dark at one poor coal,
> Held on by hope till the last spark is out."

Page 244

But the extinction of his ambitions, the final failure of his enterprise happened somewhat sooner than Miller Lyddon had predicted. There dawned a year when, just as the worst of the winter was past and hope began to revive for another season, a crushing catastrophe terminated the struggle.

Mr. Blee it was who brought the ill news to Monks Barton, having first dropped it at Mrs. Blanchard's cottage and announced it promiscuously about the village. Like a dog with a bone he licked the intelligence over and, by his delay in imparting the same, reduced his master to a very fever of irritation.

"Such a gashly thing! Of all fules! The last straw I do think. He's got something to grumble at now, poor twoad. Your son-in-law; but now—theer—gormed if I knaw how to tell 'e!"

Alarmed at this prelude, with its dark hints of unutterable woe, Mr. Lyddon took off his spectacles in some agitation, and prayed to know the worst without any long-drawn introduction.

"I'll come to it fast enough, I warn 'e. To think after years an' years he didn't knaw the duffer'nce 'twixt a bullock an' a sheep! Well—well! Of coourse us knawed times was tight, but Jack-o'-Lantern be to the end of his dance now. 'T is all awver."

"What's the matter? Come to it, caan't 'e?"

"No ill of the body—not to him or the fam'ly. An' you must let me tell it out my awn way. Well, things bein' same as they are, the bwoy caan't hide it. Dammy! Theer's patches in the coat of un now—neat sewed, I'll grant 'e, but a patch is a patch; an' when half a horse's harness is odds an' ends o' rope, then you knaw wi'out tellin' wheer a man be driving to. 'T is 'cordin' to the poetry!—

"'Out to elbows,
Out to toes,
Out o' money,
Out o' clothes.'

But—"

"Caan't 'e say what's happened, you chitterin' auld magpie? I'll go up village for the news in a minute. I lay 'tis knawn theer."

"Ban't I tellin' of 'e? 'Tis like this. Will Blanchard's been mixin' a bit of chopped fuzz with the sheep's meal these hard times, like his betters. But now I've seed hisself today, lookin' so auld as Cosdon 'bout it. He was gwaine to the horse doctor to Moreton. An' he tawld me to keep my mouth shut, which I've done for the most paart."

“A little fuzz chopped fine doan’t hurt sheep.”

“Just so. ’Cause why? They aint got no ‘bibles’ in their innards; but he’ve gone an’ given it same way to the bullocks.”

“Gude God!”

“‘Tis death to beasts wi’ ‘bibles.’ An’ death it is. The things caan’t eat such stuff’ cause it sticketh an’ brings inflammation. I seed same fule’s trick done wance thirty year ago; an’ when the animals weer cut awpen, theer ‘bibles’ was hell-hot wi’ the awfulest inflammation ever you heard tell of.”

“How many’s down? ’Twas all he had to count upon.”

“Awnly eight standin’ when he left. I could have cried ’bout it when he tawld me. He ’m clay in the Potter’s hand for sartain. Theer’s nought squenches a chap like havin’ the bailiffs in.”

Page 245

“Cruel luck! I’d meant to let him be sold out for his gude—but now.”

“Do what you meant to. Doan’t go back on it. ’Tis for his gude. ’Twas his awn mistake. He tawld me the blame was his. Let un get on the bed rock. Then he’ll be meek as a worm.”

“I doubt it. A sale of his goods will break his heart.”

“Not it! He haven’t got much as’ll be hard to paart from. Stern measures—stern measures for his everlastin’ welfare. Think of the wild-fire sawl of un! Never yet did a sawl want steadin’ worse’n his. Keep you to the fust plan, and he’ll thank’e yet.”

Elsewhere two women—his wife and sister—failed utterly in well-meaning efforts to comfort the stricken farmer. Presently, before nightfall, Mrs. Blanchard also arrived at Newtake, and Will listened dully with smouldering eyes as his mother talked. The veterinary surgeon from Moreton had come, but his efforts were vain. Only two beasts out of five-and-twenty still lived.

“Send for butcher,” he said. “He’ll be more use than I can be. The thing is done and can’t be undone.”

Chris entered most closely into her brother’s feelings and spared him the expressions of sorrow and sympathy which stung him, even from his mother’s lips, uttered at this crisis. She set about preparing supper, which weeping Phoebe had forgotten.

“You’ll weather it yet, bwoy,” Mrs. Blanchard said.

“Theer’s a little bit as I’ve got stowed away for’e; an’ come the hay—”

“Doan’t talk that way. ’Tis done with now. I’m quite cool’pon it. We must go as we’m driven. No more gropin’ an’ fightin’ on this blasted wilderness for me, that’s all. I be gwaine to turn my back ’pon it—fog an’ filthy weather an’ ice an’ snow. You wants angels from heaven to help ‘e, if you’re to do any gude here; an’ heaven’s long tired o’ me an’ mine. So I’ll make shift to do wi’out. An’ never tell me no more lies ‘bout God helpin’ them as helps themselves, ’cause I’ve proved it ban’t so. I be gwaine to furrin’ lands to dig for gawld or di’monds. The right build o’ man for gawld-seekin’, me; ’cause I’ve larned patience an’ caan’t be choked off a job tu easy.”

“Think twice. Bad luck doan’t dog a man for ever. An’ Phoebe an’ the childer.”

“My mind’s made up. I figured it out comin’ home from Moreton. I’m away in six weeks or less. A chap what’s got to dig for a livin’ may just as well handle his tools where theer’s summat worth findin’ hid in the land, as here, on this black, damned airth, wheer your pick strikes fire out o’ stone twenty times a day. The Moor’s the Moor. Everybody

knaws the way of it. Scratch its faace an' it picks your pocket an' breaks your heart—-not as I've got a heart can be broken."

"If 'e could awnly put more trust in the God of your faithers, my son. He done for them, why shouldn't He do for you?"

"Better ax Him. Tired of the fam'ly, I reckon."

Page 246

“You hurt your mother, Will, tellin’ so wicked as that.”

“An’ faither so cruel,” sobbed Phoebe. “I doan’t knaw what ever us have done to set him an’ God against us so. I’ve tried that hard; an’ you’ve toiled till the muscles shawed through your skin; an’ the li’l bwoy took just as he beginned to string words that butivul; an’ no sign of another though’t is my endless prayer.”

“The ways of Providence—” began Mrs. Blanchard drearily; but Will stopped her, as she knew he would.

“Doan’t mother—I caan’t stand no more on that head today. I’ll dare anybody to name Providence more in my house, so long as ’tis mine. Theer’s the facts to shout out ’gainst that rot. A honest, just, plain-dealin’ man—an’ look at me.”

“Meantime we’re ruined an’ faither doan’t hold out a finger.”

“Take it stern an’ hard like me. ‘Tis all chance drawin’ of prize or blank in gawld diggin’. The ‘new chums,’ as they call ’em, often finds the best gawld, ‘cause they doan’t knaw wheer to look for it, an’ goes pokin’ about wheer a skilled man wouldn’t. That’s the crooked way things happen in this poor world.”

“You wouldn’t go—not while I lived, sure? I couldn’t draw breath comfortable wi’out knawin’ you was breathin’ the same air, my son.”

“You’ll live to knaw I was in the right. If fortune doan’t come to you, you must go to it, I reckon. Anyways, I ban’t gwaine to bide here a laughing-stock to Chagford; an’ you’m the last to ax me to.”

“Miller would never let Phoebe go.”

“I shouldn’t say ‘by your leave’ to him, I promise’e. He can look on an’ see the coat rottin’ off my back in this desert an’ watch his darter gwaine thin as a lath along o’ taking so much thought. He can look on at us, hisself so comfortable as a maggot in a pear, an’ see. Not that I’d take help—not a penny from any man. I’m not gwaine to fail. I’ll be a snug chap yet.”

The stolid Chown entered at this moment.

“Butcher’ll be up bimebye. An’ the last of em’s failed down,” he said.

“So be it. Now us’ll taake our supper,” answered his master.

The meal was ready and presently Blanchard, whose present bitter humour prompted him to simulate a large indifference, made show of enjoying his food. He brought out the brandy for his mother, who drank a little with her supper, and helped himself liberally

twice or thrice until the bottle was half emptied. The glamour of the spirit made him optimistic, and he spoke with the pseudo-philosophy that alcohol begets.

“Might have been worse, come to think of it. If the things weren’t choked, I doubt they’d been near starved. ‘Most all the hay’s done, an’ half what’s left—a load or so—I’d promised to a chap out Manaton way. But theer’t is—my hand be forced, that’s all. So time’s saved, if you look at it from a right point.”

“You’m hard an’ braave, an’ you’ve got a way with you ’mong men. Faace life, same as faither did, an’ us’ll look arter Phoebe an’ the childer,” said Chris.

Page 247

“I couldn’t leave un,” declared Will’s wife. “’T is my duty to keep along wi’un for better or worse.”

“Us’ll talk ‘bout all that later. I be gwaine to act prompt an’ sell every stick, an’ then away, a free man.”

“All our furniture an’ property!” moaned Phoebe, looking round her in dismay.

“All—to the leastest bit o’ cracked cloam.”

“A forced sale brings nought,” sighed Damaris.

“Theer’s hunderds o’ pounds o’ gude chattels here, an’ they doan’t go for a penny less than they ’m worth. Because I’m down, ban’t no reason for others to try to rob me. If I doan’t get fair money I’ll make a fire wi’ the stuff an’ burn every stick of it.”

“The valuer man, Mr. Bambridge, must be seen, an’ bills printed out an’ sticked ‘pon barn doors an’ such-like, same as when Mrs. Lezzard died,” said Phoebe. “What’ll faither think then?”

Will laughed bitterly.

“I’ll see a few’s dabbed up on his awn damned outer walls, if I’ve got to put ’em theer myself. An’ as to the lists, I’ll make ’em this very night. Ban’t my way to let the dust fall upon a job marked for doin’. To-night I’ll draw the items.”

“Us was gwaine to stay along with ’e, Will,” said his mother.

“Very gude—as you please. Make shake-downs in the parlour, an’ I’ll write in the kitchen when you’m gone to bed. Set the ink an’ pen an’ paper out arter you’ve cleared away. I’m allowed to be peart enough in matters o’ business anyway, though no farmer o’ course, arter this.”

“None will dare to say any such thing,” declared Phoebe. “You can’t do miracles more than others.”

“I mind when Ellis, to Two Streams Farm, lost a mort o’ bullocks very same way,” said Mrs. Blanchard.

“’Tis that as they’ll bring against me an’ say, wi’ such a tale in my knawledge, I ought to been wiser. But I never heard tell of it before, though God knows I’ve heard the story often enough to-day.”

It was now dark, and Will, lighting a lantern, rose and went out into the yard. From the kitchen window his women watched him moving here and there; while, as he passed,

the light revealed great motionless, rufous shapes on every hand. The corpses of the beasts hove up into the illumination and then vanished again as the narrow circle of lantern light bobbed on, jerking to the beat of Will's footsteps. From the window Damaris observed her son make a complete perambulation of his trouble without comment. Then a little emotion trembled on her tongue.

"God's hand be lifted 'gainst the bwoy, same as 't was 'gainst the patriarch Job seemin'ly. Awnly he bent to the rod and Will—"

"He'm noble an' grand under his sorrows. Who should knaw but me?" cried Phoebe. "A man in ten thousand, he is, an' never yields to no rod. He'll win his way yet; an' I be gwaine to cleave to un if he travels to the other end o' the airth."

"I doan't judge un, gal. God knaws he's been the world to me since his faither died. He'm my dear son. But if he'd awnly bend afore the A'mighty breaks him."

Page 248

“He’s got me.”

“Ess, an’ he’m mouldin’ you to his awn vain pride an’ wrong ways o’ thinking. If you could lead un right, ’t would be a better wife’s paart.”

“He’m wiser’n me, an’ stronger. Ban’t my place to think against him. Us’ll go our ways, childern tu, an’ turn our backs ’pon this desert. I hate the plaace now, same as Will.”

Chris here interrupted Phoebe and called her from the other room.

“Wheer’s the paper an’ ink to? I be setting out the things against Will comes in. He axed for ’em to be ready, ‘cause theer’s a deal o’ penmanship afore him to-night. An’ wheer’s that li’l dictionary what I gived un years ago? I lay he’ll want it.”

CHAPTER V

TWO MIGHTY SURPRISES

Will returned from survey of his tribulation. Hope was dead for the moment, and death of hope in a man of Blanchard’s character proved painful. The writing materials distracted his mind. Beginning without interest, his composition speedily absorbed him; and before the task was half completed, he already pictured it set out in great black or red print upon conspicuous places.

“I reckon it’ll make some of ’em stare to see the scholar I am, anyways,” he reflected.

Through the hours of night he wrote and re-wrote. His pen scratched along, echoed by an exactly similar sound from the wainscots, where mice nibbled in the silence. Anon, from the debris of his composition, a complete work took shape; and when Phoebe awoke at three o’clock, discovered her husband was still absent, and sought him hurriedly, she found the inventory completed and Will just fastening its pages together with a piece of string. He was wide awake and in a particularly happy humour.

“Ban’t you never comin’ to bed? ’T is most marnin’,” she said.

“Just comin’. What a job! Look here—twelve pages. I be surprised myself to think how blamed well I’ve got through wi’ it. You doan’t knaw what you can do till you try. I used to wonder at Clem’s cleverness wi’ a pen; but I be purty near so handy myself an’ never guessed it!”

“I’m sure you’ve made a braave job of it. I’ll read it fust thing to-morrow.”

“You shall hear it now.”

“Not now, Will; ‘t is so late an’ I’m three paarts asleep. Come to bed, dearie.”

“Oh—if you doan’t care—if it’s nought to you that I’ve sit up all night slavin’ for our gude—”

“Then I’ll hear it now. Coourse I knaw ‘t is fine readin’. Awnly I thought you’d be weary.”

“Sit here an’ put your toes to the heat.”

He set Phoebe in the chimney corner, wrapped his coat round her, and threw more turf on the fire.

“Now you’m vitty; an’ if theer’s anything left out, tell me.”

“I lay, wi’ your memory, you’ve forgot little enough.”

“I lay I haven’t. All’s here; an’ ‘t is a gert wonder what a lot o’ gude things us have got. They did ought to fetch a couple o’ hunderd pound at least, if the sale’s carried out proper.”

Page 249

“They didn’t cost so much as that.”

“By Gor! Didn’t they? Well, set out in full, like this here, they do sound as if they ought to be worth it. Now, I’ll read ’em to see how it all sounds in spoken words.”

He cleared his throat and began:

“’Sale this day to Newtake Farm, near Chagford, Dartmoor, Devonshire. Mr. William Blanchard, being about to leave England for foreign parts, desires to sell at auction his farm property, household goods, cloam, and effects, *etc*., *etc*., as per items below, to the best bidder. Many things so good as new.’ How do ’e like that, Phoebe?”

“Butivul; but do ’e mean in all solemn seriousness to go out England? ’T is a awful thought, come you look at it close.”

“Ess, ‘t is a gert, bold thing to do; but I doan’t fear it. I be gettin’ into a business-like way o’ lookin’ ‘pon life of late; an’ I counts the cost an’ moves arter, as is the right order. Listen to these items set out here. If they ’m printed big, wan under t’other, same as I’ve wrote ’em, they’ll fill a barn door purty nigh!”

Then he turned to his papers.

“’The said goods and chattels are as follows, namely,’—reg’lar lawyer’s English, you see, though how I comed to get it so pat I caan’t tell. Yet theer ’tis—’namely, 2 washing trays; 3 zinc buckets; 1 meat preserve; 1 lantern; 2 bird-cages; carving knife and steel (Sheffield make)—’”

“Do’e judge that’s the best order, Will?”

“Coourse ‘t is! I thought that out specially. Doan’t go thrawin’ me from my stride in the middle. Arter ‘Sheffield make,’ ’half-dozen knives and forks; sundry ditto, not so good; hand saw; 2 hammers; 1 cleaver; salting trendle; 3 wheelbarrows—’”

“Doan’t forget you lent wan of ’em to Farmer Thackwell.”

“No, I gived it to un, him bein’ pushed for need of wan. It slipped my memory. ‘2 wheelbarrows.’ Then I goes on, ’pig stock; pig trough; 2 young breeding sows; 4 garden tools; 2 peat cutters; 2 carts; 1 market trap; 1 empty cask; 1 Dutch oven; 1 funnel; 2 firkins and a cider jib; small sieve; 3 pairs new Bedford harrows; 1 chain harrow (out of repair).’ You see all’s straight enough, which it ban’t in some sales. No man shall say he’s got less than full value.”

“You’m the last to think of such a thing.”

“I am. It goes on like this: ’5 mattocks; 4 digging picks; 4 head chains; 1 axe; sledge and wedges; also hooks, eyes, and hasps for hard wood.’ Never used ’em all the time us been here. ’2 sets of trap harness, much worn.’ I ban’t gwaine to sell the dogs—eh? Us won’t sell Ship or your li’l terrier. What do ’e say?”

“No. Nobody would buy two auld dogs, for that matter.”

“Though how a upland dog like Ship be gwaine to faace the fiery sunshine on furrin gawld diggings, I caan’t answer. Here goes again: ’1 sofa; 1 armchair; 4 fine chairs with green cloth seats; 1 bedstead; 2 cots; 1 cradle; feather beds and palliasses and bolster pillows to match; wash-stands and sets of crockery, mostly complete; 2 swing glasses; 3 bedroom chairs; 1 set of breeching harness—’”

Page 250

“Hadn’t ’e better put that away from the furniture?”

“No gert odds. ’Also 1 set leading harness; 2 tressels and ironing board; 2 fenders; fire-irons and fire-dogs; 1 old oak chest; 1 wardrobe; 1 Brussels carpet (worn in 1 spot only)—’”

“Ban’t worn worth namin’.”

“Ess fay, ’tis wheer I sit Sundays—’9 feet by 11; 3 four-prong dung forks.’ I’ll move them. They doan’t come in none tu well theer, I allow. ‘5 cane-seated chairs, 1 specimen of wax fruit under glass.’”

“I caan’t paart wi’ that, lovey. Faither gived it to me; an’ ’twas mother’s wance on a time.”

“Well, bein’ a forced sale it ought to go. An’ seein’ how Miller’s left us to sail our awn boat to hell—but still, if you’m set on it.”

He crossed it out, then suddenly laughed until the walls rang.

“Hush! You’ll wake everybody. What do ’e find to be happy about?”

“I was thinkin’ that down in them furrin, fiery paarts we’m gwaine to, as your wax plums an’ pears’ll damned soon run away. They’ll melt for sartin!”

“Caan’t be so hot as that! The li’l gal will never stand it. Read on now. Theer ban’t much left, surely?”

“Scores o’ things! ’1 stuffed kingfisher in good case with painted picture at back; 1 fox mask; 1 mahogany 2-lap table; 1 warming-pan; Britannia metal teapot and 6 spoons ditto metal; 5 spoons—smaller—ditto metal.’”

“I found the one us lost.”

“Then ’tis ‘6 spoons—smaller—ditto metal.’ Then, ’ironing stove; 5 irons; washing boiler; 4 fry pans; 2 chimney crooks; 6 saucepans; pestle and mortar; chimney ornaments; 4 coloured almanacs—one with picture of the Queen—’”

“They won’t fetch nothin’.”

“They might. ’Knife sharper; screen; pot plants; 1 towel-rail; 1 runner; 2 forms; kitchen table; scales and weights and beam; 1 set of casters; 4 farm horses, aged; 3 ploughs; 1 hay wain; 1 stack of dry fern; 1-1/2 tons good manure; old iron and other sundries, including poultry, ducks, geese, and fowls.’ That’s all.”

“Not quite; but I caan’t call to mind much you’ve left out ’cept all the china an’ linen.”

“Ah! that’s your job. An’ I just sit here an’ brought the things to my memory, wan by wan! An’ that bit at the top came easy as cutting a stick!”

“‘Tis a wonnerful piece o’ work! An’ the piano, Will?”

“I hadn’t forgot that. Must take it along wi’ us, or else send it down to mother. Couldn’t look her in the faace if I sold that.”

“Ban’t worth much.”

“Caan’t say. Cost faither five pound, though that was long ago. Anyway I be gwaine to buy it in.”

Silence then fell upon them. Phoebe sighed and shivered. A cock crew and his note came muffled from the hen-roost. A dim grey dawn just served to indicate the recumbent carcasses without.

“Come to bed now an’ take a little rest ‘fore marnin’, dearie. You’ve worked hard an’ done wonders.”

Page 251

“Ban’t you surprised I could turn it out?”

“That I be. I’d never have thought ’twas in ’e. So forehanded, tu! A’most afore them poor things be cold.”

“’Tis the forehandedness I prides myself ’pon. Some of us doan’t know all that’s in me yet. But they’ll live to see it.”

“I knaw right well they will.”

“This’ll ’maze mother to-morrow.”

“’Twill, sure ’nough.”

“Would ‘e like me to read it just wance more wi’out stoppin’, Phoebe?”

“No, dear love, not now. Give it to us all arter breakfast in the marnin’.”

“So I will then; an’ take it right away to the auctioneer the minute after.”

He put his papers away in the drawer of the kitchen table and retired. Uneasy sleep presently overtook him and long he tossed and turned, murmuring of his astonishment at his own powers with a pen.

His impetuosity carried the ruined man forward with sufficient speed over the dark bitterness of failure confessed, failure advertised, failure proclaimed in print throughout the confines of his little world. He suffered much, and the wide-spread sympathy of friends and acquaintance proved no anodyne but rather the reverse. He hated to see eyes grow grave and mouths serious upon his entry; he yearned to turn his back against Chagford and resume the process of living in a new environment. Temporary troubles vexed him more than the supreme disaster of his failure. Mr. Bambridge made considerable alterations in his cherished lucubration; and when the advertisement appeared in print, it looked mean and filled but a paltry space. People came up before the sale to examine the goods, and Phoebe, after two days of whispered colloquies upon her cherished property, could bear it no longer, and left Newtake with her own little daughter and little Timothy. The Rev. Shorto-Champernowne himself called, stung Will into sheer madness, which he happily restrained, then purchased an old oak coffer for two pounds and ten shillings.

Miller Lyddon made no sign, and hard things were muttered against him and Billy Blee in the village. Virtuous indignation got hold upon the Chagford quidnuncs and with one consent they declared Mr. Lyddon to blame. Where was his Christian charity—that charity which should begin at home and so seldom does? This interest in others’ affairs took shape on the night before the Newtake sale. Then certain of the baser sort displayed their anger in a practical form, and Mr. Blee was hustled one dark evening,

had his hat knocked off, and suffered from a dead cat thrown by unseen hands. The reason for this outrage also reached him. Then, chattering with indignation and alarm, he hurried home and acquainted Mr. Lyddon with the wild spirit abroad.

As for Blanchard, he roamed moodily about the scene of his lost battle. In his pockets were journals setting forth the innumerable advantages of certain foreign regions that other men desired to people for their private ends. But Will was undecided, because all the prospects presented appeared to lead directly to fortune.

Page 252

The day of the sale dawned fine and at the appointed hour a thin stream of market carts and foot passengers wound towards Newtake from the village beneath and from a few outlying farms. Blanchard had gone up the adjacent hill; and lying there, not far distant from the granite cross, he reclined with his dog and watched the people. Him they did not see; but them he counted and found some sixty souls had been attracted by his advertisement. Men laughed and joked, and smoked; women shrugged their shoulders, peeped about and disparaged the goods. Here and there a purchaser took up his station beside a coveted lot. Some noticed that none of those most involved were present; others spread a rumour that Miller Lyddon designed to stop the sale at the last moment and buy in everything. But no such incident broke the course of proceedings.

Will, from his hiding-place in the heather, saw Mr. Bambridge drive up, noted the crowd follow him about the farm, like black flies, and felt himself a man at his own funeral. The hour was dark enough. In the ear of his mind he listened to the auctioneer's hammer, like a death-bell, beating away all that he possessed. He had worked and slaved through long years for this,—for the sympathy of Chagford, for the privilege of spending a thousand pounds, for barely enough money to carry himself abroad. A few more figures dotted the white road and turned into the open gate at Newtake. One shape, though too remote to recognise with certainty, put him in mind of Martin Grimbal, another might have been Sam Bonus. He mused upon the two men, so dissimilar, and his mind dwelt chiefly with the former. He found himself thinking how good it would be if Martin proposed to Chris again; that the antiquary had done so was the last idea in his thoughts.

Presently a brown figure crept through Newtake gate, hesitated a while, then began to climb the hill and approach Blanchard. Ship recognised it before Will's eyes enabled him to do so, and the dog rose from a long rest, stretched, sniffed the air, then trotted off to the approaching newcomer.

It was Ted Chown; and in five minutes he reached his master with a letter. "'Tis from Miller Lyddon," he said. "It comed by the auctioneer. I thought you was up here."

Blanchard took it without thanks, waited until the labourer had departed, then opened the letter with some slight curiosity.

He read a page of scriptural quotations and admonitions, then tore the communication in half with a curse and flung it from him. But presently his anger waned; he rose, picked up his father-in-law's note, and plodded through it to the end.

His first emotion was one of profound thanksgiving that he had done so. Here, at the very end of the letter, was the practical significance of it.

"Powder fust, jam arter, by God!" cried Will aloud. Then a burst of riotous delight overwhelmed him. Once again in his darkest hour had Fortune turned the wheel. He

shouted, put the letter into his breast pocket, rose up and strode off to Chagford as fast as his legs would carry him. He thought what his mother and wife would feel upon such news. Then he swore heartily—swore down blessings innumerable on Miller Lyddon, whistled to his dog, and so journeyed on.

Page 253

The master of Monks Barton had reproved Will through long pages, cited Scripture at him, displayed his errors in a grim procession, then praised him for his prompt and manly conduct under the present catastrophe, declared that his character had much developed of recent years, and concluded by offering him five-and-thirty shillings a week at Monks Barton, with the only stipulation that himself, his wife, and the children should dwell at the farm.

Praise, of which he had received little enough for many years, was pure honey to Will. From the extremity of gloom and from a dark and settled enmity towards Mr. Lyddon, he passed quicker than thought to an opposite condition of mind.

“’Tis a fairy story—awnly true!” he said to himself as he swept along.

Will came near choking when he thought of the miller. Here was a man that believed in him! Newtake tumbled clean out of his mind before this revelation of Mr. Lyddon’s trust and confidence. He was full to the brainpan with Monks Barton. The name rang in his ears. Before he reached Chagford he had planned innumerable schemes for developing the valley farm, for improving, saving, increasing possibilities in a hundred directions. He pictured himself putting money into the miller’s pocket. He determined to bring that about if he had to work four-and-twenty hours a day to do it. He almost wished some profound peril would threaten his father-in-law, that he, at the cost of half his life, if need be, might rescue him and so pay a little of this great debt. Ship, taking the cue from his master, as a dog will, leapt and barked before him. In the valley below, Phoebe wept on Mrs. Blanchard’s bosom, and Chris said hard things of those in authority at Monks Barton; up aloft at Newtake, shillings rather than pounds changed hands and many a poor lot found no purchaser.

Passing by a gate beneath the great hill of Middledown, Will saw two sportsmen with a keeper and a brace of terriers, emerge from the wild land above. They were come from rabbit shooting, as the attendant’s heavy bag testified. They faced him as he passed, and, recognising John Grimbal, Will did not look at his companion. At rest with the world just then, happy and contented to a degree he had not reached for years, the young farmer was in such amiable mood that he had given the devil “good day” on slightest provocation. Now he was carried out of himself, and spoke upon a joyous inclination of the moment.

“Marnin’ to ’e, Jan Grimbal! Glad to hear tell as your greyhound winned the cup down to Newton coursing.”

The other was surprised into a sort of grunt; then, as Will moved rapidly out of earshot, Grimbal’s companion addressed him. It was Major Tremayne; and now the soldier regarded Blanchard’s vanishing figure with evident amazement, then spoke.

“By Jove! Tom Newcombe, by all that’s wonderful,” he said.

CHAPTER VI

Page 254

THE SECRET OUT

NOW many different persons in various places were simultaneously concerned with Will Blanchard and his affairs.

At Newtake, Martin Grimbal was quietly buying a few lots—and those worth the most money. He designed these as a gift for Phoebe; and his object was not wholly disinterested. The antiquary could by no means bring himself to accept his last dismissal from Chris. Seeing the vague nature of those terms in which she had couched her refusal, and remembering her frank admission that she could love him, he still hoped. All his soul was wrapped up in the winning of Chris, and her face came between him and the proof-sheets of his book; the first thoughts of his wakening mind turned to the same problem; the last reflections of a brain sinking to rest were likewise occupied with it. How could he win her? Sometimes his yearning desires clamoured for any possible road to the precious goal, and he remembered his brother's hint that a secret existed in Will's life. At such times he wished that he knew it, and wondered vaguely if the knowledge were of a nature to further his own ambition. Then he blushed and thought ill of himself But this personal accusation was unjust, for it is the property of a strong intellect engaged about affairs of supreme importance, to suggest every possible action and present every possible point of view by the mere mechanical processes of thinking. The larger a brain, the more alternative courses are offered, the more facets gleam with thought, the more numerous the roads submitted to judgment. It is a question of intellect, not ethics. Right actions and crooked are alike remorselessly presented, and the Council of Perfection, which holds that to think amiss is sin, must convict every saint of unnumbered offences. As reasonably might we blame him who dreams murder. Departure from rectitude can only begin where evil thought is converted into evil action, for thought alone of all man's possessions and antecedents is free, and a lifetime of self-control and high thinking will not shut the door against ideas. That Martin—a man of luminous if limited intellect—should have considered every possible line of action which might assist him to come at the highest good life could offer was inevitable; but he missed the reason of certain sinister notions and accused himself of baseness in giving birth to them. Nevertheless, the idea recurred and took shape. He associated John's assertion of a secret with another rumour that had spread much farther afield. This concerned the parentage of little Timothy the foundling, for it was whispered widely of late that the child belonged to Blanchard. Of course many people knew all the facts, were delighted to retail them, and could give the mother's name. Only those most vitally concerned had heard nothing as yet.

These various matters were weighing not lightly on Martin's mind during the hours of the Newtake sale; and meantime Will thundered into his mother's cottage and roared the news. He would hear of no objection to his wish, that one and all should straightway proceed to Monks Barton, and he poured forth the miller's praises, while Phoebe was reduced to tears by perusal of her father's letter to Will.

Page 255

“Thank Heaven the mystery’s read now, an’ us can see how Miller had his eyes ’pon ‘e both all along an’ just waited for the critical stroke,” said Mrs. Blanchard. “Sure I’ve knawed him these many years an’ never could onderstand his hard way in this; but now all’s clear.”

“He might have saved us a world of trouble and a sea o’ tears if he’d awnly spoken sooner, whether or no,” murmured Chris, but Will would tolerate no unfriendly criticism.

“He’m a gert man, wi’ his awn way o’ doin’ things, like all gert men,” he burst out; “an’ ban’t for any man to call un in question. He knawed the hard stuff I was made of and let me bide accordin’. An’ now get your bonnets on, the lot of ’e, for I’m gwaine this instant moment to Monks Barton.”

They followed him in a breathless procession, as he hurried across the farmyard.

“Rap to the door quick, dear heart,” said Phoebe, “or I’ll be cryin’ again.”

“No more rappin’ after thicky butivul letter,” answered Will. “Us’ll gaw straight in.”

“You walk fust, Phoebe—’tis right you should,” declared Mrs. Blanchard. “Then Will can follow ‘e; an’ me an’ Chris—us’ll walk ’bout for a bit, till you beckons from window.”

“Cheer up, Phoebe,” cried Will. “Trouble’s blawed awver for gude an’ all now by the look of it. ’Tis plain sailing hencefarrard, thank God, that is, if a pair o’ strong arms, working morning an’ night for Miller, can bring it about.”

So they went together, where Mr. Lyddon waited nervously within; and Damaris and Chris walked beside the river.

Upon his island sat the anchorite Muscovy duck as of yore. He was getting old. He still lived apart and thought deeply about affairs; but his conclusions he never divulged.

Yet another had been surprised into unutterable excitement during that afternoon. John Grimbal found the fruit of long desire tumble into his hand at last, as Major Tremayne made his announcement. The officer was spending a fortnight at the Red House, for his previous friendship with John Grimbal had ripened.

“By Jove! Tom Newcombe, by all that’s wonderful!” he exclaimed, as Will swung past him down the hill to happiness.

“That’s not his name. It’s Blanchard. He’s a young fool of a farmer, and Lord knows what he’s got to be so cock-a-hoop about. Up the hill they’re selling every stick he’s got at auction. He’s ruined.”

“He might be ruined, indeed, if I liked. ‘Tom Newcombe’ he called himself when he was with us.”

“A soldier!”

“He certainly was, and my servant; about the most decent, straightforward, childlike chap that ever I saw.”

“God!”

“You’re surprised. But it’s a fact. That’s Newcombe all right. You couldn’t forget a face and a laugh like his. The handsomest man I’ve ever seen, bar none. He borrowed a suit of my clothes, the beggar, when he vanished. But a week later I had the things back with a letter. He trusted me that far. I tried to trace him, of course, but was not sorry I failed.”

Page 256

“A letter!”

“Yes, giving a reason for his desertion. Some chap was running after his girl and had got her in a corner and bullied her into saying ‘Yes,’ though she hated the sight of him. I’d have done anything for Tom. But he took the law into his own hands. He disappeared—we were at Shorncliffe then if I remember rightly. The chap had joined to get abroad, and he told me all his harum-scarum ambitions once. I hope the poor devil was in time to rescue his sweetheart, anyway.”

“Yes, he was in time for that.”

“I’m glad.”

“Should you see him again, Tremayne, I would advise your pretending not to know him. Unless, of course, you consider it your duty to proclaim him.”

“Bless your life, I don’t know him from Adam,” declared the Major. “I’m not going to move after all these years. I wish he’d come back to me again, all the same. A good servant.”

“Poor brute! What’s the procedure with a deserter? Do you send soldiers for him or the police?”

“A pair of handcuffs and the local bobby, that’s all. Then the man’s handed over to the military authorities and court-martialled.”

“What would he get?”

“Depends on circumstances and character. Tom might probably have six months, as he didn’t give himself up. I should have thought, knowing the manner of man, that he would have done his business, married the girl, then come back and surrendered. In that case, being peace time, he would only have forfeited his service, which didn’t amount to much.”

So John Grimbal learned the secret of his enemy at last; but, to pursue a former simile, the fruit had remained so long out of reach that now it was not only overripe, but rotten. There began a painful resuscitation of desires towards revenge—desires long moribund. To flog into life a passion near dead of inanition was Grimbal’s disgusting task. For days and nights the thing was as Frankenstein’s creation of grisly shreds and patches; then it moved spasmodically,—or he fancied that it moved.

He fooled himself with reiterated assurances that he was glorying in the discovery; he told himself that he was not made of the human stuff that can forgive bitter wrongs or forget them until cancelled. He painted in lurid colours his past griefs; through a ghastly morass of revenge grown stale, of memories deadened by time, he tried to struggle

back to his original starting-point in vanished years, and feel as he felt when he flung Will Blanchard over Rushford Bridge.

Once he wished to God the truth had never reached him; then he urged himself to use it instantly and plague his mind no more. A mental exhaustion and nausea overtook him. Upon the night of his discovery he retired to sleep wishing that Blanchard would be as good as his rumoured word and get out of England. But this thought took a shape of reality in the tattered medley of dreams, and Grimbal, waking, leapt on to the floor in frantic fear that his enemy had escaped him.

Page 257

As yet he knew nothing of Will's good fortune, and when it came to his ears it unexpectedly failed to reawaken resentment or strengthen his animosity. For, as he retraced the story of the past years, it was with him as with a man reading the narrative of another's wrongs. He could not yet absorb himself anew in the strife; he could not revive the personal element.

Sometimes he looked at himself in the glass as he shaved; and the sight of the grey hair thickening on the sides of his head, the spectacle of the deep lines upon his forehead and the stamp of many a shadowy crow's-foot about his blue eyes—these indications served more than all his thoughts to sting him into deeds and to rekindle an active malignancy.

CHAPTER VII

SMALL TIMOTHY

A year and more than a year passed by, during which time some pure sunshine brightened the life of Blanchard. Chagford laughed at his sustained good fortune, declared him to have as many lives as a cat, and secretly regretted its outspoken criticism of Miller Lyddon before the event of his generosity. Life at Monks Barton was at least wholly happy for Will himself. No whisper or rumour of renewed tribulation reached his ear; early and late he worked, with whole-hearted energy; he differed from Mr. Blee as seldom as possible; he wearied the miller with new designs, tremendous enterprises, particulars concerning novel machinery, and much information relating to nitrates. Newtake had vanished out of his life, like an old coat put off for the last time. He never mentioned the place and there was now but one farm in all Devon for him.

Meantime a strange cloud increased above him, though as yet he had not discerned so much as the shadow of it. This circumstance possessed no connection with John Grimbal. Time passed and still he did not take action, though he continued to nurse his wrongs through winter, spring, and summer, as a child nurses a sick animal. The matter tainted his life but did not dominate it. His existence continued to be soured and discoloured, yet not entirely spoiled. Now a new stone of stumbling lay ahead and Grimbal's interest had shifted a little.

Like the rest of Chagford he heard the rumour of little Timothy's parentage—a rumour that grew as the resemblance ripened between Blanchard and the child. Interested by this thought and its significance, he devoted some time to it; and then, upon an early October morning, chance hurried the man into action. On the spur of an opportunity he played the coward, as many another man has done, only to mourn his weakness too late.

Page 258

There came a misty autumn sunrise beside the river and Grimbal, hastening through the valley of Teign, suddenly found himself face to face with Phoebe. She had been upon the meadows since grey dawn, where many mushrooms set in silvery dew glimmered like pearls through the mist; and now, with a full basket, she was returning to Monks Barton for breakfast. As she rested for a moment at a stile between two fields, Grimbal loomed large from the foggy atmosphere and stood beside her. She moved her basket for him to pass and her pulses quickened but slightly, for she had met him on numerous occasions during past years and they were now as strangers. To Phoebe he had long been nothing, and any slight emotion he might awaken was in the nature of resentment that the man could still harden his heart against her husband and remain thus stubborn and obdurate after such lapse of time. When, therefore, John Grimbal, moved thereto by some sudden prompting, addressed Will's wife, she started in astonishment and a blush of warm blood leapt to her face. He himself was surprised at his own voice; for it sounded unfamiliar, as though some intelligent thing had suddenly possessed him and was using his vocal organs for its own ends.

"Don't move. Why, 't is a year since we met alone, I think. So you are back at Monks Barton. Does it bring thoughts? Is it all sweet? By your face I should judge not."

She stared and her mouth trembled, but she did not answer.

"You needn't tell me you're happy," he continued, with hurried words. "Nobody is, for that matter. But you might have been. Looking at your ruined life and my own, I can find it in my heart to be sorry for us both."

"Who dares to say my life is ruined?" she flashed out. "D' you think I would change Will for the noblest in the land? He *is* the noblest. I want no pity—least of all yourn. I've been a very lucky woman—and—everybody knaws it whatever they may say here an' theer."

She was strong before him now; her temper appeared in her voice and she took her basket and rose to leave him.

"Wait one moment. Chance threw us here, and I'll never speak to you again if you resent it. But, meeting you like this, something seemed to tell me to say a word and let you know. I'm sorry you are so wretched—honestly."

"I ban't wretched! Never was a happier wife."

"Never was a better one, I know; but happy? Think. I was fond of you once and I can read between the lines—the little thin lines on your forehead. They are newcomers. I'm not deceived. Nor is it hidden. That the man has proved faithless is common knowledge now. Facts are hard things and you've got the fact under your eyes. The child's his living image."

“Who told you, and how dare you foul my ears and thoughts with such lies?” she asked, her bosom heaving. “You’m a coward, as you always was, but never more a coward than this minute.”

Page 259

“D’ you pretend that nobody has told you this? Aren’t your own eyes bright enough to see it?”

The man was in a pitiful mood, and now he grew hot and forgot himself wholly before her stinging contempt. She did not reply to his question and he continued,—

“Your silence is an answer. You know well enough. Who’s the mother? Perhaps you know that, too. Is she more to him than you are?”

Phoebe made a great effort to keep herself from screaming. Then she moved hastily away, but Grimbal stopped her and dared her to proceed.

“Wait. I’ll have this out. Why don’t you face him with it and make him tell you the truth? Any plucky woman would. The scandal grows into a disgrace and your father’s a fool to stand it. You can tell him so from me.”

“Mind your awn business an’ let me pass, you hulking, gert, venomous wretch!” she cried. Then a blackguard inspiration came to the man, and, suffering under a growing irritation with himself as much as with Phoebe, he conceived an idea by which his secret might after all be made a bitter weapon. He assured himself, even while he hated the sight of her, that justice to Phoebe must be done. She had dwelt in ignorance long enough. He determined to tell her that she was the wife of a deserter. The end gained was the real idea in his mind, though he tried to delude himself. The sudden idea that he might inform Blanchard through Phoebe of his knowledge really actuated him.

“You may turn your head away as if I was dirt, you little fool, and you may call me what names you please; but I’m raising this question for your good, not my own. What do I care? Only it’s a man’s part to step in when he sees a woman being trampled on.”

“A man!” she said. “You’m not in our lives any more, an’ we doan’t want ’e in ’em. More like to a meddlin’ auld woman than a man, if you ax me.”

“You can say that? Then we’ll put you out of the question. I, at least, shall do my duty.”

“Is it part of your duty to bully me here alone? Why doan’t ’e faace the man, like a man, ‘stead of blusterin’ to me ’bout it? Out on you! Let me pass, I tell ’e.”

“Doan’t make that noise. Just listen and stand still. I’m in earnest. It pleases me to know the true history of this child, and I mean to. As a Justice of the Peace I mean to.”

“Ax Will Blanchard then an’ let him answer. Maybe you’ll be sorry you spoke arter.”

“You can tell him I want to see him; you can say I order him to come to the Red House between eight and nine next Monday.”

“Be you a fule? Who’s he, to come at your bidding?”

“He’s a—well, no matter. You’ve got enough to trouble you. But I think he will come. Tell him that I know where he was during the autumn and winter of the year that I returned home from Africa. Tell him I know where he came from to marry you. Tell him the grey suit of clothes reached the owner safely—remember, the grey suit of clothes. That will refresh his memory. Then I think he will come fast enough and let me have the truth concerning this brat. If he refuses, I shall take steps to see justice done.”

Page 260

“I lay he’s never put himself in the power of a black-hearted, cruel beast like you,” blazed out the woman, furious and frightened at once.

“Has he not? Ask him. You don’t know where he was during those months? I thought you didn’t. I do. Perhaps this child—perhaps the other woman’s the married one—”

Phoebe dropped her basket and her face grew very pale before the horrors thus coarsely spread before her. She staggered and felt sick at the man’s last speech. Then, with one great sob of breath, she turned her back on him, nerved herself to use her shaking legs, and set off at her best speed, as one running from some dangerous beast of the field.

Grimbal made no attempt to follow, but watched her fade into the mist, then turned and pursued his way through the dripping woodlands. Sunrise fires gleamed along the upper layers of the fading vapours and gilded autumn’s handiwork. Ripe seeds fell tapping through the gold of the horse-chestnuts, and many acorns also pattered down upon a growing carpet of leaves. Webs and gossamers twinkled in the sunlight, and the flaming foliage made a pageant of colour through waning mists where red leaves and yellow fell at every breath along the thinning woods. Beneath trees and hedgerows the ripe mosses gleamed, and coral and amber fungi, with amanita and other hooded folk. In companies and clusters they sprang or arose misshapen, sinister, and alone. Some were orange and orange-tawny; others white and purple; not a few peered forth livid, blotched, and speckled, as with venom spattered from some reptile’s jaws. On the wreck of the year they flourished, sucked strange life from rotten stick and hollow tree, opened gills on lofty branch and bough, shone in the green grass rings of the meadows, thrust cup and cowl from the concourse of the dead leaves in ditches, clustered like the uprising roof-trees of a fairy village in dingle and in dene.

At the edge of the woods John Grimbal stood, and the hour was very dark for him and he cursed at the loss of his manhood. His heart turned to gall before the thought of the thing he had done, as he blankly marvelled what unsuspected base instinct had thus disgraced him. He had plumbed a possibility unknown within his own character, and before his shattered self-respect he stood half passionate, half amazed. Chance had thus wrecked him; an impulse had altered the whole face of the problem; and he gritted his teeth as he thought of Blanchard’s feelings when Phoebe should tell her story. As for her, she at least had respected him during the past years; but what must henceforth be her estimate of him? He heaped bitter contempt upon himself for this brutality to a woman; he raged, as he pursued long chains of consequences begot of this single lapse of self-control. His eye was cleared from passion; he saw the base nature of his action and judged himself as others would judge him. This spectacle produced a definite mental

Page 261

issue and aroused long-stagnant emotions from their troubled slumbers. He discovered that a frank hatred of Will Blanchard awoke and lived. He told himself this man was to blame for all, and not content with poisoning his life, now ravaged his soul also and blighted every outlook of his being. Like a speck upon an eyeball, which blots the survey of the whole eye, so this wretch had fastened upon him, ruined his ambitions, wrecked his life, and now dragged his honour and his very manhood into the dust. John Grimbal found himself near choked by a raging fit of passion at last. He burnt into sheer frenzy against Blanchard; and the fuel of the fire was the consciousness of his own craven performance of that morning. Flying from self-contemplation, he sought distraction and even oblivion at any source where his mind could win it; and now he laid all blame on his enemy and suffered the passion of his own shame and remorse to rise, as it had been a red mist, against this man who was playing havoc with his body and soul. He trembled under the loneliness of the woods in a debauch of mere brute rage that exhausted him and left a mark on the rest of his life. Even his present powers appeared trifling and their exercise a deed unsatisfying before this frenzy. What happiness could be achieved by flinging Blanchard into prison for a few months at most? What salve could be won from thought of this man's disgrace and social ruin? The spectacle sank into pettiness now. His blood was surging through his veins and crying for action. Primitive passion gripped him and craved primitive outlet. At that hour, in his own deepest degradation, the man came near madness, and every savage voice in him shouted for blood and blows and batterings in the flesh.

Phoebe Blauchard hastened home, meanwhile, and kept her own counsel upon the subject of the dawn's sensational incidents. Her first instinct was to tell her husband everything at the earliest opportunity, but Will had departed to his work before she reached the farm, and on second thoughts she hesitated to speak or give John Grimbal's message. She feared to precipitate the inevitable. In her own heart what mystery revolved about Will's past performances undoubtedly embraced the child fashioned in his likeness; and though she had long fought against the rumour and deceived herself by pretending to believe Chris, whose opinion differed from that of most people, yet at her heart she felt truth must lie hidden somewhere in the tangle. Will and Mr. Lyddon alone knew nothing of the report, and Phoebe hesitated to break it to her husband. He was happy—perhaps in the consciousness that nobody realised the truth; and yet at his very gates a bitter foe guessed at part of his secret and knew the rest. Still Phoebe could not bring herself to speak immediately. A day of mental stress and strain ended, and she retired and lay beside Will very sad. Under darkness of night the threats of the enemy grew into an imminent disaster of terrific dimensions, and with haunting fear she finally slept, to waken in a nightmare.

Page 262

Will, wholly ignorant of the facts, soothed Phoebe's alarm and calmed her as she clung to him in hysterical tears.

"No ill shall come to 'e while I live," she sobbed: "not if all the airth speaks evil of 'e. I'll cleave to 'e, and fight for 'e, an' be a gude wife, tu,—a better wife than you've been husband."

"Bide easy, an' doan't cry no more. My arm's round 'e, dearie. Theer, give awver, do! You've been dreamin' ugly along o' the poor supper you made, I reckon. Doan't 'e think nobody's hand against me now, for ban't so. Folks begin to see the manner of man I am; an' Miller knaws, which is all I care about. He've got a strong right arm workin' for him an' a tidy set o' brains, though I sez it; an' you might have a worse husband, tu, Phoebe; but theer—shut your purty eyes—I knaw they 'm awpen still, for I can hear your lashes against the sheet. An' doan't 'e go out in the early dews mushrooming no more, for 't is cold work, an' you've got to be strong these next months."

She thought for a moment of telling him boldly concerning the legend spreading on every side; but, like others less near and dear to him, she feared to do so.

Knowing Will Blanchard, not a man among the backbiters had cared to risk a broken head by hinting openly at the startling likeness between the child and himself; and Phoebe felt her own courage unequal to the task just then. She racked her brains with his dangers long after he was himself asleep, and finally she determined to seek Chris next morning and hear her opinion before taking any definite step.

On the same night another pair of eyes were open, and trouble of a sort only less deep than that of the wife kept her father awake. Billy had taken an opportunity to tell his master of the general report and spread before him the facts as he knew them.

The younger members of the household had retired early, and when Miller Lyddon took the cards from the mantelpiece and made ready for their customary game, Mr. Blee shook his head and refused to play.

"Got no heart for cards to-night," he said.

"What's amiss, then? Thank God I've heard little to call ill news for a month or two. Not but what I've fancied a shadow on my gal's face more'n wance."

"If not on hers, wheer should 'e see it?" asked Mr. Blee eagerly." I've seed it, tu, an' for that matter theer's sour looks an' sighs elsewheer. People ban't blind, worse luck. 'Tis grawed to be common talk, an' I've fired myself to tell you, 'cause 'tis fitting an' right, an' it might come more grievous from less careful lips."

"Go on then; an' doan't rack me longer'n you can help. Use few words."

“Many words must go to it, I reckon. ‘Tis well knawn I unfolds a bit o’ news like the flower of the field—gradual and sure. You might have noticed that love-cheel by the name of Timothy ’bout the plaace? Him as be just of age to harry the ducks an’ such-like.”

Page 263

“A nice li’l bwoy, tu, an’ fond of me; an’ you caan’t say he’m a love-cheel, knawin’ nothin’ ’bout him.”

“Love-cheel or changeling, ’tis all wan. Have’e ever thought ’twas coorious the way Blanchard comed by un?”

“Certainly ’twas—terrible coorious.”

“You never doubted it?”

“Why for should I? Will’s truthful as light, whatever else he may be.”

“You believe as he went ‘pon the Moor an’ found that bwoy in a roundy-poundy under the gloamin’?”

“Ess, I do.”

“Have’e ever looked at the laddie close?”

“Oftentimes—so like Will as two peas.”

“Theer ’tis! The picter of Will! How do’e read that?”

“Never tried to. An accident, no more.”

“A damn queer accident, if you ax me. Burnish it all! You doan’t see yet, such a genius of a man as you tu! Why, Will Blanchard’s the faither of the li’l twoad! You’ve awnly got to know the laws of nature an’ such-like to swear to it. The way he walks an’ holds his head, his curls, his fashion of lording it awver the birds an’ beasts, the sudden laugh of un—he’s Will’s son, for a thousand pound, an’ his mother’s alive, like as not.”

“No mother would have gived up a child that way.”

“’Zactly so! Onless she gived it to the faither!” said Billy triumphantly.

Mr. Lyddon reflected and showed an evident disposition to scoff at the whole story.

“‘Tis stuff an’ rubbish!” he said. “You might as well find a mare’s nest t’other side an’ say ’twas Will’s sister’s child. ’Tis almost so like her as him, an’ got her brown eyes in the bargain.”

“God forbid!” answered Billy, in horror. “That’s flat libel, an’ I’d be the last to voice any such thing for money. If a man gets a cheel wrong side the blanket ‘tis just a passing sarcumstance, an’ not to be took too serious. Half-a-crown a week is its awn punishment like. But if a gal do, ‘tis destruction to the end of the chapter, an’ shame

everlasting in the world to come, by all accounts. You didn't ought to think o' such things, Miller,—takin' a pure, gude maiden's carater like that. Surprised at 'e!"

"'Tis just as mad a thought wan way as t'other, and if you'm surprised so be I. To be a tale-bearer at your time o' life!"

"That gormed Blanchard's bewitched 'e from fust to last!" burst out Billy. "If a angel from heaven comed down-long and tawld 'e the truth 'bout un, you wouldn't b'lieve. God stiffen it! You make me mad! You'd stand 'pon your head an' waggle your auld legs in the air for un if he axed 'e."

"I'll speak to him straight an' take his word for it. If it's true, he 'm wickedly to blame, I knaw that."

"I was thinkin' of your darter. 'Tis black thoughts have kept her waking since this reached her ears."

"Did you tell her what people were sayin'? I warrant you did!"

"You'm wrong then. No such thing. I may have just heaved a sigh when I seed the bwoy playin' in front of her, an' looked at Blanchard, an' shook my head, or some such gentle hint as that. But no more."

Page 264

“Well, I doan’t believe a word of it; an’ I’ll tell you this for your bettering,—’tis poor religion in you, Blee, to root into other people’s troubles, like a pig in a trough; an’ auld though you be, you ’m not tu auld to mind what it felt like when the blood was hot an’ quick to race at the sight of a maid.”

“I practice same as I preach, whether or no,” said Billy stoutly, “an’ I can’t lay claim to creating nothing lawful or unlawful in my Maker’s image. ’Tis something to say that, in these godless days. I’ve allus kept my foot on the world, the flesh, an’ the Devil so tight as the best Christian in company; an’ if that ban’t a record for a stone, p’raps you’ll tell me a better. Your two-edged tongue do make me feel sometimes as though I did ought to go right away from ’e, though God knaws—God, He knaws—”

Billy hid his face and began to weep, while Mr. Lyddon watched the candle-light converge to a shining point upon his bald skull.

“Doan’t go against a word in season, my dear sawl. ’Tis our duty to set each other right. That’s what we’m put here for, I doubt. Many’s the time you’ve given me gude advice, an’ I’ve thanked ‘e an’ took it.”

Then he went for the spirits and mixed Mr. Blee a dose of more than usual strength.

“You’m the most biting user of language in Chagford, when you mind to speak sour,” declared Billy. “If I thought you meant all you said, I’d go an’ hang myself in the barn this instant moment. But you doan’t.”

He snuffled and dried his scanty tears on a red handkerchief, then cheered up and drank his liquor.

“It do take all sorts to make a world, an’ a man must act accordin’ as he’m built,” continued Mr. Lyddon. “Ban’t no more use bein’ angered wi’ a chap given to women than ‘tis bein’ angered wi’ a fule, because he’s a fule. What do ’e expect from a fule but folly, or a crab tree but useless fruit, or hot blood but the ways of it? This ban’t to speak of Will Blanchard, though. ’Pon him we’ll say no more till he’ve heard what’s on folks’ tongues. A maddening bwoy—I’ll allow you that—an’ he’ve took a year or two off my life wan time an’ another. ’Pears I ban’t never to graw to love un as I would; an’ yet I caan’t quite help it when I sees his whole-hearted ferment to put money into my pocket; or when I hears him talk of nitrates an’ the ways o’ the world; or watches un playin’ make-believe wi’ the childer—himself the biggest cheel as ever laughed at fulishness or wanted spankin’ an’ putting in the corner.”

CHAPTER VIII

FLIGHT

On the following morning Miller Lyddon arose late, looked from his window and immediately observed the twain with whom his night thoughts had been concerned. Will stood at the gate smoking; small Timothy, and another lad, of slightly riper years, appeared close by. The children were fighting tooth and nail upon the ownership of a frog, and this reptile itself, fastened by the leg to a stick, listlessly watched the progress of the battle. Will likewise surveyed the scene with genial attention, and encouraged the particular little angry animal who had most claim upon his interest. Timothy kicked and struck out pretty straight, but fought in silence; the bigger boy screamed and howled and scratched.

Page 265

“Vang into un, man, an’ knock his ugly head off!” said Will encouragingly, and the babe to whom he spoke made renewed efforts as both combatants tumbled into the road, the devil in their little bright eyes, each puny muscle straining. Tim had his foe by the hair, and the elder was trying to bite his enemy’s leg, when Martin Grimbal and Chris Blanchard approached from Rushford Bridge. They had met by chance, and Chris was coming to the farm while the antiquary had business elsewhere. Now a scuffle in a cloud of dust arrested them and the woman, uninfluenced by considerations of sportsmanship, pounced upon Timothy, dragged him from his operations, and, turning to Will, spoke as Martin Grimbal had never heard her speak before.

“You, a grawed man, to stand theer an’ see that gert wild beast of a bwoy tear this li’l wan like a savage tiger! Look at his sclowed faace all streaming wi’ blood! ‘S truth! I’d like to sarve you the same, an’ I would for two pins! I’m ashamed of ’e!”

“He hit wi’ his fistes like a gude un,” said Will, grinning; “an’ he’m made o’ the right stuff, I’ll swear. Couldn’t have done better if he was my awn son. I be gwaine to give un a braave toy bimebye. You see t’other kid’s faace come to-morrow!”

Martin Grimbal watched Chris fondle the gasping Timothy, clean his wounds, calm his panting heart; then, as though a superhuman voice whispered in his ear, her secret stood solved, and the truth of Timothy’s parentage confronted him in a lightning flash of the soul. He looked at Chris as a man might gaze upon a spectre; he stared at her and through her into her past; he pieced each part of the puzzle to its kindred parts until all stood complete; he read “mother” in her voice, in her caressing hands and gleaming eyes as surely as man reads morning in the first light of dawn; and he marvelled that a thing so clear and naked had been left to his discovery. The revelation shook him not a little, for he was familiar with the rumours concerning Tim’s paternity, and had been disposed to believe them; but from the moment of the new thought’s inception it gripped him, for he felt that the thing was true. As lamps, so ordered that the light of each may fall on the fringe of darkness where its fellow fades, and thus complete a chain of illumination, so the present discovery, duly considered, was but one point of truth revealing others. It made clear much that had not been easy to understand, and the tremendous fact rose in his mind as a link in such a perfect sequence of evidence that doubt actually vanished before he had lost sight of Chris and passed dumfounded upon his way. Her lover’s sudden death, her own disappearance, the child’s advent at Newtake, and the woman’s subsequent return—these main incidents connected a thousand others and explained what little mystery still obscured the position. He pursued his road and marvelled as he went how a tragedy so thinly veiled had thus escaped every eye. Within the story that Chris had told, this other story might be intercalated without convicting her of any spoken falsehood. Now he guessed at the reason why Timothy’s mother had refused to marry him on his last proposal; then, thinking of the child, he knew Tim’s father.

Page 266

So he stood before the truth; and it filled his heart with some agony and some light. Examining his love in this revelation, he discovered strange things; and first, that it was love only that had opened his eyes and enabled him to solve the secret at all. Nobody had made the discovery but himself, and he, of all men the least likely to come at any concern others desired to hide from him, had fathomed this great fact, had won it from the heart of unconscious Chris. His love widened and deepened into profound pity as he thought of all that her secret and the preservation of it must have meant; and tears dimmed his eyes as he pictured her life since her lover's passing.

To him the discovery hurt Chris so little that for a time he underrated the effect of it upon other people. His affection rose clean above the unhappy fact, and it was some time before he began to appreciate the spectacle of Chris under the world's eye with the truth no longer hidden. Then a sense of his own helplessness overmastered him; he walked slowly, drew up at a gate and stood motionless, leaning over it. So silent did he stand, and so long, that a stoat hopped across the road within two yards of him.

He realised to the full that he was absolutely powerless. Chris alone must disperse the rumours fastening on her brother if they were to be dispersed. He knew that she would not suffer any great cloud of unjust censure to rest upon Will, and he saw what a bitter problem must be overwhelming her. Nobody could help her and he, who knew, was as powerless as the rest. Then he asked himself if that last conviction was true. He probed the secret places of his mind to find an idea; he prayed for some chance spark or flash of genius to aid him before this trial; he mourned his own simple brains, so weak to aid him in this vital pass. But of all living men the accidental discovery was most safe with him. His heart went out to the secret mother, and he told himself that he would guard her mystery like gold.

It was strange in a nature so timorous that not once did a suspicion he had erred overtake him, and presently he wondered to observe how ancient this discovery of the motherhood of Chris had grown within his mind. It appeared as venerable as his own love for her. He yearned for power to aid; without conscious direction of his course he proceeded and strode along for hours. Then he ate a meal of bread and cheese at an inn and tramped forward once more upon a winding road towards the village of Zeal.

Through his uncertainty, athwart the deep perplexity of his mind, moved hope and a shadowed joy. Within him arose again the vision of happiness once pictured and prayed for, once revived, never quite banished to the grey limbo of ambitions beyond fulfilment. Now realities saddened the thought of it and brought ambition within a new environment less splendid than the old. But, despite clouds, hope shone fairly forth at last. So a planet, that the eye has followed at twilight and then lost a while, beams anew at dawn after lapse of days, and wheels in wide mazes upon some new background of the unchanging stars.

Page 267

Elsewhere Mr. Lyddon braced himself to a painful duty, and had private speech with his son-in-law. Like a thunderbolt the circling suspicions fell on Will, and for a moment smothered his customary characteristics under sheer surprise.

The miller spoke nervously, and walked up and down with his eyes averted.

“Ban’t no gert matter, I hope, an’ I won’t keep ’e from your work five minutes. You’ve awnly got to say ‘No,’ an’ theer’s an end of it so far as I’m concerned. ’Tis this: have ’e noticed heads close together now an’ again when you passed by of late?”

“Not me. Tu much business on my hands, I assure ’e. Coourse theer’s envious whisperings; allus is when a man gets a high place, same as what I have, thanks to his awn gude sense an’ the wisdom of others as knaws what he’s made of. But you trusted me wi’ all your heart, an’ you’ll never live to mourn it.”

“I never want to. You’m grawing to be much to me by slow stages. Yet these here tales. This child Timothy. Who’s his faither, Will, an’ who’s his mother?”

“How the flaming hell should I knaw? I found him same as you finds a berry on a briar. That’s auld history, surely?”

“The child graws so ’mazing like you, that even dim eyes such as mine can see it.”

A sudden flash of light came into Blanchard’s face. Then the fire died as quickly as it had been kindled, and he grew calm.

“God A’mighty!” he said, in a voice hushed and awed. “They think that! I lay that’s why your darter’s cried o’ nights, then, an’ Chris have grawed sad an’ wisht in her ways, an’ mother have pet the bwoy wan moment an’ been short wi’ un the next.”

He remained marvellously quiet under this attack, but amazement chiefly marked his attitude. Miller Lyddon, encouraged by this unexpected reasonableness, spoke again more sternly.

“The thing looks bad to a wife an’ mother, an’ ’tis my duty to ax ’e for a plain, straightforward answer ’pon it. Human nature’s got a ugly trick of repeatin’ itself in this matter, as we all knaws. But I’ll say nought an’ think nought till you answers me. Be the bwoy yourn or not? Tell me true, with your hand on this.”

He took his Bible from the mantelpiece, while Will, apparently cowed by the gravity of the situation, placed both palms upon it, then fixed his eyes solemnly upon Mr. Lyddon.

“As God in heaven’s my judge, he ban’t no cheel of mine, and I knaw nothing about him —no, nor yet his faither nor mother nor plaace of birth. I found un wheer I said, and if I’ve lied by a fraction, may God choke me as I stand here afore you.”

“An’ I believe you to the bottom!” declared his father-in-law. “I believe you as I hopes to be believed myself, when I stands afore the Open Books an’ says I’ve tried to do my duty. You’ve got me on your side, an’ that’s to say you’ll have Phoebe an’ your mother, tu, for certain.”

Then Blanchard’s mood changed, and there came a tremendous rebound from the tension of the last few minutes. In the anti-climax following upon his oath, passion, chained a while by astonishment, broke loose in a whirlwind.

Page 268

“Let ’em believe or disbelieve, who cares?” he thundered out. “Not me—not a curse for you or anybody, my awn blood or not my awn blood. To harbour lies against me! But women loves to believe bad most times.”

“Who said they believed it, Will? Doan’t go mad, now ’tis awver and done.”

“They *did* believe it; I knaw, I seed it in theer faaces, come to think of it. ’Tis the auld song. I caan’t do no right. Course I’ve got childer an’ ruined maids in every parish of the Moor! God damn theer lying, poisonous tongues, the lot of ’em! I’m sick of this rotten, lie-breeding hole, an’ of purty near every sawl in it but mother. She never would think against me. An’ me, so true to Phoebe as the honey-bee to his awn butt! I’ll go—-I’ll get out of it—so help me, I will—to a clean land, ’mongst clean-thinking folk, wheer men deal fair and judge a chap by his works. For a thought I’d wring the neck of the blasted child, by God I would!”

“He’ve done no wrong.”

“Nor me neither. I had no more hand in his getting than he had himself. Poor li’l brat; I’m sorry I spoke harsh of him. He was give me—he was give me—an’ I wish to God he *was* mine. Anyways he shaa’n’t come to no harm. I’ll fight the lot of ’e for un, till he ’s auld enough to fight for hisself.”

Then Will burst out of Monks Barton and vanished. He passed far from the confines of the farm, roamed on to the high Moor, and nothing further was seen of him until the following day.

Those most concerned assembled after his departure and heard the result of the interview.

“Solemn as a minister he swore,” explained Mr. Lyddon; “an’ then, a’most before his hands was off the Book, he burst out like a screeching, ravin’ hurricane. I half felt the oath was vain then, an’ ’t was his real nature bubblin’ up like.”

They discussed the matter, all save Chris, who sat apart, silent and abstracted. Presently she rose and left them, and faced her own trouble single-handed, as she had similarly confronted greater sorrows in the past.

She was fully determined to conceal her cherished secret still; yet not for the superficial reason that had occurred to any mind. Vast mental alterations had transformed Chris Blanchard since the death of Clement. Her family she scarcely considered now; no power of logic would have convinced her that she had wronged them or darkened their fame. In the past, indeed, not the least motive of her flight had centred in the fear of Will; but now she feared nobody, and her own misfortune held no shadow of sin or shame for her, looking back upon it. Those who would have denied themselves her

society or friendship upon this knowledge it would have given her no pang to lose. She could feel fiercely still, as she looked back to the birth of her son and traced the long course of her sufferings; and she yet experienced occasional thrills of satisfaction in her weaker moments, when

Page 269

she lowered the mask and reflected, not without pride, on the strength and determination that had enabled her to keep her secret. But to reveal the truth now was a prospect altogether hateful in the eyes of Chris, and she knew the reason. More than once had she been upon the brink of disclosure, since recent unhappy suspicions had darkened Phoebe's life; but she had postponed the necessary step again and again, at one thought. Her fortitude, her apathy, her stoic indifference, broke down and left her all woman before one necessity of confession; her heart stood still when she remembered that Martin Grimbal must know and judge. His verdict she did, indeed, dread with all her soul, and his only; for him she had grown to love, and the thought of his respect and regard was precious to her. Everybody must know, everybody or nobody. For long she could conceive of no action clearing Will in the eyes of the wider circle who would not be content to take his word, and yet leaving herself uninvolved. Then the solution came. She would depart once more with the child. Such a flight was implicit confession, and could not be misunderstood. Martin must, indeed, know, but she would never see him after he knew. To face him after the truth had reached his ear seemed to Chris a circumstance too terrible to dwell upon. Her action, of course, would proclaim the parentage of Timothy, and free Will from further slanderings; while for herself, through tears she saw the kind faces of the gypsy people and her life henceforth devoted to her little one.

To accentuate the significance of the act she determined to carry out her intention that same day, and during the afternoon opportunity offered. Her son, playing alone in the farmyard, came readily enough for a walk, and before three o'clock they had set out. The boy's face was badly scratched from his morning battle, but pain had ceased, and his injuries only served as an object of great interest to Timothy. Where water in ditch or puddle made a looking-glass he would stop to survey himself.

A spectator, aware of certain facts, had viewed the progress of Chris with some slight interest. Three ways were open to her, three main thoroughfares leading out of Chagford to places of parallel or greater importance. Upon the Moor road Will wandered in deep perturbation; on that to Okehampton walked another man, concerned with the same problem from a different aspect; the third highway led to Moreton; and thither Chris might have proceeded unchallenged. But a little public vehicle would be returning just then from the railway station. That the runaway knew, and therefore selected another path.

In her pocket was all the money that she had; in her heart was a sort of alloyed sorrow. Two thoughts shared her mind after she had decided upon a course of action. She wondered how quickly Tim would learn to call her "mother," for that was the only sweet word life still held; yet of the child's father she did not think, for her mind, without special act of volition, turned and turned again to him upon whom the Indian summer of her love had descended.

Page 270

CHAPTER IX

UNDER COSDON BEACON

Beneath a region where the “newtakes” straggle up Cosdon’s eastern flank and mark a struggle between man and the giant beacon, Chris Blanchard rested a while upon the grass by the highway. Tim, wrapped in a shawl, slept soundly beside his mother, and she sat with her elbows on her knees and one hand under her chin. It was already dusk; dark mist wreaths moved upon the Moor, and oncoming night winds sighed of rain. Then a moment before her intended departure from this most solitary spot she heard footsteps upon the road. Not interested to learn anything of the passer-by, Chris remained with her eyes upon the ground, but the footsteps stopped suddenly before her, whereupon she looked up and saw Martin Grimbal.

After a perambulation of twenty miles he had now set his face homewards, and thus the meeting was accomplished. Utmost constraint at first marked the expression of both man and woman, and it was left for Martin to break the silence, for Chris only started at seeing him, but said nothing. Her mind, however, ranged actively upon the reason of Grimbal’s sudden appearance, and she did not at first believe it accidental.

“Why, my dear, what is this? You have wandered far afield!”

He addressed her in unnatural tones, for surprise and emotion sent his voice up into his head, and it came thin and tremulous as a woman’s. Even as he spoke Martin feared. From the knowledge gleaned by him that morning he suspected the meaning of this action, and thought that Chris was running away.

And she, at the same moment, divined that he guessed the truth in so far as the present position was concerned. Still she did not speak, and he grew calmer and took her silence as an admission.

“You’re going away from Chagford? Is it wise?”

“Ess, Martin, ‘tis best so. You see this poor child be breedin’ trouble, an’ bringing bad talk against Will. He ban’t wanted—little Timothy—an’ I ban’t wanted overmuch, so it comed to me I’d—I’d just slip away out of the turmoil an’ taake Tim. Then—”

She stopped, for her heart was beating so fast that she could speak no more. She remembered her own arguments in the recent past,—that this flight must tell all who cared to reflect that the child was her own. Now she looked up at Martin to see if he had guessed it. But he exhibited extreme self-control and she was reassured.

“Just like your thoughtful self to try and save others from sorrow. Where are you going to, Chris? Don’t tell me more than you please; but I may be useful to you on this, the first stage of the journey.”

“To Okehampton to-night. To-morrow—but I’d rather not say any more. I don’t care so long as you think I’m right.”

“I haven’t said that yet. But I’ll go as far as Zeal with you. Then we’ll get a covered cab or something. We may reach the village before rain.”

Page 271

“No call for your coming. ’Tis awnly a short mile.”

“But I must. I’ll carry the laddie. Poor little man! Hard to be the cause of such a bother.”

He picked Timothy up so gently that the child did not wake.

“Now,” he said, “come along. You must be tired already.”

“How gude you be!” she said wearily. “I’m glad you doan’t scold or fall into a rage wi’ me, for I knaw I’m right. The bwoy’s better away, and I’m small use to any now. But I can be busy with this little wan. I might do worse than give up my life to un—eh, Martin?”

Then some power put words in his mouth. He trembled when he had spoken them, but he would not have recalled them.

“You couldn’t do better. It’s a duty staring you in the face.”

She started violently, and her dark skin flamed under the night.

“Why d’you say that?” she asked, with loud, harsh voice, and stopping still as she did so. “Why d’you say ’duty’?”

He, too, stood and looked at her.

“My dear,” he answered, “love’s a quick, subtle thing. It can make even such a man as I am less stupid than Nature built him. It fires dull brains; it adds sight to dim eyes; it shows the bookworm how to find out secrets hidden from keener spirits; it lifts a veil from the loved one and lets the lover see more than anybody else can. Be patient with me. I spoke because I love you still with all my heart and soul, Chris; I spoke, because what I feel for you is lifelong, and cannot change. Had I not still worshipped the earth under your feet I would have died rather than tell you. But love makes me bold. I have watched you so long and prayed for you so often. I have seen little differences in you that nobody else saw. And to-day I know. I knew when you picked up Timothy and flew at Will. Since then I’ve wandered Heaven can tell where, just thinking and thinking and wondering and seeing no way. And all the time God meant me to come and find you and tell you.”

She understood; she gave one bitter cry that started an echo from ruined mine-workings hard at hand; then she turned from him, and, in a moment of sheer hopeless misery, flung herself and her wrecked ambitions upon the ground by the wayside.

For a moment the man stood scared by this desperate answer to his words. Then he put his burden down, approached Chris, knelt beside her, and tried to raise her. She sat up at last with panting breast and eyes in which some terror sat.

“You!” she said. “You to knaw! Wasn’t my cup full enough before but that my wan hope should be cut away, tu? My God, I ’mauld in sorrow now—very auld. But ‘t is awver at last. You knaw, an’ I had to hear it from your awn lips! Theer ’s nought worse in the world for me now.”

Her hands were pressed against her bosom, and as he unconsciously moved a little towards her she shrank backwards, then rose to her feet. Timothy woke and cried, upon which she turned to him and picked him up.

Page 272

“Go!” she cried suddenly. “If ever you loved me, get out of my sight now, or you’ll make me want to kill myself again.”

He saw the time was come for strong self-assertion, and spoke.

“Listen!” he said. “You don’t understand, but you must. I’m the only man in the world who knows—the only one, and I’ve told you because it was stamped into my brain to tell you, and because I love you perhaps better than one creature has any right to love another.”

“You knaw. Isn’t it enough? Who else did I care for? Who else mattered to me? Mother or brother or other folk? I pray you to go an’ leave me. God knaws how hard it was to hide it, but I hugged it an’ suffered more ’n any but a mother could fathom ’cause things weer as they weer. Then came this trouble, an’ still none seed. But ‘t was meant you should, an’ the rest doan’t matter. I’d so soon go back now as not.”

“So you shall,” he answered calmly; “only hear this first. Last time I spoke about what was in my heart, Chris, you told me you could love me, but that you would not marry me, and I said I would never ask you again. I shall keep my word, sweetheart. I shall not ask; I shall take without asking. You love me; that is all I care for. The little boy came between last time; now nothing does.”

He took the woman in his arms and kissed her, but the next moment he was flying to where water lay in a ditch, for his unexpected attitude had overpowered Chris. She raised her hands to his shoulders, uttered a faint cry, then slipped heavily out of his arms in a faint. The man rushed this way and that, the child sat and howled noisily, the woman remained long unconscious, and heavy rain began to fall out of the darkness; yet, to his dying day that desolate spot of earth brought light to Martin’s eyes as often as he passed it.

Chris presently recovered her senses, and spoke words that made her lover’s heart leap. She uttered them in a sad, low voice, but her hand was in his, pressing it close the while.

“Awften an’ awften I’ve axed the A’mighty to give me wan little glint o’ knawledge as how ’twould all end. If I’d knawed! But I never guessed how big your sawl was, Martin. I never thought you was the manner of man to love a woman arter that.”

“God knows what’s in my heart, Chris.”

“I’ll tell ‘e everything some day. Lookin’ back it doan’t ’pear no ways wicked, though it may seem so in cold daylight to cold hearts.”

“Come, come with me, for the rain grows harder. I know where I can hire a covered carriage at an inn. ’Tis only five minutes farther on, and poor Tim’s unhappy.”

“He’m hungry. You won’t be hard ’pon my li’l bwoy if I come to ’e, Martin?”

“You know as well as I can tell you. There’s one other thing. About Chagford, Chris? Are you afraid of it? I’ll turn my back on it if you like. I’ll take you to Okehampton now if you would rather go there.”

Page 273

“Never! ‘Tis for you to care, not me. So you knaw an’ forgive—what’s the rest? Shadows. But let me hold your hand an’ keep my tongue still. I’m sick an’ fainty wi’ this gert turn o’ the wheel. ’T is tu deep for any words.”

He felt not less uplifted, but his joy was a man’s. It rolled and tumbled over his being like the riotous west wind. Under such stress his mind could find no worthy thing to say, and yet he was intoxicated and had to speak. He was very unlike himself. He uttered platitudes; then the weight of Timothy upon his arm reminded him that the child existed.

“He shall go to a good school, Chris.”

She sighed.

“I wish I could die quick here by the roadside, dear Martin, for living along with you won’t be no happier than I am this moment. My thoughts do all run back, not forward. I’ve lived long enough, I reckon. If I’d told ’e! But I’d rather been skinned alive than do it. I’d have let the rest knaw years agone but for you.”

Driving homewards half an hour later, Chris Blanchard told Martin that part of her story which concerned her life after the birth of Timothy.

“The travellin’ people was pure gawld to me,” she said. “And theer’s much to say of theer gert gudeness. But I can tell ’e that another time. It chanced the very day Will’s li’l wan was buried we was to Chagford, an’ the sad falling-out quickened my awn mind as to a thought ’bout my cheel. It comed awver me to leave un at Newtake. I left the vans wheer they was camped that afternoon, an’ hid ‘pon the hill wi’ the baaby. Then Will comed out hisself, an’ I chaanged my thought an’ followed un wheer he roamed, knawin’ the colour of his mind through them black hours as if ’twas my awn. ’Twas arter he’d left the roundy-poundy wheer he was born that I put my child in it, then called tu un loud an’ clear. He never knawed the voice, which was the awnly thing I feared. But a voice long silent be soon forgot. I bided at hand till I saw the bwoy in brother Will’s arms. An’ then I knawed ‘twas well an’ that mother would come to see it. Arterwards I suffered very terrible wi’out un. But I fought wi’ myself an’ kept away up to the time I’d fixed in my mind. That was so as nobody should link me with the li’l wan in theer thoughts. Waitin’ was the hard deed, and seein’ my bwoy for the first time when I went to Newtake was hard tu. But ’tis all wan now.”

She remained silent until the lengthy ride was ended and her mother’s cottage reached. Then, as that home she had thought to enter no more appeared again, the nature of the woman awoke for one second, and she flung herself on Martin’s heart.

“May God make me half you think me, for I love you true, an’ you’m the best man He ever fashioned,” she said. “An’ to-morrow’s Sunday,” she added inconsequently, “an’ I’ll kneel in church an’ call down lifelong blessings on ’e.”

“Don’t go to-morrow, my darling. And yet—but no, we’ll not go, either of us. I couldn’t hear my own banns read out for the world, and I don’t think you could; yet read they’ll be as sure as the service is held.”

Page 274

She said nothing, but he knew that she felt; then mother and child were gone, and Martin, dismissing his vehicle, proceeded to Monks Barton with the news that all was well.

Mrs. Blanchard heard her daughter's story and its sequel. She exhibited some emotion, but no grief. The sorrow she may have suffered was never revealed to any eye by word or tear.

"I reckoned of late days theer was Blanchard blood to the child," she said, "an' I won't hide from you I thought more'n wance you was so like to be the mother as Will the faither of un. Go to bed now, if you caan't eat, an' taake the bwoy, an' thank God for lining your dark cloud with this silver. If He forgives 'e, an' this here gude grey Martin forgives 'e, who be I to fret? Worse'n you've been forgived at fust hand by the Lard when He travelled on flesh-an'-blood feet 'mong men; an' folks have short memories for dates, an' them as sniggers now will be dust or dotards 'fore Tim's grawed. When you've been a lawful wife ten year an' more, who's gwaine to mind this? Not little Tim's fellow bwoys an' gals, anyway. His awn generation won't trouble him, an' he'll find a wise guardian in Martin, an' a lovin' gran'mother in me. Dry your eyes an' be a Blanchard. God A'mighty sends sawls in the world His awn way, an' chooses the faithers an' mothers for 'em; an' He's never taught Nature to go second to parson yet, worse luck. 'Tis done, an' to grumble at a dead man's doin's—specially if you caan't mend 'em—be vain."

"My share was half, an' not less," said Chris.

"Aye, you say so, but 'tis a deed wheer the blame ban't awften divided equal," answered Mrs. Blanchard. "Wheer's the maiden as caan't wait for her weddin' bells?"

The use of the last two words magically swept Chris back into the past. The coincidence was curious, and she remembered when a man, destined never to listen to such melody, declared impatiently that he heard it in the hidden heart of a summer day long past. She did not reply to her mother, but arose and took her child and went to rest.

CHAPTER X

BAD NEWS FOR BLANCHARD

On the morning that saw the wedding of Chris and Martin, Phoebe Blanchard found heart and tongue to speak to her husband of the thing she still kept locked within her mind. Since the meeting with John Grimbal she had suffered much in secret, but still kept silence; and now, after a quiet service before breakfast on a morning in mid-December, most of those who had been present as spectators returned to the valley,

and Phoebe spoke to Will as they walked apart from the rest. A sight of the enemy it was that loosed her lips, for, much to the surprise of all present, John Grimbal had attended his brother's wedding. As the little gathering streamed away after the ceremony, he had galloped off again with a groom behind him, and the incident now led to greater things.

Page 275

“Chill-fashion weddin’,” said Will, as he walked homewards, “but it ’pears to me all Blanchards be fated to wed coorious. Well, ’t is a gude matter out o’ hand. I knaw I raged somethin’ terrible come I fust heard it, but I think differ’nt now, specially when I mind what Chris must have felt those times she seed me welting her child an’ heard un yell, yet set her teeth an’ never shawed a sign.”

“Did ’e note Jan Grimbal theer?”

“I seed un, an’ I catched un wi’ his eye on you more ’n wance. He ’s grawed to look nowadays as if his mouth allus had a sour plum in it.”

“His brain’s got sour stuff hid in it if his mouth haven’t. Be you ever feared of un?”

“Not me. Why for should I be? He’ll be wan of the fam’ly like, now. He caan’t keep his passion alive for ever. We ’m likely to meet when Martin do come home again from honeymooning.”

“Will, I must tell you something—something gert an’ terrible. I should have told ’e ’fore now but I was frightened.”

“Not feared to speak to me?”

“Ess, seeing the thing I had to say. I’ve waited weeks in fear an’ tremblin’, expecting something to happen, an’ all weighed down with fright an’ dread. Now, what wi’ the cheel that’s comin’, I caan’t carry this any more.”

Being already lachrymose, after the manner of women at a wedding, Phoebe now shed a tear or two. Will thereupon spoke words of comfort, and blamed her for hiding any matter from him.

“More trouble?” he said. “Yet I doan’t think it,—not now,—just as I be right every way. I guess ‘t is your state makes you queer an’ glumpy.”

“I hope ‘t was vain talk an’ not true anyway.”

“More talk ‘bout me? You’d think Chagford was most tired o’ my name, wouldn’t ’e? Who was it now?”

“Him—Jan Grimbal. I met him ‘mong the mushrooms. He burst out an’ said wicked, awful things, but his talk touched the li’l bwoy. He thought Tim was yourn an’ he was gwaine to do mischief against you.”

“Damn his black mind! I wonder he haven’t rotted away wi’ his awn bile ’fore now.”

“But that weern’t all. He talked an’ talked, an’ threatened if you didn’t go an’ see him, as he’d tell ’bout you in the past, when you was away that autumn-time ’fore us was married.”

“Did he, by God! Doan’t he wish he knawed!”

“He does knaw, Will—least he said he did.”

“Never dream it, Phoebe. ’T is a lie. For why? ’Cause if he did knaw I shouldn’t—but theer, I’ve never tawld ‘e, an’ I ban’t gwaine to now. Awnly I’ll say this,—if Grimbal really knawed he’d have—but he can’t knaw, and theer ’s an end of it.”

“To think I should have been frighted by such a story all these weeks! An’ not true. Oh! I wish I’d told ’e when he sent the message. ’T would have saved me so much.”

“Ess, never keep nothin’ from me, Phoebe. Theer ’s troubles that might crush wan heart as comes a light load divided between two. What message?”

Page 276

“Some silly auld story ’bout a suit of grey clothes. He said I was to tell ’e the things was received by the awner.”

Will Blanchard stood still so suddenly that it seemed as though magic had turned him into stone. He stood, and his hands unclasped, and Phoebe’s church service which he carried fell with a thud into the road. His wife watched him change colour, and noted in his face an expression she had never before seen there.

“Christ A’mighty!” he whispered, with his eyes reflecting a world of sheer amazement and even terror; “he *does* knaw!”

“What? Knaw what, Will? For the Lard’s sake doan’t ’e look at me like that; you’ll frighten my heart into my mouth.”

“To think he knawed an’ watched an’ waited all these years! The spider patience o’ that man! I see how ’t was. He let the world have its way an’ thought to see me broken wi’out any trouble from him. Then, when I conquered, an’ got to Miller’s right hand, an’ beat the world at its awn game, he—an’ been nursing this against me! The heart of un!”

He spoke to himself aloud, gazing straight before him at nothing.

“Will, tell me what ’t is. Caan’t your awn true wife help ’e now or never?”

Recalled by her words he came to himself, picked up her book, and walked on. She spoke again and then he answered,—

“No, ’t is a coil wheer you caan’t do nought—nor nobody. The black power o’ waitin’—’t is that I never heard tell of. I thought I knawed what was in men to the core—me, thirty years of age, an’ a ripe man if ever theer was wan. But this malice! ’T is enough to make ’e believe in the devil.”

“What have you done?” she cried aloud. “Tell me the worst of it, an’ how gert a thing he’ve got against you.”

“Bide quiet,” he answered. “I’ll tell ’e, but not on the public road. Not but he’ll take gude care every ear has it presently. Shut your mouth now an’ come up to our chamber arter breakfast an’ I’ll tell ’e the rights of it. An’ that dog knawed an’ could keep it close all these years!”

“He’s dangerous, an’ terrible, an’ strong. I see it in your faace, Will.”

“So he is, then; ban’t no foxin’ you ’bout it now. ’T is an awful power of waitin’ he’ve got; an’ he haven’t bided his time these years an’ years for nothin’. A feast to him, I lay. He’ve licked his damned lips many a score o’ times to think of the food he’d fat his vengeance with bimebye.”

“Can he taake you from me? If not I’ll bear it.”

“Ess fay, I’m done for; credit, fortune, all gone. It might have been death if us had been to war at the time.”

She clung to him and her head swam.

“Death! God’s mercy! you’ve never killed nobody, Will?”

“Not as I knaws on, but p’r’aps ban’t tu late to mend it. It freezes me—it freezes my blood to think what his thoughts have been. No, no, ban’t death or anything like that. But ’t is prison for sure if—”

Page 277

He broke off and his face was very dark.

“What, Will? If what? Oh, comfort me, comfort me, Will, for God’s sake! An’ another li’l wan comin’!”

“Doan’t take on,” he said. “Ban’t my way to squeal till I’m hurt. Let it bide, an’ be bright an’ cheery come eating, for mother ’s down in the mouth at losin’ Chris, though she doan’t shaw it.”

Mrs. Blanchard, with little Timothy, joined the breakfast party at Monks Barton, and a certain gloom hanging over the party, Mr. Blee commented upon it in his usual critical spirit.

“This here givin’ in marriage do allus make a looker-on down in the mouth if he ‘s a sober-minded sort o’ man. ’T is the contrast between the courageousness of the two poor sawls jumpin’ into the state, an’ the solid fact of bein’ a man’s wife or a woman’s husband for all time. The vows they swear! An’ that Martin’s voice so strong an’ cheerful! A teeming cause o’ broken oaths the marriage sarvice; yet each new pair comes along like sheep to the slaughter.”

“You talk like a bachelor man,” said Damaris.

“Not so, Mrs. Blanchard, I assure ’e! Lookers-on see most of the game. Ban’t the mite as lives in a cheese what can tell e’ ’bout the flavour of un. Look at a married man at a weddin’—all broadcloth an’ cheerfulness, like the fox as have lost his tail an’ girns to see another chap in the same pickle.”

“Yet you tried blamed hard to lose your tail an’ get a wife, for all your talk,” said Will, who, although his mind was full enough, yet could generally find a sharp word for Mr. Blee.

“Bah to you!” answered the old man angrily. “*That* for you! ’T is allus your way to bring personal talk into high conversation. I was improvin’ the hour with general thoughts; but the vulgar tone you give to a discourse would muzzle the wisdom o’ Solomon.”

Miller Lyddon here made an effort to re-establish peace and soon afterwards the meal came to an end.

Half an hour later Phoebe heard from her husband the story of his brief military career: of how he had enlisted as a preliminary to going abroad and making his fortune, how he had become servant to one Captain Tremayne, how upon the news of Phoebe’s engagement he had deserted, and how his intention to return and make a clean breast of it had been twice changed by the circumstances that followed his marriage. Long he took in detailing every incident and circumstance.

“Coming to think,” he said, “of coourse ’t is clear as Grimbal must knaw my auld master. I seed his name raised to a Major in the *Western Morning News* a few year agone, an’ he was to Okehampton with a battalion when Hicks come by his death. So that’s how’t is; an’ I ban’t gwaine to bide Grimbal’s time to be ruined, you may be very sure of that. Now I knaw, I act.”

“He may be quite content you should knaw. That’s meat an’ drink enough for him, to think of you gwaine in fear day an’ night.”

Page 278

“Ess, but that’s not my way. I ban’t wan to wait an enemy’s pleasure.”

“You won’t go to him, Will?”

“Go to un? Ess fay—’fore the day’s done, tu.”

“That’s awnly to hasten the end.”

“The sooner the better.”

He tramped up and down the bedroom with his eyes on the ground, his hands in his pockets.

“A tremendous thing to tumble up on the surface arter all these years; an’ a tremendous time for it to come. ’T was a crime ’gainst the Queen for my awn gude ends. I had to choose ‘tween her an’ you; I’d do the same to-morrow. The fault weern’t theer. It lay in not gwaine back.”

“You couldn’t; your arm was broke.”

“I ought to have gone back arter ‘t was well. Then time had passed, an’ uncle’s money corned, an’ they never found me. But theer it lies ahead now, sure enough.”

“Perhaps for sheer shame he’ll bide quiet ’bout it. A man caan’t hate another man for ever.”

“I thought not, same as you, but Grimbal shaws we ’m wrong.”

“Let us go, then; let us do what you thought to do ’fore faither comed forward so kind. Let us go away to furrin paarts, even now.”

“I doubt if he’d let me go. ‘T is mouse an’ cat for the minute. Leastways so he’s thought since he talked to ’e. But he’ll knaw differ’nt ‘fore he lies in his bed to-night. Must be cut an’ dried an’ settled.”

“Be slow to act, Will, an’—”

“Theer! theer!” he said, “doan’t ’e offer me no advice, theer’s a gude gal, ’cause I couldn’t stand it even from you, just this minute. God knaws I’m not above takin’ it in a general way, for the best tried man can larn from babes an’ sucklings sometimes; but this is a thing calling for nothin’ but shut lips. ‘T is my job an’ I’ve got to see it through my own way.”

“You’ll be patient, Will? ’T isn’t like other times when you was right an’ him wrong. He’s got the whip-hand of ’e, so you mustn’t dictate.”

“Not me. I can be reasonable an’ just as any man. I never hid from myself I was doin’ wrong at the time. But, when all’s said, this auld history’s got two sides to it—’specially if you remember that ’t was through John Grimbal’s awn act I had to do wan wrong thing to save you doin’ a worse wan. He’ll have to be reasonable likewise. ’T is man to man.”

Will’s conversation lasted another hour, but Phoebe could not shake his determination, and after dinner Blanchard departed to the Red House, his destination being known to his wife only.

But while Will marched upon this errand, the man he desired to see had just left his own front door, struck through leafless coppices of larch and silver beech that approached the house, and then proceeded to where bigger timber stood about a little plateau of marshy land, surrounded by tall flags. The woodlands had paid their debt to Nature in good gold, and all the trees were naked. An east wind lent a hard, clean clearness to the country. In the foreground two little lakes spread their waters steel-grey in a cup of lead; the distance was clear and cold and compact of all sober colours save only where, through a grey and interlacing nakedness of many boughs, the roof of the Red House rose.

Page 279

John Grimbal sat upon a felled tree beside the pools, and while he remained motionless, his pipe unlighted, his gun beside him, a spaniel worked below in the sere sedges at the water's margin. Presently the dog barked, a moor-hen splashed, half flying, half swimming, across the larger lake, and a snipe got up and jerked crookedly away on the wind. The dog stood with one fore-paw lifted and the water dripping along his belly. He waited for a crack and puff of smoke and the thud of a bird falling into the water or the underwood. But his master did not fire; he did not even see the flushing of the snipe; so the dog came up and remonstrated with his eyes. Grimbal patted the beast's head, then rose from his seat on the felled tree, stretched his arms, sat down again and lighted his pipe.

The event of the morning had turned his thoughts in the old direction, and now they were wholly occupied with Will Blanchard. Since his fit of futile spleen and fury after the meeting with Phoebe, John had slowly sunk back into the former nerveless attitude. From this an occasional wonder roused him—a wonder as to whether the woman had ever given her husband his message at all. His recent active hatred seemed a little softened, though why it should be so he could not have explained. Now he sometimes assured himself that he should not proceed to extremities, but hang his sword over Will's head a while and possibly end by pardoning him altogether.

Thus he paltered with his better part and presented a spectacle of one mentally sick unto death by reason of shattered purpose. His unity of design was gone. He had believed the last conversation with Phoebe in itself sufficient to waken his pristine passion, but anger against himself had been a great factor of that storm, apart from which circumstance he made the mistake of supposing that his passion slept, whereas in reality it was dead. Now, if Grimbal was to be stung into activity, it must be along another line and upon a fresh count.

Then, as he reflected by the little tarns, there approached Will Blanchard himself; and Grimbal, looking up, saw him standing among white tussocks of dead grass by the water-side and rubbing the mud off his boots upon them. For a moment his breath quickened, but he was not surprised; and yet, before Will reached him, he had time to wonder at himself that he was not.

Blanchard, calling at the Red House ten minutes after the master's departure, had been informed by old Lawrence Vallack, John's factotum, that he had come too late. It transpired, however, that Grimbal had taken his gun and a dog, so Will, knowing the estate, made a guess at the sportsman's destination, and was helped on his way when he came within earshot of the barking spaniel.

Now that animal resented his intrusion, and for a moment it appeared that the brute's master did also. Will had already seen Grimbal where he sat, and came swiftly towards him.

Page 280

“What are you doing here, William Blanchard? You’re trespassing and you know it,” said the landowner loudly. “You can have no business here.”

“Haven’t I? Then why for do’e send me messages?”

Will stood straight and stern in front of his foe. His face was more gloomy than the sombre afternoon; his jaw stood out very square; his grey eyes were hard as the glint of the east wind. He might have been accuser, and John Grimbal accused. The sportsman did not move from his seat upon the log. But he felt a flush of blood pulse through him at the other’s voice, as though his heart, long stagnant, was being sluiced.

“That? I’d forgotten all about it. You’ve taken your time in obeying me.”

“This marnin’, an’ not sooner, I heard what you telled her when you catched Phoebe alone.”

“Ah! now I understand the delay. Say what you’ve got to say, please, and then get out of my sight.”

“‘T is for you to speak, not me. What be you gwaine to do, an’ when be you gwaine to do it? I allow you’ve bested me, God knaws how; but you’ve got me down. So the sooner you say what your next step is, the better.”

The older man laughed.

“’T isn’t the beaten party makes the terms as a rule.”

“I want no terms; I wouldn’t make terms with you for a sure plaace in heaven. Tell me what you be gwaine to do against me. I’ve a right to knaw.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You mean as you won’t tell me?”

“I mean I can’t—not yet. After speaking to your wife I forgot all about it. It doesn’t interest me.”

“Be you gwaine to give me up?”

“Probably I shall—as a matter of duty. I’m a bit of a soldier myself. It’s such a dirty coward’s trick to desert. Yes, I think I shall make an example of you.”

Will looked at him steadily.

“You want to wake the devil in me—I see that. But you won’t. I’m aulder an’ wiser now. So you ’m to give me up? I knawed it wi’out axin’.”

“And that doesn’t wake you?”

“No. Seein’ why I deserted an’ mindin’ your share in drivin’ me.”

Grimbal did not answer, and Will asked him to name a date.

“I tell you I shall suit myself, not you. When you will like it least, be sure of that. I needn’t pretend what I don’t feel. I hate the sight of you still, and the closer you come the more I hate you. It rolls years off me to see your damned brown face so near and hear your voice in my ear,—years and years; and I’m glad it does. You’ve ruined my life, and I’ll ruin yours yet.”

There was a pause; Blanchard stared cold and hard into Grimbal’s eyes; then John continued, and his flicker of passion cooled a little as he did so,—

“At least that’s what I said to myself when first I heard this little bit of news—that I’d ruin you; now I’m not sure.”

“At least I’ll thank you to make up your mind. ‘T is turn an’ turn about. You be uppermost just this minute. As to ruining me, that’s as may be.”

Page 281

“Well, I shall decide presently. I suppose you won’t run away. And it ’s no great matter if you do, for a fool can’t hide himself under his folly.”

“I sha’n’t run. I want to get through with this and have it behind me.”

“You’re in a hurry now.”

“It ‘s just an’ right. I knaw that. An’ ban’t no gert odds who ’s informer. But I want to have it behind me—an’ you in front. Do ’e see? This out o’ hand, then it ‘s my turn again. Keepin’ me waitin’ ’pon such a point be tu small an’ womanish for a fight between men. ’T is your turn to hit, Jan Grimbal, an’ theer ’s no guard ’gainst the stroke, so if you’re a man, hit an’ have done with it.”

“Ah! you don’t like the thought of waiting!”

“No, I do not. I haven’t got your snake’s patience. Let me have what I’ve got to have, an’ suffer it, an’ make an’ end of it.”

“You’re in a hurry for a dish that won’t be pleasant eating, I assure you.”

“It’s just an’ right I tell ‘e; an’ I knaw it is, though all these years cover it. Your paart ’s differ’nt. I lay you ’m in a worse hell than me, even now.”

“A moralist! How d’ you like the thought of a damned good flogging—fifty lashes laid on hot and strong?”

“Doan’t you wish you had the job? Thrashing of a man wi’ his legs an’ hands tied would just suit your sort of courage.”

“As to that, they won’t flog you really; and I fancy I could thrash you still without any help. Your memory ’s short. Never mind. Get you gone now; and never speak to me again as long as you live, or I shall probably hit you across the mouth with my riding-whip. As to giving you up, you’re in my hands and must wait my time for that.”

“Must I, by God? Hark to a fule talkin’! Why should I wait your pleasure, an’ me wi’ a tongue in my head? You’ve jawed long enough. Now you can listen. I’ll give *myself* up, so theer! I’ll tell the truth, an’ what drove me to desert, an’ what you be anyway—as goes ridin’ out wi’ the yeomanry so braave in black an’ silver with your sword drawed! That’ll spoil your market for pluck an’ valour, anyways. An’ when I’ve done all court-martial gives me, I’ll come back!”

He swung away as he spoke; and the other sat on motionless for an hour after Will had departed.

John Grimbal's pipe went out; his dog, weary of waiting, crept to his feet and fell asleep there; live fur and feathers peeped about and scanned his bent figure, immobile as a tree-trunk that supported it; and the gun, lying at hand, drew down a white light from a gathering gloaming.

One great desire was in the sportsman's mind,—he already found himself hungry for another meeting with Blanchard.

CHAPTER XI

PHOEBE TAKES THOUGHT

That night Will sat and smoked in his bedroom and talked to Phoebe, who had already gone to rest. She looked over her knees at him with round, sad eyes; while beside her in a cot slept her small daughter. A candle burned on the mantelpiece and served to illuminate one or two faded pictures; a daguerreotype of Phoebe as a child sitting on a donkey, and an ancient silhouette of Miller Lyddon, cut for him on his visit to the Great Exhibition. In a frame beneath these appeared the photograph of little Will who had died at Newtake.

Page 282

“He thinks he be gwaine to bide his time an’ let me stew an’ sweat for it,” said the man moodily.

“Awnly a born devil could tell such wickedness. Ban’t theer no ways o’ meetin’ him, now you knaw? If you’d speak to faither—”

“What ’s the use bringing sorrow on his grey hairs?”

“Well, it’s got to come; you knaw that. Grimbal isn’t the man to forgive.”

“Forgive! That would be worst of all. If he forgived me now I’d go mad. Wait till I’ve had soldier law, then us’ll talk ’bout forgiving arter.”

Phoebe shivered and began to cry helplessly, drying her eyes upon the sheet.

“Theer—theer,” he said; “doan’t be a cheel. We ‘m made o’ stern stuff, you an’ me. ‘T is awnly a matter of years, I s’pose, an’ the reason I went may lessen the sentence a bit. Mother won’t never turn against me, an’ so long as your faither can forgive, the rest of the world’s welcome to look so black as it pleases.”

“Faither’ll forgive ’e.”

“He might—just wance more. He’ve got to onderstand my points better late days.”

“Come an’ sleep then, an’ fret no more till marnin’ light anyway.”

“’Tis the thing hidden, hanging over my head, biding behind every corner. I caan’t stand it; I caan’t wait for it. I’ll grow sheer devil if I’ve got to wait; an’, so like as not, I’ll meet un faace to faace some day an’ send un wheer neither his bark nor bite will harm me. Ess fay—solemn truth. I won’t answer for it. I can put so tight a hand ’pon myself as any man since Job, but to sit down under this—”

“Theer’s nought else you can do,” said Phoebe. She yawned as she spoke, but Will’s reply strangled the yawn and effectually woke her up.

“So Jan Grimbal said, an’ I blamed soon shawed un he was out. Theer’s a thing I can do an’ shall do. ’T will sweep the ground from under un; ’t will blaw off his vengeance harmless as a gun fired in the air; ’t will turn his malice so sour as beer after thunder. I be gwaine to give myself up—then us’ll see who’s the fule!”

Phoebe was out of bed with her arms round her husband in a moment.

“No, no—never. You couldn’t, Will; you daren’t—’tis against nature. You ban’t free to do no such wild thing. You forget me, an’ the li’l maid, an’ t’ other comin’!”

“Doan’t ‘e choke me,” he said; “an’ doan’t ’e look so terrified. Your small hands caan’t keep off what’s ahead o’ me; an’ I wouldn’t let ’em if they could. ’T is in this world that a chap’s got to pay for his sins most times, an’ damn short credit, tu, so far as I can see. So what they want to bleat ’bout hell-fire for I’ve never onderstood, seeing you get your change here. Anyway, so sure as I do a trick that ban’t ’zactly wise, the whip ’s allus behind it—the whip—”

He repeated the word in a changed voice, for it reminded him of what Grimbal had threatened. He did not know whether there might be truth in it. His pride winced and gasped. He thought of Phoebe seeing his bare back perhaps years afterwards. A tempest of rage blackened his face and he spoke in a voice hoarse and harsh.

Page 283

“Get up an’ go to bed. Doan’t whine, for God’s sake, or you’ll drive me daft. I’ve paid afore, an’ I’ll pay again; an’ may the Lard help him who ever owes me ought. No mercy have I ever had from living man,—’cept Miller,—none will I ever shaw.”

“Not to-morrow, Will—not this week. Promise that, an’ I’ll get into bed an’ bide quiet. For your love o’ me, just leave it till arter Christmas time. Promise that, else you’ll kill me. No, no, no—you shaa’n’t shout me down ’pon this. I’ll cry to ’e while I’ve got life left. Promise not till Christmas be past.”

“I’ll promise nothing. I must think in the peace o’ night. Go to sleep an ’bide quiet, else you’ll wake the li’l gal.”

“I won’t—I won’t—I’ll never sleep again. Caan’ t’e think o’ me so well as yourself—you as be allus thinking o’ me? Ban’t I to count in an awful pass like this? I’m no fair-weather wife, as you knaws by now. If you gives yourself up, I’ll kill myself. You think I couldn’t, but I could. What’s my days away from you?”

“Hush, hush!” he said. “Be you mad? ’T is a matter tu small for such talk as that.”

“Promise, then, promise you’ll be dumb till arter Christmas.”

“So I will, if you ‘m that set on it; but if you knawed what waitin’ meant to the likes o’ me, you wouldn’t ax. You’ve got my word, now keep quiet, theer ‘s a dear love, an’ dry your eyes.”

He put her into bed, and soon stretched himself beside her. Then she clung to him as though powers were already dragging him away for ever. Will, bored and weary, was sorry for his wife with all his soul, and kept grunting words of good cheer and comfort as he sank to sleep. She still begged and prayed for delay, and by her importunity made him promise at last that he would take no step until after New Year’s Day. Then, finding she could win no more in that direction, Phoebe turned to another aspect of the problem, and began to argue with unexpected if sophistic skill. Her tears were now dry, her eyes very bright beneath the darkness; she talked and talked with feverish volubility, and her voice faded into a long-drawn murmur as Will’s hearing weakened on the verge of unconsciousness.

“Why for d’ you say you was wrong in what you done? Why d’ you harp an’ harp ‘pon that, knawin’ right well you’d do the same again to-morrow? You wasn’t wrong, an’ the Queen’s self would say the same if she knawed. ‘T was to save a helpless woman you runned; an’ her—Queen Victoria—wi’ her big heart as can sigh for the sorrow of even such small folks as us—she’d be the last to blame ’e.”

“She’ll never knaw nothin’ ’bout it, gude or bad. They doan’t vex her ears wi’ trifles. I deserted, an’ that’s a crime.”

“I say ‘t weern’t no such thing. You had to choose between that an’ letting me die. You saved my life; an’ the facts would be judged the same by any as was wife an’ mother, high or low. God A’mighty ’s best an’ awnly judge how much you was wrong; an’ you knaw He doan’t blame ’e, else your heart would have been sore for it these years an’ years. You never blamed yourself till now.”

Page 284

“Ess, awften an’ awften I did. It comed an’ went, an’ comed an’ went again, like winter frosts. True as I’m living it comed an’ went like that.”

Thus he spoke, half incoherently, his voice all blurred and vague with sleep.

“You awnly think ’t was so. You’d never have sat down under it else. It ban’t meant you should give yourself up now, anyways. God would have sent the sojers to find ’e when you runned away if He’d wanted ’em to find ’e. You didn’t hide. You looked the world in the faace bold as a lion, didn’t ‘e? Coourse you did; an’ ’t is gwaine against God’s will an’ wish for you to give yourself up now. So you mustn’t speak an’ you must tell no one—not even faither. I was wrong to ax ’e to tell him. Nobody at all must knaw. Be dumb, an’ trust me to be dumb. ’T is buried an’ forgot. I’ll fight for ’e, my dearie, same as you’ve fought for me many a time; an’ ’t will all fall out right for ’e, for men ’s come through worse passes than this wi’ fewer friends than what you’ve got.”

She stopped to win breath and, in the silence, heard Will’s regular respiration and knew that he slept. How much he had heard of her speech Phoebe could not say, but she felt glad to think that some hours at least of rest and peace now awaited him. For herself she had never been more widely awake, and her brains were very busy through the hours of darkness. A hundred thoughts and schemes presented themselves. She gradually eliminated everybody from the main issue but Will, John Grimbal, and herself; and, pursuing the argument, began to suspect that she alone had power to right the wrong. In one direction only could such an opinion lead—a direction tremendous to her. Yet she did not shrink from the necessity ahead; she strung herself up to face it; she longed for an opportunity and resolved to make one at the earliest moment.

Now that night was the longest in the whole year; and yet to Phoebe it passed with magic celerity.

Will awakened about half-past five, rose immediately according to his custom, lighted a candle, and started to dress himself. He began the day in splendid spirits, begotten of good sleep and good health; but his wife saw the lightness of heart, the bustling activity of body, sink into apathy and inertia as remembrance overtook his wakening hour. It was like a brief and splendid dawn crushed by storm-clouds at the very rise of the sun.

Phoebe presently dressed her little daughter and, as soon as the child had gone down-stairs, Will resumed the problems of his position.

“I be in two minds this marnin’,” he said. “I’ve a thought to tell mother of this matter. She ’m that wise, I’ve knawed her put me on the right track ‘fore now, an’ never guess she’d done it. Not but what I allus awn up to taking advice, if I follow it, an’ no man ’s readier to profit by the wisdom of his betters than me. That’s how I’ve done all I have done in my time. T’ other thought was to take your counsel an’ see Miller ’pon it.”

Page 285

“I was wrong, Will—quite wrong. I’ve been thinking, tu. He mustn’t knaw, nor yet mother, nor nobody. Quite enough knaws as ’t is.”

“What’s the wisdom o’ talkin’ like that? Who ’s gwaine to hide the thing, even if they wanted to? God knaws I ban’t. I’d like, so well as not, to go up Chagford next market-day an’ shout out the business afore the world.”

“You can’t now. You must wait. You promised. I thought about it with every inch of my brain last night, an’ I got a sort of feeling—I caan’t explain, but wait. I’ve trusted you all my life long an’ allus shall; now ’t is your turn to trust me, just this wance. I’ve got great thoughts. I see the way; I may do much myself. You see, Jan Grimbal—”

Will stood still with his chin half shorn.

“You dare to do that,” he said, “an’ I’ll raise Cain in this plaace; I’ll—”

He broke off and laughed at himself.

“Here be I blusterin’ like a gert bully now! Doan’t be feared, Phoebe. Forgive my noise. You mean so well, but you caan’t hide your secrets, fortunately. Bless your purty eyes—tu gude for me, an’ allus was, braave li’l woman!

“But no more of that—no seekin’ him, an’ no speech with him, if that’s the way your poor, silly thought was. My bones smart to think of you bearin’ any of it. But doan’t you put no oar into this troubled water, else the bwoat’ll capsize, sure as death. I’ve promised ’e not to say a word till arter New Year; now you must promise me never, so help you, to speak to that man, or look at un, or listen to a word from un. Fly him like you would the devil; an’ a gude second to the devil he is—if ’t is awnly in the matter o’ patience. Promise now.”

“You ’m so hasty, Will. You doan’t onderstand a woman’s cleverness in such matters. ’T is just the fashion thing as shaws what we ’m made of.”

“Promise!” he thundered angrily. “Now, this instant moment, in wan word.”

She gave him a single defiant glance. Then the boldness of her eyes faded and her lips drooped at the corners.

“I promise, then.”

“I should think you did.”

A few minutes later Will was gone, and Phoebe dabbed her moist eyes and blamed herself for so clumsily revealing her great intention,—to see John Grimbal and plead

with him. This secret ambition was now swept away, and she knew not where to turn or how to act for her husband.

CHAPTER XII

NEW YEAR'S EVE AND NEW YEAR'S DAY

From this point in his career Will Blanchard, who lacked all power of hiding his inner heart, soon made it superficially apparent that new troubles had overtaken him. No word concerning his intolerable anxieties escaped him, but a great cloud of tribulation encompassed every hour, and was revealed to others by increased petulance and shortness of temper. This mental friction quickly appeared on the young man's

Page 286

face, and his habitual expression of sulkiness which formerly belied him, now increased and more nearly reflected the reigning temperament of Blanchard's mind. His nerves were on the rack and he grew sullen and fretful. A dreary expression gained upon his features, an expression sad as a winter twilight brushed with rain. To Phoebe he seldom spoke of the matter, and she soon abandoned further attempts to intrude upon his heart though her own was breaking for him. Billy Blee and the farm hands were Will's safety-valve. One moment he showered hard and bitter words; the next, at sight of some ploughboy's tears or older man's reasonable anger, Will instantly relented and expressed his sorrow. The dullest among them grew in time to discern matters were amiss with him, for his tormented mind began to affect his actions and disorder the progress of his life. At times he worked laboriously and did much with his own hands that might have been left to others; but his energy was displayed in a manner fitful and spasmodic; occasionally he would vanish altogether for four-and-twenty hours or more; and none knew when he might appear or disappear.

It happened on New Year's Eve that a varied company assembled at the "Green Man" according to ancient custom. Here were Inspector Chown, Mr. Chapple, Mr. Blee, Charles Coomstock, with many others; and the assembly was further enriched by the presence of the bell-ringers. Their services would be demanded presently to toll out the old year, to welcome with joyful peal the new; and they assembled here until closing time that they might enjoy a pint of the extra strong liquor a prosperous publican provided for his customers at this season.

The talk was of Blanchard, and Mr. Blee, provided with a theme which always challenged his most forcible diction, discussed Will freely and without prejudice.

"I 'most goes in fear of my life, I tell 'e; but thank God 't is the beginning of the end. He'll spread his wings afore spring and be off again, or I doan't knaw un. Ess fay, he'll depart wi' his fiery nature an' horrible ideas 'pon manuring of land; an' a gude riddance for Monks Barton, I say."

"'Mazing 't is," declared Mr. Coomstock, "that he should look so black all times, seeing the gude fortune as turns up for un when most he wants it."

"So 't is," admitted Billy. "The faace of un weer allus sulky, like to the faace of a auld ram cat, as may have a gude heart in un for all his glowerin' eyes. But him! Theer ban't no pleasin' un. What do he want? Surely never no man 's failed on his feet awftener."

"'T is that what 's spoilin' un, I reckon," said Mr. Chappie. "A li'l ill-fortune he wants now, same as a salad o' green stuff wants some bite to it. He'd grumble in heaven, by the looks of un. An' yet it do shaw the patience of God wi' human sawls."

Page 287

“Ess, it do,” answered Mr. Blee; “but patience ban’t a virtue, pushed tu far. Justice is justice, as I’ve said more ‘n wance to Miller an’ Blanchard, tu, an’ a man of my years can see wheer justice lies so clear as God can. For why? Because theer ban’t room for two opinions. I’ve give my Maker best scores an’ scores o’ times, as we all must; but truth caan’t alter, an’ having put thinking paarts into our heads, ’t is more ‘n God A’mighty’s Self can do to keep us from usin’ of’em.”

“A tremenjous thought,” said Mr. Chapple.

“So ‘t is. An’ what I want to knaw is, why should Blanchard have his fling, an’ treat me like dirt, an’ ride rough-shod awver his betters, an’ scowl at the sky all times, an’ nothin’ said?”

“Providence doan’t answer a question just ’cause we ’m pleased to ax wan,” said Abraham Chown. “What happens happens, because ’t is foreordained, an’ you caan’t judge the right an’ wrong of a man’s life from wan year or two or ten, more ‘n you can judge a glass o’ ale by a tea-spoon of it. Many has a long rope awnly to hang themselves in the end, by the wonnerful foresight of God.”

“All the same, theer’d be hell an’ Tommy to pay mighty quick, if you an’ me did the things that bwoy does, an’ carried on that onreligious,” replied Mr. Blee, with gloomy conviction. “Ban’t fair to other people, an’ if ‘t was Doomsday I’d up an’ say so. What gude deeds have he done to have life smoothed out, an’ the hills levelled an’ the valleys filled up? An’ nought but sour looks for it.”

“But be you sure he ’m happy?” inquired Mr. Chapple. “He ’m not the man to walk ‘bout wi’ a fiddle-faace if ‘t was fair weather wi’ un. He’ve got his troubles same as us, depend upon it.”

Blanchard himself entered at this moment. It wanted but half an hour to closing time when he did so, and he glanced round the bar, snorted at the thick atmosphere of alcohol and smoke, then pulled out his pipe and took a vacant chair.

“Gude evenin’, Will,” said Mr. Chapple.

“A happy New Year, Blanchard,” added the landlord.

“Evening, sawls all,” answered Will, nodding round him. “Auld year’s like to die o’ frost by the looks of it—a stinger, I tell ’e. Anybody seen Farmer Endicott? I’ve been looking for un since noon wi’ a message from my faither-in-law.”

“I gived thicky message this marnin’,” cried Billy.

“Ess, I knaw you did; that’s my trouble. You gived it wrong. I’ll just have a pint of the treble X then. ’T is the night for ’t.”

Will's demeanour belied the recent conversation respecting him. He appeared to be in great spirits, joked with the men, exchanged shafts with Billy, and was the first to roar with laughter when Mr. Blee got the better of him in a brisk battle of repartee. Truth to tell, the young man's heart felt somewhat lighter, and with reason. To-morrow his promise to Phoebe held him no longer, and his carking, maddening

Page 288

trial of patience was to end. The load would drop from his shoulders at daylight. His letter to Mr. Lyddon had been written; in the morning the miller must read it before breakfast, and learn that his son-in-law had started for Plymouth to give himself up for the crime of the past. John Grimbal had made no sign, and the act of surrender would now be voluntary—a thought which lightened Blanchard's heart and induced a turn of temper almost jovial. He joined a chorus, laughed with the loudest, and contrived before closing time to drink a pint and a half of the famous special brew. Then the bell-ringers departed to their duties, and Mr. Chapple with Mr. Blee, Will, and one or two other favoured spirits spent a further half-hour in their host's private parlour, and there consumed a little sloe gin, to steady the humming ale.

"You an' me must see wan another home," said Will when he and Mr. Blee departed into the frosty night.

"Fust time as ever you give me an arm," murmured Billy.

"Won't be the last, I'm sure," declared Will.

"I've allus had a gude word for 'e ever since I knawed 'e," answered Billy.

"An' why for shouldn't 'e?" asked Will.

"Beginning of New Year 's a solemn sarcumstance," proceeded Billy, as a solitary bell began to toll. "Theer 's the death-rattle of eighteen hunderd an' eighty-six! Well, well, we must all die—men an' mice."

"An' the devil take the hindmost."

Mr. Blee chuckled.

"Let 's go round this way," he said.

"Why? Ban't your auld bones ready for bed yet? Theer 's nought theer but starlight an' frost."

"Be gormed to the frost! I laugh at it. Ban't that. 'T is the Union workhouse, wheer auld Lezzard lies. I likes to pass, an' nod to un as he sits on the lew side o' the wall in his white coat, chumping his thoughts between his gums."

"He 'm happier 'n me or you, I lay."

“Not him! You should see un glower ’pon me when I gives un ‘gude day.’ I tawld un wance as the Poor Rates was up somethin’ cruel since he’d gone in the House, an’ he looked as though he’d ‘a’ liked to do me violence. No, he ban’t happy, I warn ’e.”

“Well, you won’t see un sitting under the stars in his white coat, poor auld blid. He ’m asleep under the blankets, I lay.”

“Thin wans! Thin blankets an’ not many of ’em. An’ all his awn doin’. Patent justice, if ever I seed it.”

“Tramp along! You can travel faster ’n that. Ess fay! Justice is the battle-cry o’ God against men most times. Maybe they ’m strong on it in heaven, but theer ’s damned little filters down here. Theer go the bells! Another New Year come. Years o’ the Lard they call ’em! Years o’ the devil most times, if you ax me. What do ’e want the New Year to bring to you, Billy?”

“A contented ‘eart,” said Mr. Blee, “an’ perhaps just half-a-crown more a week, if ’t was seemly. Brains be paid higher ’n sweat in this world, an’ I’m mostly brain now in my dealin’s wi’ Miller. A brain be like a nut, as ripens all the year through an’ awnly comes to be gude for gathering when the tree ’s in the sere. ’T is in the autumn of life a man’s brain be worth plucking like—eh?”

Page 289

“Doan’t knaw. They ’m maggoty mostly at your age!”

“An’ they ’m milky mostly at yourn!”

“Listen to the bells an’ give awver chattering,” said Will.

“After gude store o’ drinks, a sad thing like holy bells ringing in the dark afar off do sting my nose an’ bring a drop to my eye,” confessed Mr. Blee. “An’ you—why, theer ’s a baaby hid away in the New Year for you—a human creature as may do gert wonders in the land an’ turn out into Antichrist, for all you can say positive. Theer ’s a braave thought for ’e!”

This remark sobered Blanchard and his mind travelled into the future, to Phoebe, to the child coming in June.

Billy babbled on, and presently they reached Mrs. Blanchard’s cottage. Damaris herself, with a shawl over her head, stood and listened to the bells, and Will, taking leave of Mr. Blee, hastened to wish his mother all happiness in the year now newly dawned. He walked once or twice up and down the little garden beside her, and with a tongue loosened by liquor came near to telling her of his approaching action, but did not do so. Meantime Mr. Blee steered himself with all caution over Rushford Bridge to Monks Barton.

Presently the veteran appeared before his master and Phoebe, who had waited for the advent of the New Year before retiring. Miller Lyddon was about to suggest a night-cap for Billy, but changed his mind.

“Enough ’s as gude as a feast,” he said. “Canst get up-stairs wi’out help?”

“Coourse I can! But the chap to the ‘Green Man’s’ that perfuse wi’ his liquor at seasons of rejoicing. More went down than was chalked up; I allow that. If you’ll light my chamber cannel, I’ll thank ’e, missis; an’ a Happy New Year to all.”

Phoebe obeyed, launched Mr. Blee in the direction of his chamber, then turned to receive Will’s caress as he came home and locked the door behind him.

The night air still carried the music of the bells. For an hour they pealed on; then the chime died slowly, a bell at a time, until two clanged each against the other. Presently one stopped and the last, weakening softly, beat a few strokes more, then ceased to fret the frosty birth-hour of another year.

The darkness slipped away, and Blanchard who had long learned to rise without awakening his wife, was up and dressed again soon after five o’clock. He descended silently, placed a letter on the mantelpiece in the kitchen, abstracted a leg of goose and a hunch of bread from the larder, then set out upon a chilly walk of five miles to Moreton

Hampstead. From there he designed to take train and proceed to Plymouth as directly and speedily as possible.

Some two hours later Will's letter found itself in Mr. Lyddon's hand, and his father-in-law learnt the secret. Phoebe was almost as amazed as the miller himself when this knowledge came to her ear; for Will had not breathed his intention to her, and no suspicion had crossed his wife's mind that he intended to act with such instant promptitude on the expiration of their contract.

Page 290

“I doubted I knawed him through an’ through at last, but ’t is awnly to-day, an’ after this, that I can say as I do,” mused Mr. Lyddon over an untasted breakfast. “To think he runned them awful risks to make you fast to him! To think he corned all across England in the past to make you his wife against the danger on wan side, an’ the power o’ Jan Grimbal an’ me drawed up ’pon the other!”

Pursuing this strain to Phoebe’s heartfelt relief, the miller neither assumed an attitude of great indignation at Will’s action nor affected despair of his future. He was much bewildered, however.

“He’ll keep me ’mazed so long as I live, ’pears to me. But he ’m gone for the present, an’ I doan’t say I’m sorry, knawin’ what was behind. No call for you to sob yourself into a fever. Please God, he’ll be back long ‘fore you want him. Us’ll make the least we can of it, an’ bide patient until we hear tell of him. He’ve gone to Plymouth—that’s all Chagford needs to knaw at present.”

“Theer ‘s newspapers an’ Jan Grimbal,” sobbed Phoebe.

“A dark man wi’ fixed purposes, sure enough,” admitted her father, for Will’s long letter had placed all the facts before him. “What he’ll do us caan’t say, though, seein’ Will’s act, theer ‘s nothin’ more left for un. Why has the man been silent so long if he meant to strike in the end? Now I must go an’ tell Mrs. Blanchard. Will begs an’ prays of me to do that so soon as he shall be gone; an’ he ’m right. She ought to knaw; but ‘t is a job calling for careful choice of words an’ a light hand. Wonder is to me he didn’t tell her hisself. But he never does what you’d count ’pon his doing.”

“You won’t tell Billy, faither, will ’e? Ban’t no call for that.”

“I won’t tell him, certainly not; but Blee ’s a ferret when a thing ’s hid. A detective mind theer is to Billy. How would it do to tell un right away an’ put un ’pon his honour to say nothing?”

“He mustn’t knaw; he mustn’t knaw. He couldn’t keep a secret like that if you gived un fifty pounds to keep it. So soon tell a town-crier as him.”

“Then us won’t,” promised Mr. Lyddon, and ten minutes after he proceeded to Mrs. Blanchard’s cottage with the news. His first hasty survey of the position had not been wholly unfavourable to Will, but he was a man of unstable mind in his estimates of human character, and now he chiefly occupied his thoughts with the offence of desertion from the army. The disgrace of such an action magnified itself as he reflected upon Will’s unhappy deed.

Phoebe, meantime, succumbed and found herself a helpless prey of terrors vague and innumerable. Will’s fate she could not guess at; but she felt it must be severe; she

doubted not that his sentence would extend over long years. In her dejection and misery she mourned for herself and wondered what manner of babe would this be that now took substance through a season of such gloom and accumulated sorrows.

Page 291

The thought begat pity for the coming little one,—utmost commiseration that set Phoebe's tears flowing anew,—and when the miller returned he found his daughter stricken beyond measure and incoherent under her grief. But Mr. Lyddon came back with a companion, and it was her husband, not her father, who dried Phoebe's eyes and cheered her lonely heart. Will, indeed, appeared and stood by her suddenly; and she heard his voice and cried a loud thanksgiving and clasped him close.

Yet no occasion for rejoicing had brought about this unexpected reappearance. Indeed, more ill-fortune was responsible for it. When Mr. Lyddon arrived at Mrs. Blanchard's gate, he found both Will and Doctor Parsons standing there, then learnt the incident that had prevented his son-in-law's proposed action.

Passing that way himself some hours earlier, Will had been suddenly surprised to see blue smoke rising from a chimney of the house. It was a very considerable time before such event might reasonably be expected and a second look alarmed Blanchard's heart, for on the little chimney-stack he knew each pot, and it was not the kitchen chimney but that of his mother's bedroom which now sent evidence of a newly lighted fire into the morning.

In a second Will's plans and purposes were swept away before this spectacle. A fire in a bedroom represented a circumstance almost outside his experience. At least it indicated sickness unto death. He was in the house a moment later, for the latch lifted at his touch; and when he knocked at his mother's door and cried his name, she bade him come in.

"What's this? What's amiss with 'e, mother? Doan't say 't is anything very bad. I seed the smoke an' my heart stood still."

She smiled and assured him her illness was of no account.

"Ban't nothing. Just a shivering an' stabbing in the chest. My awn fulishness to be out listening to they bells in the frost. But no call to fear. I awnly axed my li'l servant to get me a cup o' tea, an' she comed an' would light the fire, an' would go for doctor, though theer ban't no 'casion at all."

"Every occasion, an' the gal was right, an' it shawed gude sense in such a dinky maid as her. Nothin' like taaking a cold in gude time. Do 'e catch heat from the fire?"

Mrs. Blanchard's eyes were dull, and her breathing a little disordered. Will instantly began to bustle about. He added fuel to the flame, set on a kettle, dragged blankets out of cupboards and piled them upon his mother. Then he found a pillow-case, aired it until the thing scorched, inserted a pillow, and placed it beneath the patient's head. His

subsequent step was to rummage dried marshmallows out of a drawer, concoct a sort of dismal brew, and inflict a cup upon the sick woman. Doctor Parsons still tarrying, Will went out of doors, knocked a brick from the fowl-house wall, brought it in, made it nearly red hot, then wrapped it up in an old rug and applied it to his parent's feet,—all of which things the sick woman patiently endured.

Page 292

“You ‘m doin’ me a power o’ gude, dearie,” she said, as her discomfort and suffering increased.

Presently Doctor Parsons arrived, checked Will in fantastic experiments with a poultice, and gave him occupation in a commission to the physician’s surgery. When he returned, he heard that his mother was suffering from a severe chill, but that any definite declaration upon the case was as yet impossible.

“No cause to be ’feared?” he asked.

“’T is idle to be too sanguine. You know my philosophy. I’ve seen a scratched finger kill a man; I’ve known puny babes wriggle out of Death’s hand when I could have sworn it had closed upon them for good and all. Where there ’s life there ’s hope.”

“Ess, I knaw you,” answered Will gloomily; “an’ I knaw when you say that you allus mean there ban’t no hope at all.”

“No, no. A strong, hale woman like your mother need not give us any fear at present. Sleep and rest, cheerful faces round her, and no amateur physic. I’ll see her to-night and send in a nurse from the Cottage Hospital at once.”

Then it was that Miller Lyddon arrived, and presently Will returned home. He wholly mistook Phoebe’s frantic reception, and assumed that her tears must be flowing for Mrs. Blanchard.

“She’ll weather it,” he said. “Keep a gude heart. The gal from the hospital ban’t coming ’cause theer ’s danger, but ’cause she ’m smart an’ vitty ‘bout a sick room, an’ cheerful as a canary an’ knaws her business. Quick of hand an’ light of foot for sartin. Mother’ll be all right; I feel it deep in me she will.”

Presently conversation passed to Will himself, and Phoebe expressed a hope this sad event would turn him from his determination for some time at least.

“What determination?” he asked. “What be talkin’ about?”

“The letter you left for faither, and the thing you started to do,” she answered.

“‘S truth! So I did; an’ if the sight o’ the smoke an’ then hearin’ o’ mother’s trouble didn’t blaw the whole business out of my brain!”

He stood amazed at his own complete forgetfulness.

“Queer, to be sure! But coourse theer weern’t room in my mind for anything but mother arter I seed her stricken down.”

During the evening, after final reports from Mrs. Blanchard's sick-room spoke of soothing sleep, Miller Lyddon sent Billy upon an errand, and discussed Will's position.

"Jan Grimbal 's waited so long," he said, "that maybe he'll wait longer still an' end by doin' nothin' at all."

"Not him! You judge the man by yourself," declared Will. "But he 's made of very different metal. I lay he's bidin' till the edge of this be sharp and sure to cut deepest. So like 's not, when he hears tell mother 's took bad he'll choose that instant moment to have me marched away."

There was a moment's silence, then Blanchard burst out into a fury bred of sudden thought, and struck the table heavily with his fist.

Page 293

“God blast it! I be allus waitin’ now for some wan’s vengeance! I caan’t stand this life no more. I caan’t an’ I won’t—’t is enough to soften any man’s wits.”

“Quiet! quiet, caan’t ’e?” said the miller, as though he told a dog to lie down. “Theer now! You’ve been an’ gived me palpitations with your noise. Banging tables won’t mend it, nor bad words neither. This thing hasn’t come by chance. You ‘m ripening in mind an’ larnin’ every day. You mark my word; theer ‘s a mort o’ matters to pick out of this new trouble. An’ fust, patience.”

“Patience! If a patient, long-suffering man walks this airth, I be him, I should reckon. I caan’t wait the gude pleasure of that dog, not even for you, Miller.”

“‘T is discipline, an’ sent for the strengthening of your fibre. Providence barred the road to-day, else you’d be in prison now. Ban’t meant you should give yourself up—that’s how I read it.”

“‘T is cowardly, waitin’ an’ playin’ into his hands; an’ if you awnly knawed how this has fouled my mind wi’ evil, an’ soured the very taste of what I eat, an’ dulled the faace of life, an’ blunted the right feeling in me even for them I love best, you’d never bid me bide on under it. ‘T is rotting me—body an’ sawl—that’s what ‘t is doin’. An’ now I be come to such a pass that if I met un to-morrow an’ he swore on his dying oath he’d never tell, I shouldn’t be contented even wi’ that.”

“No such gude fortune,” sighed Phoebe.

“’T wouldn’t be gude fortune,” answered her husband. “I’m like a dirty chamber coated wi’ cobwebs an’ them ghostly auld spiders as hangs dead in unsecured corners. Plaaces so left gets worse. My mind ’s all in a ferment, an’ ’t wouldn’t be none the better now if Jan Grimbal broke his damned neck to-morrow an’ took my secret with him. I caan’t breathe for it; it ’s suffocating me.”

Phoebe used subtlety in her answer, and invited him to view the position from her standpoint rather than his own.

“Think o’ me, then, an’ t’ others. ’T is plain selfishness, this talk, if you looks to the bottom of it.”

“As to that, I doan’t say so,” began Mr. Lyddon, slowly stuffing his pipe. “No. When a man goes so deep into his heart as what Will have before me this minute, doan’t become no man to judge un, or tell ’bout selfishness. Us have got to save our awn sawls, an’ us must even leave wife, an’ mother, and childer if theer ’s no other way to do it. Ban’t no right living—ban’t no fair travelling in double harness wi’ conscience, onless you’ve got a clean mind. An’ yet waitin’ ’pears the only way o’ wisdom just here. You’ve never got room in that head o’ yourn for more ‘n wan thought to a time; an’ I doan’t

blame ’e theer neither, for a chap wi’ wan idea, if he sticks to it, goes further ’n him as drives a team of thoughts half broken in. I mean you ’m forgettin’ your mother for the moment. I should say, wait for her mendin’ ’fore you do anything.”

Page 294

Back came Blanchard's mind to his mother with a whole-hearted swing.

"Ess," he said, "you 'm right theer. My plaace is handy to her till she 'm movin'; an' if he tries to take me before she 'm down-house again, by God! I'll—"

"Let it bide that way then. Put t' other matter out o' your mind so far as you can. Fill your pipe an' suck deep at it. I haven't seen 'e smoke this longful time; an' in my view theer 's no better servant than tobacco to a mind puzzled at wan o' life's cross-roads."

CHAPTER XIII

MR. LYDDON'S TACTICS

In the morning Mrs. Blanchard was worse, and some few days later lay in danger of her life. Her son spent half his time in the sick-room, walked about bootless to make no sound, and fretted with impatience at thought of the length of days which must elapse before Chris could return to Chagford. Telegrams had been sent to Martin Grimbal, who was spending his honeymoon out of England; but on the most sanguine computation he and his wife would scarcely be home again in less than ten days or a fortnight.

Hope and gloom succeeded each other swiftly within Will Blanchard's mind, and at first he discounted the consistent pessimism of Doctor Parsons somewhat more liberally than the issue justified. When, therefore, he was informed of the truth and stood face to face with his mother's danger, hope sank, and his unstable spirit was swept from an altitude of secret confidence to the opposite depth of despair.

Through long silences, while she slept or seemed to do so, the young man traced back his life and hers; and he began to see what a good mother means. Then he accused himself of many faults and made impetuous confession to his wife and her father. On these occasions Phoebe softened his self-blame, but Mr. Lyddon let Will talk, and told him for his consolation that every mother's son must be accused of like offences.

"Best of childer falls far short," he assured Will; "best brings tu many tears, if 't is awnly for wantonness; an' him as thinks he've been all he should be to his mother lies to himself; an' him as says he has, lies to other people."

Will's wild-hawk nature was subdued before this grave crisis in his parent's life; he sat through long nights and tended the fire with quiet fingers; he learnt from the nurse how to move a pillow tenderly, how to shut a door without any sound. He wearied Doctor Parsons with futile propositions, but the physician's simulated cynicism often broke down in secret before this spectacle of the son's dog-like pertinacity. Blanchard much desired to have a vein opened for his mother, nor was all the practitioner's eloquence equal to convincing him such a course could not be pursued.

“She ‘m gone that gashly white along o’ want o’ blood,” declared Will; “an’ I be busting wi’ gude red blood, an’ why for shouldn’t you put in a pipe an’ draw off a quart or so for her betterment? I’ll swear ’t would strengthen the heart of her.”

Page 295

Time passed, and it happened on one occasion, while walking abroad between his vigils, that Blanchard met John Grimbal. Will had reflected curiously of late days into what ghostly proportions his affair with the master of the Red House now dwindled before this greater calamity of his mother's sickness; but sudden sight of the enemy roused passion and threw back the man's mind to that occasion of their last conversation in the woods.

Yet the first words that now passed were to John Grimbal's credit. He made an astonishing and unexpected utterance. Indeed, the spoken word surprised him as much as his listener, and he swore at himself for a fool when Will's retort reached his ear.

They were passing at close quarters,—Blanchard on foot, John upon horseback,—when the latter said,—

"How 's Mrs. Blanchard to-day?"

"Mind your awn business an' keep our name off your lips!" answered the pedestrian, who misunderstood the question, as he did most questions where possible, and now supposed that Grimbal meant Phoebe.

His harsh words woke instant wrath.

"What a snarling, cross-bred cur you are! I should judge your own family will be the first to thank me for putting you under lock and key. Hell to live with, you must be."

"God rot your dirty heart! Do it—do it; doan't jaw—do it! But if you lay a finger 'pon me while my mother 's bad or have me took before she 'm stirring again, I'll kill you when I come out. God 's my judge if I doan't!"

Then, forgetting what had taken him out of doors, and upon what matter he was engaged, Will turned back in a tempest, and hastened to his mother's cottage.

At Monks Barton Mr. Lyddon and his daughter had many and long conversations upon the subject of Blanchard's difficulties. Both trembled to think what might be the issue if his mother died; both began to realise that there could be no more happiness for Will until a definite extrication from his present position was forthcoming. At his daughter's entreaty the miller finally determined on a strong step. He made up his mind to visit Grimbal at the Red House, and win from him, if possible, some undertaking which would enable him to relieve his son-in-law of the present uncertainty.

Phoebe pleaded for silence, and prayed her father to get a promise at any cost in that direction.

“Let him awnly promise ‘e never to tell of his free will, an’ the door against danger ’s shut,” she said. “When Will knaws Grimbal ’s gwaine to be dumb, he’ll rage a while, then calm down an’ be hisself again. ’T is the doubt that drove him frantic.”

“I’ll see the man, then; but not a word to Will’s ear. All the fat would be in the fire if he so much as dreamed I was about any such business. As to a promise, if I can get it I will. An’ ‘twixt me an’ you, Phoebe, I’m hopeful of it. He ’s kept quiet so long that theer caan’t be any fiery hunger ‘gainst Will in un just now. I’ll soothe un down an’ get his word of honour if it ’s to be got. Then your husband can do as he pleases.”

Page 296

“Leave the rest to me, Faither.”

A fortnight later the cautious miller, after great and exhaustive reflection, set out to carry into practice his intention. An appointment was made on the day that Will drove to Moreton to meet his sister and Martin Grimbal. This removed him out of the way, while Billy had been despatched to Okehampton for some harness, and Mr. Lyddon’s daughter, alone in the secret, was spending the afternoon with her mother-in-law.

So Miller walked over to the Red House and soon found himself waiting for John Grimbal in a cheerless but handsome dining-room. The apartment suggested little occupation. A desk stood in the window, and upon it were half a dozen documents under a paper-weight made from a horse’s hoof. A fire burned in the broad grate; a row of chairs, upholstered in dark red leather, stood stiffly round; a dozen indifferent oil-paintings of dogs and horses filled large gold frames upon the walls; and upon a massive sideboard of black oak a few silver cups, won by Grimbal’s dogs at various shows and coursing meetings, were displayed.

Mr. Lyddon found himself kept waiting about ten minutes; then John entered, bade him a cold “good afternoon” without shaking hands, and placed an easy-chair for him beside the fire.

“Would you object to me lighting my pipe, Jan Grimbal?” asked the miller humbly; and by way of answer the other took a box of matches from his pocket and handed it to the visitor.

“Thank you, thank you; I’m obliged to you. Let me get a light, then I’ll talk to ’e.”

He puffed for a minute or two, while Grimbal waited in silence for his guest to begin.

“Now, wi’out any beatin’ of the bush or waste of time, I’ll speak. I be come ’bout Blanchard, as I dare say you guessed. The news of what he done nine or ten years ago comed to me just a month since. A month ’t was, or might be three weeks. Like a bolt from the blue it falled ’pon me an’ that’s a fact. An’ I heard how you knawed the thing—-you as had such gude cause to hate un wance.”

“‘Once?’”

“Well, no man’s hate can outlive his reason, surely? I was with ’e, tu, then; but a man what lets himself suffer lifelong trouble from a fule be a fule himself. Not that Blanchard ’s all fule—far from it. He’ve ripened a little of late years—though slowly as fruit in a wet summer. Granted he bested you in the past an’ your natural hope an’ prayer was to be upsides wi’ un some day. Well, that’s all dead an’ buried, ban’t it? I hated the shadow of un in them days so bad as ever you did; but you gets to see more of the world, an’ the men that walks in it when you ’m moved away from things by the distance of a few

years. Then you find how wan deed bears upon t' other. Will done no more than you'd 'a' done if the cases was altered. In fact, you 'm alike at some points, come to think of it."

"Is that what you've walked over here to tell me?"

Page 297

“No; I’m here to ax ‘e frank an’ plain, as a sportsman an’ a straight man wi’ a gude heart most times, to tell me what you ’m gwaine to do ‘bout this job. I’m auld, an’ I assure ’e you’ll hate yourself if you give un up. ’T would be outside your carater to do it.”

“You say that! Would you harbour a convict from Princetown if you found him hiding on your farm?”

“Ban’t a like case. Theer ’s the personal point of view, if you onderstand me. A man deserts from the army ten years ago, an’ you, a sort o’ amateur soldier, feels ’t is your duty to give un to justice.”

“Well, isn’t that what has happened?”

“No fay! Nothing of the sort. If ’t was your duty, why didn’t you do it fust minute you found it out? If you’d writ to the authorities an’ gived the man up fust moment, I might have said ’t was a hard deed, but I’d never have dared to say ’t weern’t just. Awnly you done no such thing. You nursed the power an’ sucked the thought, same as furriners suck at poppy poison. You played with the picture of revenge against a man you hated, an’ let the idea of what you’d do fill your brain; an’ then, when you wanted bigger doses, you told Phoebe what you knawed—reckoning as she’d tell Will bimebye. That’s bad, Jan Grimbal—worse than poisoning foxes, by God! An’ you knaw it.”

“Who are you, to judge me and my motives?”

“An auld man, an’ wan as be deeply interested in this business. Time was when we thought alike touching the bwoy; now we doan’t; ’cause your knowledge of un hasn’t grawed past the point wheer he downed us, an’ mine has.”

“You’re a fool to say so. D’ you think I haven’t watched the young brute these many years? Self-sufficient, ignorant, hot-headed, always in the wrong. What d’ you find to praise in the clown? Look at his life. Failure! failure! failure! and making of enemies at every turn. Where would he be to-day but for you?”

“Theer ’s a rare gert singleness of purpose ’bout un.”

“A grand success he is, no doubt. I suppose you couldn’t get on without him now. Yet you cursed the cub freely enough once.”

“Bitter speeches won’t serve ’e, Grimbal; but they show me mighty clear what’s hid in you. Your sawl ‘s torn every way by this thing, an’ you turn an’ turn again to it, like a dog to his vomit, yet the gude in ’e drags ’e away.”

“Better cut all that. You won’t tell me what you’ve come for, so I’ll tell you. You want me to promise not to move in this matter,—is that so?”

“Why, not ezackly. I want more ’n that. I never thought for a minute you would do it, now you’ve let the time pass so far. I knaw you’ll never act so ugly a paart now; but Will doan ‘t, an’ he’ll never b’lieve me if I told un.”

The other made a sound, half growl, half mirthless laugh.

“You’ve taken it all for granted, then—you, who know more about what ’s in my mind than I do myself? You’re a fond old man; and if you’d wanted to screw me up to the pitch of taking the necessary trouble, you couldn’t have gone a better way. I’ve been too busy to bother about the young rascal of late or he’d lie in gaol now.”

Page 298

“Doan’t say no such vain things! D’ you think I caan’t read what your face speaks so plain? A man’s eyes tell the truth awftener than what his tongue does, for they ’m harder to break into lying. ‘Tu busy’! You be foul to the very brainpan wi’ this job an’ you knaw it.”

“Is the hatred all on my side, d’ you suppose? Curse the brute to hell! And you’d have me eat humble-pie to the man who ’s wrecked my life?”

“No such thing at all. All the hatred be on your side. He’d forgived ’e clean. Even now, though you ’m fretting his guts to fiddlestrings because of waiting for ’e, he feels no malice—no more than the caged rat feels ’gainst the man as be carrying him, anyway.”

“You’re wrong there. He’d kill me to-morrow. He let me know it. In a weak moment I asked him the other day how his mother was; and he turned upon me like a mad dog, and told me to keep his name off my lips, and said he’d have my life if I gave him up.”

“That’s coorious then, for he ’s hungry to give himself up, so soon as the auld woman ’s well again.”

“Talk! I suppose he sent you to whine for him?”

“Not so. He’d have blocked my road if he’d guessed.”

“Well, I’m honest when I say I don’t care a curse what he does or does not. Let him go his way. And as to proclaiming him, I shall do so when it pleases me. An odious crime that,—a traitor to his country.”

“Doan’t become you nor me to dwell ’pon that, seeing how things was.”

Grimbal rose.

“You think he ’s a noble fellow, and that your daughter had a merciful escape. It isn’t for me to suggest you are mistaken. Now I’ve no more time to spare, I’m afraid.”

The miller also rose, and as he prepared to depart he spoke a final word.

“You ’m terrible pushed for time, by the looks of it. I knaw ’t is hard in this life to find time to do right, though every man can make a ‘mazing mort o’ leisure for t’ other thing. But hear me: you ‘m ruinin’ yourself, body an’ sawl, along o’ this job—body an’ sawl, like apples in a barrel rots each other. You ‘m in a bad way, Jan Grimbal, an’ I’m sorry for ‘e—brick house an’ horses an’ dogs notwithstanding. Have a spring cleaning in that sulky brain o’ yourn, my son, an’ be a man wi’ yourself, same as you be a man wi’ the world.”

The other sneered.

“Don’t get hot. The air is cold. And as you’ve given so much good advice, take some, too. Mind your own business, and let your son-in-law mind his.”

Mr. Lyddon shook his head.

“Such words do only prove me right. Look in your heart an’ see how ’t is with you that you can speak to an auld man so. ’T is common metal shawing up in ‘e, an’ I’m sorry to find it.”

He set off home without more words and, as chance ordered the incident, emerged from the avenue gates of the Red House while a covered vehicle passed by on the way from Moreton Hampstead. Its roof was piled with luggage, and inside sat Chris, her husband, and Will. They spied Mr. Lyddon and made room for him; but later on in the evening Will taxed the miller with his action.

Page 299

“I knawed right well wheer you’d come from,” he said gloomily, “an’ I’d ‘a’ cut my right hand off rather than you should have done it. You did n’t ought, Faither; for I’ll have no living man come between me an’ him.”

“I made it clear I was on my awn paart,” explained Mr. Lyddon; but that night Will wrote a letter to his enemy and despatched it by a lad before breakfast on the following morning.

> “Sir,” he said, “this comes to say that Miller seen you yesterday out of his own head, and if I had knowed he was coming I would have took good care to prevent it.
>
> “W. BLANCHARD.”

CHAPTER XIV

ACTION

Time passed, and Mrs. Blanchard made a slow return to health. Her daughter assumed control of the sick-room, and Martin Grimbal was denied the satisfaction of seeing Chris settled in her future home for a period of nearly two months. Then, when the invalid became sufficiently restored to leave Chagford for change of air, both Martin and Chris accompanied her and spent a few weeks by the sea.

Will, meantime, revolved upon his own affairs and suffered torments long drawn out. For these protracted troubles those of his own house were responsible, and both Phoebe and the miller greatly erred in their treatment of him at this season. For the woman there were indeed excuses, but Mr. Lyddon might have been expected to show more wisdom and better knowledge of a character at all times transparent enough. Phoebe, nearing maternal tribulation, threw a new obstacle in her husband’s way, and implored him by all holy things, now that he had desisted from confession thus far, to keep his secret yet a little longer and wait for the birth of the child. She used every possible expedient to win this new undertaking from Will, and her father added his voice to hers. The miller’s expressed wish, strongly urged, frequently repeated, at last triumphed, and against his own desire and mental promptings, Blanchard, at terrible cost to himself, had promised patience until June.

Life, thus clouded and choked, wrought havoc with the man. His natural safety-valves were blocked, his nerves shattered, his temper poisoned. Primitive characteristics appeared as a result of this position, and he exhibited the ferocity of an over-driven tame beast, or a hunted wild one. In days long removed from this crisis he looked back with chill of body and shudder of mind to that nightmare springtime; and he never willingly permitted even those dearest to him to retrace the period.

The struggle lasted long, but his nature beat Blanchard before the end, burst its bonds, shattered promises and undertakings, weakened marital love for a while, and set him free by one tremendous explosion and victory of natural force. There had come into his head of late a new sensation, as of busy fingers weaving threads within his skull and iron hands moulding the matter of his brain into new patterns. The demon things responsible for his torment only slept when he slept, or when, as had happened once or twice, he drank himself indifferent to all mundane matters. Yet he could not still them for long, and even Phoebe had heard mutterings and threats of the thread-spinners who were driving her husband mad.

Page 300

On an evening in late May she became seriously alarmed for his reason. Circumstances suddenly combined to strangle the last flickering breath of patience in Will, and the slender barriers were swept away in such a storm as even Phoebe's wide experience of him had never parallelled. Miller Lyddon was out, at a meeting in the village convened to determine after what fashion Chagford should celebrate the Sovereign's Jubilee; Billy also departed about private concerns, and Will and his wife had Monks Barton much to themselves. Even she irritated the suffering man at this season, and her sunken face and chatter about her own condition and future hopes of a son often worried him into sheer frenzy. His promise once exacted she rarely touched upon that matter, believing the less said the better, but he misunderstood her reticence and held it selfish. Indeed, Blanchard fretted and chafed alone now; for John Grimbal's sustained silence had long ago convinced Mr. Lyddon that the master of the Red House meant no active harm, and Phoebe readily grasped at the same conclusion.

This night, however, the flood-gates crumbled, and Will, before a futile assertion from Phoebe touching the happy promise of the time to come and the cheerful spring weather, dashed down his pipe with an oath, clenched his hands, then leapt to his feet, shook his head, and strode about like a maniac.

"Will! You've brawk un to shivers—the butivul wood pipe wi' amber that I gived 'e last birthday!"

"Damn my birthday—a wisht day for me 't was! I've lived tu long—tu long by all my years, an' nobody cares wan salt tear that I be roastin' in hell-fire afore my time. I caan't stand it no more—no more at all—not for you or your faither or angels in heaven or ten million babies to be born into this blasted world—not if I was faither to 'em all. I must live my life free, or else I'll go in a madhouse. Free—do 'e hear me? I've suffered enough and waited more 'n enough. Ban't months nor weeks neither—'t is a long, long lifetime. You talk o' time dragging! If you knawed—if you knawed! An' these devil-spinners allus knotting an' twisting. I could do things—I could—things man never dreamed. An' I will—for they 'm grawing and grawing, an' they'll burst my skull if I let 'em bide in it. Months ago I've sat on a fence unbeknawnst wheer men was shooting, an' whistled for death. So help me, 't is true. Me to do that! Theer 's a cur for 'e; an' yet ban't me neither, but the spinners in my head. Death 's a party easily called, mind you. A knife, or a pinch o' powder, or a drop o' deep water—they 'll bring un to your elbow in a moment. Awnly, if I done that, I'd go in company. Nobody should bide to laugh. Them as would cry might cry, but him as would laugh should come along o' me—he should, by God!"

"Will, Will! It isn't my Will talking so?"

"It be me, an' it ban't me. But I'm in earnest at last, an' speakin' truth. The spinners knaw, an' they 'm right. I'm sick to sheer hate o' my life; and you've helped to make me

so—you and your faither likewise. This thing doan't tear your heart out of you an' grind your nerves to pulp as it should do if you was a true wife."

Page 301

“Oh, my dear, my lovey, how can ’e say or think it? You knaw what it has been to me.”

“I knaw you’ve thought all wrong ‘pon it when you’ve thought at all. An’ Miller, tu. You’ve prevailed wi’ me to go on livin’ a coward’s life for countless ages o’ time—me—-me—creepin’ on the earth wi’ my tail between my legs an’ knawin’ I never set eyes on a man as ban’t braver than myself. An’ him—Grimbal—laughing, like the devil he is, to think on what my life must be!”

“I caan’t be no quicker. The cheel’s movin’ an’ bracin’ itself up an’ makin’ ready to come in the world, ban’t it? I’ve told ’e so fifty times. It’s little longer to wait.”

“It’s no longer. It’s nearer than sleep or food or drink. It’s comin’ ’fore the moon sets. ‘T is that or the madhouse—nothin’ else. If you’d felt the fire as have been eatin’ my thinking paarts o’ late days you’d knaw. Ban’t no use your cryin’, for ’t isn’t love of me makes you. Rivers o’ tears doan’t turn me no more. I’m steel now—fust time for a month—an’ while I’m steel I’ll act like steel an’ strike like steel. I’ve had shaky nights an’ silly nights an’ haunted nights, but my head ‘s clear for wance, an’ I’ll use it while ’tis.”

“Not to do no rash thing, Will? For Christ’s sake, you won’t hurt yourself or any other?”

“I must meet him wance for all.”

“He ’m at the council ‘bout Jubilee wi’ faither an’ parson an’ the rest.”

“But he’ll go home arter. An’ I’ll have ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to-night—I will, if I’ve got to shake the word out of his sawl. I ban’t gwaine to be driven lunatic for him or you or any. Death’s a sight better than a soft head an’ a lifetime o’ dirt an’ drivelling an’ babbling, like the brainless beasts they feed an’ fatten in asylums. That’s worse cruelty than any I be gwaine to suffer at human hands—to be mewed in wan of them gashly mad-holes wi’ the rack an’ ruins o’ empty flesh grinning an’ gibbering ‘pon me from all the corners o’ the airth. I be sane now—sane enough to knaw I’m gwaine mad fast—an’ I won’t suffer it another hour. It’s come crying and howling upon my mind like a storm this night, an’ this night I’ll end it.”

“Wait at least until the morning. See him then.”

“Go to bed, an’ doan’t goad me to more waiting, if you ever loved me. Get to bed—out of my sight! I’ve had enough of ’e and of all human things this many days. An’ that’s as near madness as I’m gwaine. What I do, I do to-night.”

She rose from her chair in sudden anger at his strange harshness, for the wife who has never heard an unkind word resents with passionate protest the sting of the first when it falls. Now genuine indignation inflamed Phoebe, and she spoke bitterly.

"'Enough of me'! Ess fay! Like enough you have—a poor, patient creature sweatin' for 'e, an' thinkin' for 'e, an' blotting her eyes with tears for 'e, an' bearin' your childer an' your troubles, tu! 'Enough of me.' Ess, I'll get gone to my bed an' stiffen my joints wi' kneelin' in prayer for 'e, an' weary God's ear for a fule!"

Page 302

His answer was an action, and before she had done speaking he stretched above him and took his gun from its place on an old beam that extended across the ceiling.

“What in God’s name be that for? You wouldn’t—?”

“Shoot a fox? Why not? I’m a farmer now, and I’d kill best auld red Moor fox as ever gave a field forty minutes an’ beat it. You was whinin’ ‘bout the chicks awnly this marnin’. I’ll sit under the woodstack a bit an’ think ’fore I starts. Ban’t no gude gwaine yet.”

Will’s explanation of his deed was the true one, but Phoebe realised in some dim fashion that she stood within the shadow of a critical night and that action was called upon from her. Her anger waned a little, and her heart began to beat fast, but she acted with courage and promptitude.

“Let un be to-night—auld fox, I mean. Theer ’m more chicks than young foxes, come to think of it; an’ he ‘m awnly doin’ what you forget to do—fighting for his vixen an’ cubs.”

She looked straight into Will’s eyes, took the gun out of his hands, climbed on to a chair, and hung the weapon up again in its place.

He laughed curiously, and helped his wife to the ground again.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now go an’ do what you want to do, an’ doan’t forget the future happiness of women an’ childer lies upon it.” Her anger was nearly gone, as he spoke again.

“How little you onderstand me arter all these years—an’ never will—nobody never will but mother. What did ’e fear? That I’d draw trigger on the man from behind a tree, p’r’aps?”

“No—not that, but that you might be driven to kill yourself along o’ having such a bad wife.”

“Now we ’m both on the mad road,” he said bitterly. Then he picked up his stick and, a moment later, went out into the night.

Phoebe watched his tall figure pass over the river, and saw him silhouetted against dead silver of moonlit waters as he crossed the stepping-stones. Then she climbed for the gun again, hid it, and presently prepared for her father’s return.

“What butivul peace an quiet theer be in ministerin’ to a gude faither,” she thought, “as compared wi’ servin’ a stormy husband!” Then sorrow changed to active fear, and that, in its turn, sank into a desolate weariness and indifference. She detected no semblance of justice in her husband’s outburst; she failed to see how circumstances must sooner

or late have precipitated his revolt; and she felt herself very cruelly misjudged, very gravely wronged.

Meantime Blanchard passed through a hurricane of rage against his enemy much akin to that formerly recorded of John Grimbal himself, when the brute won to the top of him and he yearned for physical conflict. That night Will was resolved to get a definite response or come to some conclusion by force of arms. His thoughts carried him far, and before he took up his station within the grounds of the Red House, at a point from which the avenue approach might be controlled, he had already fallen into a frantic hunger for fight and a hope that his enemy would prove of like mind. He itched for assault and battery, and his heart clamoured to be clean in his breast again.

Page 303

Whatever might happen, he was determined to give himself up on the following day. He had done all he could for those he loved, but he was powerless to suffer more. He longed now to trample his foe into the dust, and, that accomplished, he would depart, well satisfied, and receive what punishment was due. His accumulated wrongs must be paid at last, and he fully determined, an hour before John Grimbal came homewards, that the payment should be such as he himself had received long years before on Rushford Bridge. His muscles throbbed for action as he sat and waited at the top of a sloping bank dotted with hawthorns that extended upwards from the edge of the avenue and terminated on the fringe of young coverts.

And now, by a chance not uncommon, two separate series of circumstances were about to clash, while the shock engendered was destined to precipitate the climax of Will Blanchard's fortunes, in so far as this record is concerned. On the night that he thus raged and suffered the gall bred of long inaction to overflow, John Grimbal likewise came to a sudden conclusion with himself, and committed a deed of nature definite so far as it went.

In connection with the approaching Jubilee rejoicings a spirit in some sense martial filled the air, and Grimbal with his yeomanry was destined to play a part. A transient comet-blaze of militarism often sparkles over fighting nations at any season of universal joy, and that more especially if the keystone of the land's constitution be a crown. This fire found material inflammable enough in the hearts of many Devonshire men, and before its warm impulse John Grimbal, inspired by a particular occasion, compounded with his soul at last. Rumoured on long tongues from the village ale-house, there had come to his ears the report of certain ill-considered utterances made by his enemy upon the events of the hour. They were only a hot-headed and very miserable man's foolish comments upon things in general and the approaching festival in particular, and they served but to illustrate the fact that no ill-educated and passionate soul can tolerate universal rejoicings, itself wretched; but Grimbal clutched at this proven disloyalty of an old deserter, and told himself that personal questions must weigh with him no more.

"The sort of discontented brute that drifts into Socialism and all manner of wickedness," he thought. "The rascal must be muzzled once for all, and as a friend to the community I shall act, not as an enemy to him."

This conclusion he came to on the evening of the day which saw Blanchard's final eruption, and he was amazed to find how straightforward and simple his course appeared when viewed from the impersonal standpoint of duty. His brother was due to dine with John Grimbal in half an hour, for both men were serving on a committee to meet that night upon the question of the local celebrations at Chagford, and they were going together. Time, however, remained for John to put his decision into action. He turned to his desk, therefore, and wrote. The words to be employed he knew by heart, for he had composed his letter many months before, and it was with him always; yet now, seen thus set out upon paper for the first time, it looked strange.

Page 304

"RED HOUSE, CHAGFORD, DEVON.

"*To the Commandant, Royal Artillery, Plymouth.*

"SIR,—It has come to my knowledge that the man, William Blanchard, who enlisted in the Royal Artillery under the name of Tom Newcombe and deserted from his battery when it was stationed at Shorncliffe some ten years ago, now resides at this place on the farm of Monks Barton, Chagford. My duty demands that I should lodge this information, and I can, of course, substantiate it, though I have reason to believe the deserter will not attempt to evade his just punishment if apprehended. I have the honour to be,

"Your obedient servant,

"JOHN GRIMBAL,

"Capt. Dev. Yeomanry."

He had just completed this communication when Martin arrived, and as his brother entered he instinctively pushed the letter out of sight. But a moment later he rebelled against himself for the act, knowing the ugly tacit admission represented by it. He dragged forth the letter, therefore, and greeted his brother by thrusting the note before him.

"Read that," he said darkly; "it will surprise you, I think. I want to do nothing underhand, and as you're linked to these people for life now, it is just that you should hear what is going to happen. There's the knowledge I once hinted to you that I possessed concerning William Blanchard. I have waited and given him rope enough. Now he's hanged himself, as I knew he would, and I must act. A few days ago he spoke disrespectfully of the Queen before a dozen other loafers in a public-house. That's a sin I hold far greater than his sin against me. Read what I have just written."

Martin gazed with mildness upon John's savage and defiant face. His brother's expression and demeanour by no means chimed with the judicial moderation of his speech. Then the antiquary perused the letter, and there fell no sound upon the silence, except that of a spluttering pen as John Grimbal addressed an envelope.

Presently Martin dropped the letter on the desk before him, and his face was very white, his voice tremulous as he spoke.

"This thing happened more than ten years ago."

"It did; but don't imagine I have known it ten years."

“God forbid! I think better of you. Yet, if only for my sake, reflect before you send this letter. Once done, you have ruined a life. I have seen Will several times since I came home, and now I understand the terrific change in him. He must have known that you know this. It was the last straw. He seems quite broken on the wheel of the world, and no wonder. To one of his nature, the past, since you discovered this terrible secret, must have been sheer torment.”

John Grimbal doubled up the letter and thrust it into the envelope, while Martin continued:

“What do you reap? You’re not a man to do an action of this sort and live afterwards as though you had not done it. I warn you, you intend a terribly dangerous thing. This may be the wreck of another soul besides Blanchard’s. I know your real nature, though you’ve hidden it so close of late years. Post that letter, and your life’s bitter for all time. Look into your heart, and don’t pretend to deceive yourself.”

Page 305

His brother lighted a match, burnt red wax, and sealed the letter with a signet ring.

“Duty is duty,” he said.

“Yes, yes; right shall be done and this extraordinary thing made known in the right quarter. But don’t let it come out through you; don’t darken your future by such an act. Your personal relations with the man, John,—it’s impossible you should do this after all these years.”

The other affixed a stamp to his letter.

“Don’t imagine personal considerations influence me. I’m a soldier, and I know what becomes a soldier. If I find a traitor to his Queen and country am I to pass upon the other side of the road and not do my duty because the individual happens to be a private enemy? You rate me low and misjudge me rather cruelly if you imagine that I am so weak.”

Martin gasped at this view of the position, instantly believed himself mistaken, and took John at his word. Thereon he came near blushing to think that he should have read such baseness into a brother’s character.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “I ought to be ashamed to have misunderstood you so. I could not escape the personal factor in this terrible business, but you, I see, have duly weighed it. I wronged you. Yes, I wronged you, as you say. The writing of that letter was a very courageous action, under the circumstances—as plucky a thing as ever man did, perhaps. Forgive me for taking so mean a view of it, and forgive me for even doubting your motives.”

“I want justice, and if I am misunderstood for doing my duty—why, that is no new thing. I can face that, as better men have done before me.”

There was a moment or two of silence; then Martin spoke, almost joyfully.

“Thank God, I see a way out! It seldom happens that I am quick in any question of human actions, but for once, I detect a road by which right may be done and you still spared this terrible task. I do, indeed, because I know Blanchard better than you do. I can guess what he has been enduring of late, and I will show him how he may end the torture himself by doing the right thing even now.”

“It’s fear of me scorching the man, not shame of his own crime.”

“Then, as the stronger, as a soldier, put him out of his misery and set your mind at ease. Believe me, you may do it without any reflection on yourself. Tell him you have decided to take no step in the affair, and leave the rest to me. I will wager I can prevail upon him to give himself up. I am singularly confident that I can bring it about. Then, if I

fail, do what you consider to be right; but first give me leave to try and save you from this painful necessity."

Page 306

There followed a long silence. John Grimbal saw how much easier it was to deceive another than himself, and, before the spectacle of his deluded brother, felt that he appreciated his own real motives and incentives at their true worth. The more completely was Martin hoodwinked, the more apparent did the truth grow within John's mind. What was in reality responsible for his intended action never looked clearer than then, and as Martin spoke in all innocence of the courage that must be necessary to perform such a deed, Grimbal passed through the flash of a white light and caught a glimpse of his recent mental processes magnified by many degrees in the blinding ray. The spectacle sickened him a little, weakened him, touched the depths of him, stirred his nature. He answered presently in a voice harsh, abrupt, and deep.

"I've lied often enough in my life," he said, "and may again, but I think never to you till to-day. You're such a clean-minded, big-hearted man that you don't understand a mind of my build—a mind that can't forgive, that can't forget, that's fed full for years on the thought of revenging that frightful blow in the past. What you feared and hinted just now was partly the truth, and I know it well enough. But that is only to say my motives in this matter mixed."

"None but a brave man would admit so mucn, but now you wrong yourself, as I wronged you. We are alike. I, too, have sometimes in dark moments blamed myself for evil thoughts and evil deeds beyond my real deserts. So you. I know nothing but your sense of duty would make you post that letter."

"We've wrecked each other's lives, he and I; only he's a boy, and his life's before him; I'm a man, and my life is lived, for I'm the sort that grows old early, and he's helped Time more than anybody knows but myself."

"Don't say that. Happiness never comes when you are hungering most for it; sorrow never when you believe yourself best tuned to bear it. Once I thought as you do now. I waited long for my good fortune, and said 'good-by' to all my hope of earthly delight."

"You were easier to satisfy than I should have been. Yet you were constant, too,—-constant as I was. We're built that way. More's the pity."

"I have absolutely priceless blessings; my cup of happiness is full. Sometimes I ask myself how it comes about that one so little deserving has received so much; sometimes I waken in the very extremity of fear, for joy like mine seems greater than any living thing has a right to."

"I'm glad one of us is happy."

"I shall live to see you equally blessed."

"It is impossible."

There was a pause, then a gong rumbled in the hall, and the brothers went to dinner. Their conversation now ranged upon varied local topics, and it was not until the cloth had been removed according to old-fashioned custom, and fruit and wine set upon a shining table, that John returned to the crucial subject of the moment.

Page 307

He poured out a glass of port for Martin, and pushed the cigars towards him, then spoke,—

“Drink. It’s very good. And try one of those. I shall not post that letter.”

“Man, I knew it! I knew it well, without hearing so from you. Destroy the thing, dear fellow, and so take the first step to a peace I fear you have not known for many days. All this suffering will vanish quicker than a dream then. Justice is great, but mercy is greater. Yours is the privilege of mercy, and yet justice shall not suffer either—not if I know Will Blanchard.”

They talked long and drank more than usual, while the elder man’s grim and moody spirit lightened a little before his determination and his wine. The reek of past passions, the wreckage of dead things, seemed to be sweeping out of his mind. He forgot the hour and their engagement until the time fixed for that conference was past. Then he looked at his watch, rose from the table, and hurried to the hall.

“Let us not go,” urged Martin. “They will do very well without us, I am sure.”

But John’s only answer was to pull on his driving gloves. He anticipated some satisfaction from the committee meeting; he suspected, indeed, that he would be asked to take the chair at it, and, like most men, he was not averse to the exercise of a little power in a small corner.

“We must go,” he said. “I have important suggestions to make, especially concerning the volunteers. A sham fight on Scorhill would be a happy thought. We’ll drive fast, and only be twenty minutes late.”

A dog-cart had been waiting half an hour, and soon the brothers quickly whirled down Red House avenue. A groom dropped from behind and opened the gate; then it was all his agility could accomplish to scramble into his seat again as a fine horse, swinging along at twenty miles an hour, trotted towards Chagford.

CHAPTER XV

A BATTLE

Silent and motionless sat Blanchard, on the fringe of a bank at the coppice edge. He watched the stars move onward and the shadows cast by moonlight creep from west to north, from north to east. Hawthorn scented the night and stood like masses of virgin silver under the moon; from the Red House ’owl tree’—a pollarded elm, sacred to the wise bird—came mewing of brown owls; and once a white one struck, swift as a streak of feathered moonlight, on the copse edge, and passed so near to Blanchard that he saw the wretched shrew-mouse in its talons. “’Tis for the young birds somewheers,” he

thought; “an’ so they’ll thrive an’ turn out braave owlets come bimebye; but the li’l, squeakin’, blind shrews, what’ll they do when no mother comes home-along to ’em?”

He mused drearily upon this theme, but suddenly started, for there came the echo of slow steps in the underwood behind him. They sank into silence and set Will wondering as to what they might mean. Then another sound, that of a galloping horse and the crisp ring of wheels, reached him, and, believing that John Grimbal was come, he strung himself to the matter in hand. But the vehicle did not stop. A flash of yellow light leapt through the distance as a mail-cart rattled past upon its way to Moreton. This circumstance told Will the hour and he knew that his vigil could not be much longer protracted.

Page 308

Then death stalked abroad again, but this time in a form that awoke the watcher's deep-rooted instincts, took him clean out of himself, and angered him to passion, not in his own cause but another's. There came the sudden scream of a trapped hare,—that sound where terror and agony mingle in a cry half human,—and so still was the hour that Blanchard heard the beast's struggles though it was fifty yards distant. A hare in a trap at any season meant a poacher—a hated enemy of society in Blanchard's mind; and his instant thought was to bring the rascal to justice if he could. Now the recent footfall was explained and Will doubted not that the cruel cry which had scattered his reveries would quickly attract some hidden man responsible for it. The hare was caught by a wire set in a run at the edge of the wood, and now Blanchard crawled along on his stomach to within ten yards of the tragedy, and there waited under the shadow of a white-thorn at the edge of the woods. Within two minutes the bushes parted and, where the foliage of a young silver birch showered above lesser brushwood, a man with a small head and huge shoulders appeared. Seeing no danger he crept into the open, lifted his head to the moon, and revealed the person and features of Sam Bonus, the labourer with whom Will had quarrelled in times long past. Here, then, right ahead of him, appeared such a battle as Blanchard had desired, but with another foe than he anticipated. That accident mattered nothing, however. Will only saw a poacher, and to settle the business of such an one out of hand if possible was, in his judgment, a definite duty to be undertaken by every true man at any moment when opportunity offered.

He walked suddenly from shadow and stood within three yards of the robber as Bonus raised the butt of his gun to kill the shrieking beast at his feet.

"You! An' red-handed, by God! I knawed 't was no lies they told of 'e."

The other started and turned and saw who stood against him.

"Blanchard, is it? An' what be you doin' here? Come for same reason, p'r'aps?"

"I'd make you pay, if 't was awnly for sayin' that! I'm a man to steal others' fur out of season, ban't I? But I doan't have no words wi' the likes o' you. I've took you fair an' square, anyways, an' will just ax if you be comin' wi'out a fuss, or am I to make 'e?"

The other snarled.

"You—you come a yard nearer an' I'll blaw your damned head—"

But the threat was left unfinished, and its execution failed, for Will had been taught to take an armed man in his early days on the river, and had seen an old hand capture more than one desperate character. He knew that instantaneous action might get him within the muzzle of the gun and out of danger, and while Bonus spoke, he flew straight upon him with such unexpected celerity that Sam had no time to accomplish his

purpose. He came down heavily with Blanchard on top of him, and his weapon fell from his hand. But the poacher was not done with. As they lay struggling, he found his foot clear and managed to kick Will twice on the leg above the knee. Then Blanchard, hanging like a dog to his foe, freed an arm, and hit hard more than once into Sam's face. A blow on the nose brought red blood that spurted over both men black as ink under the moonlight.

Page 309

It was not long before they broke away and rose from their first struggle on the ground, but Bonus finally got to his knees, then to his feet, and Will, as he did the same, knew by a sudden twinge in his leg that if the poacher made off it must now be beyond his power to follow.

“No odds,” he gasped, answering his thought aloud, while they wrestled. “If you’ve brawk me somewheers ’t is no matter, for you ’m marked all right, an’ them squinting eyes of yourn’ll be blacker ’n sloes come marnin’.”

This obvious truth infuriated Bonus. He did not attempt to depart, but, catching sight of his gun, made a tremendous effort to reach it. The other saw this aim and exerted his strength in an opposite direction. They fought in silence awhile—growled and cursed, sweated and swayed, stamped and slipped and dripped blood under the dewy and hawthorn-scented night. Bonus used all his strength to reach the gun; Will sacrificed everything to his hold. He suffered the greater punishment for a while, because Sam fought with all his limbs, like a beast; but presently Blanchard threw the poacher heavily, and again they came down together, this time almost on the wretched beast that still struggled, held by the wire at hand. It had dragged the fur off its leg, and white nerve fibres, torn bare, glimmered in the red flesh under the moon.

Both fighters were now growing weaker, and each knew that a few minutes more must decide the fortune of the battle. Bonus still fought for the gun, and now his weight began to tell. Then, as he got within reach, and stretched hand to grasp it, Blanchard, instead of dragging against him, threw all his force in the same direction, and Sam was shot clean over the gun. This time they twisted and Will fell underneath. Both simultaneously thrust a hand for the weapon; both gripped it, and then exerted their strength for possession. Will meant using it as a club if fate was kind; the other man, rating his own life at nothing, and, believing that he bore Blanchard the grudge of his own ruin, intended, at that red-hot moment, to keep his word and blow the other’s brains out if he got a chance to do so.

Then, unheard by the combatants, a distant gate was thrown open, two brilliant yellow discs of fire shone along the avenue below, and John Grimbal returned to his home. Suddenly, seeing figures fighting furiously on the edge of the hill not fifty yards away, he pulled up, and a din of conflict sounded in his ears as the rattle of hoof and wheel and harness ceased. Leaping down he ran to the scene of the conflict as fast as possible, but it was ended before he arrived. A gun suddenly exploded and flashed a red-hot tongue of flame across the night. A hundred echoes caught the detonation and as the discharge reverberated along the stony hills to Fingle Gorge, Will Blanchard staggered backwards and fell in a heap, while the poacher reeled, then steadied himself, and vanished under the woods.

Page 310

“Bring a lamp,” shouted Grimbal, and a moment later his groom obeyed; but the fallen man was sitting up by the time John reached him, and the gun that had exploded was at his feet.

“You ’m tu late by half a second,” he gasped. “I fired myself when I seed the muzzle clear. Poachin’ he was, but the man ’s marked all right. Send p’liceman for Sam Bonus to-morrer, an’ I lay you’ll find a picter.”

“Blanchard!”

“Ess fay, an’ no harm done ’cept a stiff leg. Best to knock thicky poor twoad on the head. I heard the scream of un and comed along an’ waited an’ catched my gen’leman in the act.”

The groom held a light to the mangled hare.

“Scat it on the head,” said Will, “then give me a hand.”

He was helped to his feet; the servant went on before with the lamp, and Blanchard, finding himself able to walk without difficulty, proceeded, slowly supporting himself by the poacher’s gun.

Grimbal waited for him to speak and presently he did so.

“Things falls out so different in this maze of a world from what man may count on.”

“How came it that you were here?”

“Blamed if I can tell ’e till I gather my wits together. ’Pears half a century or so since I comed; yet ban’t above two hour agone.”

“You didn’t come to see Sam Bonus, I suppose?”

“No fay! Never a man farther from my thought than him when I seed un poke up his carrot head under the moon. I was ‘pon my awn affairs an’ comed to see you. I wanted straight speech an’ straight hitting; an’ I got ’em, for that matter. An’ fightin’ ’s gude for the blood, I reckon—anyway for my fashion blood.”

“You came to fight me, then?”

“I did—if I could make ’e fight.”

“With that gun?”

“With nought but a savage heart an’ my two fistes. The gun belongs to Sam Bonus. Leastways it did, but ’t is mine now—or yours, as the party most wronged.”

“Come this way and drink a drop of brandy before you go home. Glad you had some fighting as you wanted it so bad. I know what it feels like to be that way, too. But there wouldn’t have been blows between us. My mind was made up. I wrote to Plymouth this afternoon. I wrote, and an hour later decided not to post the letter. I’ve changed my intentions altogether, because the point begins to appear in a new light. I’m sorry for a good few things that have happened of late years.”

Will breathed hard a moment; then he spoke slowly and not without more emotion than his words indicated.

“That’s straight speech—if you mean it. I never knawed how ’t was that a sportsman, same as you be, could keep rakin’ awver a job an’ drive a plain chap o’ the soil like me into hell for what I done ten year agone.”

“Let the past go. Forget it; banish it for all time as far as you have the power. Blame must be buried both sides. Here’s the letter upon my desk. I’ll burn it, and I’ll try to burn the memory often years with it. Your road’s clear for me.”

Page 311

“Thank you,” said Blanchard, very slowly. “I lay I’ll never hear no better news than that on this airth. Now I’m free—free to do how I please, free to do it undriven.”

There was a long silence. Grimbal poured out half a tumbler of brandy, added soda water, then handed the stimulant to Will; and Blauchard, after drinking, sat in comfort a while, rubbed his swollen jaw, and scraped the dried blood of Bonus off his hands.

“Why for did you chaange so sudden?” he asked, as Grimbal turned to his desk.

“I could tell you, but it doesn’t matter. A letter in the mind looks different to one on paper; and duty often changes its appearance, too, when a man is honest with himself. To be honest with yourself is the hardest sort of honesty. I’ve had speech with others about this—my brother more particularly.”

“I wish to God us could have settled it without no help from outside.”

Grimbal rang the bell, then answered.

“As to settling it, I know nothing about that. I’ve settled with my own conscience—such as it is.”

“I’d come for ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

“Now you have a definite answer.”

“An’ thank you. Then what ’s it to be between us, when I come back? May I ax that? Them as ban’t enemies no more might grow to be friends—eh?”

What response Grimbal would have made is doubtful. He did not reply, for his servant, Lawrence Vallack, entered at the moment, and he turned abruptly upon the old man.

“Where ’s the letter I left upon my desk? It was directed to Plymouth.”

“All right, sir, all right; don’t worrit. I’ve eyes in my head for my betters still, thank God. I seed un when I come to shut the shutters an’ sent Joe post-haste to the box. ’T was in plenty of time for the mail.”

John emptied his lungs in a great respiration, half-sigh, half-groan. He could not speak. Only his fingers closed and he half lifted his hand as though to crush the smirking ancient. Then he dropped his arm and looked at Blanchard, asking the question with his eyes that he could find no words for.

“I heard the mail go just ’fore the hare squealed,” said Will stolidly, “an’ the letter with it for certain.”

Grimbal started up and rushed to the hall while the other limped after him.

“Doan’t ‘e do nothin’ fulish. I believe you never meant to post un. Ess, I’ll take your solemn word for that. An’ if you didn’t mean to send letter, ’t is as if you hadn’t sent un. For my mind weer fixed, whatever you might do.”

“Don’t jaw, now! There ’s time to stop the mail yet. I can get to Moreton as soon or sooner than that crawling cart if I ride. I won’t be fooled like this!”

Page 312

He ran to the stables, called to the groom, clapped a saddle on the horse that had just brought him home, and in about three minutes was riding down the avenue, while his lad reached the gate and swung it open just in time. Then Grimbal galloped into the night, with heart and soul fixed upon his letter. He meant to recover it at any reasonable cost. The white road streaked away beneath him, and a breeze created by his own rapid progress steadied him as he hastened on. Presently at a hill-foot, he saw how to save a mile or more by short cuts over meadow-land, so left the highway, rode through a hayfield, and dashed from it by a gap into a second. Then he grunted and the sound was one of satisfaction, for his tremendous rate of progress had served its object and already, creeping on the main road far ahead, he saw the vehicle which held the mail.

Meanwhile Blanchard and the man-servant stood and watched John Grimbal's furious departure.

"Pity," said Will. "No call to do it. I've took his word, an' the end 's the same, letter or no letter. Now let me finish that theer brandy, then I'll go home."

But Mr. Vallack heard nothing. He was gazing out into the night and shaking with fear.

"High treason 'gainst the law of the land to lay a finger on the mail. A letter posted be like a stone flinged or a word spoken—out of our keeping for all time. An' me to blame for it. I'm a ruined man along o' taking tu much 'pon myself an' being tu eager for others. He'll fling me out, sure 's death. 'T is all up wi' me."

"As to that, I reckon many a dog gets a kick wheer he thinks he 's earned a pat," said Will; "that's life, that is. An' maybe theer's sore hearts in dumb beasts, tu, sometimes, for a dog loves praise like a woman. He won't sack 'e. You done what 'peared your duty."

Blanchard then left the house, slowly proceeded along the avenue and presently passed out on to the highroad. As he walked the pain of his leg diminished, but he put no strain upon it and proceeded very leisurely towards home. Great happiness broke into his mind, undimmed by aching bones and bruises. The reflection that he was reconciled to John Grimbal crowded out lesser thoughts. He knew the other had spoken truth, and accepted his headlong flight to arrest the mail as sufficient proof of it. Then he thought of the possibility of giving himself up before Grimbal's letter should come to be read.

At home Phoebe was lying awake in misery waiting for him. She had brought up to their bedroom a great plate of cold bacon with vegetables and a pint of beer; and as Will slowly appeared she uttered a cry and embraced him with thanksgivings. Upon Blanchard's mind the return to his wife impressed various strange thoughts. He soothed her, comforted her, and assured her of his safety. But to him it seemed that he spoke with a stranger, for half a century of experience appeared to stretch between the

present and his departure from Monks Barton about three hours before. His wife experienced similar sensations. That this cheerful, battered, hungry man could be the same who had stormed from her into the night a few short hours before, appeared impossible.

Page 313

CHAPTER XVI

A PAIR OF HANDCUFFS

Mr. Blee, to do him justice, was usually the first afoot at Monks Barton, both winter and summer. The maids who slept near him needed no alarum, for his step on the stair and his high-pitched summons, “Now then, you lazy gals, what be snorin’ theer for, an’ the day broke?” was always sufficient to ensure their wakening.

At an early hour of the morning that dawned upon Will’s nocturnal adventures, Billy stood in the farmyard and surveyed the shining river to an accompaniment of many musical sounds. On Monks Barton thatches the pigeons cooed and bowed and gurgled to their ladies, cows lowed from the byres, cocks crew, and the mill-wheel, already launched upon the business of the day, panted from its dark habitation of dripping moss and fern.

Billy sniffed the morning, then proceeded to a pig’s sty, opened a door within it, and chuckled at the spectacle that greeted him.

“Burnish it all! auld sow ’s farrowed at last, then. Busy night for her, sure ‘nough! An’ so fine a litter as ever I seed, by the looks of it.”

He bustled off to get refreshment for the gaunt, new-made mother, and as he did so met Ted Chown, who now worked at Mr. Lyddon’s, and had just arrived from his home in Chagford.

“Marnin’, sir; have ’e heard the news? Gert tidings up-long I ’sure ’e.”

“Not so gert as what I’ve got, I’ll lay. Butivul litter ‘t is. Come an’ give me a hand.”

“Bonus was catched poachin’ last night to the Red House. An’ he’ve had his faace smashed in, nose broke, an’ all. He escaped arter; but he went to Doctor fust thing to-day an’ got hisself plastered; an’ then, knawin’ ‘t weern’t no use to hide, comed right along an’ gived hisself up to faither.”

“My stars! An’ no more’n what he desarved, that’s certain.”

“But that ban’t all, even. Maister Jan Grimbal’s missing! He rode off last night, Laard knaws wheer, an’ never a sign of un seed since. They’ve sent to the station ‘bout it a’ready; an’ they ‘m scourin’ the airth for un. An’ ‘t was Maister Blanchard as fought wi’ Bonus, for Sam said so.”

“Guy Fawkes an’ angels! Here, you mix this. I must tell Miller an’ run about a bit. Gwaine to be a gert day, by the looks of it!”

He hurried into the house, met his master and began with breathless haste,—

“Awful doin’s! Awful doin’s, Miller. Such a sweet-smellin’ marnin’, tu! Bear yourself stiff against it, for us caan’t say what remains to be told.”

“What’s wrong now? Doan’t choke yourself. You ‘m grawin’ tu auld for all the excitements of modern life, Billy. Wheer’s Will?”

“You may well ax. Sleepin’ still, I reckon, for he comed in long arter midnight. I was stirrin’ at the time an’ heard un. Sleepin’ arter black deeds, if all they tell be true.”

“Black deeds!”

Page 314

“The bwoy Ted’s just comed wi’ it. ’T is this way: Bonus be at death’s door wi’ a smashed nose, an’ Blanchard done it; an’ Jan Grimbal’s vanished off the faace o’ the airth. Not a sign of un seed arter he drove away last night from the Jubilee gathering. An’ if ’t is murder, you’ll be in the witness-box, knawin’ the parties same as you do; an’ the sow ’s got a braave litter, though what’s that arter such news?”

“Guess you ‘m dreamin’, Blee,” said Mr. Lyddon, as he took his hat and walked into the farmyard.

Billy was hurt.

“Dreamin’, be I? I’m a man as dreams blue murders, of coourse! Tu auld to be relied on now, I s’pose. Theer! Theer!” he changed his voice and it ran into a cracked scream of excitement. “Theer! P’r’aps I’m dreamin’, as Inspector Chown an’ Constable Lamacraft be walkin’ in the gate this instant moment!”

But there was no mistaking this fact. Abraham Chown entered, marched solemnly to the party at the door, cried “Halt!” to his subordinate, then turned to Mr. Lyddon.

“Good-day to you, Miller,” he said, “though ’t is a bad day, I’m fearin’. I be here for Will Blanchard, *alias* Tom Newcombe.”

“If you mean my son-in-law, he ’s not out of bed to my knawledge.”

“Dear sawls! Doan’t ’e say ’t is blue murder—doan’t ’e say that!” implored Mr. Blee. His head shook and his tongue revolved round his lips.

“Not as I knaws. We ‘m actin’ on instructions from the military to Plymouth.”

“Theer ’s allus wickedness hid under a alias notwithstanding,” declared Billy, rather disappointed; “have ’e found Jan Grimbal?”

“They be searchin’ for un. Jim Luke, Inspector to Moreton, an’ his men be out beatin’ the country. But I’m here, wi’ my staff, for William Blanchard. March!”

Lamacraft, thus addressed, proceeded a pace or two until stopped by Mr. Lyddon.

“No call to go in. He’ll come down. But I’m sore puzzled to knaw what this means, for awnly last night I heard tell from Jan Grimbal’s awn lips that he’d chaanged his mind about a private matter bearin’ on this.”

“I want the man, anyways, an’ I be gwaine to have un,” declared Inspector Chown. He brought a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and gave them to the constable.

“Put up them gashly things, Abraham Chown,” said the miller sternly. “Doan’t ’e knaw Blanchard better ’n that?”

“Handcuffed he’ll be, whether he likes it or not,” answered the other; “an’ if theer’s trouble, I bid all present an’ any able-bodied men ’pon the premises to help me take him in the Queen’s name.”

Billy hobbled round the corner, thrust two fingers into his mouth, and blew a quavering whistle; whereupon two labourers, working a few hundred yards off, immediately dropped their tools and joined him.

“Run you here,” he cried. “P’lice be corned to taake Will Blanchard, an’ us must all give the Law a hand, for theer’ll be blows struck if I knaw un.”

Page 315

“Will Blanchard! What have he done?”

“Been under a alias—that’s the least of it, but—God, He knaws—it may rise to murder. ’T is our bounden duty to help Chown against un.”

“Be danged if I do!” said one of the men.

“Nor me,” declared the other. “Let Chown do his job hisself—an’ get his jaw broke for his trouble.”

But they followed Mr. Blee to where the miller still argued against Lamacraft’s entrance.

“Why didn’t they send soldiers for un? That’s what he reckoned on,” said Mr. Lyddon.

“’T is my job fust.”

“I’m sorry you’ve come in this high spirit. You knaw the man and ought to taake his word he’d go quiet and my guarantee for it.”

“I knaw my duty, an’ doan’t want no teachin’ from you.”

“You’re a fule!” said Miller, in some anger. “An’ ’t will take more ’n you an’ that moon-faced lout to put them things on the man, or I’m much mistaken.”

He went indoors while the labourers laughed, and the younger constable blushed at the insult.

“How do ’e like that, Peter Lamacraft?” asked a labourer.

“No odds to me,” answered the policeman, licking his hands nervously and looking at the door. “I ban’t feared of nought said or done if I’ve got the Law behind me. An’ you’m liable yourself if you doan’t help.”

“Caan’t wait no more,” declared Mr. Chown. “If he’s in bed, us’ll take un in bed. Come on, you!”

Thus ordered to proceed, Lamacraft set his face resolutely forward and was just entering the farm when Phoebe appeared. Her tears were dry, though her voice was unsteady and her eyelids red.

“Gude mornin’, Mr. Chown,” she said.

“Marnin’, ma’am. Let us pass, if you please.”

“Are you coming in? Why?”

“Us caan’t bide no more, an’ us caan’t give no more reasons. The Law ban’t ‘spected to give reasons for its deeds, an’ us won’t be bamboozled an’ put off a minute longer,” answered Chown grimly. “March, I tell ’e, Peter Lamacraft.”

“You caan’t see my husband.”

“But we’m gwaine to see un. He’ve got to see me, an’ come along wi’ me, tu. An’ if he’s wise, he’ll come quiet an’ keep his mouth shut. That much I’ll tell un for his gude.”

“If you’ll listen, I might make you onderstand how ’tis you caan’t see Will,” said Phoebe quietly. “You must knaw he runned away an’ went soldiering before he married me. Then he comed back for love of me wi’out axin’ any man’s leave.”

“So much the worse, ma’am; he’m a desarter!”

“The dark wickedness!” gasped Mr. Blee; “an’ him dumb as a newt ’bout it all these years an’ years! The conscience of un!”

“Well, you needn’t trouble any more,” continued Phoebe to the policemen. “My husband be gwaine to take this matter into his awn hands now.”

Inspector Chown laughed.

“That’s gude, that is!—now he ’m blawn upon!”

Page 316

“He ’s gwaine to give himself up—he caan’t do more,” said Phoebe, turning to her father who now reappeared.

“Coourse he caan’t do more. What more do ’e want?” the miller inquired.

“Him,” answered Mr. Chown. “No more an’ no less; an’ everything said will be used against him.”

“You glumpy auld Dowl!” growled a labouring man.

“All right, all right. You just wait, all of ’e! Wheer’s the man? How much longer be I to bide his pleasure? March! Damn it all! be the Law a laughing-stock?” The Inspector was growing very hot and excited.

“He’s gone,” said Phoebe, as Mr. Lamacraft entered the farm, put one foot on the bottom step of the stairs, then turned for further orders. “He’s gone, before light. He rested two hours or so, then us harnessed the trap an’ he drove away to Moreton to take fust train to Plymouth by way o’ Newton Abbot. An’ he said as Ted Chown was to go in arter breakfast an’ drive the trap home.”

“Couldn’t tell me nothin’ as had pleased me better,” said the miller. “‘T is a weight off me—an’ off him I reckon. Now you ’m answered, my son; you can telegraph back as you corned wi’ your auld handcuffs tu late by hours, an’ that the man’s on his way to give hisself up.”

“I’ve only got your word for it.”

“An’ what better word should ’e have?” piped Billy, who in the space of half a minute had ranged himself alongside his master. “You to question the word o’ Miller Lyddon, you crooked-hearted raven! Who was it spoke for ‘e fifteen year ago an’ got ’em to make ’e p’liceman ’cause you was tu big a fule to larn any other trade? Gert, thankless twoad! An’ who was it let ’em keep the ‘Green Man’ awpen two nights in wan week arter closin’ time, ’cause he wanted another drop hisself?”

“Come you away,” said the Inspector to his constable. “Ban’t for the likes of we to have any talk wi’ the likes o’ they. But they’ll hear more of this; an’ if theer’s been any hookem-snivey dealin’s with the Law, they’ll live to be sorry. An’ you follow me likewise,” he added to his son, who stood hard by. “You come wi’ me, Ted, for you doan’t do no more work for runaway soldiers, nor yet bald-headed auld antics like this here!”

He pointed to Mr. Blee, then turned to depart.

“Get off honest man’s land, you black-bearded beast!” screamed Billy. “You ’m most like of any wan ever I heard tell of to do murder yourself; an’ auld as I be, I’d crawl on my hands an’ knees to see you scragged for ’t, if ’t was so far as the sun in heaven!”

“That’s libel,” answered Mr. Chown, with cold and haughty authority; “an’ you’ve put yourself in the grip of the Law by sayin’ it, as you’ll knaw before you ’m much aulder.”

Then, with this trifling advantage, he retreated, while Lamacraft and Ted brought up the rear.

“So theer’s an end of that. Now us’ll fall to wi’ no worse appetites,” declared Miller. “An’ as to Will,” he added, “’fore you chaps go, just mind an’ judge no man till you knaw what’s proved against him. Onless theer’s worse behind than I’ve larned so far, I’m gwaine to stand by un.”

Page 317

“An’ me, tu!” said Mr. Blee, with a fine disregard for his recent utterances. “I’ve teached the chap purty nigh all he knaws an’ I ban’t gwaine to turn on un now, onless ‘t is proved blue murder. An’ that Chown ‘s a disgrace to his cloth; an’ I’d pull his ugly bat’s ears on my awn behalf if I was a younger an’ spryer man.”

CHAPTER XVII

SUSPENSE

The fate of John Grimbal was learned within an hour or two of Inspector Chown’s departure from Monks Barton; and by the time that Martin Grimbal had been apprised of the matter his brother already lay at the Red House.

John had been found at daybreak upon the grass-land where he rode overnight on his journey to intercept the mail. A moment after he descried the distant cart, his horse had set foot in a hole; and upon the accident being discovered, the beast was found lying with a broken leg within twenty yards of its insensible master. His horse was shot, John Grimbal carried home with all despatch, and Doctor Parsons arrived as quickly as possible, to do all that might be done for the sufferer until an abler physician than himself reached the scene.

Three dreary days saw Grimbal at the door of death, then a brief interval of consciousness rewarded unceasing care, and a rumour spread that he might yet survive. Martin, when immediate fear for his brother’s life was relieved, busied himself about Blanchard, and went to Plymouth. There he saw Will, learned all facts concerning the letter, and did his best to win information of the prisoner’s probable punishment. Fears, magnified rumours, expressed opinions, mostly erroneous, buzzed in the ears of the anxious party at Monks Barton. Then Martin Grimbal returned to Chagford and there came an evening when those most interested met after supper at the farm to hear all he could tell them.

Long faces grouped round Martin as he made his statement in a grey June twilight. Mr. Blee and the miller smoked, Mrs. Blanchard sat with her hand in her daughter’s, and Phoebe occupied a comfortable arm-chair by the wood fire. Between intervals of long silence came loud, juicy, sounds from Billy’s pipe, and when light waned they still talked on until Chris stirred herself and sought the lamp.

“They tell me,” began Martin, “that a deserting soldier is punished according to his character and with regard to the fact whether he surrenders himself or is apprehended. Of course we know Will gave himself up, but then they will find out that he knew poor John’s unfortunate letter had reached its destination—or at any rate started for it; and they may argue, not knowing the truth, that it was the fact of the information being finally despatched made Will surrender. They will say, I am afraid, as they said to me: ’Why

did he wait until now if he meant to do the right thing? Why did he not give himself up long ago?'"

"That's easy answered: to please others," explained Mr. Lyddon. "Fust theer was his promise to Phoebe, then his mother's illness, then his other promise, to bide till his wife was brought to bed. Looking back I see we was wrong to use our power against his awn wish; but so it stands."

Page 318

“I ought to go; I ought to be alongside un,” moaned Phoebe; “I was at the bottom of everything from fust to last. For me he run away; for me he stopped away. Mine’s the blame, an’ them as judge him should knaw it an’ hear me say so.”

“Caan’t do no such vain thing as that,” declared Mr. Blee. “’T was never allowed as a wife should be heard ’pon the doin’s of her awn husband. ‘Cause why? She’d be one-sided—either plump for un through thick an’ thin, or else all against un, as the case might stand.”

“As to the sentence,” continued Martin, “if a man with a good character deserts and thinks better of it and goes back to his regiment, he is not as a rule tried by court-martial at all. Instead, he loses all his former service and has to begin to reckon his period of engagement—six or seven years perhaps—all over again. But a notoriously bad character is tried by court-martial in any case, whether he gives himself up or not; and he gets a punishment according to the badness of his past record. Such a man would have from eighty-four days’ imprisonment, with hard labour, up to six months, or even a year, if he had deserted more than once. Then the out-and-out rascals are sentenced to be ’dismissed her Majesty’s service.’”

“But the real gude men,” pleaded Phoebe—“them as had no whisper ’gainst ’em, same as Will? They couldn’t be hard ’pon them, ’specially if they knawed all?”

“I should hope not; I’m sure not. You see the case is so unusual, as an officer explained to me, and such a great length of time has elapsed between the action and the judgment upon it. That is in Will’s favour. A good soldier with a clean record who deserts and is apprehended does not get more than three months with hard labour and sometimes less. That’s the worst that can happen, I hope.”

“What’s hard labour to him?” murmured Billy, whose tact on occasions of universal sorrow was sometimes faulty. “’Tis the rankle of bein’ in every blackguard’s mouth that’ll cut Will to the quick.”

“What blackguards say and think ban’t no odds,” declared Mrs. Blanchard. “’Tis better—far better he should do what he must do. The disgrace is in the minds of them that lick theer lips upon his sorrow. Let him pay for a wrong deed done, for the evil he did that gude might come of it. I see the right hand o’ God holding’ the li’l strings of my son’s life, an’ I knaw better’n any of ’e what’ll be in the bwoy’s heart now.”

“Yet, when all’s said, ‘tis a mournful sarcumstance an’ sent for our chastening,” contended Mr. Blee stoutly. “Us mustn’t argue away the torment of it an’ pretend ’tis nought. Ban’t a pleasing thing, ‘specially at such a time when all the airth s gwaine daft wi’ joy for the gracious gudeness o’ God to the Queen o’ England. In plain speech, ‘t is a damn dismal come-along-of-it, an’ I’ve cried by night, auld though I am, to think o’ the man’s babes grawin’ up wi’ this round theer necks. An’ wan to be born while he ’m put

away! Theer ’s a black picksher for ‘e! Him doin’ hard labour as the Law directs, an’ his wife doin’ hard labour, tu—in her lonely bed! Why, gormed if I—”

Page 319

“For God’s sake shut your mouth, you horrible old man!” burst out Martin, as Phoebe hurried away in tears and Chris followed her. “You’re a disgrace to humanity and I don’t hesitate—I don’t hesitate at all to say you have no proper feeling in you!”

“Martin’s right, Billy,” declared Mr. Lyddon without emotion. “You ’m a thought tu quick to meet other people’s troubles half way, as I’ve told ’e before to-night. Ban’t a comely trait in ’e. You’ve made her run off sobbing her poor, bruised heart out. As if she hadn’t wept enough o’ late. Do ‘e think us caan’t see what it all means an’ the wisht cloud that’s awver all our heads, lookin’ darker by contrast wi’ the happiness of the land, owing to the Jubilee of a gert Queen? Coourse we knaw. But’t is poor wisdom to talk ’bout the blackness of a cloud to them as be tryin’ to find its silver lining. If you caan’t lighten trouble, best to hold your peace.”

“What’s the use of cryin’ ‘peace’ when us knaws in our hearts ’tis war? Us must look inside an’ outside, an’ count the cost same as I be doin’ now,” declared Mr. Blee. “Then to be catched up so harsh ’mong friends! Well, well, gude-night, all; I’ll go to my rest. Hard words doan’t break, though they may bruise. But I’ll do my duty, whether or no.”

He rose and shuffled to the door, then looked round and opened his mouth to speak again. But he changed his mind, shook his head, snorted expressively, and disappeared.

“A straange-fashioned chap,” commented Mrs. Blanchard, “wi’ sometimes a wise word stuck in his sour speech, like a gude currant in a bad dumpling.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NIGHT OF JUBILEE

Unnumbered joy fires were writing the nation’s thanksgiving across the starry darkness of a night in June. Throughout the confines of Britain—on knolls arising beside populous towns, above the wild cliffs of our coasts, in low-lying lands, upon the banks of rivers, at the fringes of forests and over a thousand barren heaths, lonely wastes, and stony pinnacles of untamed hills, like some mundane galaxy of stars or many-tongued outbreak of conflagration, the bonfires glimmered. And their golden seed was sown so thickly, that from no pile of those hundreds then brightening the hours of darkness had it been possible to gaze into the night and see no other.

Upon the shaggy fastnesses of Devon’s central waste, within the bounds, metes, and precincts of Dartmoor Forest, there shone a whole constellation of little suns, and a wanderer in air might have counted a hundred without difficulty, whilst, for the beholders perched upon Yes Tor, High Wilhays, or the bosom of Cosdon during the fairness and clearness of that memorable night, fully threescore beacons flamed. All those granite

giants within the field of man's activities, all the monsters whose enormous shades fell at dawn or evening time upon the hamlets and villages of the

Page 320

Moor, now carried on their lofty crowns the flames of rejoicing. Bonfires of varying size, according to the energy and importance of the communities responsible for them, dotted the circumference of the lonely region in a vast, irregular figure, but thinned and ceased towards the unpeopled heart of the waste. On Wattern, at Cranmere, upon Fur Tor, and under the hoary, haunted woods of Wistman, no glad beacons blazed or voices rang. There Nature, ignorant of epochs and heeding neither olympiad nor lustrum, cycle nor century, ruled alone; there, all self-centred, self-contained, unwitting of conscious existence and its little joys, her perfection above praise and more enduring than any chronicle of it, asking for no earthborn acclamations of her eternal reign, demanding only obedience from all on penalty of death, the Mother swayed her sceptre unseen. Seed and stone, blade and berry, hot blood and cold, did her bidding and slept or stirred at her ordinance. A nightjar harshly whirred beneath her footstool; wan tongues of flame rose and fell upon her quaking altars; a mountain fox, pattering quick-footed to the rabbit warren, caught light from those exhalations in his round, green eyes and barked.

Humanity thronged and made merry around numberless crackling piles of fire. Men and women, boys and girls, most noisily rejoiced, and from each flaming centre of festivity a thin sound of human shouting and laughter streamed starward with the smoke.

Removed by brief distance in space, the onlooker, without overmuch strain or imagination, might stride a pace or two backward in time and conceive himself for a moment as in the presence of those who similarly tended beacons on these granite heights of old. Then, truly, the object and occasion were widely different; then, perchance, in answer to evil rumour moving zigzag on black bat-wings through nights of fear, many a bale-fire had shot upwards, upon the keystone of Cosdon's solemn arch, beckoned like a bloody hand towards north and south, and cried danger to a thousand British warriors lurking in moor, and fen, and forest. Answering flames had leapt from Hay Tor, from Buckland Beacon, from Great Mis Tor in the west; and their warning, caught up elsewhere, would quickly penetrate to the heart of the South Hams, to the outlying ramparts of the Cornish wastes, to Exmoor and the coast-line of the north. But no laughter echoed about those old-time fires. Their lurid light smeared wolfskins, splashed on metal and untanned hide, illumined barbaric adornments, fierce faces, wild locks, and savage eyes. Anxious Celtic mothers and maidens stood beside their men, while fear and rage leapt along from woman's face to woman's face, as some gasping wretch, with twoscore miles of wilderness behind him, told of high-beaked monsters moving under banks of oars, of dire peril, of death and ruin, suddenly sprung in a night from behind the rim of the sea.

Since then the peaks of the Moor have smiled or scowled under countless human fires, have flashed glad tidings or flamed ill news to many generations. And now, perched upon one enormous mass of stone, there towered upward a beacon of blazing furze and pine. In its heart were tar barrels and the monster bred heat enough to remind the

granite beneath it of those fires that first moulded its elvan ingredients to a concrete whole and hurled them hither.

Page 321

About this eye of flame crowded those who had built it, and the roaring mass of red-hot timber and seething pitch represented the consummation of Chagford's festivities on the night of Jubilee. The flames, obedient to such light airs as were blowing, bent in unison with the black billows of smoke that wound above them. Great, trembling tongues separated from the mass and soared upward, gleaming as they vanished; sparks and jets, streams and stars of light, shot from the pile to illuminate the rolling depths of the smoke cloud, to fret its curtain with spangles and jewels of gold atid ruby, to weave strange, lurid lights into the very fabric of its volume. Far away, as the breezes drew them, fell a red glimmer of fire, where those charred fragments caught in the rush and hurled aloft, returned again to earth; and the whole incandescent structure, perched as it was upon the apex of Yes Tor, suggested at a brief distance a fiery top-knot of streaming flame on some vast and demoniac head thrust upward from the nether world.

Great splendour of light gleamed upon a ring of human beings. Adventurous spirits leapt forth, fed the flames with faggots and furze and risked their hairy faces within the range of the bonfire's scorching breath. Alternate gleam and glow played fantastically upon the spectators, and, though for the most part they moved but little while their joy fire was at its height, the conflagration caused a sheer devil's dance of impish light and shadow to race over every face and form in the assemblage. The fantastic magician of the fire threw humps on to straight backs, flattened good round breasts, wrote wrinkles on smooth faces, turned eyes and lips into shining gems, made white teeth yellow, cast a grotesque spell of the unreal on young shapes, of the horrible upon old ones. A sort of monkey coarseness crept into the red, upturned faces; their proportions were distorted, their delicacy destroyed. Essential lines of figures were concealed by the inky shadows; unimportant features were thrown into a violent prominence; the clean fire impinged abruptly on a night of black shade, as sunrise on the moon. There was no atmosphere. Human noses poked weirdly out of nothing, human hands waved without arms, human heads moved without bodies, bodies bobbed along without legs. The heart-beat and furnace roar of the fire was tremendous, but the shouts of men, the shriller laughter of women, and the screams and yells of children could be heard through it, together with the pistol-like explosion of sap turned to steam, and rending its way from green wood. Other sounds also fretted the air, for a hundred yards distant—in a hut-circle—the Chagford drum-and-fife band lent its throb and squeak to the hour, and struggled amain to increase universal joy. So the fire flourished, and the plutonian rock-mass of the tor arose, the centre of a scene itself plutonian.

Page 322

Removed by many yards from the ring of human spectators, and scattered in wide order upon the flanks of the hill, stood tame beasts. Sheep huddled there and bleated amazement, their fleeces touched by the flicker of the distant fire; red heifers and steers also faced the flame and chewed the cud upon a spectacle outside all former experience; while inquisitive ponies drew up in a wide radius, snorted and sniffed with delicate, dilated nostrils at the unfamiliar smell of the breeze, threw up their little heads, fetched a compass at top speed and so returned; then crowded flank to flank, shoulder to shoulder, and again blankly gazed at the fire which reflected itself in the whites of their shifty eyes.

Fitting the freakish antics of the red light, a carnival spirit, hard to rouse in northern hearts, awakened within this crowd of Devon men and women, old men and children. There was in their exhilaration some inspiration from the joyous circumstance they celebrated; and something, too, from the barrel. Dancing began and games, feeble by day but not lacking devil when pursued under cover of darkness. There were hugging and kissing, and yells of laughter when amorous couples who believed themselves safe were suddenly revealed lip to lip and heart to heart by an unkind flash of fire. Some, as their nature was, danced and screamed that flaming hour away; some sat blankly and smoked and gazed with less interest than the outer audience of dumb animals; some laboured amain to keep the bonfire at blaze. These last worked from habit and forgot their broadcloth. None bade them, but it was their life to be toiling; it came naturally to mind and muscle, and they laughed while they laboured and sweated. A dozen staid groups witnessed the scene from surrounding eminences, but did not join the merrymakers. Mr. Shorto-Champernowne, Doctor Parsons, and the ladies of their houses stood with their feet on a tumulus apart; and elsewhere Mr. Chapple, Charles Coomstock, Mr. Blee, and others, mostly ancient, sat on the granite, inspected the pandemonium spread before them, and criticised as experts who had seen bonfires lighted before the greater part of the present gathering was out of its cradle. But no cynic praising of past time to the disparagement of the present marked their opinions. Mr. Chapple indeed pronounced the fire brilliantly successful, and did not hesitate to declare that it capped all his experience in this direction.

“A braave blaze,” he said, “a blaze as gives the thoughtful eye an’ nose a tidy guess at what the Pit’s like to be. Ess, indeed, a religious fire, so to say; an’ I warrant the prophet sat along just such another when he said man was born to trouble sure as the sparks fly up’ard.”

Somewhat earlier on the same night, under the northern ramparts of Dartmoor, and upon the long, creeping hill that rises aloft from Okehampton, then dips again, passes beneath the Belstones, and winds by Sticklepath and Zeal under Cosdon, there rattled a trap holding two men. From their conversation it appeared that one was a traveller who now returned southward from a journey.

Page 323

“Gert, gay, fanciful doin’s to-night,” said the driver, looking aloft where Cosdon Beacon swelled. “You can see the light from the blaze up-long, an’ now an’ again you can note a sign in the night like a red-hot wire drawed up out the airth. They ’m sky-rockets, I judge.”

“’T is a joyful night, sure ’nough.”

The driver illustrated a political ignorance quite common in rural districts ten years ago and not conspicuously rare to-day. He laboured under uneasy suspicions that the support of monarchy was a direct and dismal tax upon the pockets of the poor.

“Pity all the fuss ban’t about a better job,” he said. “Wan auld, elderly lady ’s so gude as another, come to think of it. Why shouldn’t my mother have a jubilee?”

“What for? ’Cause she’ve borne a damned fule?” asked the other man angrily. “If that’s your way o’ thought, best keep it in your thoughts. Anyhow, I’ll knock your silly head off if I hears another word to that tune, so now you knaw.”

The speaker was above medium height and breadth, the man who drove him happened to be unusually small.

“Well, well, no offence,” said the latter.

“There is offence; an’ it I heard a lord o’ the land talk that way to-night, I’d make un swallow every dirty word of it. To hell wi’ your treason!”

The driver changed the subject.

“Now you can see a gude few new fires,” he said. “That’s the Throwleigh blaze; an’ that, long ways off, be—”

“Yes Tor by the look of it. All Chagford’s traapsed up-long, I warn ’e, to-night.”

They were now approaching a turning of the ways and the traveller suddenly changed his destination.

“Come to think of it, I’ll go straight on,” he said. “That’ll save you a matter o’ ten miles, tu. Drive ahead a bit Berry Down way. Theer I’ll leave ‘e an’ you’ll be back home in time to have some fun yet.”

The driver, rejoicing at this unhoped diminution of his labours, soon reached the foot of a rough by-road that ascends to the Moor between the homesteads of Berry Down and Creber.

Yes Tor now arose on the left under its cap of flame, and the wayfarer, who carried no luggage, paid his fare, bid the other “good-night,” and then vanished into the darkness.

He passed between the sleeping farms, and only watch-dogs barked out of the silence, for Gidleigh folks were all abroad that night. Pressing onwards, the native hurried to Scorhill, then crossed the Teign below Batworthy Farm, passed through the farmyard, and so proceeded to the common beneath Yes Tor. He whistled as he went, then stopped a moment to listen. The first drone of music and remote laughter reached his ear. He hurried onwards until a gleam lighted his face; then he passed through the ring of beasts, still glaring fascinated around the fire; and finally he pushed among the people.

He stood revealed and there arose a sudden whisper among some who knew him, but whom he knew not. One or two uttered startled cries at this apparition, for all associated the newcomer with events and occurrences widely remote from the joy of the hour. How he came among them now, and what event made it possible for him to stand in their midst a free man, not the wisest could guess.

Page 324

A name was carried from mouth to mouth, then shouted aloud, then greeted with a little cheer. It fell upon Mr. Blee's ear as he prepared to start homewards; and scarcely had the sound of it set him gasping when a big man grew out of the flame and shadow and stood before him with extended hand.

"Burnish it all! You! Be it Blanchard or the ghost of un?"

"The man hisself—so big as bull's beef, an' so free as thicky fire!" said Will.

Riotous joy sprang and bubbled in his voice. He gripped Billy's hand till the old man jumped and wriggled.

"Free! Gude God! Doan't tell me you've brawke loose—doan't 'e say that! Christ! if you haven't squashed my hand till theer's no feeling in it! Doan't 'e say you've runned away?"

"No such thing," answered Will, now the centre of a little crowd. "I'll tell 'e, sawls all, if you mind to hear. 'Tis this way: Queen Victoria, as have given of the best she've got wi' both hands to the high men of the land, so they tell me, caan't forget nought, even at such a time as this here. She've made gert additions to all manner o' men; an' to me, an' the likes o' me she've given what's more precious than bein' lords or dukes. I'm free—me an' all as runned from the ranks. The Sovereign Queen's let deserters go free, if you can credit it; an' that's how I stand here this minute."

A buzz and hum with cheers and some laughter and congratulations followed Will's announcement. Then the people scattered to spread his story, and Mr. Blee spoke.

"Come you down home to wance. Ban't none up here as cares a rush 'bout 'e but me. But theer 's a many anxious folks below. I comed up for auld sake's sake an' because ban't in reason to suppose I'll ever see another joy fire 'pon Yes Tor rock, at my time o' life. But us'll go an' carry this rare news to Chagford an' the Barton."

They faded from the red radius of the fire and left it slowly dying. Will helped Billy off rough ground to the road. Then he set off at a speed altogether beyond the old man's power, so Mr. Blee resorted to stratagem.

"'Bate your pace; 'bate your pace; I caan't travel that gait an' talk same time. Yet theer's a power o' fine things I might tell 'e if you'd listen."

"'T is hard to walk slow towards a mother an' wife like what mine be, after near a month from 'em; but let's have your news, Billy, an' doan't croak, for God's sake. Say all's well wi' all."

“I ban’t no croaker, as you knaws. Happy, are ’e?—happy for wance? I suppose you’ll say now, as you’ve said plenty times a’ready, that you ’m to the tail of your troubles for gude an’ all—just in your auld, silly fashion?”

“Not me, auld chap, never no more—so long as you ’m alive! Ha, ha, ha—that’s wan for you! Theer! if ’t isn’t gude to laugh again!”

“I be main glad as I’ve got no news to make ’e do anything else, though ban’t often us can be prophets of gude nowadays. But if you’ve grawed a streak wiser of late, then theer’s hope, even for a scatterbrain like you, the Lard bein’ all-powerful. Not that jokes against such as me would please Him the better.”

Page 325

“I’ve thought a lot in my time, Billy; an’ I haven’t done thinking yet. I’ve comed to reckon as I caan’t do very well wi’out the world, though the world would fare easy enough wi’out me.”

Billy nodded.

“That’s sense so far as it goes,” he admitted. “Obedience be hard to the young; to the auld it comes natural; to me allus was easy as dirt from my youth up. Obedience to betters in heaven an’ airth. But you—you with your born luck—never heard tell of nothin’ like it ’t all. What’s a fix to you? You goes in wan end an’ walks out t’ other, like a rabbit through a hedge. Theer you was—in such a tight pass as you might say neither God nor angels could get ’e free wi’out a Bible miracle, when, burnish it all! if the Jubilee Queen o’ England doan’t busy herself ’bout ’e!”

“‘T is true as I’m walkin’ by your side. I’d give a year o’ my wages to knaw how I could shaw what I think about it.”

“You might thank her. ’T is all as humble folks can do most times when Queens or Squires or the A’mighty Hisself spares a thought to better us. Us can awnly say ‘thank you.’”

There was a silence of some duration; then Billy again bid his companion moderate his pace.

“I’m forgetting all I’ve got to tell ’e, though I’ve news enough for a buke,” he said.

“How’s Jan Grimbal, fust plaace?”

“On his legs again an’ out o’ danger if the Lunnon doctor knaws anything. A hunderd guineas they say that chap have had! Your name was danced to a mad tune ’pon Grimbal’s lips ’fore his senses corned back to un. Why for I caan’t tell ‘e. He’ve shook hands wi’ Death for sartain while you was away.”

“An’ mother, an’ wife, an’ Miller?”

“Your mother be well—a steadfast woman her be. Joy doan’t lift her up, an’ sorrow doan’t crush her. Theer’s gert wisdom in her way of life. ’T is my awn, for that matter. Then Miller—well, he ‘m grawin’ auld an’ doan’t rate me quite so high as formerly—not that I judge anybody but myself. An’ your missis—theer, if I haven’t kept it for the last! ’Tis news four-an-twenty hour old now an’ they wrote to ’e essterday, but I lay you missed the letter awin’ to me—”

“Get on!”

“Well, she’ve brought ‘e a bwoy—so now you’ve got both sorts—bwoy an’ cheel. An’ all doin’ well as can be, though wisht work for her, thinkin’ ’pon you the while.”

Will stood still and uttered a triumphant but inarticulate sound—half-laugh, half-sob, half-thanksgiving. Then the man spoke, slow and deep,—

“He shall go for a soldier!”

“Theer! Now I knaw ‘t is Blanchard back an’ no other! Hear me, will ’e; doan’t plan no such uneven way of life for un.”

“By God, he shall!”

The words came back over Will Blanchard’s shoulder, for he was fast vanishing.

“Might have knawed he wouldn’t walk along wi’ me arter that,” thought Billy. Then he lifted up his voice and bawled to the diminishing figure, already no more than a darker blot on the darkness of night.

Page 326

“For the Lard’s love go in quiet an’ gradual, or you’ll scare the life out of ’em all.”

And the answer came back,—

“I knaw, I knaw; I ban’t the man to do a rash deed!”

Mr. Blee chuckled and plodded on through the night while Will strode far ahead.

Presently he stood beside the wicket of Mrs. Blanchard’s cottage and hesitated between two women. Despite circumstances, there came no uncertain answer from the deepest well-springs of him. He could not pass that gate just then. And so he stopped and turned and entered; and she, his mother, sitting in thought alone, heard a footfall upon the great nightly silence—a sudden, familiar footfall that echoed to her heart the music it loved best.

THE END.