

Tales from Many Sources eBook

Tales from Many Sources

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LOB LIE-BY-THE-FIRE

Introductory.

Lob Lie-By-The-Fire—the Lubber-fiend, as Milton calls him—is a rough kind of Brownie or House Elf, supposed to haunt some north-country homesteads, where he does the work of the farm labourers, for no grander wages than

“—to earn his cream bowl duly set.”

Not that he is insensible of the pleasures of rest, for

“—When, in one night, ere glimpse of morn, His shadowy flail hath threshed the corn
That ten day-labourers could not end, Then lies him down the Lubber-fiend, And,
stretched out all the chimney’s length, Basks at the fire his hairy strength.”

It was said that a Lob Lie-by-the-fire once haunted the little old Hall at Lingborough. It was an old stone house on the Borders, and seemed to have got its tints from the grey skies that hung above it. It was cold-looking without, but cosy within, “like a north-country heart,” said Miss Kitty, who was a woman of sentiment, and kept a commonplace book.

It was long before Miss Kitty’s time that Lob Lie-by-the-fire first came to Lingborough. Why and whence he came is not recorded, nor when and wherefore he withdrew his valuable help, which, as wages rose, and prices rose also, would have been more welcome than ever.

This tale professes not to record more of him than comes within the memory of man.

Whether (as Fletcher says) he were the son of a witch, if curds and cream won his heart, and new clothes put an end to his labours, it does not pretend to tell. His history is less known than that of any other sprite. It may be embodied in some oral tradition that shall one day be found; but as yet the mists of forgetfulness hide it from the storyteller of to-day as deeply as the sea fogs are wont to lie between Lingborough and the adjacent coast.

THE LITTLE OLD LADIES.—ALMS DONE IN SECRET.

The little old ladies of Lingborough were heiresses.

Not, mind you, in the sense of being the children of some mushroom millionaire, with more money than manners, and (as Miss Betty had seen with her own eyes, on the daughter of a manufacturer who shall be nameless) dresses so fine in quality and be-



furbelowed in construction as to cost a good quarter's income (of the little old ladies), but trailed in the dirt from "beggarly extravagance," or kicked out behind at every step by feet which fortune (and a very large fortune, too) had never taught to walk properly.

"And how should she know how to walk?" said Miss Betty. "Her mother can't have taught her, poor body! that ran through the streets of Leith, with a creel on her back, as a lassie; and got out of her coach (lined with satin, you mind, sister Kitty?) to her dying day, with a bounce, all in a heap, her dress caught, and her stockings exposed (among ourselves, ladies!) like some good wife that's afraid to be late for the market. Aye, aye! Malcolm Midden—good man!—made a fine pocket of silver in a dirty trade, but his women'll jerk, and toss, and bounce, and fuss, and fluster for a generation or two yet, for all the silks and satins he can buy 'em."

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From this it will be seen that the little old ladies inherited some prejudices of their class, and were also endowed with a shrewdness of observation common among all classes of north-country women.

But to return to what else they inherited. They were heiresses, as the last representatives of a family as old in that Border country as the bold blue hills which broke its horizon. They were heiresses also in default of heirs male to their father who got the land from his uncle's dying childless, sons being scarce in the family. They were heiresses, finally, to the place and the farm, to the furniture that was made when folk seasoned their wood before they worked it, to a diamond brooch which they wore by turns, besides two diamond rings, and two black lace shawls, that had belonged to their mother and their Auntie Jean, long since departed thither where neither moth nor rust corrupt the true riches.

As to the incomings of Lingborough, "It was nobody's business but their own," as Miss Betty said to the lawyer who was their man of business, and whom they consulted on little matters of rent and repairs at as much length, and with as much formal solemnity, as would have gone elsewhere to the changing hands of half a million of money. Without violating their confidence, however, we may say that the estate paid its way, kept them in silk stockings, and gave them new tabbinet dresses once in three years. It supplied their wants the better that they had inherited house plenishing from their parents, "Which they thanked their stars was not made of tag-rag, and would last their time," and that they were quite content with an old home and old neighbours, and never desired to change the grand air that blew about their native hills for worse, in order to be poisoned with bad butter, and make the fortunes of extortionate lodging-house keepers.

The rental of Lingborough did more. How much more the little old ladies did not know themselves, and no one else shall know, till that which was done in secret is proclaimed from the housetops.

For they had had a religious scruple, founded upon a literal reading of the scriptural command that a man's left hand should not know what his right hand gives in alms, and this scruple had been ingeniously set at rest by the parson, who, failing in an attempt to explain the force of Eastern hyperbole to the little ladies' satisfaction, had said that Miss Betty, being the elder, and the head of the house, might be likened to the right hand, and Miss Kitty, as the younger, to the left, and that if they pursued their good works without ostentation, or desiring the applause even of each other, the spirit of the injunction would be fulfilled.

The parson was a good man and a clever. He had (as Miss Betty justly said) a very spiritual piety. But he was also gifted with much shrewdness in dealing with the various members of his flock. And his word was law to the sisters.



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Thus it came about that the little ladies' charities were not known even to each other—that Miss Betty turned her morning camlet twice instead of once, and Miss Kitty denied herself in sugar, to carry out benevolent little projects which were accomplished in secret, and of which no record appears in the Lingborough Ledger.

AT TEA WITH MRS. DUNMAW.

The little ladies of Lingborough were very sociable, and there was, as they said, “as much gaiety as was good for anyone” within their reach. There were at least six houses at which they drank tea from time to time, all within a walk. As hosts or guests, you always met the same people, which was a friendly arrangement, and the programmes of the entertainments were so uniform, that no one could possibly feel awkward. The best of manners and home-made wines distinguished these tea parties, where the company was strictly genteel, if a little faded. Supper was served at nine, and the parson and the lawyer played whist for love with different partners on different evenings with strict impartiality.

Small jealousies are apt to be weak points in small societies, but there was a general acquiescence in the belief that the parson had a friendly preference for the little ladies of Lingborough.

He lived just beyond them, too, which led to his invariably escorting them home. Miss Betty and Miss Kitty would not for worlds have been so indelicate as to take this attention for granted, though it was a custom of many years' standing. The older sister always went through the form of asking the younger to “see if the servant had come,” and at this signal the parson always bade the lady of the house good night, and respectfully proffered his services as an escort to Lingborough.

It was a lovely evening in June, when the little ladies took tea with the widow of General Dunmaw at her cottage, not quite two miles from their own home.

It was a memorable evening. The tea party was an agreeable one. The little ladies had new tabbinets on, and Miss Kitty wore the diamond brooch. Miss Betty had played whist with the parson, and the younger sister (perhaps because of the brooch) had been favoured with a good deal of conversation with the lawyer. It was an honour, because the lawyer bore the reputation of an *esprit fort*, and was supposed to have, as a rule, a contempt for feminine intellects, which good manners led him to veil under an almost officious politeness in society. But honours are apt to be uneasy blessings, and this one was at least as harassing as gratifying. For a somewhat monotonous vein of sarcasm, a painful power of producing puns, and a dexterity in suggesting doubts of everything, were the main foundation of his intellectual reputation, and Miss Kitty found them hard to cope with. And it was a warm evening.



But women have much courage, especially to defend a friend or a faith, and the less Miss Kitty found herself prepared for the conflict the harder she esteemed it her duty to fight. She fought for Church and State, for parsons and poor people, for the sincerity of her friends, the virtues of the Royal Family, the merit of Dr. Drugson's prescriptions, and for her favourite theory that there is some good in everyone and some happiness to be found every where.



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She rubbed nervously at the diamond brooch with her thin little mitted hands. She talked very fast; and if the lawyer were guilty of feeling any ungallant indifference to her observations, she did not so much as hear his, and her cheeks became so flushed that Mrs. Dunmaw crossed the room in her China crape shawl and said, "My dear Miss Kitty, I'm sure you feel the heat very much. Do take my fan, which is larger than yours."

But Miss Kitty was saved a reply, for at this moment Miss Betty turned on the sofa, and said, "Dear Kitty, will you kindly see if the servant—"

And the parson closed the volume of "Friendship's Offering" which lay before him, and advanced towards Mrs. Dunmaw and took leave in his own dignified way.

Miss Kitty was so much flustered that she had not even presence of mind to look for the servant, who had never been ordered to come, but the parson relieved her by saying in his round, deep voice, "I hope you will not refuse me the honour of seeing you home, since our roads happen to lie together," And she was glad to get into the fresh air, and beyond the doubtful compliments of the lawyer's nasal suavity—"You have been very severe upon me to-night, Miss Kitty. I'm sure I had no notion I should find so powerful an antagonist," *etc.*

MIDSUMMER EVE.—A LOST DIAMOND.

It was Midsummer Eve. The long light of the North was pale and clear, and the western sky shone luminous through the fir-wood that bordered the road. Under such dim lights colours deepen, and the great bushes of broom, that were each one mass of golden blossom, blazed like fairy watch-fires up the lane.

Miss Kitty leaned on the left arm of the parson and Miss Betty on his right. She chatted gaily, which left her younger sister at leisure to think of all the convincing things she had not remembered to say to the lawyer, as the evening breeze cooled her cheeks.

"A grand prospect for the crops, sir," said Miss petty; "I never saw the broom so beautiful." But as he leaned forward to look at the yellow blaze which foretells good luck to farmers, as it shone in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road, she caught sight of the brooch in Miss Kitty's lace shawl. Through a gap in the wood the light from the western sky danced among the diamonds. But where one of the precious stones should have been there was a little black hole.

"Sister, you've lost a stone out of your brooch!" screamed Miss Betty. The little ladies were well-trained, and even in that moment of despair Miss Betty would not hint that her sister's ornaments were not her sole property.

When Miss Kitty burst into tears the parson was a little astonished as well as distressed. Men are apt to be so, not perhaps because women cry on such very small



accounts, as because the full reason does not always transpire. Tears are often the climax of nervous exhaustion and this is commonly the result of more causes than one. Ostensibly Miss Kitty was “upset” by the loss of the diamond, but she also wept away a good deal of the vexation of her unequal conflict with the sarcastic lawyer, and of all this the parson knew nothing.

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Miss Betty knew nothing of that, but she knew enough of things in general to feel sure that the diamond was not all the matter.

“What is amiss, sister Kitty?” said she. “Have you hurt yourself? Do you feel ill? Did you know the stone was out?”—“I hope you’re not going to be hysterical, sister Kitty,” added Miss Betty anxiously; “there never was a hysterical woman in our family yet.”

“Oh dear no, sister Betty,” sobbed Miss Kitty; “but it’s all my fault. I know I was fidgeting with it whilst I was talking; and it’s a punishment on my fidgety ways, and for ever presuming to wear it at all, when you’re the head of the family, and solely entitled to it. And I shall never forgive myself if it’s lost, and if it’s found I’ll never, never wear it any more.” And as she deluged her best company pocket-handkerchief (for the useful one was in a big pocket under her dress, and could not be got at, the parson being present), Church, State, the royal family, the family Bible, her highest principles, her dearest affections, and the diamond brooch, all seemed to swim before her disturbed mind in one sea of desolation.

There was not a kinder heart than the parson’s toward women and children in distress. He tucked the little ladies again under his arms, and insisted upon going back to Mrs. Dunmaw’s searching the lane as they went. In the pulpit or the drawing room a ready anecdote never failed him, and on this occasion he had several. Tales of lost rings, and even single gems, recovered in the most marvellous manner and the most unexpected places—dug up in gardens, served up to dinner in fishes, and so forth. “Never,” said Miss Kitty, afterward, “never, to her dying day, could she forget his kindness.”

She clung to the parson as a support under both her sources of trouble, but Miss Betty ran on and back, and hither and thither, looking for the diamond. Miss Kitty and the parson looked too, and how many aggravating little bits of glass and silica, and shining nothings and good-for-nothings there are in the world, no one would believe who has not looked for a lost diamond on a high road.

But another story of found jewels was to be added to the parson’s stock. He had bent his long back for about the eighteenth time, when such a shimmer as no glass or silica can give flashed into his eyes, and he caught up the diamond out of the dust, and it fitted exactly into the little black hole.

Miss Kitty uttered a cry, and at the same moment Miss Betty, who was farther down the road, did the same, and these were followed by a third, which sounded like a mocking echo of both. And then the sisters rushed together.

“A most miraculous discovery!” gasped Miss Betty.

“You must have passed the very spot before,” cried Miss Kitty.

“Though I’m sure, sister, what to do with it now we have found it I don’t know,” said Miss Betty, rubbing her nose, as she was wont to do when puzzled.



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"It shall be taken better care of for the future, sister Betty," said Miss Kitty penitently. "Though how it got out I can't think now."

"Why, bless my soul! you don't suppose it got there of itself, sister?" snapped Miss Betty. "How it did get there is another matter."

"I felt pretty confident about it, for my own part," smiled the parson as he joined them.

"Do you mean to say, sir, that you knew it was there?" asked Miss Betty, solemnly.

"I didn't know the precise spot, my dear madam, but——"

"You didn't see it, sir, I hope?" said Miss Betty.

"Bless me, my dear madam, I found it!" cried the parson.

Miss Betty bridled and bit her lip.

"I never contradict a clergyman, sir," said she, "but I can only say that if you did see it, it was not like your usual humanity to leave it lying there."

"I've got it in my hand, ma'am!"

"Why

He's got it in his hand, sister!"

cried the parson and Miss Kitty in one breath. Miss Betty was too much puzzled to be polite.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"The diamond, oh dear, oh dear! *The diamond!*" cried Miss Kitty. "But what are you talking about, sister?"

"*The baby*" said Miss Betty.

WHAT MISS BETTY FOUND.

It was found under a broom-bush. Miss Betty was poking her nose near the bank that bordered the wood, in her hunt for the diamond, when she caught sight of a mass of yellow of a deeper tint than the mass of broom-blossom above it, and this was the baby.

This vivid color, less opaque than "deep chrome" and a shade more orange, seems to have a peculiar attraction for wandering tribes. Gipsies use it, and it is a favorite color with Indian squaws. To the last dirty rag it is effective, whether it flutters near a tent on



Bagshot Heath, or in some wigwam doorway makes a point of brightness against the grey shadows of the pine forest.

A large kerchief of this, wound about its body, was the baby's only robe, but he seemed quite comfortable in it when Miss Betty found him, sleeping on a pillow of deep hair moss, his little brown fists closed as fast as his eyes, and a crimson toadstool grasped in one of them.

When Miss Betty screamed the baby awoke, and his long black lashes tickled his cheeks and made him wink and cry. But by the time she returned with her sister and the parson, he was quite happy again, gazing up with dark eyes full of delight into the glowing broom-brush, and fighting the evening breeze with his feet, which were entangled in the folds of the yellow cloth, and with the battered toadstool which was still in his hand.

"And, indeed, sir," said Miss Betty, who had rubbed her nose till it looked like the twin toadstool to that which the baby was flourishing in her face, "you won't suppose I would have left the poor little thing another moment, to catch its death of cold on a warm evening like this; but having no experience of such cases, and remembering that murder at the inn in the Black Valley, and that the body was not allowed to be moved till the constables had seen it, I didn't feel to know how it might be with foundlings, and—"

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But still Miss Betty did not touch the bairn. She was not accustomed to children. But the parson had christened too many babies to be afraid of them, and he picked up the little fellow in a moment, and tucked the yellow rag round him, and then addressing the little ladies precisely as if they were sponsors, he asked in his deep round voice, "Now where on the face of the earth are the vagabonds who have deserted this child?"

The little ladies did not know, the broom bushes were silent, and the question has remained unanswered from that day to this.

There were no railways near Lingborough at this time. The coach ran three times a week, and a walking postman brought the letters from the town to the small hamlets. Telegraph wires were unknown, and yet news travelled quite as fast then as it does now, and in the course of the following morning all the neighbourhood knew that Miss Betty had found a baby under a broom bush, and the lawyer called in the afternoon to inquire how the ladies found themselves after the tea party at Mrs. General Dunmaw's.

Miss Kitty was glad on the whole. She felt nervous, but ready for a renewal of hostilities. Several clinching arguments had occurred to her in bed last night, and after hastily looking up a few lines from her common-place book, which always made her cry when she read them, but which she hoped to be able to hurl at the lawyer with a steady voice, she followed Miss Betty to the drawing-room.

It was half a relief and half a disappointment to find that the lawyer was quite indifferent to the subject of their late contest. He overflowed with compliments; was quite sure he must have had the worst of the argument, and positively dying of curiosity to hear about the baby.

The little ladies were very full of the subject themselves. An active search for the baby's relations, conducted by the parson, the clerk, the farm-bailiff, the constable, the cowherd, and several supernumeraries, had so far proved quite vain. The country folk were most anxious to assist, especially by word of mouth. Except a small but sturdy number who had seen nothing, they had all seen "tramps," but unluckily no two could be got together whose accounts of the tramps themselves, of the hour at which they were seen, or of the direction in which they went, would tally with each other.

The little ladies were quite alive to the possibility that the child's parents might never be traced, indeed the matter had been constantly before their minds ever since the parson had carried the baby to Lingborough, and laid it in the arms of Thomasina, the servant.

Miss Betty had sat long before her toilette-table that evening, gazing vacantly at the looking-glass. Not that the reflection of the eight curl-papers she had neatly twisted up was conveyed to her brain. She was in a brown study, during which the following thoughts passed through her mind, and they all pointed one way:



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That that fine little fellow was not to blame for his people's misconduct.

That they would never be found.

That it would probably be the means of the poor child's ruin, body and soul, if they were.

That the master of the neighbouring workhouse bore a bad character.

That a child costs nothing to keep—where cows are kept too—for years.

That just at the age when a boy begins to eat dreadfully and wear out his clothes, he is very useful on a farm (though not for these reasons).

That Thomasina had taken to him.

That there need be no nonsense about it, as he could be brought up in his proper station in life in the kitchen and the farm yard.

That tramps have souls.

That he would be taught to say his prayers.

Miss Betty said hers, and went to bed; but all through that midsummer night the baby kept her awake, or flaunted his yellow robe and crimson toadstool through her dreams.

The morning brought no change in Miss Betty's views, but she felt doubtful as to how her sister would receive them. Would she regard them as foolish and unpractical, and her respect for Miss Betty's opinion be lessened thenceforward?

The fear was needless. Miss Kitty was romantic and imaginative. She had carried the baby through his boyhood about the Lingborough fields whilst she was dressing; and he was attending her own funeral in the capacity of an attached and faithful servant, in black livery with worsted frogs, as she sprinkled salt on her buttered toast at breakfast, when she was startled from this affecting daydream by Miss Betty's voice.

"Dear sister Kitty, I wish to consult you as to our plans in the event of those wicked people who deserted the baby not being found."

The little ladies resolved that not an inkling of their benevolent scheme must be betrayed to the lawyer. But they dissembled awkwardly, and the tone in which they spoke of the tramp-baby roused the lawyer's quick suspicions. He had a real respect for the little ladies, and was kindly anxious to save them from their own indiscretion.

"My dear ladies," said he, "I do hope your benevolence—may I say your romantic benevolence?—of disposition is not tempting you to adopt this gipsy waif?"



“I hope we know what is due to ourselves, and to the estate—small, as it is—sir,” said Miss Betty, “as well as to Providence, too well to attempt to raise any child, however handsome, from that station of life in which he was born.”

“Bless me, madam! I never dreamed you would adopt a beggar child as your heir; but I hope you mean to send it to the workhouse, if the gipsy tramps it belongs to are not to be found?”

“We have not made up our minds, sir, as to the course we propose to pursue,” said Miss Betty, with outward dignity proportioned to her inward doubts.



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“My dear ladies,” said the lawyer anxiously, “let me implore you not to be rash. To adopt a child in the most favorable circumstances is the greatest of risks. But if your benevolence *will* take that line, pray adopt some little boy out of one of your tenants’ families. Even your teaching will not make him brilliant, as he is likely to inherit the minimum of intellectual capacity; but he will learn his catechism, probably grow up respectable, and possibly grateful, since his forefathers have (so Miss Kitty assures me) had all these virtues for generations. But this baby is the child of a heathen, barbarous, and wandering race. The propensities of the vagabonds who have deserted him are in every drop of his blood. All the parsons in the diocese won’t make a Christian of him, and when (after anxieties I shudder to foresee) you flatter yourself that he is civilized, he will run away and leave his shoes and stockings behind him.”

“He has a soul to be saved, if he is a gipsy,” said Miss Kitty, hysterically.

“The soul, my dear Miss Kitty “—began the lawyer, facing round upon her.

“Don’t say anything dreadful about the soul, sir, I beg,” said Miss Betty, firmly. And then she added in a conciliatory tone, “Won’t you look at the little fellow, sir? I have no doubt his relations are shocking people; but when you see his innocent little face and his beautiful eyes, I think you’ll say yourself that if he were a duke’s son he couldn’t be a finer child.”

“My experience of babies is so limited, Miss Betty,” said the lawyer, “that really—if you’ll excuse me—but I can quite imagine him. I have before now been tempted myself to adopt stray—puppies, when I have seen them in the round, soft, innocent, bright-eyed stage. And when they have grown up in the hands of more credulous friends into lanky, ill-conditioned, misconducted curs, I have congratulated myself that I was not misled by the graces of an age at which ill-breeding is less apparent than later in life.”

The little ladies both rose. “If you see no difference, sir,” said Miss Betty in her stateliest manner, “between a babe with an immortal soul and the beasts that perish, it is quite useless to prolong the conversation.”

“Reason is apt to be useless when opposed to the generous impulses of a sex so full of sentiment as yours, madam,” said the lawyer, rising also. “Permit me to take a long farewell, since it is improbable that our friendship will resume its old position until your *protege* has—run away.”

The words “long farewell” and “old friendship” were quite sufficient to soften wrath in the tender hearts of the little ladies. But the lawyer had really lost his temper, and, before Miss Betty had decided how to offer the olive branch without conceding her principles he was gone.



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The weather was warm. The little ladies were heated by discussion and the parson by vain scouring of the country on foot, when they asked his advice upon their project, and related their conversation with the lawyer. The two gentlemen had so little in common that the parson felt it his duty not to let his advice be prejudiced by this fact. For some moments he sat silent, then he began to walk about as if he were composing a sermon; then he stopped before the little ladies (who were sitting as stiffly on the sofa as if it were a pew) and spoke as if he were delivering one.

“If you ask me, dear ladies, whether it is your duty to provide for this child because you found him, I say that there is no such obligation. If you ask if I think it wise in your own interests, and hopeful as to the boy’s career, I am obliged to agree with your legal adviser. Vagabond ways are seldom cured in one generation, and I think it is quite probable that, after much trouble and anxiety spent upon him, he may go back to a wandering life. But, Miss Betty,” continued the parson in deepening tones, as he pounded his left palm with his right fist for want of a pulpit, “If you ask me whether I believe any child of any race is born incapable of improvement, and beyond benefit from the charities we owe to each other, I should deny my faith if I could say yes. I shall not, madam, confuse the end of your connection with him with the end of your training in him, even if he runs away, or fancy that I see the one because I see the other. I do not pretend to know how much evil he inherits from his forefathers as accurately as our graphic friend; but I do know that he has a Father whose image is also to be found in His children—not quite effaced in any of them—and whose care of this one will last when yours, madam, may seem to have been in vain.”

As the little ladies rushed forward and each shook a hand of the parson, he felt some compunction for his speech.

“I fear I am encouraging you in grave indiscretion,” said he. “But, indeed, my dear ladies, I am quite against your project, for you do not realize the anxieties and disappointments that are before you, I am sure. The child will give you infinite trouble. I think he will run away. And yet I cannot in good conscience say that I believe love’s labour must be lost. He may return to the woods and wilds; but I hope he will carry something with him.”

“Did the reverend gentleman mean Miss Betty’s teaspoons?” asked the lawyer, stroking his long chin, when he was told what the parson had said.

BABYHOOD.—PRETTY FLOWERS.—THE ROSE-COLOURED TULIPS.

The matter of the baby’s cap disturbed the little ladies. It seemed so like the beginning of a fulfilment of the lawyer’s croakings.



Miss Kitty had made it. She had never seen a baby without a cap before, and the sight was unusual if not indecent. But Miss Kitty was a quick needlewoman, and when the new cap was fairly tied over the thick crop of silky black hair, the baby looked so much less like Puck, and so much more like the rest of the baby world, that it was quite a relief.



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Miss Kitty's feelings may therefore be imagined when, going to the baby just after the parson's departure, she found him in open rebellion against his cap. It had been tied on whilst he was asleep, and his eyes were no sooner open than he commenced the attack. He pulled with one little brown hand and tugged with the other; he dragged a rosette over his nose and got the frills into his eyes; he worried it as a puppy worries your handkerchief if you tie it around its face and tell it to "look like a grandmother." At last the strings gave way, and he cast it triumphantly out of the clothes-basket which served him for cradle.

Successive efforts to induce him to wear it proved vain, so Thomasina said the weather was warm and his hair was very thick, and she parted this and brushed it, and Miss Kitty gave the cap to the farm-bailiff's baby, who took to it as kindly as a dumpling to a pudding-cloth.

How the boy was ever kept inside his christening clothes, Thomasina said she did not know. But when he got into the parson's arms he lay quite quiet, which was a good omen. That he might lack no advantage, Miss Betty stood godmother for him, and the parish clerk and the sexton were his godfathers.

He was named John.

"A plain, sensible name," said Miss Betty. "And while we are about it," she added, "we may as well choose his surname. For a surname he must have, and the sooner it is decided upon the better."

Miss Kitty had made a list of twenty-seven of her favourite Christian names, which Miss Betty had sternly rejected, that everything might be plain, practical, and respectable at the outset of the tramp-child's career. For the same reason she refused to adopt Miss Kitty's suggestions for a surname.

"It's so seldom there's a chance of *choosing* a surname for anybody, sister," said Miss Kitty, "it seems a pity not to choose a pretty one."

"Sister Kitty," said Miss Betty, "don't be romantic. The boy is to be brought up in that station of life for which one syllable is ample. I should have called him Smith if that had not been Thomasina's name. As it is, I propose to call him Broom. He was found under a bush of broom, and it goes very well with John, and sounds plain and respectable."

So Miss Betty bought a Bible, and on the flyleaf of it she wrote in her fine, round, gentlewoman's writing—"John Broom. *With good wishes for his welfare, temporal and eternal. From a sincere friend!*" And when the inscription was dry the Bible was wrapped in brown paper, and put by in Thomasina's trunk till John Broom should come to years of discretion.



He was slow to reach them, though in other respects he grew fast.

When he began to walk he would walk barefoot. To be out of doors was his delight, but on the threshold of the house he always sat down and discarded his shoes and stockings. Thomasina bastinadoed the soles of his feet with the soles of his shoes "to teach him the use of them," so she said. But Miss Kitty sighed, and thought of the lawyer's prediction.

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There was no blinking the fact that the child was as troublesome as he was pretty. The very demon of mischief danced in his black eyes, and seemed to possess his feet and fingers as if with quicksilver. And if, as Thomasina said, you “never knew what he would be at next,” you might also be pretty sure that it would be something he ought to have left undone.

John Broom early developed a taste for glass and crockery, and as the china cupboard was in that part of the house to which he by social standing also belonged, he had many chances to seize upon cups, jugs, and dishes. If detected with any thing that he ought not to have had, it was his custom to drop the forbidden toy and toddle off as fast as his unpractised feet would carry him. The havoc which this caused amongst the glass and china was bewildering in a household where tea-sets and dinner-sets had passed from generation to generation, where slapdash, giddy-pated kitchenmaids never came, where Miss Betty washed the best teacups in the parlor, where Thomasina was more careful than her mistress, and the breaking of a single plate was a serious matter, and, if beyond rivetting, a misfortune.

Thomasina soon found that her charge was safest, as he was happiest, out of doors. A very successful device was to shut him up in the drying ground, and tell him to “pick the pretty flowers.” John Broom preferred flowers even to china cups with gilding on them. He gathered nosegays of daisies and buttercups, and the winning way in which he would present these to the little ladies atoned, in their benevolent eyes, for many a smashed teacup.

But the tramp-baby’s restless spirit was soon weary of the drying-ground, and he set forth one morning in search of “fresh woods and pastures new.” He had seated himself on the threshold to take off his shoes, when he heard the sound of Thomasina’s footsteps, and, hastily staggering to his feet, toddled forth without farther delay. The sky was blue above him, the sun was shining, and the air was very sweet. He ran for a bit and then tumbled, and picked himself up again, and got a fresh impetus, and so on till he reached the door of the kitchen garden, which was open. It was an old-fashioned kitchen garden with flowers in the borders. There were single rose-colored tulips which had been in the garden as long as Miss Betty could remember, and they had been so increased by dividing the clumps that they now stretched in two rich lines of colour down both sides of the long walk. And John Broom saw them.

“Pick the pretty flowers, love,” said he, in imitation of Thomasina’s patronising tone, and forthwith beginning at the end, he went steadily to the top of the right-hand border, mowing the rose-coloured tulips as he went.

Meanwhile, when Thomasina came to look for him he could not be found, and when all the back premises and the drying-ground had been searched in vain, she gave the alarm to the little ladies.



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Miss Kitty's vivid imagination leaped at once to the conclusion that the child's vagabond relations had fetched him away, and she became rigid with alarm. But Miss Betty rushed out into the shrubbery, and Miss Kitty took a whiff of her vinaigrette and followed her.

When they came at last to the kitchen-garden, Miss Betty's grief for the loss of John Broom did not prevent her observing that there was something odd about the borders, and when she got to the top, and found that all the tulips had been picked from one side, she sank down on the roller which happened to be lying beside her.

And John Broom staggered up to her, and crying, "For 'oo, Miss Betty," fell headlong with a sheaf of rose-coloured tulips into her lap.

As he did not offer any to Miss Kitty, her better judgment was not warped, and she said, "You must slap him, sister Betty."

"Put out your hand, John Broom," said Miss Betty much agitated.

And John Broom, who was quite composed, put out both his little grubby paws so trustfully that Miss Betty had not the heart to strike him. But she scolded him, "Naughty boy!" and she pointed to the tulips and shook her head. John Broom looked thoughtfully at them, and shook his.

"Naughty boy!" repeated Miss Betty, and she added in very impressive tones, "John Broom's a very naughty boy!"

After which she took him to Thomasina, and Miss Kitty collected the rose-colored tulips and put them into water in the best old china punch-bowl.

In the course of the afternoon she peeped into the kitchen, where John Broom sat on the floor under the window, gazing thoughtfully up into the sky.

"As good as gold, bless his little heart!" murmured Miss Kitty. For as his feet were tucked under him, she did not know that he had just put his shoes and stockings into the pig-tub, into which he all but fell himself from the exertion. He did not hear Miss Kitty, and thought on. He wanted to be out again, and he had a tantalizing remembrance of the ease with which the tender juicy stalks of the tulips went snap, snap, in that new place of amusement he had discovered. Thomasina looked into the kitchen and went away again. When she had gone, John Broom went away also.

He went both faster and steadier on his bare feet. And when he got into the kitchen garden, it recalled Miss Betty to his mind. And he shook his head, and said, "Naughty boy!" And then he went up the left-hand border, mowing the tulips as he went; after which he trotted home, and met Thomasina at the back door. And he hugged the sheaf of rose-coloured tulips in his arms, and said, "John Broom a very naughty boy!"



Thomasina was not sentimental, and she slapped him well—his hands for picking the tulips, and his feet for going barefoot.

But his feet had to be slapped with Thomasina's slipper, for his own shoes could not be found.

In spite of all his pranks, John Broom did not lose the favor of his friends. Thomasina spoiled him, and Miss Betty and Miss Kitty tried not to do so.

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The parson had said, "Treat the child fairly. Bring him up as he will have to live hereafter. Don't make him half pet and half servant." And following this advice, and her own resolve that there should be "no nonsense" in the matter, Miss Betty had made it a rule that he should not be admitted to the parlor. It bore more heavily on the tender hearts of the little ladies than on the light heart of John Broom, and led to their waylaying him in the passages and gardens with little gifts, unknown to each other. And when Miss Kitty kissed his newly-washed cheeks, and pronounced them "like ripe russets," Miss Betty murmured, "Be judicious, sister Kitty;" and Miss Kitty would correct any possible ill effects by saying, "Now make your betters, John Broom, and say, 'Thank you, ma'am!'" which was accomplished by the child's giving a tug to the forelock of his thick black hair, with a world of mischief in his eyes.

When he was old enough, the little ladies sent him to the village school.

The total failure of their hopes for his education was not the smallest of the disappointments Miss Betty and Miss Kitty endured on his behalf. The quarrel with the lawyer had been made up long ago, and though there was always a touch of raillery in his inquiries after "the young gipsy," he had once said, "If he turns out anything of a genius at school, I might find a place for him in the office, by-and-by." The lawyer was kind-hearted in his own fashion, and on this hint Miss Kitty built up hopes, which unhappily were met by no responsive ambition in John Broom.

As to his fitness to be an errand boy, he could not carry a message from the kitchen to the cowhouse without stopping by the way to play with the yard-dog, and a hedgehog in the path would probably have led him astray, if Thomasina had had a fit and he had been despatched for the doctor.

During school hours he spent most of his time under the fool's cap when he was not playing truant. With his schoolmates he was good friends. If he was seldom out of mischief, he was seldom out of temper. He could beat any boy at a foot race (without shoes); he knew the notes and nests of every bird that sang, and whatever an old pocket-knife is capable of, that John Broom could and would do with it for his fellows.

Miss Betty had herself tried to teach him to read, and she continued to be responsible for his religious instruction. She had hoped to stir up his industry by showing him the Bible, and promising that when he could read it he should have it for his "very own." But he either could not or would not apply himself, so the prize lay unearned in Thomasina's trunk. But he would listen for any length of time to Scripture stories, if they were read or told him, especially to the history of Elisha, and the adventures of the judges.

Indeed, since he could no longer be shut up in the drying-ground, Thomasina had found that he was never so happy and so safe as when he was listening to tales, and many a long winter evening he lay idle on the kitchen hearth, with his head on the sheep dog, whilst the more industrious Thomasina plied her knitting-needles, as she sat in the

inglenook, with the flickering firelight playing among the plaits of her large cap, and told tales of the country side.



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Not that John Broom was her only hearer. Annie “the lass” sat by the hearth also, and Thomasina took care that she did not “sit with her hands before her.” And a little farther away sat the cowherd.

He had a sleeping-room above the barn, and took his meals in the house. By Miss Betty’s desire he always went in to family prayers after supper, when he sat as close as possible to the door, under an uncomfortable consciousness that Thomasina did not think his boots clean enough for the occasion and would find something to pick off the carpet as she followed him out, however hardly he might have used the door-scraper beforehand.

It might be a difficult matter to decide which he liked best, beer or John Broom. But next to these he liked Thomasina’s stories.

Thomasina was kind to him. With all his failings and the dirt on his boots, she liked him better than the farm-bailiff. The farm-bailiff was thrifty, and sensible and faithful, and Thomasina was faithful and sensible and thrifty, and they each had a tendency to claim the monopoly of those virtues. Notable people complain, very properly, of thriftless and untidy ones, but they sometimes agree better with them than with rival notabilities. And so Thomasina’s broad face beamed benevolently as she bid the cowherd “draw up” to the fire, and he who (like Thomasina) was a native of the country, would confirm the marvels she related, with a proper pride in the wonderful district to which they both belonged.

He would help her out sometimes with names and dates in a local biography. By his own account he knew the man who was murdered at the inn in the Black Valley so intimately that it turned Annie the lass as white as a dish-cloth to sit beside him. If Thomasina said that folk were yet alive who had seen the little green men dance in Dawborough Croft the cowherd would smack his knees and cry, “Scores on ’em!” And when she whispered of the white figure which stood at the cross roads after midnight, he testified to having seen it himself—tall beyond mortal height, and pointing four ways at once. He had a legend of his own too, which Thomasina sometimes gave him the chance of telling, of how he was followed home one moonlight night by a black something as big as a young calf, which “wimmled and wammled,” around him till he fell senseless into the ditch, and being found there by the farm-bailiff on his return from market was unjustly accused of the vice of intoxication.

“Fault-finders should be free of flaws,” Thomasina would say with a prim chin. She *had* seen the farm-bailiff himself “the worse” for more than his supper beer.

But there was one history which Thomasina was always loth to relate, and it was that which both John Broom and the cowherd especially preferred—the history of the Lob Lie-by-the-fire.



Thomasina had a feeling (which was shared by Annie the lass) that it was better not to talk of “anything” peculiar to the house in which you were living. One’s neighbours’ ghosts and bogles are another matter.



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But to John Broom and the cowherd no subject was so interesting as that of the Lubber-fiend. The cowherd sighed to think of the good old times when a man might sleep on in spite of cocks, and the stables be cleaner, and the beasts better tended than if he had been up with the lark. And John Broom's curiosity was never quenched about the rough, hairy Good-fellow who worked at night that others might be idle by day, and who was sometimes caught at his hard earned nap, lying "like a great hurgin bear," where the boy loved to lie himself, before the fire, on this very hearth.

Why and where he had gone, Thomasina could not tell. She had heard that he had originally come from some other household, where he had been offended. But whether he had gone elsewhere when he forsook Lingborough, or whether "such things had left the country" for good, she did not pretend to say.

And when she had told, for the third or fourth time, how his porridge was put into a corner of the cowhouse for him over night, and how he had been often overheard at his work, but rarely seen, and then only lying before the fire, Miss Betty would ring for prayers, and Thomasina would fold up her knitting and lead the way, followed by Annie the lass, whose nerves John Broom would startle by treading on her heels, the rear being brought up by the cowherd, looking hopelessly at his boots.

Miss Betty and Miss Kitty did really deny themselves the indulgence of being indulgent, and treated John Broom on principles, and for his good. But they did so in their own tremulous and spasmodic way, and got little credit for it. Thomasina, on the other hand, spoiled him with such a masterful managing air, and so much sensible talk, that no one would have thought that the only system she followed was to conceal his misdemeanours, and to stand between him and the just wrath of the farm-bailiff.

The farm-bailiff, or grieve, as he liked to call himself, was a Scotchman, with a hard-featured face (which he washed on the Sabbath), a harsh voice, a good heart rather deeper down in his body than is usual, and a shrewd, money-getting head, with a speckled straw hat on the top of it. No one could venture to imagine when that hat was new, or how long ago it was that the farm-bailiff went to the expense of purchasing those work-day clothes. But the dirt on his face and neck was an orderly accumulation, such as gathers on walls, oil-paintings, and other places to which soap is not habitually applied; it was not a matter of spills and splashes, like the dirt John Broom disgraced himself with. And his clothes, if old, fitted neatly about him; they never suggested raggedness, which was the normal condition of the tramp-boy's jacket. They only looked as if he had been born (and occasionally buried) in them. It is needful to make this distinction, that the good man may not be accused of inconsistency in the peculiar vexation which John Broom's disorderly appearance caused him.



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In truth, Miss Betty's *protege* had reached the age at which he was to "eat dreadfully, wear out his clothes, and be useful on the farm;" and the last condition was quite unfulfilled. At eleven years old he could not be trusted to scare birds, and at half that age the farm-bailiff's eldest child could drive cattle.

"And no' just ruin the leedies in new coats and compliments, either, like some ne'er-do-weels," added the farm-bailiff, who had heard with a jealous ear of sixpences given by Miss Betty and Miss Kitty to their wasteful favourite.

When the eleventh anniversary of John Broom's discovery was passed, and his character at school gave no hopes of his ever qualifying himself to serve the lawyer, it was resolved that—"idleness being the mother of mischief," he should be put under the care of the farm-bailiff, to do such odd jobs about the place as might be suited to his capacity and love of out-door life. And now John Broom's troubles began. By fair means or foul, with here an hour's weeding and there a day's bird scaring, and with errands perpetual, the farm-bailiff contrived to "get some work out of" the idle little urchin. His speckled hat and grim face seemed to be everywhere, and always to pop up when John Broom began to play.

They lived "at daggers drawn." I am sorry to say that John Broom's fitful industry was still kept for his own fancies. To climb trees, to run races with the sheep dog, to cut grotesque sticks, gather hedge fruits, explore a bog, or make new friends among beasts and birds—at such matters he would labor with feverish zeal. But so far from trying to cure himself of his indolence about daily drudgery, he found a new and pleasant excitement in thwarting the farm-bailiff at every turn.

It would not sound dignified to say that the farm-bailiff took pleasure in thwarting John Broom. But he certainly did not show his satisfaction when the boy did do his work properly. Perhaps he thought that praise is not good for young people; and the child did not often give him the chance of trying. Of blame he was free enough. Not a good scolding to clear the air, such as Thomasina would give to Annie the lass, but his slow, caustic tongue was always growling, like muttered thunder, over John Broom's incorrigible head.

He had never approved of the tramp-child, who had the overwhelming drawbacks of having no pedigree and of being a bad bargain as to expense. This was not altogether John Broom's fault, but with his personal failings the farm bailiff had even less sympathy. It had been hinted that he was born in the speckled hat, and whether this were so or not, he certainly had worn an old head whilst his shoulders were still young, and could not remember the time when he wished to waste his energies on any thing that did not earn or at least save something.

Once only did any thing like approval of the lad escape his lips.



Miss Betty's uncle's second cousin had returned from foreign lands with a good fortune and several white cockatoos. He kept the fortune himself, but he gave the cockatoos to his friends, and he sent one of them to the little ladies of Lingborough.



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He was a lovely creature (the cockatoo, not the cousin, who was plain), and John Broom's admiration of him was boundless. He gazed at the sulphur-colored crest, the pure white wings with their deeper-tinted lining, and even the beak and the fierce round eyes, as he had gazed at the broom bush in his babyhood, with insatiable delight.

The cousin did things handsomely. He had had a ring put round one of the cockatoo's ankles, with a bright steel chain attached and a fastener to secure it to the perch. The cockatoo was sent in the cage by coach, and a perch, made of foreign wood, followed by the carrier.

Miss Betty and Miss Kitty were delighted both with the cockatoo and the perch, but they were a good deal troubled as to how to fasten the two together. There was a neat little ring on the perch, and the cockatoo's chain was quite complete, and he evidently wanted to get out, for he shook the walls of his cage in his gambols. But he put up his crest and snapped when any one approached, in a manner so alarming that Annie the lass shut herself up in the dairy, and the farm-bailiff turned his speckled hat in his hands, and gave cautious counsel from a safe distance.

"How he flaps!" cried Miss Betty. "I'm afraid he has a very vicious temper."

"He only wants to get out, Miss Betty," said John Broom. "He'd be all right with his perch, and I think I can get him on it."

"Now Heaven save us from the sin o' presumption!" cried the farm-bailiff, and putting on the speckled hat, he added, slowly: "I'm thinking, John Broom, that if ye're engaged wi' the leddies this morning it'll be time I turned my hand to singling these few turnips ye've been thinking about the week past."

On which he departed, and John Broom pressed the little ladies to leave him alone with the bird.

"We shouldn't like to leave you alone with a wild creature like that," said Miss Betty.

"He's just frightened on ye, Miss Betty. He'll be like a lamb when you're gone," urged John Broom.

"Besides, we should like to see you do it," said Miss Kitty.

"You can look in through the window, miss. I must fasten the door, or he'll be out."

"I should never forgive myself if he hurt you, John," said Miss Betty, irresolutely, for she was very anxious to have the cockatoo and perch in full glory in the parlour.

"He'll none hurt me, miss," said John, with a cheerful smile on his rosy face. "I likes him, and he'll like me."



This settled the matter. John was left with the cockatoo. He locked the door, and the little ladies went into the garden and peeped through the window.

They saw John Broom approach the cage, on which the cockatoo put up his crest, opened his beak slowly, and snarled, and Miss Betty tapped on the window and shook her black satin workbag.

“Don’t go near him!” she cried. But John Broom paid no attention.



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“What are you putting up that top-knot of yours at me for?” said he to the cockatoo. “Don’t ye know your own friends? I’m going to let ye out, I am. You’re going on to your perch, you are.”

“Eh, but you’re a bonny creature!” he added, as the cockatoo filled the cage with snow and sulphur flutterings.

“Keep away, keep away!” screamed the little ladies, playing a duet on the window panes.

“Out with you!” said John Broom, as he unfastened the cage door.

And just when Miss Betty had run round, and as she shouted through the keyhole, “Open the door, John Broom. We’ve changed our minds. We’ve decided to keep it in its cage,” the cockatoo strode solemnly forth on his eight long toes.

“Pretty Cocky!” said he.

When Miss Betty got back to the window, John Broom had just made an injudicious grab at the steel chain, on which Pretty Cocky flew fiercely at him, and John, burying his face in his arms, received the attack on his thick poll, laughing into his sleeves and holding fast to the chain, whilst the cockatoo and the little ladies screamed against each other.

“It’ll break your leg—you’ll tear its eyes out!” cried Miss Kitty.

“Miss Kitty means that you’ll break its leg, and it will tear your eyes out,” Miss Betty explained through the glass. “John Broom! Come away! Lock it in! Let it go!”

But Cocky was now waddling solemnly round the room, and John Broom was creeping after him, with the end of the chain in one hand, and the perch in the other, and in a moment more he had joined the chain and the ring, and just as Miss Betty was about to send for the constable and have the door broken open, Cocky—driven into a corner—clutched his perch and was raised triumphantly to his place in the bow-window.

He was now a parlour pet, and John Broom saw little of him. This vexed him, for he had taken a passionate liking for the bird. The little ladies rewarded him well for his skill, but this brought him no favour from the farm-bailiff, and matters went on as ill as before.

One day the cockatoo got his chain entangled, and Miss Kitty promptly advanced to put it right. She had unfastened that end which secured it to the perch, when Cocky, who had been watching the proceeding with much interest, dabbed at her with his beak. Miss Kitty fled, but with great presence of mind shut the door after her. She forgot, however, that the window was open, in front of which stood the cockatoo scanning the summer sky with his fierce eyes, and flapping himself in the breeze.



And just as the little ladies ran into the garden, and Miss Kitty was saying, "One comfort is, sister Betty, that it's quite safe in the room, till we can think what to do next," he bowed his yellow crest, spread his noble wings, and sailed out into the aether.

In ten minutes the whole able-bodied population of the place was in the grounds of Lingborough, including the farm-bailiff.

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The cockatoo was on the top of a fir-tree, and a fragment of the chain was with him, for he had broken it, and below on the lawn stood the little ladies, who, with the unflinching courage of women in a hopeless cause, were trying to dislodge him by waving their pocket-handkerchiefs and crying “sh!”

He looked composedly down out of one eye for some time, and then he began to move.

“I think it’s coming down now,” said Miss Kitty.

But in a quarter of a minute, Cocky had sailed a quarter of a mile, and was rocking himself on the top of an old willow-tree. And at this moment John Broom joined the crowd which followed him.

“I’m thinking he’s got his chain fast,” said the farm-bailiff; “if anybody that understood the beastie daured to get near him——”

“I’ll get him,” said John Broom, casting down his hat.

“Ye’ll get yer neck thraved,” said the farm-bailiff.

“We won’t hear of it,” said the little ladies.

But to their horror, John Broom kicked off his shoes, after which he spat upon his hands (a shock which Miss Kitty thought she never could have survived), and away he went up the willow.

It was not an easy tree to climb, and he had one or two narrow escapes, which kept the crowd breathless, but he shook the hair from his eyes, moistened his hands afresh, and went on. The farm-bailiff’s far-away heart was stirred. No Scotchman is insensible to gallantry. And courage is the only thing a “canny” Scot can bear to see expended without return.

“John Broom,” screamed Miss Betty, “come down! I order, I command you to come down.”

The farm-bailiff drew his speckled hat forward to shade his upward gaze, and folded his arms.

“Dinna call on him, leddies,” he said, speaking more quickly than usual. “Dinna mak him turn his head. Steady, lad! Grip wi’ your feet. Spit on your pawms, man.”

Once the boy trod on a rotten branch, and as he drew back his foot, and it came crashing down, the farm-bailiff set his teeth, and Miss Kitty fainted in Thomasina’s arms.



“I’ll reward anyone who’ll fetch him down,” sobbed Miss Betty. But John Broom seated himself on the same branch as the cockatoo, and undid the chain and prepared his hands for the downward journey.

“You’ve got a rare perch, this time,” said he. And Pretty Cocky crept towards him, and rubbed its head against him and chuckled with joy.

What dreams of liberty in the tree tops, with John Broom for a playfellow, passed through his crested head, who shall say? But when he found that his friend meant to take him prisoner, he became very angry and much alarmed. And when John Broom grasped him by both legs and began to descend, Cocky pecked him vigorously. But the boy held the back of his head towards him, and went steadily down.

“Weel done!” roared the farm-bailiff. “Gently, lad! Gude save us! ha’e a care o’ yoursen. That’s weel. Keep your pow at him. Dinna let the beast get to your een.”



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But when John Broom was so near the ground as to be safe, the farm-bailiff turned wrathfully upon his son, who had been gazing open-mouthed at the sight which had so interested his father.

“Ye look weel standing gawping here, before the leddies,” said he, “wasting the precious hours, and bringing your father’s grey hairs wi’ sorrow to the grave; and John Broom yonder shaming ye, and you not so much as thinking to fetch the perch for him, ye lazy loon. Away wi’ ye and get it, before I lay a stick about your shoulders.”

And when his son had gone for the perch, and John Broom was safely on the ground, laughing, bleeding, and triumphant, the farm-bailiff said,—

“Ye’re a bauld chiel, John Broom, I’ll say that for ye.”

INTO THE MIST.

Unfortunately the favourable impression produced by “the gipsy lad’s” daring soon passed from the farm-bailiff’s mind. It was partly effaced by the old jealousy of the little ladies favour. Miss Betty gave the boy no less than four silver shillings, and he ungraciously refused to let the farm-bailiff place them in a savings bank for him.

Matters got from bad to worse. The farming man was not the only one who was jealous, and John Broom himself was as idle and restless as ever. Though, if he had listened respectfully to the Scotchman’s counsel, or shown any disposition to look up to and be guided by him, much might have been overlooked. But he made fun of him and made a friend of the cowherd. And this latter most manifest token of low breeding vexed the respectable taste of the farm-bailiff.

John Broom had his own grievances too, and he brooded over them. He thought the little ladies had given him over to the farm-bailiff, because they had ceased to care for him, and that the farm-bailiff was prejudiced against him beyond any hope of propitiation. The village folk taunted him, too, with being an outcast, and called him Gipsy John, and this maddened him. Then he would creep into the cowhouse and lie in the straw against the white cow’s warm back, and for a few of Miss Betty’s coppers, to spend in beer or tobacco, the cowherd would hide him from the farm-bailiff and tell him countryside tales. To Thomasina’s stories of ghosts and gossip, he would add strange tales of smugglers on the near-lying coast, and as John Broom listened, his restless blood rebelled more and more against the sour sneers and dry drudgery that he got from the farm-bailiff.

Nor were sneers the sharpest punishment his misdemeanours earned. The farm-bailiff’s stick was thick and his arm was strong, and he had a tendency to believe that if a flogging was good for a boy, the more he had of it the better it would be for him.

And John Broom, who never let a cry escape him at the time, would steal away afterwards and sob out his grief into the long soft coat of the sympathising sheep dog.



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Unfortunately he never tried the effect of deserving better treatment as a remedy for his woes. The parson's good advice and Miss Betty's entreaties were alike in vain. He was ungrateful even to Thomasina. The little ladies sighed and thought of the lawyer. And the parson preached patience.

"Cocky has been tamed," said Miss Kitty thoughtfully, "perhaps John Broom will get steadier by-and-by."

"It seems a pity we can't chain him to a perch, Miss Kitty," laughed the parson; "he would be safe then, at any rate."

Miss Betty said afterwards that it did seem so remarkable that the parson should have made this particular joke on this particular night—the night when John Broom did not come home.

He had played truant all day. The farm-bailiff had wanted him, and he had kept out of the way.

The wind was from the east, and a white mist rolled in from the sea, bringing a strange invigorating smell, and making your lips clammy with salt. It made John Broom's heart beat faster, and filled his head with dreams of ships and smugglers, and rocking masts higher than the willow-tree, and winds wilder than this wind, and dancing waves.

Then something loomed through the fog. It was the farm-bailiff's speckled hat. John Broom hesitated—the thick stick became visible.

Then a cloud rolled between them, and the child turned, and ran, and ran, and ran coastwards, into the sea mist.

THE SEA.—THE ONE-EYED SAILOR.—THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD.

John Broom was footsore when he reached the coast, but that keen, life-giving smell had drawn him on and held him up. The fog had cleared off, and he strained his black eyes through the darkness to see the sea.

He had never seen it—that other world within this, on which one lived out of doors, and climbed about all day, and no one blamed him.

When he did see it, he thought he had got to the end of the world. If the edge of the cliff were not the end, he could not make out where the sky began; and if that darkness were the sea, the sea was full of stars.



But this was because the sea was quiet and reflected the colour of the night sky, and the stars were the lights of the herring-boats twinkling in the bay.

When he got down by the water he saw the vessels lying alongside, and they were dirtier than he had supposed. But he did not lose heart, and remembering, from the cowherd's tales, that people who cannot pay for their passage must either work it out or hide themselves on board ship, he took the easier alternative, and got on to the first vessel which had a plank to the quay, and hid himself under some tarpaulin on the deck.

The vessel was a collier bound for London, and she sailed with the morning tide.

When he was found out he was not ill-treated. Indeed, the rough skipper offered to take him home again on his return voyage. He would have liked to go, but pride withheld him, and homesickness had not yet eaten into his very soul. Then an old sailor with one eye (but that a sly one) met him, and told him tales more wonderful than the cowherd's. And with him he shipped as cabin-boy, on a vessel bound for the other side of the world.



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* * * * *

A great many sins bring their own punishment in this life pretty clearly, and sometimes pretty closely; but few more directly or more bitterly than rebellion against the duties, and ingratitude for the blessings, of home.

There was no playing truant on board ship; and as to the master poor John Broom served now, his cruelty made the memory of the farm-bailiff a memory of tenderness and gentleness and indulgence. Till he was half-naked and half-starved, and had only short snatches of sleep in hard corners, it had never struck him that when one has got good food and clothes, and sound sleep in a kindly home, he has got more than many people, and enough to be thankful for.

He did everything he was told now as fast as he could do it, in fear for his life. The one-eyed sailor had told him that the captain always took orphans and poor friendless lads to be his cabin-boys, and John Broom thought what a nice kind man he must be, and how different from the farm-bailiff, who thought nobody could be trustworthy unless he could show parents and grand-parents, and cousins to the sixth degree. But after they had sailed, when John Broom felt very ill, and asked the one-eyed sailor where he was to sleep, the one-eyed sailor pleasantly replied that if he hadn't brought a four-post bed in his pocket he must sleep where he could, for that all the other cabin-boys were sleeping in Davy's Locker, and couldn't be disturbed. And it was not till John Broom had learned ship's language that he found out that Davy's Locker meant the deep, and that the other cabin-boys were dead. "And as they'd nobody belonging to 'em, no hearts was broke," added the sailor, winking with his one eye.

John Broom slept standing sometimes for weariness, but he did not sleep in Davy's Locker. Young as he was he had dauntless courage, a careless hopeful heart, and a tough little body; and that strong, life-giving sea smell bore him up instead of food, and he got to the other side of the world.

Why he did not stay there, why he did not run away into the wilderness to find at least some easier death than to have his bones broken by the cruel captain, he often wondered afterwards. He was so much quicker and braver than the boys they commonly got, that the old sailor kept a sharp watch over him with his one eye whilst they were ashore; but one day he was too drunk to see out of it, and John Broom ran away.

It was Christmas Day, and so hot that he could not run far, for he was at the other side of the world, where things are upside down, and he sat down by the roadside on the outskirts of the city; and as he sat, with his thin, brown face resting on his hands, a familiar voice beside him said, "Pretty Cocky!" and looking up he saw a man with several cages of birds. The speaker was a cockatoo of the most exquisite shades of cream colour, salmon and rose, and he had a rose-coloured crest. But lovely as he



was, John Broom's eyes were on another cage, where, silent, solemn, and sulky, sat a big white one with sulphur-coloured trimmings and fierce black eyes; and he was so like Miss Betty's pet, that the poor child's heart bounded as if a hand had been held out to him from home.



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“If you let him get at you, you’ll not do it a second time, mate,” said the man. “He’s the nastiest tempered beast I ever saw. I’d have wrung his neck long ago if he hadn’t such a fine coat.”

But John Broom said, as he had said before, “I like him and he’ll like me.”

When the cockatoo bit his finger to the bone, the man roared with laughter, but John Broom did not draw his hand away. He kept it still at the bird’s beak, and with the other he gently scratched him under the crest and wings. And when the white cockatoo began to stretch out his eight long toes, as cats clutch with their claws from pleasure, and chuckled, and sighed, and bit softly without hurting, and laid his head against the bars till his snow and sulphur feathers touched John Broom’s black locks, the man was amazed.

“Look here, mate,” said he, “you’ve the trick with birds, and no mistake. I’ll sell you this one cheap, and you’ll be able to sell him dear.”

“I’ve not a penny in the world,” said John Broom.

“You do look cleaned out too,” said the man, scanning him from head to foot. “I tell you what, you shall come with me a bit and tame the birds, and I’ll find you something to eat.”

Ten minutes before, John Broom would have jumped at this offer, but now he refused it. The sight of the cockatoo had brought back the fever of home-sickness in all its fierceness. He couldn’t stay out here. He would dare anything, do anything, to see the hills about Lingborough once more before him died; and even if he did not live to see them, he might live to sleep in that part of Davy’s Locker which should rock him on the shores of home.

The man gave him a shilling for fastening a ring and chain on to the Cocky’s ankle, and with this he got the best dinner he had eaten since he lost sight of the farm-bailiff’s speckled hat in the mist.

And then he went back to the one-eyed sailor, and shipped as cabin-boy again for the homeward voyage.

THE HIGHLANDER.—BARRACK LIFE.—THE GREAT CURSE.—JOHN BROOM’S MONEY-BOX.

When John Broom did get home he did not go to sea again. He lived from hand to mouth in the seaport town, and slept, as he was well accustomed to sleep, in holes and corners.



Every day and every night, through the long months of the voyage, he had dreamed of begging his way barefoot to Miss Betty's door. But now he did not go. His life was hard, but it was not cruel. He was very idle, and there was plenty to see. He wandered about the country as of old. The ships and shipping too had a fascination for him now that the past was past, and here he could watch them from the shore; and, partly for shame and partly for pride, he could not face the idea of going back. If he had been taunted with being a vagrant boy before, what would be said now if he presented himself, a true tramp, to the farm-bailiff? Besides, Miss Betty and Miss Kitty could not forgive him. It was impossible!



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He was wandering about one day when he came to some fine high walls with buildings inside. There was an open gateway, at which stood a soldier with a musket. But a woman and some children went in, and he did not shoot them; so when his back was turned, and he was walking stiffly to where he came from, John Broom ran in through the gateway.

The first man he saw was the grandest-looking man he had ever seen. Indeed, he looked more like a bird than a man—a big bird with a big black crest. He was very tall. His feet were broad and white, like the feathered feet of some plummy bird, his legs were bare and brown and hairy. He was clothed in many colours. He had fur in front, which swung as he walked, and silver and shining stones about him. He held his head very high and from it drooped great black plumes. His face looked as if it had been cut—roughly but artistically—out of a block of old wood, and his eyes were the colour of a summer sky. And John Broom felt as he had felt when he first saw Miss Betty's cockatoo.

In repose the Highlander's eye was as clear as a cairngorm and as cold, but when it fell upon John Broom it took a twinkle not quite unlike the twinkle in the one eye of the sailor; and then, to his amazement, this grand creature beckoned to John Broom with a rather dirty hand.

"Yes, sir," said John Broom, staring up at the splendid giant, with eyes of wonder.

"I'm saying," said the Highlander, confidentially (and it had a pleasant homely sound to hear him speak like the farm-bailiff)—"I'm saying, I'm confined to barracks, ye ken; and I'll gi'e ye a hawpenny if ye'll get the bottle filled wi' whusky. Roun' yon corner ye'll see the 'Britain's Defenders.'"

But at this moment he erected himself, his turquoise eyes looked straight before them, and he put his hand to his head and moved it slowly away again, as a young man with more swinging grandeur of colors and fur and plumes, and with greater glittering of gems and silver, passed by, a sword clattering after him.

Meanwhile John Broom had been round the corner and was back again.

"What for are ye stan'in' there, ye fule?" asked his new friend. "What for didna ye gang for the whusky?"

"It's here, sir."

"My certy, ye dinna let the grass grow under your feet," said the Highlander; and he added, "If ye want to run errands, laddie, ye can come back again."

It was the beginning of a fresh life for John Broom. With many other idle or homeless boys he now haunted the barracks, and ran errands for the soldiers. His fleetness of



foot and ready wit made him the favourite. Perhaps, too, his youth and his bright face and eyes pleaded for him, for British soldiers are a tender-hearted race.

He was knocked about, but never cruelly, and he got plenty of coppers and broken victuals, and now and then an old cap or pair of boots, a world too large for him. His principal errands were to fetch liquor for the soldiers. In arms and pockets he would sometimes carry a dozen bottles at once, and fly back from the canteen or public-house without breaking one.



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Before the summer was over he was familiar with every barrack-room and guard-room in the place; he had food to eat and coppers to spare, and he shared his bits with the mongrel dogs who lived, as he did, on the good-nature of the garrison.

It must be confessed that neatness was not among John Broom's virtues. He looped his rags together with bits of string, and wasted his pence or lost them. The soldiers standing at the bar would often give him a drink out of their pewter-pots. It choked him at first, and then he got used to it, and liked it. Some relics of Miss Betty's teachings kept him honest. He would not condescend to sip by the way out of the soldiers' jugs and bottles, as other errand-boys did, but he came to feel rather proud of laying his twopence on the counter, and emptying his own pot of beer with a grimace to the bystanders through the glass at the bottom.

One day he was winking through the froth of a pint of porter at the canteen sergeant's daughter, who was in fits of laughing, when the pewter was knocked out of his grasp, and the big Highlander's hand was laid on his shoulder and bore him twenty or thirty yards from the place in one swoop.

"I'll trouble ye to give me your attention," said the Highlander, when they came to a standstill, "and to speak the truth. Did ye ever see me the worse of liquor?"

John Broom had several remembrances of the clearest kind to that effect, so he put up his arms to shield his head from the probable blow, and said, "Yes, M'Alister."

"How often?" asked the Scotchman.

"I never counted," said John Broom; "pretty often."

"How many good-conduct stripes do you ken me to have lost of your ain knowledge?"

"Three, M'Alister."

"Is there a finer man than me in the regiment?" asked the Highlander, drawing up his head.

"That there's not," said John Broom, warmly.

"Our sairgent, now," drawled the Scotchman, "wad ye say he was a better man than me?"

"Nothing like so good," said John Broom, sincerely.

"And what d'ye suppose, man," said the Highlander, firing with sudden passion, till the light of his clear blue eyes seemed to pierce John Broom's very soul—"what d'ye suppose has hindered me that I'm not sairgent, when yon man is? What has keepit me



from being an officer, that had served my country in twa battles when oor quartermaster hadna enlisted? Wha gets my money? What lost me my stripes? What loses me decent folks' respect and, waur than that, my ain? What gars a hand that can grip a broadsword tremble like a woman's? What fills the canteen and the kirkyard? What robs a man of health and wealth and peace? What ruins weans and women, and makes mair homes desolate than war? Drink, man, drink! The deevil of drink!"

It was not till the glare in his eyes had paled that John Broom ventured to speak. Then he said,—

"Why don't ye give it up, M'Alister?"



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The man rose to his full height, and laid his hand heavily on the boy's shoulder, and his eyes seemed to fade with that pitiful, weary look, which only such blue eyes show so well, "Because I *canna*" said he; "because, for as big as I am, I canna. But for as little as you are, laddie, ye can, and, Heaven help me, ye shall."

That evening he called John Broom into the barrack-room where he slept. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, and had a little wooden money-box in his hands.

"What money have ye, laddie?" he asked.

John Broom pulled out three halfpence lately earned, and the Scotchman dropped them slowly into the box. Then he turned the key, and put it into his pocket, and gave the box to the boy.

"Ye'll put what ye earn in there," said he, "I'll keep the key, and ye'll keep the box yoursel; and when it's opened we'll open it together, and lay out your savings in decent clothes for ye against the winter."

At this moment some men passing to the canteen shouted, "M'Alister?" The Highlander did not answer, but he started to the door. Then he stood irresolute, and then turned and reseated himself.

"Gang and bring me a bit o' tobacco," he said, giving John Broom a penny. And when the boy had gone he emptied his pocket of the few pence left, and dropped them into the box, muttering, "If he manna, I wanna."

And when the tobacco came, he lit his pipe, and sat on the bench outside, and snarled at every one who spoke to him.

OUTPOST DUTY.—THE SERGEANT'S STORY.— GRAND ROUNDS.

It was a bitterly cold winter. The soldiers drank a great deal, and John Broom was constantly trotting up and down, and the box grew very heavy.

Bottles were filled and refilled, in spite of greatly increased strictness in the discipline of the garrison, for there were rumours of invasion, and penalties were heavy, and sentry posts were increased, and the regiments were kept in readiness for action.

The Highlander had not cured himself of drinking, though he had cured John Broom. But, like others, he was more wary just now, and had hitherto escaped the heavy punishments inflicted in a time of probable war; and John Broom watched over him with the fidelity of a sheep dog, and more than once had roused him with a can of cold water



when he was all but caught by his superiors in a state of stupor, which would not have been credited to the frost alone.

The talk of invasion had become grave, when one day a body of men were ordered for outpost duty, and M'Alister was among them. The officer had got a room for them in a farmhouse, where they sat round the fire, and went out by turns to act as sentries at various posts for an hour or two at a time.

The novelty was delightful to John Broom. He hung about the farmhouse, and warmed himself at the soldiers' fire.

In the course of the day M'Alister got him apart and whispered, "I'm going on duty the night at ten, laddie. It's fearsome cold, and I hav'na had a drop to warm me the day. If ye could ha' brought me a wee drappie to the corner of the three roads—it's twa miles from here I'm thinking—"



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"It's not the miles, M'Alister," said John Broom, "but you're on outpost duty, and—"

"And you're misdoubting what may be done to ye for bringing liquor to a sentry on duty? Aye, aye, lad, ye do weel to be cautious," said the Highlander, and he turned away.

But it was not the fear of consequences to himself which had made John Broom hesitate, and he was stung by the implication.

The night was dark and very cold, and the Highlander had been pacing up and down his post for about half-an-hour, when his quick ear caught a faint sound of footsteps.

"Wha goes there?" said he.

"It's I, M'Alister," whispered John Broom.

"Whisht, laddie," said the sentry; "are ye there after all? Did no one see ye?"

"Not a soul; I crept by the hedges. Here's your whiskey, M'Alister; but oh be careful!" said the lad.

The Scotchman's eyes glittered greedily at the bottle.

"Never fear," said he, "I'll just rub a wee drappie on the pawms of my hands to keep away the frost-bite, for its awsome cold, man. Now away wi' ye, and take tent, laddie, keep off the other sentries."

John Broom went back as carefully as he had come, and slipped in to warm himself by the guardroom fire.

It was a good one, and the soldiers sat close round it. The officer was writing a letter in another room, and in a low, impressive voice, the sergeant was telling a story which was listened to with breathless attention. John Broom was fond of stories, and he listened also.

It was of a friend of the sergeant's, who had been a boy with him in the same village at home, who had seen active service with him abroad, and who had slept at his post on such a night as this, from the joint effects of cold and drink. It was war time, and he had been tried by court-martial, and shot for the offence. The sergeant had been one of the firing party to execute his friend, and they had taken leave of each other as brothers, before the final parting face to face in this last awful scene.

The man's voice was faltering, when the tale was cut short by the jingling of the field officer's accoutrements as he rode by to visit the outposts. In an instant the officer and



men turned out to receive him; and, after the usual formalities, he rode on. The officer went back to his letter, and the sergeant and his men to their fireside.

The opening of the doors had let in a fresh volume of cold, and one of the men called to John Broom to mend the fire. But he was gone.

* * * * *

John Broom was fleet of foot, and there are certain moments which lift men beyond their natural powers, but he had set himself a hard task.

As he listened to the sergeant's tale, an agonising fear smote him for his friend M'Alister. Was there any hope that the Highlander could keep himself from the whiskey? Officers were making their rounds at very short intervals just now, and if drink and cold overcame him at his post!



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Close upon these thoughts came the jingling of the field officer's sword, and the turn out of the guard. "Who goes there?"—"Rounds."—"What rounds?"—"Grand rounds."—"Halt, grand rounds, advance one, and give the counter-sign!" The familiar words struck coldly on John Broom's heart, as if they had been orders to a firing party, and the bandage was already across the Highlander's blue eyes. Would the grand rounds be challenged at the three roads to-night? He darted out into the snow.

He flew, as the crow flies, across the fields, to where M'Alister was on duty. It was a much shorter distance than by the road, which was winding; but whether this would balance the difference between a horse's pace and his own was the question, and there being no time to question, he ran on.

He kept his black head down, and ran from his shoulders. The clatter, clatter, jingle, jingle, on the hard road came to him through the still frost on a level with his left ear. It was terrible, but he held on, dodging under the hedges to be out of sight, and the sound lessened, and by-and-by, the road having wound about, he could hear it faintly, *but behind him*.

And he reached the three roads, and M'Alister was asleep in the ditch.

But when, with jingle and clatter, the field officer of the day reached the spot, the giant Highlander stood like a watch-tower at his post, with a little snow on the black plumes that drooped upon his shoulders.

HOSPITAL.—“HAME.”

John Broom did not see the Highlander again for two or three days. It was Christmas week, and, in spite of the war panic, there was festivity enough in the barracks to keep the errand-boy very busy.

Then came New Year's Eve—"Hogmenay," as the Scotch call it—and it was the Highland regiment's particular festival. Worn-out with whiskey-fetching and with helping to deck barrack-rooms and carrying pots and trestles, John Broom was having a nap in the evening, in company with a mongrel deer-hound, when a man shook him, and said, "I heard some one asking for ye an hour or two back; M'Alister wants ye."

"Where is he?" said John Broom, jumping to his feet.

"In hospital; he's been there a day or two. He got cold on outpost duty, and it's flown to his lungs, they say. Ye see he's been a hard drinker, has M'Alister, and I expect he's breaking up."

With which very just conclusion the speaker went on into the canteen, and John Broom ran to the hospital.



Stripped of his picturesque trappings, and with no plumes to shadow the hollows in his temples, M'Alister looked gaunt and feeble enough, as he lay in the little hospital bed, which barely held his long limbs. Such a wreck of giant powers of body, and noble qualities of mind as the drink-shops are preparing for the hospitals every day!



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Since the quickly-reached medical decision that he was in a rapid decline, and that nothing could be done for him, M'Alister had been left a good deal alone. His intellect (and it was no fool's intellect,) was quite clear, and if the long hours by himself, in which he reckoned with his own soul, had hastened the death-damps on his brow, they had also written there an expression which was new to John Broom. It was not the old sour look, it was a kind of noble gravity.

His light-blue eyes brightened as the boy came in, and he held out his hand, and John Broom took it with both his, saying.

"I never heard till this minute, M'Alister. Eh, I do hope you'll be better soon."

"The Lord being merciful to me," said the Highlander. "But this world's nearly past, laddie, and I was fain to see ye again. Dinna greet, man, for I've important business wi' ye, and I should wish your attention. Firstly, I'm aboot to hand ower to ye the key of your box. Tak it, and put it in a pocket that's no got a hole in it, if you're worth one. Secondly, there's a bit bag I made mysel', and it's got a trifle o' money in it that I'm giving and bequeathing to ye, under certain conditions, namely, that ye shall spend the contents of the box according to my last wishes and instructions, with the ultimate end of your ain benefit, ye'll understand."

A fit of coughing here broke M'Alister's discourse; but, after drinking from a cup beside him, he put aside John Broom's remonstrances with a dignified movement of his hand, and continued,—

"When a body comes of decent folks, he won't just care, maybe, to have their names brought up in a barrack-room. Ye never heard me say ought of my father or my mither?"

"Never, M'Alister."

"I'd a good hame," said the Highlander, with a decent pride in his tone. "It was a strict hame—I've no cause now, to deceive mysel', and I'm thinking it was a wee bit ower strict—but it was a good hame. I left it, man—I ran away."

The glittering blue eyes turned sharply on the lad, and he went on:—

"A body doesna care to turn his byeganes oot for every fool to pick at. Did I ever speer about your past life, and whar ye came from?"

"Never, M'Alister."

"But that's no to say that, if I knew manners, I didna obsairve. And there's been things now and again, John Broom, that's gar'd me think that ye've had what I had, and done as I did. Did ye rin awa', laddie?"



John Broom nodded his black head, but tears choked his voice.

“Man!” said the Highlander, “ane word’s as gude’s a thousand. Gang back! Gang hame! There’s the bit siller here that’s to tak ye, and the love yonder that’s waiting ye. Listen to a dying man, laddie, and gang hame!”

“I doubt if they’d have me,” sobbed John Broom, “I gave ’em a deal of trouble, M’Alister.”

“And d’ye think, lad, that that thought has na’ cursed *me*, and keepit me from them that loved me? Aye, lad, and till this week I never overcame it.”



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“Weel may I want to save ye, bairn,” added the Highlander tenderly, “for it was the thocht of a’ ye riskit for the like of me at the three roads that made me consider wi’ mysel’ that I’ve aiblins been turning my back a’ my wilfu’ life on love that’s bigger than a man’s deservings. It’s near done now, and it’ll never lie in my poor power so much as rightly to thank ye. It’s strange that a man should set store by a good name that he doesna deserve; but if any blessings of mine could bring ye good, they’re yours, that saved an old soldier’s honour, and let him die respectit in his regiment.”

“Oh, M’Alister, let me fetch one of the chaplains to write a letter to fetch your father,” cried John Broom.

“The minister’s been here this morning,” said the Highlander, “and I’ve tell’t him mair than I’ve tell’t you. And he’s jest directed me to put my sinful trust in the Father of us a’. I’ve sinned heaviest against *Him*, laddie, but His love is stronger than the lave.”

John Broom remained by his friend, whose painful fits of coughing, and of gasping for breath, were varied by intervals of seeming stupor. When a candle had been brought in and placed near the bed, the Highlander roused himself and asked,—

“Is there a Bible on yon table? Could ye read a bit to me, laddie?”

There is little need to dwell on the bitterness of heart with which John Broom confessed,
—

“I can’t read big words, M’Alister.”

“Did ye never go to school?” said the Scotchman.

“I didn’t learn,” said the poor boy; “I played.”

“Aye, aye. Weel, ye’ll learn, when ye gang hame,” said the Highlander, in gentle tones.

“I’ll never get home,” said John Broom, passionately. “I’ll never forgive myself. I’ll never get over it, that I couldn’t read to ye when ye wanted me, M’Alister.”

“Gently, gently,” said the Scotchman. “Dinna daunt yoursel’ owermuch wi’ the past, laddie. And for me—I’m not that presoomtious to think I can square up a misspent life as a man might compound wi’s creditors. ’Gin HE forgi’es me, He’ll forgi’e; but it’s not a prayer up or a chapter down that’ll stan’ between me and the Almighty. So dinna fret yoursel’, but let me think while I may.”

And so, far into the night, the Highlander lay silent, and John Broom watched by him.

It was just midnight when he partly raised himself, and cried,—



“Whisht, laddie! do ye hear the pipes?”

The dying ears must have been quick, for John Broom heard nothing; but in a few moments he heard the bagpipes from the officers’ mess, where they were keeping Hogmenay. They were playing the old year out with “Auld lang syne,” and the Highlander beat the tune out with his hand, and his eyes gleamed out of his rugged face in the dim light, as cairngorms glitter in dark tartan.

There was a pause after the first verse, and he restless, and turning doubtfully to where John Broom sat, as if his sight were failing, he said, “Ye’ll mind your promise, ye’ll gang hame?” And after awhile he repeated the last word.



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"Hame!"

But as he spoke there settled over his face a smile so tender and so full of happiness, that John Broom held his breath as he watched him. As the light of sunrise creeps over the face of some rugged rock, it crept from chin to brow, and the pale blue eyes shone tranquil, like water that reflects heaven.

And when it had passed it left them still open, but gems that had lost their ray.

LUCK GOES.—AND COMES AGAIN.

The spirit does not always falter in its faith because the flesh is weary with hope deferred. When week after week, month after month, and year after year, went by and John Broom was not found, the disappointment seemed to "age" the little ladies, as Thomasina phrased it. But yet they said to the parson, "We do not regret it."

"God forbid that you should regret it," said he.

And even the lawyer (whose heart was kinder than his tongue) abstained from taunting them with his prophecies, and said, "The force of habits of early education is a power as well as that of inherent tendencies. It is only for your sake that I regret a too romantic benevolence." And Miss Betty and Miss Kitty tried to put the matter quite away. But John Broom was very closely bound up with the life of many years past. Thomasina mourned him as if he had been her son, and Thomasina being an old and valuable servant, it is needless to say that when she was miserable no one in the house was permitted to be quite at ease.

As to Pretty Cocky, he lived, but Miss Kitty fancied that he grew less pretty and drooped upon his polished perch.

There were times when the parson felt almost conscience-stricken because he had encouraged the adoption of John Broom. Disappointments fall heavily upon elderly people. They may submit better than the young, but they do not so easily revive. The little old ladies looked greyer and more nervous, and the little old house looked greyer and gloomier than of old.

Indeed there were other causes of anxiety. Times were changing, prices were rising, and the farm did not thrive. The lawyer said that the farm-bailiff neglected his duties, and that the cowherd did nothing but drink; but Miss Betty trembled, and said they could not part with old servants.

The farm-bailiff had his own trouble, but he kept it to himself. No one knew how severely he had beaten John Broom the day before he ran away, but he remembered it himself with painful clearness. Harsh men are apt to have consciences, and his was far



from easy about the lad who had been entrusted to his care. He could not help thinking of it when the day's work was over, and he had to keep filling up his evening whiskey-glass again and again to drown disagreeable thoughts.

The whiskey answered this purpose, but it made him late in the morning: it complicated business on market days, not to the benefit of the farm, and it put him at a disadvantage in dealing with the drunken cowherd.



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The cowherd was completely upset by John Broom's mysterious disappearance, and he comforted himself as the farm-bailiff did, but to a larger extent. And Thomasina winked at many irregularities in consideration of the groans of sympathy with which he responded to her tears as they sat round the hearth where John Broom no longer lay.

At the time that he vanished from Lingborough the gossips of the country side said, This comes of making pets of tramps' brats, when honest folk's sons may toil and moil without notice. But when it was proved that the tramp-boy had stolen nothing, when all search for him was vain, and when prosperity faded from the place season by season and year by year, there were old folk who whispered that the gaudily-clothed child Miss Betty had found under the broom-bush had something more than common in him, and that whoever and whatever had offended the eerie creature, he had taken the luck of Lingborough with him when he went away.

It was early summer. The broom was shining in the hedges with uncommon wealth of golden blossoms. "The lanes looked for all the world as they did the year that poor child was found," said Thomasina, wiping her eyes. Annie the lass sobbed hysterically, and the cowherd found himself so low in spirits that after gazing dismally at the cowstalls, which had not been cleaned for days past, he betook himself to the ale-house to refresh his energies for this and other arrears of work.

On returning to the farm, however, he found his hands still feeble, and he took a drop or two more to steady them, after which it occurred to him that certain new potatoes which he had had orders to dig were yet in the ground. The wood was not chopped for the next day's use, and he wondered what had become of a fork he had had in the morning and had laid down somewhere.

So he seated himself on some straw in the corner to think about it all, and whilst he was thinking he fell fast asleep.

By his own account many remarkable things had befallen him in the course of his life, including that meeting with a Black Something to which allusion has been made, but nothing so strange as what happened to him that night.

When he awoke in the morning and sat up on the straw, and looked around him, the stable was freshly cleaned, the litter in the stalls was shaken and turned, and near the door was an old barrel of newly dug potatoes, and the fork stood by it. And when he ran to the wood house there lay the wood neatly chopped and piled to take away.

He kept his own counsel that day and took credit for the work, but when on the morrow the farm-bailiff was at a loss to know who had thinned the turnips that were left to do in the upper field, and Annie the lass found the kitchen cloths she had left overnight to soak, rubbed through and rinsed, and laid to dry, the cowherd told his tale to

Thomasina, and begged for a bowl of porridge and cream to set in the barn, as one might set a mouse-trap baited with cheese.



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“For,” said he, “the luck of Lingborough’s come back, missis. *It’s Lob Lie-by-the-fire*”

LOB LIE-BY-THE-FIRE.

“It’s Lob Lie-by-the-fire!”

So Thomasina whispered exultingly, and Annie the lass timidly. Thomasina cautioned the cowherd to hold his tongue, and she said nothing to the little ladies on the subject. She felt certain that they would tell the parson, and he might not approve. The farm-bailiff knew of a farm on the Scotch side of the Border where a brownie had been driven away by the minister preaching his last Sunday’s sermon over again at him, and as Thomasina said, “There’d been little enough luck at Lingborough lately, that they should wish to scare it away when it came.”

And yet the news leaked out gently, and was soon known all through the neighborhood—as a secret.

“The luck of Lingborough’s come back. Lob’s lying by the fire!”

He could be heard at his work any night, and several people had seen him, though this vexed Thomasina, who knew well that the good people do not like to be watched at their labours.

The cowherd had not been able to resist peeping down through chinks in the floor of the loft above the barn, where he slept, and one night he had seen Lob fetching straw for the cowhouse. “A great rough, black fellow,” said he, and he certainly grew bigger and rougher and blacker every time the cowherd told the tale.

The Lubber-fiend appeared next to a boy who was loitering at a late hour somewhere near the little ladies’ kitchen-garden, and whom he pursued and pelted with mud till the lad nearly lost his wits with terror. (It was the same boy who was put in the lock-up in the autumn for stealing Farmer Mangel’s Siberian crabs.)

For this trick, however, the rough elf atoned by leaving three pecks of newly-gathered fruit in the kitchen the following morning. Never had there been such a preserving season at Lingborough within the memory of Thomasina.

The truth is, hobgoblins, from Puck to Will-o’-the-wisp, are apt to play practical jokes and knock people about whom they meet after sunset. A dozen tales of such were rife, and folks were more amused than amazed by Lob Lie-by-the-fire’s next prank.

There was an aged pauper who lived on the charity of the little ladies, and whom it was Miss Betty’s practice to employ to do light weeding in the fields for heavy wages. This venerable person was toddling to his home in the gloaming with a barrow load of Miss



Betty's new potatoes, dexterously hidden by an upper sprinkling of groundsel and hemlock, when the Lubber-fiend sprang out from behind an elder-bush, ran at the old man with his black head, and knocked him, heels uppermost, into the ditch. The wheelbarrow was afterwards found in Miss Betty's farmyard, quite empty.

And when the cowherd (who had his own opinion of the aged pauper, and it was a very poor one) went that evening to drink Lob Lie-by-the-fire's health from a bottle he kept in the harness room window, he was nearly choked with the contents, which had turned into salt and water, as fairy jewels turn to withered leaves.



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But luck had come to Lingborough. There had not been such crops for twice seven years past.

The lay-away hens' eggs were brought regularly to the kitchen.

The ducklings were not eaten by rats.

No fowls were stolen.

The tub of pig-meal lasted three times as long as usual.

The cart-wheels and gate-hinges were oiled by unseen fingers.

The mushrooms in the croft gathered themselves and down on a dish in the larder.

It is by small savings that a farm thrives, and Miss Betty's farm throve.

Everybody worked with more alacrity. Annie the lass said the butter came in a way that made it a pleasure to churn.

The neighbours knew even more than those on the spot. They said—That since Lob came back to Lingborough the hens laid eggs as large as turkeys' eggs, and the turkeys' eggs were—oh, you wouldn't believe the size!

That the cows gave nothing but cream, and that Thomasina skimmed butter off it as less lucky folk skim cream from milk.

That her cheeses were as rich as butter.

That she sold all she made, for Lob took the fairy butter from the old trees in the avenue, and made it up into pats for Miss Betty's table.

That if you bought Lingborough turnips, you might feed your cows on them all the winter and the milk would be as sweet as new-mown hay.

That horses foddered on Lingborough hay would have thrice the strength of others, and that sheep who cropped Lingborough pastures would grow three times as fat.

That for as good a watchdog as it was, the sheep dog never barked at Lob, a plain proof that he was more than human.

That for all its good luck it was not safe to loiter near the place after dark, if you wished to keep your senses. And if you took so much as a fallen apple belonging to Miss Betty, you might look out for palsy or St. Vitus' dance, or be carried off bodily to the underground folk.



Finally, that it was well all the cows gave double, for that Lob Lie-by-the-fire drank two gallons of the best cream every day, with curds, porridge, and other dainties to match. But what did that matter, when he had been overheard to swear that luck should not leave Lingborough till Miss Betty owned half the country side?

MISS BETTY IS SURPRISED.

Miss Betty and Miss Kitty having accepted a polite invitation from Mrs. General Dunmaw, went down to tea with that lady one fine evening in this eventful summer.

Death had made a gap or two in the familiar circle during the last fourteen years, but otherwise it was quite the same, except that the lawyer was married and not quite so sarcastic, and that Mrs. Brown Jasey had brought a young niece with her dressed in the latest fashion, which looked quite as odd as new fashions are wont to do, and with a *coiffure* "enough to frighten the French away," as her aunt told her.



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It was while this young lady was getting more noise out of Mrs. Dunmaw's red silk and rosewood piano than had been shaken out of it during the last thirty years, that the lawyer brought his cup of coffee to Miss Betty's side, and said, suavely, "I here wonderful accounts of Lingborough, dear Miss Betty."

"I am thankful to say, sir, that the farm is doing well this year. I am very thankful, for the past few years have been unfavourable, and we had begun to face the fact that it might be necessary to sell the old place. And I will not deny, sir, that it would have gone far to break my heart, to say nothing of my sister Kitty's."

"Oh, we shouldn't have let it come to that," said the lawyer, "I could have raised a loan —"

"Sir," said Miss Betty with dignity, "if we have our own pride, I hope it's an honest one. Lingborough will have passed out of our family when it's kept up on borrowed money."

"I *could* live in lodgings," added Miss Betty, firmly, "little as I've been accustomed to it, but *not in debt*."

"Well, well, my dear madam, we needn't talk about it now. But I'm dying of curiosity as to the mainstay of all this good luck."

"The turnips—" began Miss Betty.

"Bless my soul, Miss Betty!" cried the lawyer, "I'm not talking of turnips. I'm talking of Lob Lie-by-the-fire, as all the country side is for that matter."

"The country people have plenty of tales of him," said Miss Betty, with some pride in the family goblin. "He used to haunt the old barns, they say, in my great-grandfather's time."

"And now you've got him back again," said the lawyer.

"Not that I know of," said Miss Betty.

On which the lawyer poured into her astonished ear all the latest news on the subject, and if it had lost nothing before reaching his house in the town, it rather gained in marvels as he repeated it to Miss Betty.

No wonder that the little lady was anxious to get home to question Thomasina, and that somewhat before the usual hour she said,—

"Sister Kitty, if it's not too soon for the servant—"



And the parson, threading his way to where Mrs. Dunmaw's china crape shawl (dyed crimson) shone in the bow window, said, "The clergy should keep respectable hours, madam; especially when they are as old as I am. Will you allow me to thank you for a very pleasant evening, and to say good night?"

THE PARSON AND THE LUBBER-FIEND.

"Do you think there'd be any harm in leaving it alone, sister Betty?" said Miss Kitty, tremulously.

They had reached Lingborough, and the parson had come in with them, by Miss Betty's request, and Thomasina had been duly examined.

"Eh, Miss Betty, why should ye chase away good luck with the minister?" cried she.

"Sister Kitty! Thomasina!" said Miss Betty. "I would not accept good luck from a doubtful quarter to save Lingborough. But if It can face this excellent clergyman, the Being who haunted my great-grandfather's farm is still welcome to the old barns, and you, Thomasina, need not grudge It cream or curds."



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“You’re quite right, sister Betty,” said Miss Kitty. “You always are; but oh dear, oh dear!”—

“Thomasina tells me,” said Miss Betty, turning to the parson, “that on chilly evenings it sometimes comes and lies by the kitchen fire after they have gone to bed, and I can distinctly remember my grandmother mentioning the same thing. Thomasina has of late left the kitchen door on the latch for its convenience, and as they had to sit up late for us, she and Annie have taken their work into the still-room to leave the kitchen free for Lob Lie-by-the-fire. They have not looked into the kitchen this evening, as such beings do not like to be watched. But they fancy that they heard it come in. I trust, sir, that neither in myself nor my sister Kitty does timidity exceed a proper feminine sensibility, where duty is concerned. If you will be good enough to precede us, we will go to meet the old friend of my great-grandfather’s fortunes, and we leave it entirely to your valuable discretion to pursue what course you think proper on the occasion.”

“Is this the door?” said the parson, cheerfully, after knocking his head against black beams and just saving his legs down shallow and unexpected steps on his way to the kitchen—beams so unfelt and steps so familiar to the women that it had never struck them that the long passage was not the most straightforward walk a man could take—“I think you said it generally lies on the hearth?”

The happy thought struck Thomasina that the parson might be frightened out of his unlucky interference.

“Aye, aye, sir,” said she from behind. “We’ve heard him rolling by the fire, and growling like thunder to himself. They say he’s an awful size, too, with the strength of four men, and a long tail, and eyes like coals of fire.”

But Thomasina spoke in vain, for the parson opened the door, and as they pressed in, the moonlight streaming through the latticed window showed Lob lying by the fire.

“There’s his tail! Ay—k!” screeched Annie the lass, and away she went, without drawing breath to the top garret, where she locked and bolted herself in, and sat her bandbox flat, and screamed for help.

But it was the plummy tail of the sheep dog, who was lying there with the Lubber-fiend. And Lob was asleep, with his arms around the sheep dog’s neck, and the sheep dog’s head lay on his breast, and his own head touched the dog’s.

And it was a smaller head than the parson had been led to expect, and it had thick black hair.



As the parson bent over the hearth, Thomasina took Miss Kitty round the waist, and Miss Betty clutched her black velvet bag till the steel beads ran into her hands, and they were quite prepared for an explosion, and sulphur, and blue lights, and thunder.

And then the parson's deep round voice broke the silence, saying,—

“Is that you, lad? GOD bless you, John Broom. You're welcome home!”



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THE END

Some things—such as gossip—gain in the telling, but there are others before which words fail, though each heart knows its own power of sympathy. And such was the joy of the little ladies and of Thomasina at John Broom's return.

The sheep dog had had his satisfaction out long ago, and had kept it to himself, but how Pretty Cocky crowed, and chuckled, and danced, and bowed his crest, and covered his face with his amber wings, and kicked his seed-pot over, and spilled his water-pot on to the Derbyshire marble chess-table, and screamed till the room rang again, and went on screaming, with Miss Kitty's pocket-handkerchief over his head to keep him quiet, my poor pen can but imperfectly describe.

The desire to atone for the past which had led John Broom to act the part of one of those Good-Fellows who have, we must fear, finally deserted us, will be easily understood. And to a nature of his type, the earning of some self-respect, and of a character before others, was perhaps a necessary prelude to future well-doing.

He did do well. He became a good scholar, as farmers were then. He spent as much of his passionate energies on the farm as the farm would absorb, and he restrained the rest. It is not cockatoos only who have sometimes to live and be happy in this unfinished life with one wing clipped.

In fine weather, when the perch was put into the garden, Miss Betty was sometimes startled by stumbling on John Broom in the dusk, sitting on his heels, the unfastened chain in his hand, with his black head lovingly laid against Cock's white and yellow poll, talking in a low voice, and apparently with the sympathy of his companion; and as Miss Betty justly feared, of that "other side of the world," which they both knew, and which both at times had cravings to revisit.

Even after the sobering influences of middle age had touched him, and a wife and children bound him with the quiet ties of home, he had (at long intervals) his "restless times," when his good "misses" would bring out a little store laid by in one of the children's socks, and would bid him. "Be off, and get a breath of the sea-air," but on condition that the sock went with him as his purse. John Broom always looked ashamed to go, but he came back the better, and his wife was quite easy in his absence with that confidence in her knowledge of the "master," which is so mysterious to the unmarried, and which Miss Betty looked upon as "want of feeling" to the end. She always dreaded that he would not return, and a little ruse which she adopted of giving him money to make bargains for foreign articles of *vertu* with sailors, is responsible for many of the choicest ornaments in the Lingborough parlour.



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“The sock’ll bring him home,” said Mrs. Broom, and home he came, and never could say what he had been doing. Nor was the account given by Thomasina’s cousin, who was a tide-waiter down yonder, particularly satisfying to the women’s curiosity. He said that John Broom was always about; that he went aboard of all the craft in the bay, and asked whence they came and whither they were bound. That being once taunted to do it, he went up the rigging of a big vessel like a cat, and came down it looking like a fool. That as a rule, he gossiped and shared his tobacco with sailors and fishermen, and brought out the sock much oftener than was prudent for the benefit of the ragged boys who haunt the quay.

He had two other weaknesses, which a faithful biographer must chronicle.

A regiment on the march would draw him from the plough-tail itself, and “With daddy to see the pretty soldiers” was held to excuse any of Mrs. Broom’s children from household duties.

The other shall be described in the graphic language of that acute observer the farm-bailiff.

“If there cam’ an Irish beggar, wi’ a stripy cloot him and a bellows under ‘s arm, and ca’d himsel’ a Hielander, the lad wad gi’e him his silly head off his shoulders.”

As to the farm-bailiff, perhaps no one felt more or said less than he did on John Broom’s return. But the tones of his voice had tender associations for the boy’s ears as he took off his speckled hat, and after contemplating the inside for some moments, put it on again, and said,—

“Aweel, lad, sae ye’ve cam’ hame?”

But he listened with quivering face when John Broom told the story of M’Alister, and when it was ended he rose and went out, and “took the pledge” against drink, and—kept it.

Moved by similar enthusiasm, the cowherd took the pledge also, and if he didn’t keep it, he certainly drank less, chiefly owing to the vigilant oversight of the farm-bailiff, who now exercised his natural severity almost exclusively in the denunciation of all liquors whatsoever, from the cowherd’s whiskey to Thomasina’s elder-flower wine.

The plain cousin left his money to the little old ladies, and Lingborough continued to flourish.

Partly perhaps because of this, it is doubtful if John Broom was ever looked upon by the rustics as quite “like other folk.”



The favourite version of his history is that he was Lob under the guise of a child; that he was driven away by new clothes; that he returned from unwillingness to see an old family go to ruin “which he had served for hundreds of years;” that the parson preached his last Sunday’s sermon at him; and that, having stood that test, he took his place among Christian people.

Whether a name invented off-hand, however plain and sensible, does not stick to a man as his father’s does, is a question. But John Broom was not often called by his.

With Scotch caution, the farm-bailiff seldom exceeded the safe title of “Man!” and the parson was apt to address him as “My dear boy” when he had certainly outgrown the designation.



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Miss Betty called him John Broom, but the people called him by the name he had earned.

And long after his black hair lay white and thick on his head, like snow on the old barn roof, and when his dark eyes were dim in an honoured old age, the village children would point him out to each other, crying, "There goes Lob Lie-by-the-fire, the Luck of Lingborough!"

[Illustration]

WILD JACK.

CHAPTER I.

A series of accidents had overtaken the Newbury mail from the hour that it started in the fine dewy morning, till the sun went down; and as the twilight deepened over the landscape it was still many miles from its destination.

The troubles began early in the day. One of the leaders cast a shoe, and had to be shod at the first village through which they passed. Farther on something went wrong with the harness, and later still a much more serious impediment to their progress arose—some accident happened to a wheel, so that the coach must needs go half-pace, in spite of the oaths of old Joe, the driver, whose boast it was that he had never reached Wancote later than midnight.

But this evening old Joe's boasts were doomed to fall to the ground, for the coach could only crawl along, and the night was closing in fast.

The guard was engaged in a somewhat mysterious occupation, an occupation which, though only partially visible from the interior of the coach, caused a faint shriek to issue therefrom.

"What is he doing? What is it?" cried a woman's voice.

"Nothing, madam; be easy, I entreat," was the answer from within. "There is nothing to alarm, but rather to reassure, in his actions—he prepares his pistols and looks to their priming. Zounds! one must be ready for all contingencies with ten miles of unfrequented road ahead of us."

The mail continued on its way, becoming slower and slower, as an ominous creaking of the injured wheel gave token that the pace must be reduced to a walk.



The curtain before the window was held back, and a gentleman from within addressed the guard.

“Will the wheel hold out, think you?” he said.

“It is impossible to assure your reverence that it will, and the night will be dark.”

The gentleman drew in his head with a little “Tut-tut” of consternation.

There were four occupants of the coach—two ladies and two gentlemen. Of the ladies one was young, perhaps nineteen, and one close upon forty. The younger was the parson’s daughter Elizabeth, otherwise Betty Ives. Her father, Mr. Ives, was bringing her home from Newbury, where she had spent the last six months with her aunt, Mrs. Primrose, seeing something of the gay world in the county town.

The father and daughter, who sat opposite to each other, bore a strong resemblance to each other. In the girl’s face the dark brows were more arched, the large blue eyes more tender, the firm mouth more sweet, and all tinted with the lilies and roses of a fresh country life, so beautifully blended on the peach-like cheeks that, even without her rare perfection of feature, the colouring alone would have made Betty beautiful.



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Parson Ives had been very handsome in his youth, and though worn by years (he was forty years older than his child), and by the grief of bereavement, he was yet famous for his good looks.

Betty wore a short dark green riding-habit and a broad felt hat. She was as much at home on horseback as on foot, and seldom in the mornings wore a less business-like costume.

The other two occupants of the coach were to ordinary eyes less interesting. Mistress Mary Jones was a faded woman, who had once been pretty, a spinster, a great friend of Betty's, and one of her father's parishioners. She was an excellent woman in her way, albeit somewhat given to terrors both real and fanciful.

Her opposite neighbor was a man past the prime of life, owner and breeder of large herds of cattle near Wancote, a man who, after attending the Newbury markets, often returned home by this very coach, and was believed to carry large sums of money in the flap-pockets of his many-caped riding-coat.

Mr. Barnes had a fixed mask-like countenance, his bushy eyebrows almost met in a wrinkle that told of thought and deep calculation. He was clean-shaven, and his chin was swathed in a huge neckcloth of white muslin; he wore his hat low on his brow.

"I like not to be out so late on the high road," said he very suddenly, so that both Mr. Ives and Mistress Mary Jones started, and Betty, whom nothing ever startled, turned her great blue eyes inquiringly on him.

"Why, sir?" she asked.

"Why, my good young lady, because the Newbury sales are just over, and it is well known that the stock reared on Belford home farm has sold well"

"Are the roads not safe then, sir?" asked Mr. Ives rather anxiously.

"I do not quite say that, for it is many a long day since the coach was attacked between Newbury and Wancote; but rumour has been busy."

"Ha!" cried Betty, sitting upright eagerly.

"It is said that Wild Jack Barnstaple has been heard of in the neighbourhood."

"Heaven help us!" shrieked Mary Jones.

"Be calm, I entreat you, my dear madam, and have pity on my unfortunate toes! Zounds! it is torture enough to be subject to periodical gout, without such an infliction as the stamp of a lady's fashionable heel on the tender place."



“But you say Wild Jack is in the neighbourhood! Oh Heaven! what will become of us!”

Betty’s blooming cheek had turned just a faint shade paler, but the rosy colour came rushing back, her eyes flashed.

Suddenly stooping forward she said in a low voice:

“Mr. Barnes, you may confide in me. Do you carry much money?”

He answered in a tone of assumed ease, “Paper to the value of nearly a thousand pounds.”

“Then look you, Mr. Barnes,” said Betty in her natural voice, “I have a proposal to make to you. Give the valuables you have to us—to Miss Mary Jones and to myself. Wild Jack, all say, is a gentleman—should he, by any unfortunate chance, be on the road to-night, he will not rob women. Your money will be safe.”



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“No, no, no, no!” cried Mary. “Betty, how can you propose anything so impossible, so unfeminine! Are not men our natural protectors?” and she threw a languishing glance at the cattle-breeder. “Shall we usurp their rights?”

“It is quite true; it is impossible,” said Barnes.

“You are foolish to throw away the chance,” said Betty calmly.

“I cannot see why you should not accept her offer,” said the parson restlessly; he was accustomed to yield to his daughter’s judgment in everything. “Betty is a bold girl, and she is generally in the right.”

“Come, yield the point, Mr. Barnes,” said Betty, with a light laugh, holding out her hand for the pocket-book.

“Remember I have no part or parcel in it,” cried Mary, shrinking farther and farther away. “I would not for the whole world! Why, Betty,” she whimpered, “they might even search you.”

“Wild Jack is a gentleman,” answered the girl; then with a sudden flash of scorn, “but even had I not such faith in his honourable dealing, I should know how to take care of myself. Give me the papers, Mr. Barnes.”

Very unwillingly, as if he despised himself for so doing, Barnes gave them into her hands. The notes were smoothed and laid flat, they occupied the smallest space possible.

Betty Ives placed the papers within the bosom of her tight-fitting riding-habit, and leant back as if she had done with the subject.

Mr. Ives looked with anxious eyes through the window.

The mail was passing along a wide fair unsheltered road, on each side spread away treeless tracts of country, flat and wide, over which the fresh cold wind blew listlessly. To the left the horizon was bounded by the wide expanse of the grassy Berkshire downs. They rose and fell, a vast undulating plain, covered with short fine herbage.

It was growing very dark; the parson drew in his head, and thanked Heaven that the country was so fine and open, that he could even in the gathering gloom see far behind and before, and could perceive no suspicious object.

“We are all right here,” said Mr. Barnes, his voice becoming more and more dismal. “But a mile farther on, and we come to a small wood—the road dips down there suddenly, it is a first-rate place for an ambush.”



“Mercy! mercy!” cried Mary Jones in a voice half-strangled by the anguish of her terror.

“We have yet a mile of safety,” said Betty kindly “—a whole mile, Mary; and going at this pace, we need not prepare our terrors for another hour.”

“Heaven grant that the moon may be up,” cried Barnes.

“Sir,” said Betty slowly, “I imagine that you carry arms?”

“I am not unarmed,” he answered hastily, “I have pistols and a sword.”

“I should have them in readiness, as I myself intend to do,” said Betty, and she drew out a tiny silver-mounted pistol. “See, it is prepared for use. My father is a clergyman and must eschew firearms; Mary Jones is a woman—”



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“Aye, a true woman, a frail woman,” whined the poor lady.

“But,” continued Betty, “the guard is armed, so are we; we have still a mile to go. Ha!” her voice ended abruptly. There was a crashing sound, a shot, a shout, a confused sense as if the whole coach were falling to the ground. The door was torn open. Before Betty could even raise the deadly little weapon she carried, it was seized from her hand—the whole party were dragged out of the carriage—they found themselves surrounded by armed men. There was a violent struggle, fighting and disorder, loud oaths from the coachman, appalling shrieks from Mary Jones. Some one opened a lantern and allowed its red glare to fall on the scared prisoners and on the black masks of their captors.

The man who was evidently the leader of the party was holding Betty's two hands in one of his in a grasp which she imagined to be gentle until she attempted to release them, when she discovered that she might as easily have broken bands of steel.

“Here, give me a rope, we must bind our prisoners,” said this man suddenly. “This fair lady had all but fired one shot too many for Wild Jack to-night!”

There was a laugh, and with dexterity, evidently gained from experience, the prisoners were rapidly bound.

“I am grieved to incommode you thus, madam,” said the leader, bowing low to Betty. “Our business is with that gentleman,” with a slight motion of his hand towards the hapless Mr. Barnes. Betty bowed slightly. The light fell full on her tall figure, on her noble head slightly raised and thrown back, the nostrils dilated, the colour glowing richly in the soft cheek. Wild Jack, looking at her, felt a glow of enthusiasm which betrayed itself in his voice.

“You have nothing to fear, madam,” he said.

“I? I fear nothing,” said the girl calmly—“Wild Jack is a gentleman.”

The highwayman made a rapid sign to his comrades, who proceeded to throw themselves on to Samuel Barnes, and begin to search him from head to foot.

A sudden fear flashed into Betty's mind. How if Wild Jack were unable to restrain his companions, infuriated as they would be by their failure in discovering the expected treasure on the person of their victim?

Her cheeks paled, for one moment she turned her eyes full on the masked face of her captor. Masked as he was, her look thrilled him through and through.

“You are safe,” he repeated hurriedly.



Something in his voice seemed to give her confidence, for she stooped forward and said in a low voice, "Mr. Barnstaple, I trust to your honour,—the money is here."

And with a grand movement she laid her bound hands on her breast.

Wild Jack bowed low, but he said nothing, and in spite of the bold front she bore, Betty's heart beat fast.

The noise increased. Samuel Barnes, maddened with fright, struggled against his assailants furiously, but he was overmatched, a violent blow with the butt end of a pistol stunned him completely, and all resistance was over. Undaunted by their want of success the coach was then rifled, the mails ruthlessly thrown out into the road.



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One or two of the men, of whom there appeared to be five at least, now proposed to search the women.

There was a moment's pause, during which Wild Jack tightened his grasp on Betty's arm. Had she shown one symptom of fear, it is possible that his fierce profession would have triumphed over the infatuation of her beauty, but the look she turned upon him was so full of confidence, such absolute trust in his honour, that it prevailed.

He swore that he made no war upon women, and ordered back his disappointed followers, allowing them to divide the trumpery booty they had secured, of watches, trinkets, and the parson's purse, which was not empty.

They stood back. Wild Jack spoke to them in a low tone, looking, as he did so, several times up at the sky as if to see how the time went; then advancing he opened the door of the coach, and unbinding the hands of the two ladies, offered to hand them in.

Betty demurred. "We have duties here first," she said, pointing to the inanimate form of poor Samuel Barnes.

"It is well then," said Wild Jack, just touching the prostrate man with the toe of his boot. "We will leave you now, with many apologies, madam, for our intrusion."

The others were already in the saddle and almost out of sight.

Wild Jack, who was about to mount, withdrew his foot from the stirrup and approached Betty once more.

"Go, go!" she said. "This poor man bleeds; ah, why do you not go?"

"I am gone," he answered. "But first, fair lady, in consideration of the booty I have resigned I demand a reward."

"What can I give you?"

He pointed to her hand, on one finger of which was a small gold ring in the form of a serpent with tiny ruby eyes.

"Give me that," he said somewhat imperiously.

"You are welcome," she said haughtily, and she drew the ring from her finger. "I would give a trinket of more value," she cried, stamping her little foot, "to be freed from your company now!"

The words stung him.



“You will remember those words, madam,” he said, “some day—when this ring returns to your keeping.”

He shut the lantern, which during all this time had thrown its yellow light on the strange scene, mounted his horse and disappeared. The horse was snow white, and it passed by like a white gleam in the darkness.

It was pitch dark now, and the horror of their situation was increased by the moans which Mr. Barnes began to utter as consciousness slowly returned.

It was a relief to all when the familiar sound of flint and steel smote the ear, and the coachman awkwardly, with his bound hands, attempted to light the lamps of the coach. Betty’s first business was to unfasten the ropes which bound the men hand and foot, and by degrees they were able to take in their exact position.

One of the leaders had been shot dead, the traces had been cut, but the frightened horses had not strayed out of reach.



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Mary Jones was in a dead faint, and, in the absence of all restoratives, seemed likely to remain so.

Mr. Barnes, his head carefully bound up by Betty and her father, was at last able to rise to his feet and take his place in the carriage.

The dawn was already breaking, and a white light stealing over the murky sky, before the mail could once more get under weigh and move heavily forwards.

Far and wide the downs stretched, silent and deserted; a bitter wind swept over them and stirred the mane of the dead horse, who lay a ghastly spectacle, his head thrown back, in a pool of his own blood. From afar, from whence nor eye nor tongue could tell, came a foul raven croaking.

CHAPTER II.

The village of Hendred, of which Mr. Ives was the parson, lay about two miles beyond Wancote, in a low valley nestling under a great wave of the downs. Behind the village a chalk cliff rose white and dazzling, and the warm red brick of the houses, the gleaming chalk, the bright tender green of the herbage, formed one of those sunny pictures of which Berkshire is full.

In the centre of the village rose the little church, with its square grey tower, over which grew a magnificent creeper with crimson leaves glowing with a wondrous richness of colour.

A stone's throw back from the road, in a high-walled garden, stood the parsonage. The garden was rich with orchard trees and wall fruit, and boasted in particular one golden plum that was the parson's boast and pride. He had imported rich soil from the valleys, and in each corner of the garden gathered little hills of leaf-mould. Mr. Ives was a notable gardener.

Those who would see Betty Ives at her best should see her at home—at least, so said young Mr. Robins, the rich yeoman's son, who sighed in vain for her good graces. He was a domestic man, much given to superintending himself, duties which were looked upon as women's gear—"A womanish man," said the women.

On the other hand young Thornton, eldest son of Squire Thornton of Thornton Beeches, in the neighbourhood of Wancote, gave out that to see Mistress Betty at her best, was to see her in the hunting-field, for she rode like a bird, and was bright and ready as a pike-staff! There was a confusion of metaphor, but words always failed the young fellow when he spoke of the lady who had already three times refused to be his wife.



Then Dr. Glebe, the good doctor of Wancote, in a grey bag-wig and hunting-boots, would take a whole handful of snuff, while he swore that Mistress Betty was only at her best by a sick-bed.

The parson laughed, and exclaimed with a tear in his eye that such a woman as his daughter was always at her best in whatever she put her hand to do; and the old groom Isaac assented with a chuckle, vowing that his young lady was good all round.

The autumn was beginning, and the crimson creepers on church and wall were at the height of their glow. Betty Ives was strolling in the parsonage garden gathering plums from the wall.



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The garden-door was on the latch, it needed but to raise it, and Mistress Mary Jones walked in. Betty went eagerly forward to meet her with out-stretched hands. No welcome could be more cordial than that which Betty Ives gave to her friends.

“I am so glad to see you, Mary? and are you well? Have you lost your headache?”

Miss Mary sank into a garden-seat and sighed, still retaining the hand of her friend.

“I am better, sweet Bet,” she said; “but my nerves will not recover the shock for years! No, no! do not shake your head and smile; if you had the crawlings up the back that I experience, and the creepings down the spine, and the shaking of knees, the twittering of the lips, and quivering of the eyelids—”

“Enough, enough!” cried Betty. “Thank Heaven, I am not tormented thus! My dear Mary, how can you survive such a multitude of ailments?”

“I have survived worse!” she answered, shuddering. “I survived the shock itself.”

“Were you very much frightened?” asked Betty in a tone of interest.

“Frightened! I was terrified. I have not nerve like yours. The dark, the shot! the dark faces, the loud voices, the ... ah!”

Seeing Mary’s chest beginning to heave, Betty thought it high time to change the subject. “We will not recall it,” she said hastily. “Let us think on more agreeable topics. My father rode into Wancote this morning, to stroll about the marketplace and hear the news.”

“And why did you not go?”

“Because,” answered Betty, “I have been making preserves the livelong day. Up at six this morning, for Dame Martha told me that, owing to my putting it off so long, the fruit was beginning to rot, so there was no time to lose.”

“I leave preserving to my woman,” said Mary. “The hanging over the fire is ruin to the finest skin.”

“Yes, my face is scorched and heated,” answered Betty, turning a cheek like a peach to her friend. “But after all, to so weather-beaten a maid as myself, up and out in all seasons, a scorched cheek, more or less, signifies not; and Dame Martha works hard.”

“And had your father any news from Wancote?”

“Yes, news indeed—Belton has been taken!”



“Taken?”

“Hired or purchased by a gentleman of the name of Johnstone, whose arrival is expected hourly.”

“This is news indeed! None but a rich man could have paid the price asked.”

“His horses have arrived,” went on Betty. “Only four of them as yet, but each one of the four of surpassing beauty. One of them, Mr. Barnes told my father, looked worth a king’s ransom.”

“May the owner be worthy of his cattle,” said Mary Jones. “And were there no coach-horses, no carriages? No symptoms of a lady to dispense the hospitalities of Belton?”

“Mr. Johnstone is said to be unmarried,” answered Betty gravely. “I am sorry for it, a new neighbour would have been an agreeable addition to our society.”



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There was a click of the garden-gate, then a smart rap, as if by the knob of a hunting-whip.

“Someone is at the gate,” said Miss Mary with curiosity.

“Yes,” answered Betty, “and I must needs answer it myself, for the bell is broken, as doubtless our visitor has discovered, and he may knock till doomsday ere the sound reach the ears of Dame Martha or Isaac, both of whom are engaged in quarrelling in the kitchen. So so! how impatient it is!”

For another succession of knocks fell on the panel.

“I entreat you, do not open the door yourself, Betty,” cried Mary in a tone of alarm. “Who knows who may be there?”

“Certainly not Wild Jack,” answered Betty smiling, and disengaging herself from her friend’s arm she went forward and opened the gate.

“Does Mr. Ives live here?” asked a loud, clear voice, which, however, suddenly changed in tone when the opening door disclosed the radiant vision of the parson’s lovely daughter.

A feathered hat was doffed, a gentleman sprang from his horse and, bowing low, asked if he had the honour of addressing one of the family of Mr. Ives.

“His only daughter, sir,” answered Betty courteously. “If you wish to see my father, I will beg you to come in and wait, as he will be in shortly,” Mary Jones advanced, her eyes took in at a glance the whole distinguished appearance of the visitor, from the fine cut of his suit of claret-coloured cloth, to the well-shaped boot with shining spurs, and she gave a little sign of approval.

Betty summoned old Isaac and bade him take charge of the horse, and then led the way into the garden.

“We are primitive folk here,” she said. “But I find most people prefer our garden-seats to entering the house.”

Mary was somewhat scandalised, she thought these easy out-door seats a breach of etiquette in themselves, but she could make no remonstrance beyond a little tweak at her friend’s sleeve.

Betty sat down and, inviting her visitor to do likewise, she said:



“In my character as mistress of the house, I would wish to introduce you, sir, to my friend Mistress Mary Jones, of Elm Cottage close by, but have not the honour of being acquainted actually with your name, albeit I have conjectured.”

“My name is John Johnstone, madam,” he replied. “I have but now become the possessor of Belton, near Wancote.”

“Our new neighbour,” cried Mary.

“Yes, I claim that honour,” continued Mr. Johnstone.

“We are vastly pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Mary, thinking with some pride that she could boast to her friends of already knowing the newcomer.

Mr. Johnstone acknowledged the compliment courteously, but he never took his eyes off his young hostess, who appeared in them a miracle of grace and beauty.

With the skill of a man of the world, he drew her into animated conversation, gathering from her information respecting the country round, the different meets of the hounds, the neighbours, the tradespeople, the horses. Time slipped away almost unperceived, and neither lady knew how it had sped, when Mr. Ives, mounted on his handsome bay cob, rode up to the door.



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Mr. Ives beheld with some surprise his daughter and her friend in full converse with a stranger.

The scene was worthy of a Watteau's brush—the sun just sinking behind the orchard trees gilding the edge of each leaf, shone on the dark red of John Johnstone's dress, warmed the sombre hue of fair Betty's lincoln green, and played on the blue and primrose of Mistress Mary's flower-like costume. It was a fair picture, and no eye could rest on a goodlier couple than the tall lithe young man, and the noble maiden.

"It was courteous of him to pay us one of the first, nay, *the* first of his neighbourly visits," said the good parson, exchanging his tie-wig for a comfortable flannel night-cap, when he was once more alone with his daughter.

"Next time he comes I will reward him with some of our golden plums," said Betty gaily as she fixed her white teeth in the tender skin of one that was lusciously ripe.

Mistress Mary to her maid described the newcomer thus:

"He is tall, Deborah, very tall; slight, but with shoulders of great breadth, and a square neck—one would say that his strength was herculean. His eyes are dark blue, his nose a trifle arched, brows thick and square, a sweet mouth—a very sweet mouth—but wondrous stern all the same. But his manners, Deborah, and his curling dark hair, just slightly dashed with powder—his manners are perfect! his hair is divine! Heigh-ho, Deborah!"

CHAPTER III.

Up from the plains a steep road rose on the downs, a road so steep, so dazzling white that it looked like a white thread hanging on a green surface.

Betty Ives rode slowly up the hill, leaning slightly forward to ease her horse as she did so. Though November had set in, the sun was still powerful, and both horse and rider were a little oppressed by its heat.

Some very close observer might have seen a change in the girl's face—a very slight change, something that deepened the expression of the lovely eyes, something that played softly like the shadow of a great happiness on the mobile lips. She was thinking, thinking deeply as she rode.

Folks said that Betty Ives was very hard to win. Ruth Thornton, the squire's buxom daughter, would have given years of her life for one of the passionate appeals young Robins had made so often to Betty in vain. Lady Rachel Tremame had almost broken her heart when Betty, at the Newbury ball, had so attracted Sir Harry Clare that he had



no eyes for other than her. Yet amid her many adorers, fair Betty, with the carelessness of inexperience, passed unpitying and fancy free.

But now times were changed: fair Betty's heart was given away.

Yet John Johnstone had not found his courtship easy, it was long before he made any way. He wooed proudly, and she took his subjection as due to herself, and was not grateful for that which she deemed her right. But the young man loved her the better for this, for he was one of those who value most that which is hardest to gain.



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Betty with her rein on her horse's neck was thinking, wondering how it was that John Johnstone was always present to her mind, that her eyes sought him in the hunting-field, that those evenings were dull and lonely on which he did not come in for a chat with her father before supper-time, and all the world fell flat, stale and unprofitable, during various short absences of his, when he would disappear for three days together and none knew whither he went.

Betty's horse had mounted the white hill at last, and now scoured swiftly away over the springy turf on the wide downs.

For miles she passed no human habitation, then Betty reached her destination.

Low in a hollow dip of the green grass sea nestled a small cottage. No tree or bush within miles, the unbroken winds tore round it, the snow often banked up against it; but the owner, one of Mr. Ives' pensioners, appeared to care little for wind or weather.

As Betty rode up, she sent her clear ringing voice before her:

"Rachel! Rachel Ray!"

Then paused suddenly, for fastened by the bridle to a low post close to the cottage door, she perceived a fine bay horse that she knew well. She drew rein, swiftly debating within herself whether she should go on, or draw back, then shaking back her proud little head she rode forward.

Betty feared nothing on earth; should she be scared by the odd feeling in her heart that made it beat so fast and loud? A thousand times no.

Before she had reached the cottage, the door opened, and a small troop of ragged children tumbled out to meet her, children with black elfin locks, and eyes gleaming like live coals, showing wild gipsy blood.

Betty leapt from her horse, and called the eldest boy to her side.

"Here, Reuben," she said, "I will give you a silver penny if you hold Conrad steadily, and like a good boy, while I visit your grandmother." She opened the door with a slight knock and went in. An odd sight met her eyes.

By the table stood the vigorous figure of old Rachel Ray, handsome yet, with the dark gipsy characteristics of her grandchildren—before her the tall fine figure of John Johnstone in full hunting scarlet, just stooping in the act of giving her a kiss.

The old woman started, and pushed him aside when she saw Betty come in. She advanced to meet her visitor, who stood during the space of a minute without advancing, so great was her astonishment.



“You are surprised to see an old woman kiss her nursling,” cried old Rachel. “But it would be odd if he did not, bless his brave heart!”

“Not surprised at his kissing you, Dame Rachel,” said Betty, a little less steadily than usual. “But I did not know that you were acquainted, I thought Mr. Johnstone was a stranger to this part of the world.”

The old woman turned her eyes on the young man, eyes brimming with burning tears, and with a look of entreaty in them.



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John Johnstone gave a little impatient stamp of the foot.

It seemed to Betty watching them, that thus he gave a mute answer to some mute question or entreaty made.

“Sit down, sit down, my pretty lady,” said Rachel drawing forward and dusting a chair. “You are welcome as flowers in May, or as the first swallow that heralds the spring. Are you well, my bonnie dear? and the good gentleman your father?”

“We are all well, dame. I am ashamed not to have been to see you for so long, but I am glad that you have had other visitors,” and she glanced at Mr. Johnstone.

“We are old friends,” he said with a smile of rare sweetness. “One of my most faithful servants and friends was my foster-brother Harry Ray, Rachel’s eldest son.”

“Aye, aye, was!” cried the woman, her voice rising to a kind of wail. “We speak of Hal Ray in the past now.”

Johnstone bit his lip, and a bitter frown contracted his brow.

“Alas, is he dead, dame?” asked Betty tenderly.

“Aye, dear heart, dead, and his bones have no grave, and happen his spirit no rest.”

“This is terrible,” said Betty with a shiver.

Mr. Johnstone moved restlessly to the window, and busied himself with his sword-knot.

“I have often told you, good mother,” he said, and his voice had in it an odd mixture of grief and irritation, “that the less we dwell on these things the better. Mistress Betty,” he went on hurriedly, “Harry Ray when he left my service, joined his fortunes with Wild Jack Barnstaple. He had ill-luck, poor lad, he was taken and ... and hanged.”

His mother uttered a shuddering cry.

“And by the road he must hang,” she cried, “till the earth and the wild winds have done their worst, and never a one to scare the wild birds from the flesh of my boy!”

“Dear dame,” said Betty earnestly, “the soul recks little of its earthly tenement.”

“God rest his soul, he was a good fellow and brave,” said Johnstone earnestly.

“I also have seen Wild Jack,” said Betty, willing to turn the poor woman from her troubles.

“Seen him! seen Wild Jack?” cried she.



“Aye, seen him and been his prisoner; and say who will to the contrary, I have reason to maintain that he is a true gentleman.”

“Is it so?” said Mr. Johnstone, smiling. “A cut-throat, a robber, a highwayman, a true gentleman?”

Betty gave him an indignant glance. “I speak of him as I found him,” she said. “And we of the country have always known how to distinguish between common malefactors and the gentlemen of the road.”

“So, so!” answered Johnstone, still smiling. “And yet both end too often on Tyburn Hill.”

Betty turned pale and shivered. It seemed as if she gasped for breath; she turned her large eyes on her lover and said, “Ah, these matters are far too serious for so grim a jest.”



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But her eyes were caught and arrested by the look which met them; so long, so burning with passionate admiration and love, with a strange expression of exaltation, almost gratitude. Betty's heart beat fast. He had forced her to love him, and such maidens as Betty Ives when they give love at last, give life itself. Dame Rachel glanced from one to another, then she rose quickly, and from a dark corner of the room produced a pack of cards. "Come, fair lady and noble gentleman," she said, with a touch of the professional whine in her voice. "Will you hear your fortunes? Cross the old gipsy's hand with silver, my pretty dears, and you shall hear all the good things past, present, and future, that may fall to your lot."

"Will you try?" said John Johnstone, bending forward.

The rosy colour rushed into Betty's cheek, the light shone in her eyes.

"I will try," she said, half laughing.

"Then all that is good we will believe, and all that is bad will cast to the winds as false and untrue."

"Nothing can be bad in the future of faces like yours, dear hearts," said Rachel, rapidly shuffling the cards.

Some minutes passed, the gipsy busily and with growing discomfiture turning the cards, trying them in every way—the two were silent.

Betty leant her head on her hand, shading her eyes from view, full of shyness for the first time in her bold young life. John Johnstone gazed on her with his soul in his eyes, and yet with a strange impatient interest in the business that was going on.

Presently Rachel flung all the cards down with violence.

"I am losing the trick of the trade," she said, in a harsh, frightened voice. "I am getting afraid of the cards, and when you are afraid of them, they master you."

"Tut, tut!" said John kindly. "Do not blame yourself, good mother, if they show not all the gilded coaches and six, and the lovely bride and gay bridegroom you would fain have promised us."

"The combinations turn to evil—all evil. Pah! it is the old story. I was afraid of the cards, and they have mastered me."

"Was there no warning conveyed in these strange combinations, Dame?" asked Johnstone eagerly.

"I deal not in warnings," said Rachel hastily.



“Did I deal in warnings, the reading of the cards might prove useful to you both.”

“Come, come!” he said, “you speak in riddles. The warning. Is it the same for this gentle lady as for my rough self?”

“Aye, aye, for both—both.” She bent down, and laid a dark hand on the shoulder of each, and peering into one face after another, she muttered:

“Beware of Wild Jack Barnstaple!”

Both started. John Johnstone flushed angrily: he rose to his feet.

“We have had enough of this fooling,” he said. “The day is advancing, madam,” turning to Betty. “Will you vouchsafe me the extreme pleasure of being your escort home?”



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As Betty was about to answer, she was arrested by the sound of singing outside, in a voice so wild, loud, and sweet, it seemed the very embodiment of the music of Nature.

“Who is singing like that?” asked Betty. “How beautiful! and how marvellously sad.”

“It is Nora Ray, only our Nora, dear heart. Her voice is sweet as the lark, and she sings old songs she gathers in the villages round.”

“Hush, hush, listen!” cried Betty, and she stood with upraised hand listening.

The air was in the minor key, the voice of the singer thrilled to the very nerves, every word came distinctly to their ears.

“Aye, Margaret loved the fair gentleman,
Aye, well and well-a-day,
And the winter clouds gather wild and fast;
He loved, and he galloped away.

Aye, call him! call him over the lea,
Thou sad forsaken lass,
Never more he’ll come back to thee
Over the wild green grass.

The swallows return from over the sea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
But lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away.

Aye, call him! call him over the sea,
The winter is coming fast;
He waved his hat, he bowed full low
And smiled as he galloped past.

Aye, call him! call him over the lea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
Lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away.”

A strange shiver came over Betty Ives, a thrill such as she had never experienced before. She glanced at Dame Rachel. The old woman was nervously fingering the cards, and muttering to herself. Then her frightened eyes turned to her lover; he read some appeal in them.

He held out his hand, and caught hers and pressed it for one short second to his lips.



The door burst open, and the girl who had been singing came in; her black hair was all blown back, the great black eyes staring out of the small dark face. She drew her scanty cloak round her and laughed a shrill laugh.

“Will you have your fortunes told, my good gentleman? my pretty lady?” she cried. “Cross little Nora’s palm with a silver sixpence then.”

“No, no, we have had enough of that. Come, dear madam, we must be going,” said Johnstone, and he conducted Betty to the place where Reuben, faithful to his trust, held the rein of her horse.

“Do not be so long without coming to see me again, dear heart,” cried Rachel Ray, standing outside her door.

“No, no, I will come soon,” answered Betty. Johnstone placed her in the saddle.

“A good gallop over the downs will bring back the colour to your cheek,” he said softly. “You are so white and cold.”

“There is something ill-omened in all here,” said Betty with a slight shiver.

“Here, Nora,” cried Johnstone, flinging her a piece of gold. “This is to make up for the loss of that silver sixpence.”



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The girl laughed loud and shrilly. “Ah! ah!” she cried after them. “The good gentleman! the brave fellow! For this I would follow you! aye! follow you, my lad, from Belton to Tyburn Hill!”

CHAPTER IV.

“It is then true, my Betty? And I am to wish you joy?” cried Mary Jones, with both hands outstretched.

“It is true,” answered Betty, her lips parted in a smile of sunshiny happiness. “Congratulate me, Mary; yes, wish me joy, for there is no happier woman to-day between the Northern and Southern seas.”

“I am glad to see you so happy, dear child!” cried Mary affectionately, but there was something pinched and starved in her voice. Ah, pity for those who possess the capacity for love and yet must go hungry to their dying day!

This odd want is none the less bitter that it meets with scant sympathy in this hard world. In the breast of many an unsought woman lies a wealth of wasted treasure, treasure which no one has cared to seek, and yet what a treasure it might have been!

Mary Jones’s heart had grown somewhat starved, but it was the heart of a loving woman still, and when the bright sunshine of her young friend’s happiness shed its light on her soul, it awakened an echo of old dead days, and swelled it with sympathy.

“Sit down, sweet one,” she said, drawing Betty down on the sofa beside her. “Tell me all about it. When did he ask you to be his wife?”

“This morning, Mary, only this morning; but it seems as if years had passed since then.”

“And what says Mr. Ives? Does he welcome the stranger who takes from him his only child?”

“Not far, Mary—but two miles away—and my father is always to live with me, if he so will it, so says Mr. Johnstone.”

“But is he pleased?” asked Mary, with a little persistence.

“Yes, he is well pleased; he already loves him as a son. Mary, perhaps the thing that most readily won my heart was his reverence and tender courtesy to my father.”

“I can believe it, Betty. His manners are perfect. I was only making that same remark to Deborah this morning. Yes, I knew only one other whose manners could compare with your John Johnstone’s, Betty—only one.”



Mary Jones sighed deeply and looked down. Betty gently pressed her hand.

Hitherto she had always laughed at her friend's tender recollections; now, it seemed to her that her eyes were opened to her former cruelty.

But Mistress Mary was too much interested to waste too much time even on such reflections.

"You must tell me all, dear," she said. "What is his family? Has he parents living, brothers and sisters? Is his fortune assured?"

"Ah, there is some little difficulty there," answered Betty, her face falling a little. "He has no parents, no friends, no kindred; he is all alone in the wide world. And as for his fortune, that is assured, but it is somehow mysteriously bound up in trusts—I know not what—he has no papers to show my father, he asks for perfect confidence."



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Mistress Mary was a prudent woman. She pursed up her lips and uttered a little sound expressive of discontent.

“Dear Betty,” she said, “it is doubtless a very good thing to be in love with a stranger romantically, but still—”

“He is no stranger,” said Betty quickly.

“No, no, not to be called a stranger,” cried Mary, laughing—“an old and valued friend of two months’ standing.”

“The time is short,” said Betty thoughtfully. “But a whole lifetime seems to have passed in that space! My father,” she cried, as Mr. Ives entered the room, “here is Mistress Mary Jones.”

“Come to offer my warmest good wishes,” said the lady, “and also all the assistance in my power when the important day approaches.”

“I shall indeed be glad and grateful for your help,” said Betty affectionately.

Mr. Ives persuaded Mary to remain for supper. The candles were brought in, and the room looked bright and cheery.

“Stay with me and cheer my loneliness,” said the parson cheerily. “The young folk will stroll in the garden till supper be ready. I am too old for dewy twilight walks, egad.”

Was it a new idea that flashed into Mary’s mind that caused her to start? She glanced at Mr. Ives’ comely person, at his glossy cassock, his smartly-buckled shoes, at the neat tie-wig which surmounted a face which she hastily pronounced as handsome as it ever had been.

With a sweep of her fan Mistress Mary renounced her waning youth.

“Stay with you!” she cried, “that will I! and you and I from the window will superintend our dear young ones. Alas!” she said, with a languishing look, “how lonely the house will seem when you are bereft of your daughter.”

Mr. Ives sighed deeply.

Outside in the gloaming, Betty Ives and her young lover walked slowly backwards and forwards under the orchard trees.

“No father, no mother, no sisters!” she said, looking up into his face. “No one to love, no one to love you!”



“I do not know whether I am to be pitied,” he answered with a light laugh. “My life has been one of strange vicissitudes. No, no, sweet Bet; I have often thanked God that no one shared my life.”

“But you will never do so again,” she said earnestly.

“Sweetheart!” he answered. “Until you have once drunk of the cup of happiness you know not what it is; but once tasted, you can ill spare it thenceforth.”

“Ah, some day you will tell me about this life of yours—will you not?”

“Some day, my heart, when you and I are alone together in the fair woods of Belton—when you are my precious wife, and when days have passed on, and our full trust and confidence each in the other is proved and strengthened by time. But not now, beloved, not now.”

“Have you known griefs, sorrows?”

“A few.”

“Happiness?”

“Yes, and triumphs often.”



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Betty bent down her head thoughtfully; fain would she have swept away the veil of mystery which surrounded her betrothed, but she would take no step to do so—no confidence was precious save that which was given unasked.

The twilight gathered softly. Presently Betty turned round, and placed her two clasped hands on his arm, her noble head proudly raised, her large eyes seeking his.

“Look you,” she said, “there is something I would wish to say to you. You and I are to be man and wife—and I have accepted you—I know nothing of you, John—I know not whence you come, or from among what kinsfolk; I have taken all on trust. I love you, John, so I fear not. They say that perfect love casteth out fear. There can be no dark secret in your life, no deed or deeds that you shame to disclose to me. I take you with infinite faith. So tell me what you will, dear, or as much as you will. My heart will give you gratitude for the confidence you give to me, and, John, my love shall cover your silence.”

With a sudden impulse John Johnstone was down on his knees, he pressed her hands to his lips with a passion akin to worship.

“My life, my love!” he cried—“my whole life shall be devoted to rewarding your trust in me. Oh, would to God I were more worthy of you!”

Within the house Mistress Mary and Mr. Ives were very comfortable: they played a game of patience together (in which the former was a great proficient), they chatted, they waxed confidential, and not till Dame Martha summoned them to sup, did they perceive the lapse of time. Mr. Ives called from the window, and the betrothed pair came in, their eyes shining and dazzled by the bright light.

Matters went on happily thus for many days—it seemed that the course of true love was to run very smooth—when one evening a little incident occurred that startled all.

The little party of four were dining together, as they generally did.

Mr. Ives was in a merry mood: he poured out a glass of good red wine, wine that was not often brought forth from the depth of his cellar; he bade John Johnstone fill up his glass, and as each gentleman raised it brimming to his lips, pledged “His sacred Majesty, good King George.”

With a sharp rattle John Johnstone’s glass crashed untasted on the table, and the red wine splashed like blood on the white napery.

The parson looked at him, and the colour forsook his cheek.

Mistress Mary glanced tremulously from one to another, and half rose in consternation.



The colour flushed high in Betty Ives' cheek. "Was this then the mystery?"

The absent king held all her sympathies.

Mr. Ives moved back his chair from the table, and said somewhat unsteadily:

"Good sir, I am a man of peace. I love order and a strong government. Can I hazard my daughter by—"

Now, strangely enough, Mary Jones came to the rescue.



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“Sirs,” she said, “allow me to make a proposition; it is this, that not one of us breathe a word elsewhere of what has happened tonight. For heaven’s sake say nothing, keep all dark, and on this understanding,” she stooped forward and daintily raised her own glass, “I also pledge his Majesty over the sea.”

But Mr. Ives did not recover his spirits that night: presentiments of evil haunted him, misgivings that he had not done wisely by his darling. When the small hours of the morning struck he still lay awake, tossing restlessly to and fro.

CHAPTER V.

The days passed on, and now all the world lay under a pall of white snow. Under their dazzling mantle gleamed the dark prickly leaves of the holly-trees with abundance of scarlet berries. Here and there a little robin-redbreast hopped to and fro, chiefly gathering round the latticed windows of the parsonage, where morning and evening Betty fed hundreds of feathered pensioners.

Sportsmen cursed the hard weather, the idle horses restlessly moved in their stalls, and the hounds dreamed dreams to pass away the long hours.

Betty was never idle. She made it her pride that when she left home as a bride all should be found in order in her father’s home. Mistress Mary took much interest in it herself, and joined her in mending and marking and sorting fine household linen that had need of much care.

Betty’s own clothes were in course of manufacture, not many but rich, as should become the Lady of Belton; above all, her wedding-gown of dove-coloured and silver brocade, all trimmed with strings and strings of orient pearls which John Johnstone had brought her one day.

He gave her many jewels but she loved the pearls best, for they were his first gift, and destined, he said, for that day of days that was to make her his own forever.

Almost every day as the time passed on, he brought her a new gift. Once it was a pretty little dog, another day a ring of large rubies.

“My Betty herself is a ruby,” he said, when he placed this on her hand. “A brave stone rich in colour, strong, unchanging, and the most precious of gems.”

Then there was nothing for it, but that she and her father should come to Belton to look over Betty’s future home, suggest improvements, and choose among Mr. Johnstone’s many fine horses one to be trained for his bride’s special use. She was a bold fearless rider, looking beautiful on horseback, and she had scorned his proposal to buy her a



gentle lady's horse, expressing her wish to be allowed to ride his hunters. With one or two exceptions John offered her the choice.

It was a brilliant frosty day on which the invitation was accepted. Mr. Ives laughingly included Mary Jones in the little party, asserting that two and two would be a fairer division of company.

Mary bridled and blushed and threw a tender glance at him from behind her fan, and the parson thought to himself that after all he was not old yet.



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In every life there is perhaps one day that stands out from the others as the happiest day—one day in which the cup of joy seems full to the brim; it is not generally a day of powerful emotions, but of unbroken peace, sunshine, love, sweetness and the glory of life.

Such a day had dawned for fair Betty Ives. It was not so unbroken for her betrothed: now and then a look of care overcast his brow, and now and then his hands clenched themselves with a slight nervous movement. All through the day he paid her a courtship so tender, so deferential, so loving, it might have been a votary addressing his saint, a courtier waiting on his queen; and as the hour advanced, and the time of departure drew near, his attentions became yet more tender, more wistful.

They visited the horses and the dogs, gave bread to the shy young gazelle that John was endeavouring to tame, to offer to his bride. Then he suddenly drew her aside, and while Mr. Ives and Mary Jones strolled onwards to the garden, he took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the door of a loose box which he had passed by hitherto.

“Here lives my best treasure, sweetheart,” he said. “You must travel far, and look wide, ere you meet with his match.”

Betty looked in, and her eyes fell on a magnificent white horse. It would have needed an experienced eye fully to appreciate the strength and symmetry of its proportions; to Betty he looked beautiful, and words failed to describe her admiration.

“Strange that I have never chanced to see you ride him,” she said. “I recognised at once the brown mare and the two chestnuts, and the bay with a white star, but this one I have never seen.”

“No, I never hunt Seagull,” he answered thoughtfully. “I owe him my life not once, but over and over again.”

“Seagull!” exclaimed Betty. “Is not that the name of Wild Jack’s famous white horse?”

“Yes, he was named after him. I bethought myself that my Seagull was as noble an animal as Wild Jack’s.”

“I am sure that he has not his equal in the wide world!” cried Betty.

John Johnstone turned suddenly to her and said: “Do you still keep up your interest in that poor sinner Wild Jack, sweet Bet? or has it died away in your gentle breast?”

“I shall never forget our first, and (heaven grant) our last interview,” she answered with a smile. “How he justified my trust in him!”



“Poor Jack,” said John Johnstone thoughtfully. “I knew Jack well once; you were right to have faith in him. He has done good service to the Cause. Look you, dear, he never took purse or papers on the king’s highway, but in the king’s name who is over the seas; he never injured woman or shot an unnecessary shot—keep your sympathy with Jack. And now,” he said, throwing back his head with an odd look of defiance and pride—“now there is a reward of five hundred pounds offered for Wild Jack’s body living or dead. They place a high price on the head of one, whom, to his honour, they dub traitor as well as highwayman!”



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“Five hundred pounds,” said Betty. “Alas! the reward is tempting.”

“He has escaped so often from their very midst, has more than once been prisoner, has often baffled his swiftest pursuers. Next time Wild Jack is taken, his shrift will be short, I warrant.”

The tears rose to Betty’s eyes.

“God grant him a safe escape to France,” she said earnestly.

“It is a good and a charitable wish, sweetheart,” said John somewhat gloomily. “But men who have lived as Wild Jack has lived, dread, exile as much as death.”

“Surely,” said Betty, “that depends upon whether he is utterly friendless, or has any who love him.”

“Wild Jack is not utterly friendless,” he answered with a grave sweet smile.

“And this also is one of the mysteries,” said Betty gaily. “Do not forget your promise, that some day you will tell me all the past history of your life, and also, above all, the story of your acquaintance with the most famous gentleman of the road.”

“Aye, some day,” he said, closing the door of Seagull’s home, and placing the key in his pocket.

As they turned away he said suddenly: “Say nothing about my treasure in there, dear Bet, I beg of you, neither to your father nor to Mistress Mary.”

Betty looked up at him somewhat surprised.

“Oh, it is for a trifling reason,” he said—“a mere wager.”

So the matter faded from her mind.

The elders of the little party now summoned them—the evening was closing, it was time to be going home.

They were all to ride, Mary on a pillion behind Mr. Ives.

While the horses were being saddled, Mr. Johnstone prayed them to come in, and they entered once more the large drawing-room, and gathered round a cheerfully blazing fire.

It was a stately room, with handsome furniture, all arranged with stiff propriety, needing the trifling signs of a woman’s presence to give grace and life to its appearance.



“How different it will look when my lady reigns here,” said John Johnstone softly. He led her away to one of the windows, and pointed out to her the beauties of the fair English landscape, and there unseen he held her hand in both his, and once pressed it to his lips. Tea came in, in cups of delicate old china, and home-made cakes and fresh butter.

“We must have a dairy fit for your superintendence, sweet Bet,” said John Johnstone. “See how pale is this butter, how thin this cream compared to what you offer me at the parsonage.”

The horses came round at last, Mr. Johnstone’s bay mare with them; he would certainly accompany them home.

Indeed it seemed as if this evening he could not tear himself away, he lingered on and on, and it grew quite dark, and the moon rose over the snow, and the stars shone out one by one.

Supper was over, Mistress Mary long since gone home. It was nine o’clock—Mr. Johnstone must go. Mr. Ives sat quiet in his deep chair, the warmth and the comfort entered into his soul, and he slept.



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“Come with me to the door, sweet Bet,” said John lingeringly.

“Yes, even farther than that,” she said, and she caught up her fur cloak, threw it round her, and followed him out to the garden gate. The crisp snow crackled pleasantly under foot.

Old Isaac, who held the bay mare, left them when he had given the bridle into her master’s hand.

“They will be wishing to kiss, mayhap,” he muttered to himself, “and I’ll not stand in their way, God bless them!”

John Johnstone mounted. He looked up to the sky and said, “It is later than I thought. I have a long ride before me to-night, sweetheart. I have business near Newbury. I had meant to go home and change the bay mare for my faithful Seagull, but it is too late.”

“When shall you be back?” asked Betty, who was used now to his sudden departures.

“To-morrow—to-morrow at latest, and my first halt shall be here.”

“Are you armed?”

He gave a laugh, and pointed to his saddle, well garnished with pistols.

“They are loaded,” he said. “For it might fall out that I should meet with Wild Jack.”

“Heaven forbid!” said Betty with a shiver.

“You are cold, sweetheart, you must go in. We must part. Oh! it is bitter to say farewell.”

“Only till to-morrow, John! Only till to-morrow!”

“Only till to-morrow!” he echoed.

Then he bent down, put his hand under her chin and raised her sweet face—the moon shone on it, on the large eyes lovingly turned to his, on the wondering tender look, in which joy and pain seemed strangely mingled.

Their lips met, one long wild kiss—for the first time she heard his passionate words, “My own, my beloved!” Then he drew up his reins. John gave one glance at the moon, and noted how she mounted heaven’s arch—then he looked back no more, but set spurs to the bay mare’s flanks, and galloped away.



Betty went home; she lay down to rest with a smile on her beautiful face. The happiest day must end when night falls.

CHAPTER VI.

When evening fell the next day, Betty lingered long at the gate.

“He could not get his business done in time,” she said to herself. “He will not come to-day.”

But the next day passed also, and the next, and still John Johnstone had not come home.

On the fourth day Mr. Ives rode into Wancote to hear the news, and promised his daughter that he would go over to Belton, and find out from the servants whether they had had any news of their master, and when they expected him to return.

Mary Jones came over to the parsonage—it was an important day, for Betty was to try on her wedding-gown, finished the night before.

She looked very beautiful in it, the soft colour flushing on her cheek, her sweet eyes shining. When the little ceremony was over, Betty put her arm round the waist of her friend, and led her away out of earshot of busy Dame Martha, and the smart dressmakers.



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“Dear Mary!” she said, “my great wish now is to see you don just such a dress as this wedding-gown of mine.”

“Oh la! Betty, bethink you of my age,” cried Mary, but tears of genuine emotion rose to her eyes.

“Yet would I fain see you my father’s wife,” said Betty. She put her hands on her shoulders, and looked down from her greater height into her face.

“Say yes, Mary, say yes,” she said.

“I must wait till the right person asks me that question,” answered Mary, half sobbing, half laughing; but Betty persisted:

“Say yes, Mary dear!”

“Well then yes, if so it must be,” answered Mary. “You are a good girl, Betty,” and she kissed her warmly, and hurried away to the glass to rearrange her elaborate curls of hair.

Mr. Ives came home full of excitement: he had heard great news in Wancote, the whole town was ringing with it.

“What do you think has happened?” he cried as he came into the room.

“Has John come home?” asked Betty eagerly.

“No, child, and the servants say that they never expect him until he appears, he is often away like this for a few days. The news is quite otherwise—Wild Jack has been taken.”

“Ah!” cried the women in a breath, and Betty turned white as a sheet.

“What will they do with him!” asked Mary.

“He was taken on the king’s highway, some twenty miles from here on the Newbury Road, on the cross roads where the steep way comes down from the downs. It seems that an important paper had fallen into the possession of some individual here, convicting many well-known gentlemen about Wancote of loyalty to him that is over the sea, and Sir Harry Clare was to carry the paper to Newbury to-night. I warrant some not very distant friends of ours were shaking in their shoes.”

“They rode four together and all well-armed; but Wild Jack was too much for them—he and two others attacked the party; he seized the paper himself, after a short encounter with young Clare, whose horse he shot dead. That accomplished, all made off. The paper was lost. Some say Wild Jack burnt it as he rode, some that he swallowed it,



some that he tore and scattered it to the four winds of heaven. Then, when in full flight, his horse stumbled and fell, and the four gentlemen came up with him. Entangled as he was by the fallen horse, he fought and kept all at bay with his marvellous fencing powers till his men were far out of sight. Then he broke his sword across his knee, saying that never should his trusty weapon fall into the hands of the king's enemies. He was badly wounded."

"Well?" cried Mary breathlessly. Betty sat down, she felt cold and faint.

"Well, they took him that night to the nearest village, bound hand and foot. At first they hardly knew the value of their captive, for he was not riding his famous horse Seagull; had he been mounted as usual, small chance would they have had of capturing Wild Jack. There was a hasty assembly of magistrates, such as could be induced to come. I warrant some would have died sooner than join in what followed. They caused a gallows to be erected forty feet high on the king's high road, and there they hanged Wild Jack."



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“God rest his soul,” said Betty. “John will be sorry indeed, as sorry as I am.”

“Yes, John always has a certain sympathy with the gentlemen of the road,” said Mr. Ives. “But after all, order must be kept, the roads must be made safe. I know the government will be sorely displeased that the list of suspected gentlemen has been saved, I mean lost.”

It was too late, and all were too much excited by what had passed for Betty to broach the subject of marriage to her father that night, but she promised herself to do so early on the following morning.

It was very cold, and Betty could not sleep; in vain she turned from side to side, in vain she drank water and paced her room, and tried all the devices known to the sleepless—all was fruitless; her pillow seemed to her on fire, and incessantly in her imagination she heard the galloping of horses so vividly, that she rose several times and went to the window; but the night was clear, and the moon bright, and all over the country lay one sheet of untrodden snow.

She lay down once more, and about three o'clock was roused suddenly by a light tap, as of something which hit her window.

She went to it hastily, and as she did so, another light pebble hit the panes. She opened the casement and looked out. Below in the garden in the moonlight, which was almost as light as day, she saw standing a slight woman's figure.

The figure held up a warning hand to be silent and come down.

Betty was bold and fearless, she put on her clothes hastily, and went down. She went into the garden at once, and looked cautiously round. There was no one to be seen at first.

She waited in some amazement, when suddenly she felt a light touch on her shoulder, and looking round, saw standing beside her Nora Ray, the young gipsy girl, looking more wild and elf-like than usual.

“Hist!” said the strange child. “I have brought you a token from one whom you know so well. His day is over,” she cried with a wild grin, showing all her white teeth. “The ravens are feasting on Wild Jack's tender flesh to-night. See here is the token; he gave it to me at the foot of the gallows with his own hand.”

With a sob Betty took it from the girl's brown hand—her own little serpent-ring that he had taken from her that night that seemed so long ago.

“It shall never again leave my finger,” she said. “God rest his soul.”



“You will cross the poor gipsy’s hand with silver, pretty lady,” cried Nora. “He never failed to do so to poor Nora Ray, not he!”

Betty quickly went into the house, gave her money, and let her out of the gate—the wild creature had come in over the wall—then she went slowly up to her room.

She leant out of the open window, her brow burning in spite of the cold.

Suddenly came on her ear the wild sound of Nora’s singing, with its strange pathos like the sighing of the wind, or the cry of storm-tossed sea-birds.



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Betty clasped her hands, and sank on her knees, the sound made her shudder from head to foot. She stopped her ears with trembling fingers, but yet every word fell on them distinctly and would not be shut out.

“Aye, call him, call him over the lea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
Lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away.”

CHAPTER VII.

“How pale you are this morning, my child,” said Mr. Ives to his daughter.

“It is nothing. I have had a feverish night; the story of the fate of my poor friend haunted me,” she answered. She could not eat, the cold had chilled her blood, and now and then she shivered painfully.

Betty sought her opportunity in spite of her bodily discomforts, and fondly caressing her father’s hands she knelt down by his chair.

“Father,” she said. “Dear father, you know that very soon I am going to leave you, to be married to my own true love. Our wedding-day is fixed, but I dare say he will not be back much before then. Do you think he will? Oh no, probably not.”

“Why, child, to be sure he will! He will be back in a few days at the outside. Why, silly child, you will make a poor wife if you fret always when your husband is from home.”

“But I do not fret. I am perfectly satisfied. Listen, dear father: when I am married and gone away with my dear love, you will look round you and see only my empty place, no hand to hold yours, no voice to welcome you, no music to cheer you, no child to love you.”

“Betty,” cried Mr. Ives with a sob, “why do you show me so dismal a picture? It is bad enough already.”

“I have a good reason, dear father,” she said. “You see I am going so soon. I should leave you with so much lighter a heart were Mary here to take my place. She is kind and good, and true, and would love you dearly.”

Mr. Ives laughed a little.

“Mistress Mary is somewhat old to replace my daughter,” he said.

“Then the more suited to be your wife.”



Mr. Ives rose to his feet, and paced up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped, and catching his daughter's hands, looked her full in the face.

"Would she have me, my Bet?" he said. "I may not be too old to wed, but I am vastly too old to woo."

"She will have you, father," answered Betty. "And you will be quite happy when I am gone."

So all was settled, and the elderly pair pledged to each other. The banns were asked in church that their marriage might take place at once when John Johnstone should take his bride away.

Days passed on, days lengthened into weeks, the wedding-day drew near, and the bridegroom came not.

All Betty's high courage came back, the frost melted away, and the country was open again, and once more she rode to hounds. Her colour was high, her lips feverishly scarlet, her eyes large and brilliant. She rode with the best, and came home with the brush at her pommel.



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“Why do they look at me so strangely, father?” she asked. “Old Squire Thornton, when he welcomed my return to the hunt, held my hand a whole minute in his, and it was as if he were about to speak, for he swallowed once or twice and then turned away. And Doctor Glebe would not speak to me at all, and his face was set as a mask, though I saw that he was watching me strangely all the time. Have I changed? Am I not the same Betty I used to be?”

“The same, only a little thinner, my darling,” her father answered, and his eyes filled with tears.

He too had grown curiously sad of late, and followed his daughter with wistful eyes.

“Father,” she said one day, “to-morrow you know is our wedding-day. John will come home, he must return to-night. I know that he will. I shall wait up till the clock strikes twelve, but if he does not come (and of course no one can tell how long business may detain him, can they?), one thing, dear father: will you take Mary to church, even though I should not be there, and marry her? She might wear my wedding-gown. To please me, father, to please me?”

“Anything, anything to please you, my own child,” said Mr. Ives in a choked voice.

All day Betty wandered in the garden; they watched her wistfully, her head was raised, always listening—listening to every sound.

The hours passed, evening came, the night fell. Betty had thrown wide the casement. Her father and Mary Jones, crouching over the fire, had no heart to speak to her, or warn her that the night was cold.

A wild stormy wind swayed the branches of the apple-trees, surging and roaring as it rushed over the downs; the candles flickered and burned low, and from them dropped those strange waxen off-shoots that old women call winding-sheets.

At last the church-bell struck twelve, slowly, awfully.

Betty was listening still, her head raised, her finger on her lip.

“Hush!” she said, with a strange smile. “Do you hear the white horse’s hoofs?”

They listened. Distinctly on the ear came the sound of a horse galloping, coming nearer and nearer, passing the door, on and on without pause, the sound of the hoofs growing faint and fainter till lost in the far distance.

Betty held out her arms. “Mary!” she said. “Mary!” Her voice was a strange harsh whisper, out of which all tone had passed. “Mary, he gallops away.”



CHAPTER VIII.

After the lapse of another three days, it was determined that there should be no further delay of the marriage, and one morning without pomp or parade of any kind, Mr. Ives took his bride into Wancote, and they returned home man and wife.

The only wedding-guest was the parson's old friend Dr. Glebe, and he returned with them to the parsonage because he had a few serious words that he wished to say there.

He took Mr. Ives aside, and said abruptly, "Are you mad, Ives? Do you wish to lose that peerless daughter of yours? I warn you that you will do so, if you are not more watchful."



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"I would give my life for hers," answered her father sorrowfully. "And so would Mary, who loves her dearly, but alas! what can we do? We cannot bring back John Johnstone."

"You must send her away at once. She must have change of air and scene. At once, mark you, without an hour's unnecessary delay."

"You think it will do her good?"

"I think it the one chance of escaping fatal mischief. See, I have a plan to propose. Why not send her to Newbury to her aunt? She is a sensible woman, and the house is full of children—they will rouse her."

"I will take her myself," cried Mr. Ives.

"Nay, nay, that would defeat my object. I want absolute change for her, change of thought, scene, companions."

"But how manage it, if I may not go myself?"

"Squire Thornton rides to Newbury tomorrow with Sir Harry Clare, and he will willingly be her protector."

"They ride?"

"Yes, it will do Betty good to ride, and old Isaac can follow with a valise full of clothes."

"Tomorrow did you say?"

"Tomorrow at daybreak."

"It shall be done. God grant that it may do her good."

The following morning, with many a tear and many a blessing Mr. Ives and his wife started Betty on her way.

She made no resistance, passively assented to all they wished. When she was once more in the saddle, her spirits rose feverishly again.

Sir Harry Clare, riding by her side, felt the old fascination stealing over him again, the fascination that had well nigh broken Lady Rachel's heart at Newbury last year. Squire Thornton saw her bright color, and heard the old lively talk as of old, and thought how that time cures all things, and that perhaps in the days to come, his son might have a chance at last.



About half way on their journey the little party was joined by two gentlemen who reached the highway by a cross-road; they lived far from the Wancote neighbourhood. The one Sir James Templemore, the other Mr. Mat Harding.

Squire Thornton was glad to meet with friends so rarely encountered; they had secrets together mayhap. They saluted each other cordially, their greeting of Sir Harry Clare was more cold.

It was a gloomy windy day, and after the midday halt to bait their horses, the weather grew worse, a cold violent wind blew in their faces, now and then a driving shower of rain.

“Are you tired, Mistress Betty?” asked the squire.

“No, no, I enjoy the free fresh air, it gives me new life.”

“That is well,” he said, riding on well pleased.

The two cavaliers who attended Betty on each side were the new arrivals, both of whom appeared much struck by her exceeding beauty.

Now it seemed almost as if they entered into a cloud, so dark it became, so blinded were they by wind and a fresh storm of cold fine rain. The horses grew subdued, they whinnied and held down their tails tightly. It was very cold.



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They moved into a short trot, but pulled up soon, breathless.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and now Betty became aware of some tall dark object looming in front of her, only as yet half visible. The wind howled past, and distinctly she heard a sort of clanking noise, as of chains or the rattling of something hard clanking together.

“Let us ride on, let us ride fast.” cried Squire Thornton in his loud hearty voice. As he spoke there was a whirr of loud wings, and a dark cloud of foul birds rose into the air from off that dark thing.

Betty put out her hand and laid it on Sir James Templemore’s arm.

“What is it?” she said in a ghastly whisper.

“Ah, a sad sight indeed,” said he sadly. “There hangs as noble a gentleman as ever drew sword for the king, God bless him.”

“Who is it?” she asked again; the whisper came hissing forth.

“Who? God rest his soul, he had many names. He was Wild Jack Barnstaple, alias John Johnstone of Belton, alias Daredevil Jack of the North.”

“For the sake of all that is sacred, hold your tongue!” shouted the squire, who had caught the last words.

He was too late. With a wild hoarse cry that none who heard it ever forgot, Betty flung wide her arms, and fell back on her saddle. The terrified horse galloped furiously forward, throwing her from side to side, then violently to the ground at the foot of the gallows.

In horror the gentlemen surrounded her, and raised her inanimate form between them.

But it was long and very late before they could get her home.

After long hours her body awoke to life, but her brain was gone. Heartbroken, mind gone, in very sooth mad, what remained for sweet Betty now.

Travellers passing by would point to the parsonage wall, and sorrowfully tell her story. Some more curious than the rest would perhaps stop to look through the gate.

A strange sight met their eyes.

As beautiful as ever, with a strange fearful beauty, stood Betty, her hands hanging clasped before her, and she sang to herself softly, dreamily:



“Call him, call him over the lea,
Aye, well and well-a-day;
Lover will never come back to thee
Who loves and gallops away.”

Then she put her hands to her mouth as men do who wish that their voices should carry far, and called over and over again slowly, “John Johnstone! John Johnstone!”—the last syllable rising loud on a long high note.

Then she would hold up her finger, and bend her head listening, listening, listening, till she heard the sound of the galloping hoofs come nearer and nearer, passing and fading away.

Those who watched with her in the dark evenings in the walled garden swore that they also heard the sound, and their hair bristled with cold fear.

VIRGINIA.



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PART I.

“He is a very strange mixture.”

“I really do not think you ought to ask him to the house. An atheist, a man of disreputable life, a——.”

“Come, come, my dear, don’t give him such a character, before Virginia.”

This fragment of dialogue takes place over a cheery breakfast table in a house not very far from Park Lane.

The first speaker is a pleasant-looking man of between fifty and sixty, and his interlocutor is a rather prim lady, who appears older, but is, in reality, his junior by two years. They are Mr. Hamilton Hayward and his sister, Miss Susan.

The party has a third member—the Virginia alluded to by Mr. Hayward. She is tall, handsome, bright-looking; evidently she possesses character, but with it the grace and charm of manner which prevent a woman of character from falling into that disagreeable being, a strong-minded woman.

“What are Mr. Vansittart’s good points?” she says, smiling at her uncle.

“He has the kindest heart in the world,” Mr. Hayward replies, warmly, “and he would never do a shabby thing. One of the few men who really practice not letting their left hand know the good their right does. He certainly is a looseish fish; but he does not parade his irregularities before the world—the world need not know anything about them if it does not insist on prying into his affairs. The greatest grudge women have against him is that he is mortally opposed to marriage, and carries on a crusade against it as though he were St. George, and matrimony the Dragon. He says if you want to make two people hate each other who would otherwise be disposed to love——”

“Hush! my dear Hamilton,” cries Miss Susan, horrified. “Pray spare us a repetition of Mr. Vansittart’s iniquitous opinions.”

“I suppose,” laughs Virginia, “that women don’t insist on marrying him by force, do they?”

“A great many would be very glad to have him,” rejoins Mr. Hamilton, “he is a tremendously taking fellow.”

“And have you *really* asked him to dinner?” interposes Miss Susan.



“I have, indeed, my dear, and I had a good deal of difficulty in persuading him to come. He persisted that he went so little into society—into *ladies’* society.”

Miss Susan gave a little snort.

“He has no right to go into it at all with the views he holds; and, pray, whom is he to take in to dinner?”

“Mrs. Ashton, I thought,” answers Mr. Hamilton. “I am afraid he would be bored with an unmarried lady.”

“When I was young,” says Miss Susan, bristling, “married women were as modest and particular in their conversation as unmarried ones.”

“Ah!” observes her brother dryly.

“Uncle,” cries Virginia, “let him take me. If he is original, I shall be sure to like him; and as I don’t intend to marry, he need not be afraid of my having designs on him. I shall give him a hint whilst he is eating his soup that I have made a vow to *coiffer Ste. Catherine.*”



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“Virginia!” remonstrates Miss Susan; “and you know Sir Harry Hotspur is to take you.”

“No, no,” cries Virginia, “he bores me to distraction. Besides,” laughing, “he ‘goes for married women.’ Let him have Mrs. Ashton, and give me Mr. Vansittart.”

Miss Susan has one virtue, which is, that she is never quite so shocked as she pretends to be. Moreover, Virginia always gets her way with both uncle and aunt. So when the evening of the dinner party arrives, Mr. Hayward brings Mr. Vansittart up to his niece and introduces him. Whilst he is uttering a few of those *banalities* which must inevitably be the precursors of even the most interesting conversation between two strangers, Virginia is taking an inventory of him. He is tall, rather dark than fair; his features are well cut, and he has particularly expressive eyes, the color of which it takes her some time to decide about. At the same moment he is saying to himself: “What sort of woman is this, and what on earth shall I talk to her about? I hope to heaven she isn’t a girl of the period. She doesn’t look like it—still less like a prude. How I hate a society dinner! I suppose I shall be bored to death, as usual.”

True to her promise, Virginia apprises him, whilst he yet is assimilating his soup, of her vow of celibacy. He turns to look at her, being just a shade surprised at receiving such a confidence so early in their acquaintance, and then he sees the archest smile curving the corners of her mouth, and meets a glance from a pair of brown eyes that he now perceives to be beautiful.

Mr. Vansittart has a quick intelligence—he understands in an instant the object of her remark. His eyes light up with a sudden gleam, and he murmurs quietly, “Thanks so much for putting me at my ease.”

From that moment they are perfectly at home with each other, and fall to animated talk. He does not air his theories about marriage, nor is religion discussed between them, but there are plenty of other topics, and they become aware of a dozen feelings and sympathies in common. Virginia is as bright and witty as she is modest and pure-minded; there is nothing in the world that Mr. Vansittart detests so much as a coarse or immodest *lady*. So charmed is he with Virginia, that he remains close to her side the whole evening, to the surprise of every one else. No one ever saw him devote himself to a girl before. He stays until the very last. As he walks away from the door, after lighting his cigar, he reflects to himself: “If any earthly power could induce me to marry, it would be a girl like that. But,” resolutely, “nothing could.” As Virginia wends her way upstairs to bed, she says to herself with a heavy sigh, “Why should he abuse marriage? How happy he might make some woman!”



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Virginia is the daughter of a clergyman. Father and mother are both dead. She has a brother in the army, and a sister married to a country rector. Her uncle, Mr. Hayward, has adopted her. She is clever and accomplished. She has both passion and imagination. Some of her ideas are original; she hates common-placeness, but she is also imbued with the attribute possessed by every charming woman, the love of approbation. This prevents her doing or saying anything *outré* or unconventional; this makes her careful of her appearance and fond of fair apparel; this makes the evidence of admiration from the other sex exceedingly agreeable to her; this causes her to adopt a manner towards them that induces jealous women to call her a coquette. She has had several offers of marriage, but she entertains peculiar ideas about the strength of passion and the sympathy of thought a man and woman ought to feel for each other before they decide to spend a life-time together. She does not think a man who has a good income, and who is simply not repulsive or abhorrent to her, a sufficient inducement.

The days wear on. Virginia does not forget Mr. Vansittart any more than he forgets her, but he weighs more on her heart than she does on his, for, happy man! he is perpetually occupied, being a barrister with a considerable practice, whilst she is an idle woman as the well-to-do of her sex mostly are. If she goes to balls or dances, she is always contrasting every man, with whom she talks or dances, with him; if she works at her embroidery, her thoughts are intent on him; if she reads, a hero of her own ousts the hero of the novel from her brain; if she sings, her voice is moved to strong pathos; her eyes become drowned by that strange passion which consumes her. Days and weeks pass by; and she does not catch a glimpse of him; does not even hear his name. She sees it frequently in the *Times*. One Sunday afternoon, she and her uncle strolling in the Park meet him. He lifts his hat, and is about to pass, when something that her eyes have communicated to his heart, stops him suddenly. He turns and joins them. It is a delicious summer afternoon: they take chairs under the big trees which shade this cool green spot. Presently a crony joins Mr. Hayward—soon the elder pair are deep in the *cause celebre* of the day. Virginia and Mr. Vansittart have forgotten that other people exist in the world—the topics of their conversation are ordinary enough, but it is not from them that a subtle delight steals through their veins. What they heed is the language of each other's eyes. His say—"You fulfil my idea of perfect womanhood. I could love you with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength. I respect you with my purest feelings; I love you with my strongest passions; I would to God I could shake off my doubts about marriage. But I *know* that if I married you, inexorable Destiny would no longer let us love one another."



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And her eyes reiterate one little sentence, "You are my lord, my master, and I am your slave."

It was one of the very strongest cases of love at first sight. Such cases are more common, however, than people affect to think.

"Come home and dine with us," says Mr. Hayward, as a distant clock strikes seven.

"I'm afraid I have not time to dress," replies Philip Vansittart; "that is if you dine at half past seven, as I have heard you say you do."

"Never mind about dress," answers Mr. Hayward. "I won't dress either."

He has no designs on his guest, but he is a good-natured gentleman, and he sees that these two are attracted toward each other.

Miss Susan is at church. If her brother will dine at his usual hour on Sunday, she cannot help it, but she will not countenance him by her presence.

Philip Vansittart thinks he has never spent such a divinely happy evening as this. Virginia sings to him; her voice thrills to his very soul. Mr. Hamilton is asleep in the next room. As for Virginia, when she is alone, she first smiles a happy, triumphant smile, because she knows he loves her, and then she bursts into a passion of tears and sobs until her whole frame is convulsed. If his mind is really set against marriage, what will become of her! She feels as though life without him must be one long night of despair.

Philip Vansittart paces his room until the small hours, thinking of this charming, lovable creature, who inspires stronger, deeper sensations in him than he has ever felt before. He tells himself, without vanity or self-deception, that what he feels for her, with that difference which governs the loves of men and women, she feels for him—heart has gone out to heart, nay, they are twain halves of a perfect heart. It is but for him to stretch out his hand to her, and she will come. Aye! but how can he stretch out his hand? In the society in which they both move there is but one way in which she can be his—the way sanctioned by society, blessed by the church. Society and the church will bless and smile upon any union: the decrepit old man with the blooming child; the drunkard and adulterer with the pure young girl; the avaricious youth with the doting old woman. Marriage purifies, sanctifies, hallows sensuality, greed, any, every base motive. To love as God made you free to love, unfettered, and with a true heart, is a crime; to live together full of hatred, loathing, and revolt, is to perform a sacred duty once you have tied yourself up in church. This was Vansittart's theory. Marriage to him was only another word for satiety, weariness, restraint, tyranny. He had never seen what he called a happy marriage, though he had observed many which the world crowned with that adjective, and he had sworn a thousand oaths that he would never subject himself to that miserable awakening which inevitably follows the temporary

sleep of mind and reason, and the short dream of passion which makes a man bind himself with shackles.



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Philip paced his room for hours, fighting the hardest battle he had ever fought. It was the first time he had ever been tempted to marry—tempted beyond endurance. And, at last, ashen pale, in the wan morning light, and with set teeth, he took his final oath and resolve. He would save himself years of wretchedness by a month's anguish; he would not go near her, nor see her again. He was not entirely selfish; he did not forget that she might, nay, would suffer, but he said, with a sigh, "It will be best for her as for me."

* * * * *

A month passed by: two months. Virginia grew pale, listless, *distraite*; her step was languid, her eye haggard. She did not know how to endure her life; she suffered torments day and night from an agonising desire to hear the voice, to meet the eyes again which had given light to her soul and in whose absence she felt it must needs perish of want. It was plain enough to her why he avoided her. He had seen that she loved him; he would not encourage false hopes in her breast. Had she not been warned, ere ever she met him, that he abjured marriage? She remembered, with a breaking heart, her own first playful words to him.

Mr. Hayward saw the change in Virginia, but he put it down entirely to the effects of a London season—to late hours and the want of fresh air. Never mind! the end was near at hand, and then they would go and fill their lungs with mountain air and their eyes with fair scenes, and the roses would come back to her cheeks and lips, and the light to her eyes. He never for an instant connected his niece's pallor with Philip Vansittart. He would have ridiculed the idea of people being twice in each other's company, and breaking their hearts with longing afterwards.

* * * * *

Mr. Hayward, his sister, and Virginia, were dining at a Swiss *table d'hote*. Exactly opposite were two empty places. The fish had been served, and two gentlemen came in and took them. One was Mr. Philip Vansittart. At sight of him the crimson blood rushed to Virginia's cheeks, then ebbed away, leaving her deathly pale. For a moment she thought she must swoon or die from the intensity of her feelings. Philip was scarcely less moved, though, being a man, he was better able to control his agitation. When he had time to look more narrowly at Virginia, he saw a mighty change in her. His heart smote him; and yet—had he not suffered? Great heaven! had his been a bed of roses? Had he not agonised after her?

Dinner over, the party went off into the garden. A mutual unspoken desire made Vansittart and Virginia steal off together to a secluded spot. Twilight was creeping on—the last glow of a rosy sunset was fading away; the strains of a delicious waltz were borne towards them. Vansittart felt his passion mastering him. He made a herculean effort over himself. He would speak. He would tell her the truth. After that she would forget him. They were sitting under a tree that screened them off from the rest of the

garden. He could see well enough that she was trembling with nervousness; that delight, fear, expectation were blended in the beautiful eyes she turned towards him; and, lest suddenly he should yield to that mad longing to catch her to his heart, he began to speak hurriedly—abruptly.



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But Virginia scarcely hears him. Her lips are burning to ask him that one question, and, not heeding what he is saying, she turns and in a tremulous voice that vibrates to his very soul, she says:

“Why have you kept away from us all this time?”

Why? And Vansittart catches his breath. Then the gyves of his strong will give way as the withes fell from Samson.

“I will tell you,” he says. “I love you so horribly, that it is pain and anguish to me to be with you, for then I feel that when I leave you I am ready to die of longing and misery.”

“Well?” she utters in a very low voice, bending her eyes on the ground. It is only one little word, but it speaks such volumes! “Why should you leave me?” it says. “Is it not my case, too? What need you more than speak!”

“You have heard,” he goes on, not daring to look at her, “that I have forsworn marriage. Marriage,” passionately, “kills love, and I would rather, ten times over, suffer what I have suffered—and God knows that is not a little!—than a day should come when, having known such divine happiness as I *should* know were you mine, we should grow cold and weary; when our passions should turn to indifference, to disappointment and heart-burnings, and end, perhaps, in our cherishing feelings of vindictive spite and bitterness against each other, and in my thinking every woman pleasanter and fairer than you, end in your believing me to be the greatest brute under heaven!”

“Oh!” utters Virginia, as she raises her eyes to his face with a look of pained wonder.

“I have seen it a thousand times,” he continues vehemently. “I have known men passionately, madly in love with women, ready to count ‘the world well lost,’ to sacrifice all the future only to call that idol of the moment theirs. I have seen them marry. I have watched the weariness that comes from security even more than from satiety. I have seen the links that were forged in roses become gyves of iron—tenderness and courtesy give place to rudeness and contempt. I never saw but two people perfectly happy, and they,” lowering his voice, “were not married. I have sworn a thousand times never to court wretchedness for myself and a woman I loved by loading her and myself with chains. My idea has been this. Some day I may meet with a being who, under natural circumstances, she keeping her freedom and leaving me mine, I might love with all my heart and be faithful to until the day of my death. I would give her all I possessed. I would devote myself to making her happy; if she had to sacrifice anything for my sake, I would atone to her for it by my unwearying love. But,” his voice mastered by emotion, “how dare I say such words to you? In the sphere in which you live they would be considered a dastardly insult—one must not dare to move one step from the beaten track of custom. The world would scoff at the idea that my love for you is more sacred and reverent than that of a man who, inspired by a momentary passion for a



woman and desiring her, obtains his end by a simple and speedy means, without reflection as to the possible misery of both in the future. And yet," his lips quivering, his face growing deathly white, "I believe I could love you more dearly, love you longer than husband ever loved wife."



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Virginia sits rooted to the spot, a deadly anguish strangling her heart. Then, whilst the divine strains of music still flow on, she feels herself drawn to his heart; his lips meet hers in one long kiss that steals her very soul away from her. He is gone—the music has ceased—the night grows chill—she shivers. “The world well lost,” she mutters to herself, and then, with listless steps, and strange, affrighted eyes, she drags herself up stairs to her room.

PART II.

In a charming house, surrounded by an acre of ground, turned into a small paradise, a house not more than two miles from Hyde Park Corner, live Philip Vansittart and Virginia Hayward. The neighbourhood knows them as Mr. and Mrs. Vansittart, and has not the very remotest conception that in so perfectly ordered an establishment, there is anything which they would designate as “odd.” If anything could arouse suspicion in the breasts of the servants who wait upon them, and the tradespeople who serve them it would be the extraordinary tenderness subsisting between them; the excessive courtesy and consideration of Mr. Vansittart for Mrs. Vansittart, and the entire absence of that familiarity commonly seen between affectionate husbands and wives, which almost invariably engenders subsequent contempt.

The house is furnished with exquisite taste. Mr. Vansittart is continually bringing home artistic treasures to add to its embellishment. Mrs. Vansittart has a carriage and a fine pair of horses. She seldom, however, drives into town except to the play, or to dine. A great many gentlemen of distinction and rank come to the house, who treat Mrs. Vansittart like a queen, and a few ladies; clever, literary ladies, ladies holding peculiar views—very rarely the consorts of distinguished and well-born men.

Is Philip happy? Is Virginia happy? To this I can only reply by another question. Is any one Happy? They love each other with unfailing tenderness—they are all the world to each other—the thought of separation would be death to them. And yet the heart of either is gnawed by a secret worm. In the midst of his busy life, Philip can never forget that he has sacrificed the woman whom he adores from the very bottom of his soul, and the horrible suspicion will stab him, that he has sacrificed her needlessly. They are living as husband and wife, and yet no feeling of weariness, of satiety, comes near them—each day draws them nearer together; makes them find fresh points in each other to love and admire. Were she his wife, occupying her proper sphere in society, sought after, courted, admired, he with no feeling of self-reproach, she with no consciousness (which she must feel though she never betrays) of cruelty and selfishness on his part; might they not be even happier? He forgets to tell himself that they are happy because no tie binds them—nay, he says secretly in his heart that that tie is the only thing wanting to make



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their felicity perfect. Now, it is too late. The world knows the truth—marriage can never whitewash Virginia in society's eyes—no future can condone the crime of the past. He has settled every farthing he has in the world upon her—no mean fortune—he loads her with gifts—he is perpetually thinking of her pleasure and amusement, and yet, for ever, the load of his debt to her weighs down his soul.

And Virginia? Paul is all in all to her; he is her heart, her soul, her conscience, and yet he cannot shield her from the fate which he has brought upon her. What must inevitably be the sufferings of a proud and pure-minded woman, who knows herself to be an object of scorn to her sex? How would a man, naturally honorable and high-minded, feel, if, in some fatal moment, he had been tempted to commit a forgery, or take an unfair advantage at cards, and was afterwards shunned by every man friend; thrust out of every club, banned utterly from the society of his fellows, except those with whom it would revolt him to associate? This is the only case that can parallel that of a woman who has lost the world for a man's sake; and men who have a difficulty in realizing how great is the sacrifice they compel or accept from a woman, would do well to consider this.

Virginia suffered many a bitter pang when she showed herself in public with Philip. She quivered under the open stare, or the look askance of members of her sex; if she showed a brave front, it was that of the Spartan boy! Philip was particularly fond of the opera and the play; he would not have gone without her; so she accompanied him, and made no demur. Of course every relation and friend she had in the world shunned her as though she were a leper, which indeed, morally, she was in their eyes. She loved society; no woman was more calculated to shine in it, and from this she was cut off. True, they constantly entertained brilliant and clever men, whose conversation and company were very agreeable to her; but, however much a woman may like, may even prefer the society of men, it is a bitter thought to her that she cannot command that of her own sex. And, though men treated her with even a greater and more delicate courtesy than they would perhaps have shown their own women, Virginia was none the less keenly conscious of the moral ban under which she lay.

She was the daughter of a clergyman, she had been religiously brought up, and she writhed under the terrible consciousness that her life was a sin against her God. At first she went to church, but everything she heard there sent the iron deeper into her soul; if there were comforting promises to repentant Magdalens, there was nothing but wrath and threatening for those who continued in their sin. By-and-by she left off going to church. Philip was a sceptic, most of his friends were the same. Virginia listened to their talk, and, in time, her faith began to waver; she liked to think they were right, and that the Bible was a string of fables; it lessened her sense of criminality and remorse, but it cut her off forever from the only consolation a woman can know, when her hour of

trial comes. If man could supply the place of God and Saviour now, whither should she fly when he was torn from her or grew weary of her?



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She was glad that she had no children—could she live to be shamed by them, scorned by them? And yet—how sweet it would have been to feel clinging arms about her neck; to hear little voices lisp the sweetest word on earth to a mother's ear, if only she might have been as other mothers—as other wives! Never, never once had she breathed or hinted a wish that Philip should marry her; she had a superstitious dread that once the chain was forged his love for her would cease—marriage could not now reinstate her in the world's sight—she had ceased to remember that her life was a crime. She had heard it said so often that marriage was simply an institution founded upon expediency; that all systems having been tried, the one that worked best was the union of a man to one wife, that she herself began to doubt its being a heaven-ordained institution, and the only state tolerated by Divine Providence. But if she ceased to feel herself actually a guilty and sinning woman, she was none the less sensitive to the world's scorn; to the bitterness of holding a position that society refused to tolerate or to recognize.

But, after all, she knew happiness which is denied to nine-tenths of women, nay, to ninety-nine out of a hundred. She enjoyed the passionate, unflinching devotion of the man whom she adored—no harsh word ever crossed his lips to her—she was his first care and thought—no party of pleasure ever tempted him from her side—nothing but the claim of business could induce him to spend an evening away from her. And so the years passed on. It is an unalterable law of nature that passion must succumb before habit, but it may be succeeded by a calm content, a happy trustful confidence, that wears better, and is perhaps in the long run more satisfactory.

Twelve years elapsed, and during that time Virginia enjoyed unbroken health. Then, one winter, she caught a severe cold, which settled on her lungs; her life was despaired of. No woman was ever a more tender, more devoted nurse than Philip. But this illness left her extremely delicate; she could no longer brave all weathers as formerly, nor be Philip's constant companion in his walks and drives. She was forbidden to go out at night, and they had been so in the habit of going to the play, especially in the winter months. At first he insisted on remaining at home with her, but she was too unselfish to allow him to sacrifice himself. There was many an evening when she was unable to leave her room, and when talking would bring on severe paroxysms of coughing. She succeeded in prevailing upon him to visit the theatre without her, and sometimes even to dine with a friend. After a time he got into the habit of going about alone, and, although he was even more tender and considerate than before, she felt an agonising consciousness that he could, after all, do without her, which he had sworn ten thousand times he never could. She began to have sleepless nights and passionate fits of crying. Nemesis was coming upon her with gigantic strides. Philip did not suspect that she was unhappy; he thought her illness affected her spirits. A great change had come over her, which he deplored. She no longer was the bright, amusing companion of yore.



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Two more years went by. Virginia was almost a confirmed invalid—she could only get out in fine summer weather—then her spirits rallied, and she was something of her old self again. Philip often spent his evenings away from home now; it became a habit; he did not suspect that Virginia suffered from his absence, but thought that it was really her wish, dear, unselfish soul that she was, that he should go out and be amused. And she, fearful of making him fancy that he felt a chain where none existed, was careful never to show him by word or look that she suffered from his absence. She tormented herself with the thought that he might meet any day with a young and beautiful woman who would inspire again in his breast the feeling that he had once known for her. And *she* remembered that she was free, even if he forgot it. Poor soul! she recognised bitterly enough now, that the only safety for a woman is in that bond which a man may so lightly affect to set at naught: in a contract like hers and Philip's, the man has all to gain, the woman all to lose.

It was growing dusk one November afternoon, when the door of Virginia's drawing-room was thrown open, and Lord Harford announced. A slight blush suffused her cheek as she rose to receive him, and she appeared slightly embarrassed. Virginia was still beautiful, though no longer very young; she had an extremely fragile and delicate appearance, which is attractive to some men, notably to those who, like Lord Harford, are big, strong and robust.

"You are not angry with me for coming, are you?" he asks almost diffidently, as soon as the door has closed on the servant.

"No," she answers gently. Times are changed with her since the last occasion in which she and he stood face to face in this very room. Then she was angry, but then she was in the full flush of health and beauty, and he was her would-be lover. There had been nothing to wound or humiliate her in his love-making; he had come loyally to offer her his hand and all that belonged to him, which of wealth and honor was no mean portion. But she had been deeply stung by a man daring to remember that she was free, and there was only one husband and lover in the world for her. Now that, as it seemed to her, beauty and love were so far removed from her, it was almost a pleasure to remember that she had been beloved.

"I have passed your door a hundred times," he says, "and never been able to summon up courage enough to ask for you."

"But to-day you were braver," she utters, looking at him with something of the old smile and manner.

"I thought perhaps you had a good many dull hours now Vansittart is so much away."

"How do you know that he is much away?" asks Virginia, feeling vaguely hurt at his words and tone.



“Because I so often meet him out.”

“Where do you meet him?”

“Oh, at different places. Chiefly at Mrs. Devereux’s.”



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Lord Harford looks full in Virginia's face, and she, who is so quick, cannot fail to see that his eyes and tone are intended to convey some meaning.

"Mrs. Devereux?" she says, inquiringly. "You mean his cousin."

"Yes."

After this there is a pause. It is as though he wanted her to question him; as though she were fighting against the desire to know his meaning. She conquers herself by an effort.

"I have been very ill since you saw me last. You find me much altered, do you not?"

"You look delicate," he answers, "but in my eyes," lowering his voice, "you are as beautiful as ever."

She half-smiles, half-sighs.

"It is very kind of you to say that," she utters, "but I cannot deceive myself. I am an old woman now; if ever I had any good looks they are gone."

"They are *not!*" cries Lord Harford staunchly. "What I say is gospel truth. I think your delicacy becomes you. I hate your great buxom, dairymaid women."

Virginia smiles at his earnestness.

"Ah, if you had been mine," he goes on, "I should never have wanted to look at another woman, young or old."

Still that strange meaning in his tone. A chill terror creeps to Virginia's heart—she can no longer restrain herself.

"What do you mean?" she says, fixing her eyes on him. "You are hinting at something—you want to convey something to my mind. If you are a man—if you pretend to be my friend, speak out honestly."

He rises, and takes one or two turns in the room, then stops abruptly in front of her.

"Will you believe me, I wonder?" he asks, "or will you think me a mean hound who only seeks his own interest?"

"Interest?" echoes Virginia bitterly, "what interest can it be to you?"

"This much," he answers, a red flush mounting to his brow, "that I am as anxious this moment to make you my wife as I was four years ago."



Virginia makes an impatient movement with her hand.

“Vansittart is in love with Mrs. Devereux’s eldest girl, Connie. She is a pretty little kitten of a thing, but a mere child—a doll. I go there rather often—they are old friends of mine. Whenever I go, he is always there.”

For a moment Virginia feels as though she were dying; then, by an extraordinary effort, she recovers herself.

“I would rather have my tongue cut out than tell you,” Lord Harford continues, half-ashamed, “only that I want you to know where your refuge is if he breaks your heart. Oh!” imploringly, “why will you not care for me who am ready to devote my life to you? Marry me, and let us go abroad and win health for you and happiness for me!”

His voice is broken with emotion—he takes one of her hands in his. She is leaning back in her chair, very white—she is hardly conscious of his action—all the hot blood in his veins cannot warm her chill white fingers.



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“Do you think,” she says at last, very slowly, “that if—if he were rid of me, he would marry her? Does she care for him?”

“I don’t think about it. Yes, it is very strange; but, child as she is, he has perfectly infatuated her.”

There is another long pause, during which he eagerly scans her face. Suddenly her eyes light up, and she returns his glance.

“Are you *really* willing to marry me?” she says.

“Why do you ask?” he returns, simply. “Are my eyes not honest?”

Virginia smiles. “If you mean it,” she says, “go now, and write me the same words to-night or to-morrow.”

So, as she bids him, he goes.

* * * * *

Lord Harford had set down nothing in malice. What he told Virginia is absolutely true. Philip Vansittart is in love with a gay, pretty child, whose winsome tricks have coiled her round his heart. He has never spoken one word of love to her, for he feels and knows himself as much bound to Virginia as though the marriage-tie he once so utterly abhorred linked them. He no longer, strange to say, thinks and speaks so evilly of marriage. Were he free, would he not joyfully chain himself with all the bonds that church and society can impose to this sweet young life which would make him young again? He has no thought or desire to blast this girl-life as he had done Virginia’s. Perish the thought! When these ideas come to him, he hates and loathes himself; he makes superhuman efforts to drive them away—but the limpid blue eyes come and look at him over his briefs; the childish voice rings in his ears in the night watches! He grows pale and haggard. At last he makes a mighty resolve.

“Virginia,” he says, two nights after Lord Harford’s visit to her, “let us be married!”

He takes her hand kindly, but his eyes do not meet hers, and the tender inflection of yore is missing from his voice.

Virginia betrays no surprise. Poor soul! She understands too well.

“Why?” she says quietly. “I think we are very well as we are.”

“No,” he returns hastily, “we are not! My views have changed on the subject—changed entirely. Marriage is the best thing. It decides your fate. To live as we do is neither one thing nor the other.”



“You forget,” she says, in a tone so calm as to be almost unnatural. “This state has great advantages. There is no tie between us. If either of us tired of the other, there is nothing to hinder our parting, to-morrow—to-night even.” He looks at her, speechless with amazement. Her eyes do not flinch from his. “If,” she continues, with that terrible calmness,—“if you wanted to marry Miss Constance Devereux; if I wished to marry—let us say, Lord Harford—there is nothing to prevent it except,” slowly, “the unwritten law of a faithful heart.”

Philip Vansittart leans his face between his hands. He cannot find a word to say. He is smitten with remorse, for he knows well enough that she is faithful. But why that allusion to Lord Harford?



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“What do you mean about Harford?” he asks presently.

“He wants me to marry him,” replied Virginia quietly. “He asked me four years ago; he asked me again the day before yesterday.”

She draws a letter from her pocket, and scans Philip’s face as he reads it. When he has finished, he looks at her. She understands his glance but too well. There is an only half-suppressed eagerness—a half-suppressed hope in it.

“What shall I do?” she says, so quietly that it deceives him.

“There is no better fellow living than Harford,” he says cordially. “If you thought you could be happy with him; if—”

He stops abruptly. There is a look of such terrible agony in Virginia’s face that he starts up and takes her hand.

“No, no,” he cries. “Let it be as I said. Let us marry each other. It is the only thing to be done.”

Virginia’s ears, sharpened by suffering, catch the dreary tone of the concluding words.

* * * * *

Next morning, when Philip, according to custom, went to Virginia’s room, he found her asleep. From that sleep she never woke. One more of those unfortunate cases of an overdose of chloral. The deceased lady had suffered much from sleeplessness, and always kept the fatal drug by her bedside.

The church gave its blessing, and society smiled when that heretic and sceptic Mr. Vansittart led his charming girl-bride to the altar a few months later. It was whispered that there had been an—entanglement, but that was all hushed up now, and he had become a respectable member of society.

MR. JOSIAH SMITH’S BALLOON JOURNEY.

It would be an injustice to Josiah to suppose that he limited his quest in the field of knowledge to that particular portion indicated by his honoured association with a distinguished society. He was proud in his modest way, if the paradox be permitted, when he produced his card, on which was engraved “Josiah Smith, F.R.S.A.” Also it was known amongst his friends that casual references to his great work on “Underground England” were not displeasing to him. But, as he was wont to say, “The surest way of finding either mental or bodily recreation is to seek it in fresh fields of labour.”



Thus it came to pass one evening in the spring of this year that Josiah, having shut himself in all day with the determination to make up for lost time, found he had, with the aid of cold tea and wet bandages, added as much as half a page to his great work. Feeling the need of a little change of thought and association, he had availed himself of an invitation kindly sent to him to join the meeting of an aeronautic society. Josiah had listened with profound attention to the various speeches made, and had thought, really, when he had a little more time he would devote it to the fascinating science of aeronautics.



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Amongst the guests of the society, and indeed the hero of the evening, was Captain Mulberry, the famous guardsman who devoted much natural talent and a considerable portion of his life to the endeavour either to kill or hopelessly maim himself. Evil fortune had kept his sword stainless, as far as regular warfare went, but there was generally a little fighting going on somewhere, and, the captain's leave of absence coinciding, he from time to time managed to sniff the exhilarating smell of powder, and knew the music of bullet and shell. These things were surrounded with difficulties. It obviously would not do for a man bearing Her Majesty's commission to lend his sword to one or other belligerents in a conflict between nations at peace with England. In a country like Spain, for example, things naturally run a little irregularly and the captain being on the spot may have occasionally lapsed into battle.

But these were mere episodes. Having tried most things, he had taken to ballooning, as offering the largest amount of risk in the least possible space of time. He had been up in all kinds of balloons in all possible circumstances, and had come down in various ways. He had just now achieved a great feat, making a voyage from the Grampian Hills to the Orkney Islands. The society desiring to do him honour had invited him to this meeting, and Josiah had heard him describe his perilous voyage.

"A mere nothing," he said; "perhaps a little difficult going, but nothing at all coming back. The difficulty in going out was to drop on the Orkneys. The place is so small that when you are up in the air it looks as if you might as well try to drop on a pin's point. But after all, it was a nothing—a mere nothing, gentlemen, I assure you. Any one of you could have done the same."

Every one in the room was delighted, not less with the captain's gallantry than with his modesty. Many moving stories of his escapes were retailed. Josiah listened with enthralled attention to an adventure which, it seems, the captain had had in Spain, and which Josiah's companion (a bald-headed gentleman with spectacles) narrated with great effect. Mulberry in one of the marches of the Carlists, to whom he had attached himself, was surprised and taken prisoner by the enemy. They locked him in the kitchen of a farmhouse near, mentioning incidentally that in the morning they would shoot him. They took away his sword and pistols; and would have taken his umbrella, but the captain pleaded hard for its society, declaring that from early boyhood he had never been able to sleep without an umbrella under his pillow. The Spaniards had heard much of the eccentricity of Englishmen, and not being inclined to refuse the request of a doomed man, they left him the umbrella.

The next morning, when they came to take him out for shooting purposes, lo! the captain and the umbrella were both gone. There was a good deal of soot about the place, and regarding this and other signs of hasty flight the truth flashed upon the Spaniards. There had been a fire in the grate. The captain had opened the umbrella inside the chimney, waited till it had been inflated with the warm air, and then, hanging

on the handle, had been drawn up clear to the top and descending in a neighbouring field, had shut up his umbrella and walked off.



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“Dear me!” said Josiah; “how very interesting. I suppose the chimneys are wide in Spain?”

“Very wide indeed,” said the bald-headed gentleman in spectacles.

Josiah regarded the captain with fresh interest after the recital of this remarkable ascent, and it was not diminished by further tales he heard. One related to his reception by an Illustrious Personage. After his journey to Orkney the I.P. had sent for him immediately on his return to town. The captain had put on his uniform and gone cheerfully. He had heard so much of his feat that he began to think there really was something creditable in it, and fancied the Illustrious Personage might be going to bestow upon him some recognition of the service he had done in blazoning abroad the pluck of the British soldier. On the contrary, he found the Illustrious Person almost speechless with wrath, and stuffed with oaths like plums in a Christmas pudding.

“What—what was the meaning of this flying by night, sir?” he cried turning a flaming visage upon the contrite captain. “You’ll be going round with a circus next, riding five horses at a time, or walking round to show your muscle. I hope I shall hear no more of this sort of thing. Such goings-on bring disgrace upon the army and discredit upon its officers. Stop at home, sir, and get into what mischief you like. Go and idle your time at playing cards or worse; but don’t be playing these pranks any more. Did you ever see *me* in a balloon, sir? Did you ever hear of *me* skimming around the world in search of adventure?”

The Illustrious Personage drew himself up to full height, and swelled visibly before the eyes of the captain, as he angrily put these questions, garnished with many ejaculations. He knew that our army swore terribly in Flanders, and was nothing if not a soldier.

“Your Royal Highness cannot blame us if we sometimes go out of our way to get into danger,” said the captain, saluting. “Your Royal Highness has much to answer for by inflaming us with the memory of Inkermann. How can we sit still or lounge about in our peaceful homes, when we think of you on that day?”

“Tut, tut!” said the Illustrious Personage, spluttering down like a fire on which a bucket of water had been flung, “that was a different thing. But come and dine with me to-night: only, drive up in a hansom, don’t arrive in a balloon.”

And the Illustrious Personage, what with enjoyment of the joke, and what with muscular effort to suppress his laughter, nearly brought about a vacancy in the highest rank of the army.



All this was doubtless as true as the story about the exit from the Spanish farmhouse. But it pleased the company, and was only one of a dozen stories they told about the captain, who was chiefly longing to be out where he could smoke a cigar.



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When the meeting came to an end, Josiah walked along Pall Mall meditating on things, and on the comparative obscurity of the work he had assigned to himself. Whilst others were soaring in high places, he was burrowing underground. Both were in search of knowledge. Both desired to benefit their fellow-men. But of the two Josiah felt that the aeronauts had the advantage of the undergrounders. It was too late for him to think of striking out a new path; but he thought that if he had to begin life again he would soar.

Whilst pondering on these matters, he was startled by a heavy hand laid upon his shoulder, and heard a cheery voice exclaim:

“Got a match in your pocket, old man?”

He looked up, and there, somewhere on a level with the lantern in the neighbouring lamp-post, was the genial face of Captain Mulberry.

“No,” said Josiah, “I’m sorry I have not.”

“Don’t smoke, eh? You don’t look the kind of old boy to have any pleasant vices. I saw you in the Balloon Society’s rooms just now, and rather took a fancy to you.”

“You are very kind,” Josiah said, blushing up to where in earlier and happier days the roots of his hair had been. “I am sure I feel it a great honour.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, I think you’re the innocentest-looking old boy I have seen in a day’s ride. I like innocence, particularly when combined with middle age. It is the rarest thing in the world. I hope you’ll come and dine with me some night at my club.”

“I shall like it very much indeed,” said Josiah, “We are close at my rooms—just here in King Street I live—and if you would step in, you might light your cigar.”

“Thanks, I will. You won’t mind me making up to you in this way; but ‘pon my honour, I took such a liking to your face, seeing it among that mass of humbug where we were just now, that I was going to speak to you then, only I could not get near you.”

Josiah was in a tremor of delight, which presently subsided into a soft glow of contentment, as the captain, stretching himself out over as much of the couch as he could find in the little room, not only lit his cigar, but praised Josiah’s claret and told him a good deal more of his balloon adventures than he had communicated to the eminent society in whose rooms they had met.

“By the way,” he said, “I am going to make a balloon excursion to-morrow. I didn’t mention it to the society because these fellows gab so. There’d be a great crowd round, and I’d only have been hampered. When you mean work, the less you say about it beforehand the better. That is what I have always found. Ever up in a balloon?”



“No,” said Josiah, “but I should very much like to go.”

He had drunk a whole tumbler of claret in honour of his distinguished company, and, being accustomed to more moderate measure, had begun to think going up in a balloon was after all a mere ordinary performance.



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“What do you ride?” asked the captain, looking him up and down, as if either about to measure him for a suit of clothes, or considering where he could most advantageously plant a blow from his ox-hoof-like fist.

“A pony—at least, I used to ride a pony when I was at home: but that is a long time ago, and I have not ridden much since.”

“I mean, what do you weigh,” said the captain, laughing.

“A little over ten stone.”

“Is it possible! why, I pull the scales at seventeen stuns. I’d give something to be your weight. Think of the ballast you might take up with you!”

“Is that an important thing?” Josiah asked, his old instinct of gaining knowledge manifesting itself.

“It’s simply everything. That’s how I managed to get over to the Orkneys. These fellows that go up in balloons which they fit up like first-floor rooms, and take everything with them except a feather bed, don’t know anything about it. They go fumbling around with a few pounds of ballast, and when they get into a wrong current there they stick. Now, between you and me, Mr. Smith, I don’t mind telling you my secret of successful ballooning. Take as much ballast as you can carry, and when you get stuck in a calm or carried off by a wrong current, out goes your ballast, up you shoot, get into another current, and there you are. Ten stuns!” he murmured, gazing wistfully upon the spare figure of his host. “There ought to be a good deal done with that. Tell you what, old chappie, you shall come with me to-morrow.”

Josiah had been a few moments ago possessed with a burning desire to go up in a balloon, but at these words the fire went out and he felt a cold chill steal over his body. Still, he would like to go; but not to-morrow. If it were next month or next week it would be different. But to-morrow was so sudden.

“I rather fancy I have an engagement to-morrow,” he said, producing his pocket diary and anxiously gazing on it in the month of December.

“Nonsense!” said the captain, laying his large hand on Josiah’s shoulder, conveying to him an impression that if he pleased he could take him up, put him in his coat-tail pocket, walk off, and think no more about him till he landed him in a balloon. “You’ve no engagement, and if you had you couldn’t find it by holding your book upside down. You come along with me. There’s not the slightest danger, and it’s not every man who has crossed the Channel in a balloon.”

“The Channel!” cried Josiah feebly. He had thought of some little excursion. Perhaps in the fields ten or twenty miles off. “I don’t think I would like to start with the Channel.



Suppose we begin somewhere else, and try the Channel later on. It will be better—if anything happened, you know—to have the water warm.”

“Nonsense,” said the captain cheerily; “we shall never be nearer the water than 2,000 feet. We’ll dine in Paris to-morrow night, and I’ll take you to the Closerie after dinner. It will do them good to see you there. Now that’s settled, and you’d better go to bed straight off. We’ll have to be up early in the morning to catch the mail train for Dover. I’ve got my balloon there all ready, and we’ll start about noon.”



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This was perfectly horrible. Josiah felt as if it was a hideous nightmare, and he had a dim hope that presently he would wake up. But there was the burly form of the captain before him, with his third cigar sticking in the side of his mouth, and a pleased smile upon his face in anticipation of this new adventure.

Those who have learned something of the character of Josiah by reading earlier chapters of his history, will not need to be told how this ended. If he had been in company of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, when they started on their progress through the fiery furnace, and if they had insisted upon his accompanying them, he would have smiled feebly, and gone—that is, if he could not by some means or other slink away out of sight. Now, if he could have gone out of the door on some pretence and run off, down King Street, he would have borne the subsequent shame and humiliation. But he knew that the captain would have been up with him in five strides. So he determined to make the best of it, drank another tumbler of claret, and became almost hysterically eager for the morning.

“I’ll see you don’t oversleep yourself,” were the last words of the captain as he went off. “I’ll look you up and take you down to Victoria in my hansom. You needn’t bring any luggage, you know. A clean shirt and a tooth-brush will see you through.”

Thus faded Josiah’s last and secret hope, one he had cherished even whilst he drank his claret and talked boldly of aerial navigation. He might, he had thought, peradventure oversleep himself and miss the train, and all would be well. But the captain would call for him, and there was plainly no escape. However, he had made his will, and “Underground England” was in such an advanced stage that it might be published as “a fragment,” and would be sufficient to carry his name down to remotest posterity. Whether it were sweeter thus to vex public desire, to give so much and no more, or to satiate the public with the full accomplishment, was a nice question. Josiah was inclined to think that, other things being equal, he would just as soon live to finish his work. But he had no choice, and after all, the voyage might end happily. Captain Mulberry was an experienced aeronaut. He had never failed, and why should failure be probable now?

Josiah made up his mind upon this point, that if they got safely across in the balloon he would come back by the ordinary boat express. Having once shown his possession of a daring spirit, he would be at liberty to declare his preference for a more prosaic mode of locomotion.

How he got down to Dover he did not know. It all seemed a dream. He had a dim recollection of the captain thundering at his door at six o’clock in the morning. He remembered lighting his Etna, making his cup of coffee, and thinking as he drank it it might be his last. Then they must have caught the train. In fact, he remembered the sound of the rushing carriage, the darkness of the tunnel, the glories of the dawning day, and felt around him the bright fresh sunlit air that made all nature glad.



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They drove out to the balloon, which was down by the gas-works, and was now in process of inflation. Josiah looked upon the monster, swerving first to the right, then to the left, and threatening every moment to break its bonds and go off on its own account. If it only would, what a happy conclusion of this painful adventure! But he could see there was no such danger. The captain was as cheerful as a lark, and looked with kindling eye upon what Josiah regarded as his coffin.

Still, it was no use complaining. A man must die some time; and though there is much to be said against the process being hurried on by unnecessary attempts to cross the Channel in a balloon when there are well-appointed packet-boats, it was no use arguing the matter.

There settled upon Josiah a certain mood of quiet despair. What must be must, and it was better to avoid a scene and imitate as closely as possible the cheerful indifference of the captain.

“Now, old man, in you tumble,” said the captain. “Sit down in the bottom of the car, and keep quiet till we get past this stack of chimneys. If we run into them it’s all over; but I reckon I’ll take you clear.”

This was a cheerful thing to start with. Josiah had pictured all kinds of horrors, ending with the certainty of dropping into the sea. That they should begin with a stack of chimneys was an unexpected aggravation. Still, it might be better to get it over at once. At least, he would fall on land, and the fragments picked up would receive Christian burial.

He got in and sat in the bottom of the car. It was, he noticed, something like one of the coracles of which he had made mention in the preface to “Underground England.” There was something good in that. The Romans made long journeys in the coracle. If the worst came to the worst, they might float.

Even in the anguish of his mind, he couldn’t help wondering when Captain Mulberry would finish coming in. He had never before noticed how tall he was, till he found the necessity of getting out of the way of his legs as he crept between the ropes into the car.

“Let go all!” cried the captain, and Josiah felt his last hour had come. He held his breath and stuck to his hat, being under the impression that the whole affair would shoot up into the air like a rocket. He expected to be deafened by the noise of whizzing through the air, and to be half suffocated with the rush of wind. Looking over to get a last look at the nature of the soil on which he would presently fall, Josiah beheld a strange sight. As far as he knew, the balloon was motionless, while the earth was dropping rapidly from under them as if the laws of gravitation were irrevocably broken and the world was falling through space.



“Done it!” he heard the captain cry in a voice that sounded curiously remote.

“Done what?” said Josiah, anxiously looking up.

“Why, the chimney-stack. Just cleared it by half a foot. I didn’t like to say much about it, but it was a pretty near touch-and-go affair. That’s the worst of filling a balloon. You must do it near a gasworks, and there’s sure to be a stack of chimneys at hand.”



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It seemed but a moment since Josiah had heard the captain call out "Let go all," and there they were in space a thousand feet above the level of the land, sailing calmly along in bright warm sunlight, and with no more motion perceptible than if they were still sitting in the room in King Street—that cherished apartment which Josiah felt his eye would never light on more.

"This won't do," said the captain sternly; "we've got in the wrong current, and instead of going out to sea we are going inland. In half an hour we'll be at Canterbury."

"I have heard Canterbury's a very nice old town," said Josiah. "It wouldn't be a bad place to stop at; and if the wind's contrary to-day, it might be right to-morrow."

The captain said nothing, and Josiah, looking up to see what effect his suggestion might have, noticed for the first time that on a face usually smiling there were possibilities of a fixed hard look which it evidently didn't beseem him to trifle with.

The balloon slowly rose till the aneroid marked a height of 1,500 feet and still the current drove it steadily north-west. Looking southward, Josiah beheld a sight which, if it were the last he was ever to look upon, was at least a glorious glimpse of earth, and sky, and sea. There lay the Channel gleaming in the sun, a broad belt of silver. Beyond it, like a cloud, was France. Dover had vanished even to the crest of the castle on the hill. But Josiah knew where it was by the mist that lay over it and shone white in the rays of the sun. Save for this patch of mist, which seemed to drift with the voyagers far below the car, there was nothing to obscure the range of vision. Josiah could not at any time make out forms of people. The white highways that ran like threads among the fields, and the tiny openings in the towns and villages which he guessed were streets, seemed to belong to a dead world, for nowhere was there trace of living person. The strange stillness that brooded over the earth was made more uncanny by cries that occasionally seemed to float in the air around them, behind, before, to the right or to the left, but never exactly beneath the car. They could hear people calling, and the captain said that they were running after the balloon and cheering. But Josiah could distinguish no moving thing. Yes; once he saw some pheasants running across a field below and pointed them out to the captain. The captain laughed, a strange resonant laugh it seemed in this upper stillness, and said they were "a lot of chestnut horses capering about in the field." A flock of sheep in another field huddled together, looked like a heap of limestone chippings. As for the fields, stretched out in illimitable extent, far as the eye could reach, they seemed to form a gigantic carpet, with patterns chiefly diamond-shaped, and in colour shaded from bright emerald to russet brown.

"This won't do," the captain said again, and seizing a bag of ballast he emptied it. The balloon swiftly rose, and the aneroid marked 2,500 feet. The villages seemed mere spots, the pattern of the carpet grew blurred. Nothing was distinguishable—nor horse, nor sheep, nor any living thing.



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“Hurrah!” cried the captain, “we’re off now.”

Nearer and nearer came the belt of silver which seemed to girdle continent and island. They were close to Dover, and could make out the town. Josiah, knowing well the irregular plan on which the streets are laid out, was struck by the manner in which, as looked down upon from this height, they formed themselves into beautifully defined curves, straight lines, and other highly respectable geometrical shapes. They saw the castle and the pier with what seemed to be ants crawling on it. A little patch of colour, that to Josiah looked like a ball of scarlet worsted, was, the captain said, a sentry on duty.

“There’s Shakespeare’s Cliff,” said the captain. “The Earl of Gloucester should be with us now:—

How fearful
And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles; half-way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head:
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark,
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight.”

“I’ll look no more,” said Josiah, who also knew his Shakespeare.

“Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.”

It was passing strange and at first dreadful, this intense silence and this strangeness of the familiar earth. But after a while everything like terror passed away from Josiah’s mind. He began to feel the fascination of the thing. His spirits rose as he breathed the delicious air, and when the captain said, “We are over the water now,” and Josiah looking down discerned the sea gleaming below, he could have clapped his hands for joy.

“This is splendid,” said the captain. “We’ll be across in half an hour. We’ll catch the train for Paris, and you shall dance at the Closerie to-night.”

Josiah didn’t dance, and didn’t know what the Closerie might be. But he was not without susceptibility to the allurements of a quiet dinner in Paris, and began to feel the exhilaration of having accomplished a perilous feat, to which he would certainly drag in some reference in his great work. It would be difficult, as he was as far as possible



remote from Underground England. But it might be worked in some antithetical sentence.

After they had sailed for the space of ten minutes the captain, who had been throwing out bits of paper which they left far behind, suddenly said a bad word.

“We are becalmed,” he continued, and truly the bits of paper flung out floated idly round the balloon. “We must get out of this.”

He cast out the ballast, bag after bag, and higher still they soared. Nevertheless, whenever they flung out the bits of paper, they floated here and there, some dropping back into the car.



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“There goes our last bag of ballast,” said the captain, “and may luck go with it. We are lost men unless it takes us into another current, which let us hope won’t be coming from the East and carry us out into the Atlantic.”

Up again they mounted, how many feet Josiah didn’t know, but he was sensible of a sudden iciness in the atmosphere, a tingling of the blood at his finger ends, and a strong disposition to bleed at the nose. The captain threw out some more bits of paper. Still they circled round and round, dropping into the car or falling to the distant earth now utterly out of sight. They had passed through the cloud, and had above them a chilly sun and an intensely blue sky. Below them were the clouds, on one of which was clearly caught the shadow of the balloon. Josiah, when he moved his head, could see an answering motion on the cloud, and recognised the reflection of the captain’s figure, sitting stern and erect, with his teeth set and a look of angry determination on his brow.

This frightened Josiah a great deal more than the captain’s words. He felt that they were lost in space, and that the end must speedily come. This terrible look on the captain’s face made him sick at heart.

“Mr. Smith,” said the captain, speaking scarcely above a whisper, but his voice sounded as if he were shouting from the housetops, “you told me you were *not* a married man.”

“Yes,” said Josiah, “I have never been married.”

“That is so, or I should not have asked you to come with me. And you have not many relations?”

“No,” said Josiah, “there are not many that would miss me.”

“Very well,” said the captain; “I have; but your life is as valuable as mine, and I would hold you at no disadvantage. The fact is, we are becalmed, and there is no prospect of any wind reaching us here till night, when we shan’t know which way we are drifting, and may as well give up all hope. There is wind overhead, I know, and it is going straight for France. If we could get up another thousand feet or so, we should catch the current and be over land in ten minutes. But all the ballast has gone, and there is only one thing to be done.”

“What’s that?” asked Josiah faintly.

“One of us must go overboard,” said the captain.

Josiah felt his heart sink within him.

“I am not sure that it would be much use my going over,” the captain continued, discussing the matter as quietly as if he were arranging what they should have for dinner. “I’m such a thundering weight, you’d shoot up till you bumped your head against



Jupiter; and besides, you would not know what to do with the balloon if I was gone. Still, I think we should have equal chances. Now, I'll give you the first chance. You get hold of me and try to push me over. If I go, you will find the balloon shoot up; but don't be frightened: you'll be all right in a bit, and can let out a few feet of gas. If you can't get me over—well, I must try to get *you* over. Hold on a bit till I light a cigar.”



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In the calm still air the captain struck a light, bending low in the car to avoid contact of flame and gas, bit the end of a cigar, and lit it. Josiah, shaking with terror, could see in the shadow of the balloon on the cloud the smoke curling up from the cigar and lazily spreading itself out.

“Now, old chappie,” said the captain, “I’m ready. Heave hard, and over I go.”

What was the use of disputing with a man like this? Josiah never had been inclined to fight with men of strong will. He was certain he could not move the captain, but he was able to try, and try he did. He got one foot over the car, the captain encouraging him and cheerfully smoking.

“Very well done, old man. A few more tugs, and over we go. I’ll just have time to finish my cigar before I get to the bottom.”

Josiah tugged and tugged till he felt the warm blood rushing through his veins and his breath came short. But though he might move one of the captain’s colossal legs, which seemed to his disordered fancy to be the size of the Monument, he could do no more. The captain sat passive, encouraging him by every kindly phrase he could think of. But it was of no use, and after ten minutes’ violent struggling Josiah threw himself back in the car.

“Very sorry, old man,” said the captain, with a tone of unmistakable sincerity. “Thought once you’d have done it; but I’ve got a little out of training lately and run up half a stun. Now I must see what I can do with you.”

First of all he tore off some slips of paper and threw them out. Josiah looked at them with hungry eyes. Round and round they spun, falling back into the car or dropping to the world beyond the clouds. There was no hope of movement for the balloon.

“Well, Mr. Smith, it’s your turn now. I must see what I can do. It’s not nice for either of us, but it would be no nicer to stay here and be starved to death or blown out to sea. You won’t feel anything after the first rush. Good-bye. I am sorry there will be no opportunity of my communicating with you as to the result of this interesting experiment. I don’t suppose,” the captain added, his love of scientific research increasing his unfeigned regret for the inconvenience Josiah was about to suffer, “that ever before ten stun was dropped out of a car in a lump. I reckon I’ll get as high as most people have been. Now, if you’ve any message, just hand it over. If I can do anything for you in King Street or anywhere else, you may depend upon me.”

“No,” said Josiah, gulping down a rising sob; “if you will only say I went off bravely and didn’t flinch, that will be all. Perhaps you might write a few lines by way of preface to ‘Underground England,’ pointing out that I died in the interests of science.”



“Certainly, my dear fellow, it shall be done,” said the captain, with quite a glow of honest energy. “If you’d like a little monument or anything of that sort, I’ll see it’s run up. Now, over you go. Time’s getting on, and I don’t want to miss the Paris train. Give us a shake of your paw, then shut your eyes, for I fancy I shan’t have much difficulty with you. Heave your watch over or take it with you!”



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“If you wouldn’t mind accepting it,” said Josiah, pulling out his fine old turnip-shaped time-piece, “as a memento of our friendship—which, though brief, has I trust been sincere—it would give me great pleasure.”

“Certainly,” said the captain, weighing it in his hand critically, and thinking to himself that it might serve as ballast in a last emergency. “I’ll hang it over my bed, and will think of you whenever it ticks. Nothing more to say?”

“No,” said Josiah; “only, please to drop me feet first.”

The captain took him in his arms as if he were a child, held him for a moment over the side of the car, and with a cheery farewell dropped him.

Josiah felt his hat go, and could see the balloon shoot up with tremendous rapidity, though, as he reckoned, the rate of velocity would need to be divided by about half, as he was simultaneously descending rapidly. He felt the rush of air, and shrank from the moment, coming nearer and nearer, when he should strike the earth. He seemed an unconscionably long time falling. Still, through the clouds he went, and, it seemed to him at the end of five minutes, began to get glimpses of the earth. Down he went like a shot. The rushing noise in his ears grew more intolerable. There was a swift upgrowth of the hedgerows, a sudden vision of cows and horses, and of people running across fields. Then a heavy bump, and Josiah, opening his eyes, found himself lying on the floor in the room in King Street.

On the table were an empty claret bottle and two tumblers. The room was full of the smoke, now growing stale, of cigars. Josiah was shivering with cold, and the room was dark save from what light flickered in from the lamp down the street. He struck a light, and there in its accustomed place on the mantelpiece was his watch, the hands pointing to three o’clock. Dazed and shivering he crept into bed, where he thought the matter over, and amid much that was bewildering groped his way to the conclusion that Captain Mulberry really had come into his room, had spent an hour with him, smoked cigars, drunk claret, and then gone off. He remembered standing at the head of the stairs shaking hands with him, and promising to dine with him at his club one day in the following week. Then he had gone back and lain on the couch, where, overcome with the unaccustomed tumbler of claret and dazed with the tobacco smoke, he had fallen asleep, dreamed, and rolled off on to the floor.

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CHAPTER I.



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A poor garret on the sixth floor of one of the poorest houses in the poorest quarters of Paris, does not give much opportunity for a detailed description. There is little to be said about the furniture, which in this case consisted of a rickety old table, a wooden stool, and a small charcoal stove, all of the commonest kind, but all clean, and the room was not quite without adornment. The window, to be sure, was in the roof, but pinned to the wall were a few newspaper prints in strong blacks and whites, and—most remarkable of all—there was an alcove for the bed, which was carefully shut off from the room by a gaily variegated chintz. In spite of its poverty and bareness, there was nothing squalid or unwholesome about the place.

The house itself was a tall narrow slip. People of different callings, and different degrees of respectability, lived in it; on the whole it had not a bad character. The landlord was an immensely fat man, called Plon—a name which, irresistibly converted into Plon-Plon, seemed to give an aristocratic air to the house—and he lived and made shoes in a small room at the foot of the lowest flight of stairs, so that he acted as his own *concierge*, and boasted that no one came in or out without his knowledge. Probably some of his lodgers contrived to elude his vigilance, but he was as obstinate in his belief as an old Norman has a right to be, and was a kind-hearted old fellow in the main, though with the reputation of a *grogard*, and a ridiculous fear of being discovered in a good action. Perhaps with this fear, the more credit was due to him for occasionally running the risk, as when he saw young Monnier, the artist, coming down the stairs one evening with a look in his eyes, which Plon told himself gave him an immediate shuddering back-sensation, as of cold water and marble slabs. Plon did something for him, perhaps knocked off the rent, but he implored Monnier to show his gratitude by saying nothing, and he never gave him more of a greeting than the sidelong twist he vouchsafed to the other lodgers. For the rest, his benevolence depended in a great measure upon his temper, and he prided himself upon being very terrible at times.

With five floors we have nothing to do, and need waste no time over them. The inmates mostly went out early and came in late, but the house kept better hours than its neighbours, for the simple reason that those who arrived after a certain time found themselves shut into the street for the night. They might hammer and appeal in the strongest language of their vocabulary, but Plon snored unmoved, and nothing short of a fire in the house would have turned him out of his bed. Gradually this became so well understood, that his lodgers accommodated themselves to it as to any other of the inexorable laws of fate.

On the sixth and highest floor the crowded house resolved itself into comparative quiet. Besides the garret of which we have spoken, there were two other rooms, but for some years past these had been used merely as store-rooms for furniture. No one knew to whom the furniture belonged, some curious speculators avowing that Plon had a child—a girl—at school in Normandy, and had collected it as part of her dowry; others that some mysterious tie of gratitude bound him to the owner. Whoever was right or wrong, the rooms remained closed and unlet.



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The garret itself was inhabited by a young widow, whose story was sufficiently sad. She was the daughter of a farmer in the north of France, and married to a glazier, Jean Didier by name, with whom she had come to Paris in search of work. If there had been no war, and, above all, no Commune, things might have gone well with the young couple, but, unhappily, one followed the other, and there was an end of peace. Jean was no fool, but he was too certain that he was extremely wise not to make mistakes, and he possessed enough of the French nature to be easily influenced by the brag and fine promises which filled the air at that time. It is always satisfactory to reflect on changes which assure us the highest step of a ladder, which ordinarily takes a life-time for a step. Jean talked a great deal about it, not only to Marie, who would have been safe, but to others who agreed with him more thoroughly, and were dangerous. Nevertheless, when the Commune, in March, 1871, broke into actual life, and Jean began to see what it all meant, he was terrified by the outburst and held back. Things which look seductive in theory, have a way of losing their gloss when they appear as hard realities, with accompaniments which do not belong to the ideals; and the rabble rout of half-drunk citizens who marched, shouting, through the streets of the 19th *arrondissement*, frightened Marie out of her senses. She clung to Jean, and implored him not to join them on pain of breaking her heart. To do him justice, common sense, perhaps aided by a desire to keep out of the way of rifle-balls, was proving stronger than bombast; and, to do him justice again, he was desirous to keep others than himself from danger.

It was this which brought about the catastrophe. May came, and with it the conquering troops from Versailles poured into the city. It was sufficiently clear what the end would be; Jean, who never distrusted his own reasoning powers, insisted, in spite of his wife's prayers and Plon's expostulations, in going out into the streets, and trying to dissuade some of his comrades from fighting. He promised to return immediately, but he did not come, Marie became almost frenzied with terror. She would have rushed out to seek him, but that she knew not where to turn, and if he came, wanting help, and she was not there to give it, matters might go hardly with him. The din of battle drew nearer, shells were falling, bullets were whizzing, it seemed hardly possible that any one could escape, and yet, men went by shouting and singing, mad with either drink or excitement. Plon, after entreating Madame Didier to come farther into shelter, shut himself into his little room with a white face, and was seen no more. Everything seemed to grow more horrid as the night drew on.

At about ten o'clock, Plon, hearing voices in the passage, peeped out. There still stood Madame Didier, wan as a ghost, but with the restless excitement gone. A man was speaking to her, an elderly, grimy, frightened-looking man, with a bald head. He was telling a story in a dull, hopeless kind of way, as if at such a time no one story was particularly distinguished from another, and pity had to wait for quieter seasons.



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“He was shot in the next street; Jean says he never wished to go with them, but they forced him along. After that he got into a doorway, where he might have hidden himself, but Fort saw him, and denounced him. Fort might have left him alone, as it was he your husband was trying to persuade, but at such a time men look after their own skins. They dragged him out and set him up with some others against a wall, and that was the end of him, and of a good many others.”

His listener flung up her hands with a gesture of wild despair, and turned her face to the wall, speechless. The man, who was by trade a *trieur* or chief *chiffonnier*, seeing Plon’s head appear, turned round and addressed himself to him.

“Fort is a traitor, he has denounced others. They will be here presently searching for arms. It is short work I can tell you.”

“And my—my *locataire* is shot!” murmured Plon, panic-struck. But the man whose mission was ended, turned round without another word and went out into the lurid darkness.

The landlord made a trembling effort to stagger across the passage, and to pluck at Marie’s gown. When he spoke, his voice quavered with fright.

“Come, come, Madame Didier, go upstairs, and—and—cry there like a good woman. Here it isn’t safe. Besides, if they know who you are, I might be compromised. Poor Jean! Heavens!—”

For a volley of rifle shot poured down the street, a rush of feet followed; and Plon fled precipitously to his den, double-bolted his door, and rolled his mattress round him for protection. Marie Didier slowly turned her head, and, as if recognising the wisdom of his advice, felt her way along the wall and groped up the dark staircase. No one had lit the small oil lamp on the *premier*, but light from burning houses flashed in at windows; a child had been killed by the fragment of a shell, and the mother was loudly wailing; some were peering out of their doorways; they stared at Marie, who crept up like a ghost. In this rookery the young couple had kept themselves apart, and had no friends. But it was instinctively known that something had happened to Jean, and only one woman was bold enough to question the wife. She answered steadily in a strange strained voice:

“They are searching the houses. We shall have them soon.”

It was, however, an hour before a party of soldiers made a rough visitation. They dragged Plon out of his mattress, and made him climb the stairs, panting and protesting. When they reached the top garret, Marie was sitting in the darkness, with her arms on the poor table; she did not move as they entered.



“Bring in the lantern!” shouted the sergeant. “Now, good woman, who have you got hiding here?”

She turned a white face upon him, speechless. Plon, who was recovering his composure, pressed forward, and laid a hand on the soldier’s arm.

“Don’t worry her, sergeant,” he said, “her husband has just been shot.”



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“Serve him right,” said the man brutally. “Are there more of the brood about?”

“Not a soul. They lived here alone, these two.”

“Well, we’ll see.”

“No cupboards here,” said a soldier, whose face was bleeding from a bayonet scratch.

“There’s a trap door, though,” said the sergeant, holding the lantern up to the ceiling. He glanced sharply at Marie, but she remained immovable. “Humph,” he grumbled, “if he is shot he is out of the way. Now, friend Porpoise, the other rooms if you please.”

They searched these thoroughly with no better success. But when they had satisfied themselves and were out again, the sergeant, whose suspicions seemed to have been aroused, flung open the door of the Didiers’ garret, and turned the lantern full upon Marie once more. She had not moved hand or foot.

“What is that blood?” said the sergeant, pointing to a trail of red drops on the floor.

For answer she silently rolled back her sleeve, and unbandaging her arm, showed a deep cut, from which the blood still oozed.

“Good. She has no one,” said the man, withdrawing the light.

This, as all the world knows, was in 1871. Four years afterwards, at the time my story begins, Marie Didier still occupied that attic. She lived by taking in needlework, and it was sometimes a wonder to the few who knew her, that working so hard as she did, she should remain so poor. The furniture of her attic I have described, the sole addition she had made to it was the gay chintz which curtained off the alcove with the bed. She was always ready to do a kindness, but made no acquaintances, and the only persons who ever climbed to her attic were Plon, who made occasional weighty visitations, often discoursed upon his prowess at the time of the Commune; and an idiot girl called Perine, whom Marie one day found crying in the street; she had no father or mother, and the old rag-picker she lived with beat her. Once or twice Marie gave her food, and the poor creature attached herself to her like a dog, followed her upstairs and lay across her door. After a while Madame Didier admitted her into her room at times, and let her share her poor meals, and sleep on a heap of sacking outside the door. Perine, in such prosperity, was as happy as a queen. It is true that Plon at first objected, but Marie could persuade him into anything, and he only grumbled.

On one winter day, Marie was stooping over the stove stirring something in an earthen pipkin; Perine, seated on the wooden stool, leaned forward and watched her operations with excessive interest. Perhaps for want of an intelligent companion, Madame Didier was in the habit of soliloquising aloud, and at this moment she was saying cheerfully:



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“Not much, to be sure, but something! I should have liked a carrot or two, but in these hard times that would have been extravagant. And, after all, there is some credit in making good soup out of nothing at all. If one could run here and there in the market—’A pound of your best veal, monsieur’—’A bunch of those fine turnips, and a stick of celery, madame’—well, truth obliges me to admit that it is possible the soup would have a finer flavour, but there would not be the satisfaction of seeing it grow out of a few onions a crust of bread, and a pinch of salt. And that is a satisfaction which I am favoured with tolerably often. Well, Perine, my child, it interests you—this occupation—does it not? Do you think you will ever learn to make soup?”

The girl nodded many times.

“Perine eat it,” she said.

“Listen to her!” Marie exclaimed, patting her cheek approvingly. “And that any one should say she has no sense! She knows as well as any of us, that the great thing in soup is to eat it with an appetite, and so she puts together two and two—”

She was interrupted by the girl.

“Four!” she said abruptly.

Madame Didier, instead of showing astonishment, began to laugh.

“There she is with her numbers again! How strange it is that she should never forget a number or make a mistake in a sum! In taking away or adding together one can’t puzzle her. I don’t mean that I can’t,” she continued, apparently addressing no one in particular, “because I am a poor ignorant woman; but wiser people than I. Now, Perine, you shall have your lesson. See here, I shall stand near my bed, and you over there with your face to the wall. Do you understand?”

The girl nodded, and stumbling along towards the place indicated, contrived on her way to knock down and break into atoms a white dish.

“Oh, the unfortunate child!” cried Marie, darting forward. “Another! and it was my last! How many more things will you destroy!”

At this reproach the guilt-stricken Perine covered her face and howled aloud, and Madame Didier’s momentary anger passed.

“There, don’t cry!” she said, “crying does no good, and it was an accident. You’ll be more careful another time, won’t you? Try to move gently, and look where you go, or some day you will hurt yourself. At present let me see you stand well against the wall, so! I put on the soup—and we are ready.”



As she said these words she went back to the alcove. And then a strange thing happened. For from behind the gaily-figured chintz, there issued a strange hoarse whisper, which caused so little astonishment to Madame Didier, that she merely echoed the words aloud. Apparently this was Perine's lesson.

"Seven six nine, and eight five four," repeated Madame Didier.

The answer from the girl came instantaneously:

"Sixteen hundred and twenty-three."



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Her teacher paused for a moment, perhaps to allow the whisperer time for objection, if there were one to make, but as nothing came she said cheerfully:

“Good! Now let me think of another.”

“Nine ought three, and fifteen nine seven,” prompted the hidden voice.

“Ah, here is a fine one! Nine ought—” she hesitated, “fifteen—”

The voice corrected her impatiently: “Nine ought three, and fifteen nine seven.”

In the same whisper she answered “Hush!” warningly, before repeating the figures aloud and correctly. The girl, on her part, returned rapidly and indifferently:

“Twenty-five hundred.”

“She seems a different creature when she is doing it!” Marie exclaimed admiringly.

“Now one more, and then I must run down and see in what sort of a temper Monsieur Plon finds himself. If it is good, he will lend me his journal. At any rate, I shall only be gone a moment. *Allons!* Something difficult, something to take away, shall it be?”

As before the whisper responded:

“From thirteen thousand nine hundred and fifty-nine, take eight thousand five hundred and four.”

Madame Didier began in a puzzled voice, “From eight thousand five hundred and four, take thirteen—” but, seeing Perine shake her head, caught herself up. “No, no, not that, of course not that!”

“The other way, stupid woman!” said the whisper.

Slowly she started again, “From thirteen thousand,” and, interprompted by the mysterious voice, arrived at the end of her sum, “nine hundred and—fifty—nine—take—eight—thousand—five hundred—and—four.”

Quick as thought came the answer:

“Five thousand four hundred and fifty-five.”

“All those fives! You are really a wonder, Perine!” said Marie happily. “I never could do anything like that, decidedly I am only fit to make soup. Well, every one to his trade—we can’t dine upon figures. If we could you would provide us with plenty, eh, my child? But now I have something for you to do while I am away. Here is the stool; I am going to put it before the fire, so, and you shall sit upon it and watch the pot for me. Don’t



move, and don't look behind you, and then, by-and-by, you shall have a basin of the soup. If only I had something to put into it, something good, for bread and onions are not too fattening. However, there is plenty to be thankful for. Remember, Perine, you must not take your eyes off the soup."

The girl, who seemed to have the faculty of obedience, sat down where she was directed, and fastened her stolid gaze upon the pot. For a time there was absolute silence in the garret, a ray of cold winter sunshine, cold but bright (for this was Paris), streamed in through the little window in the roof, and fell on Perine's slouching figure and coarse hair. Less than five minutes, however, had passed, when the chintz curtains of the alcove shook, parted, and from between them looked out a pale and haggard man's face.



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It will be guessed that this third inhabitant of the sixth floor attic was no other than Jean Didier, whose name had been entered in the *bureau* of police—when they tried to get some imperfect statistics of missing men—as “Jean Didier, glazier; fought with the insurgents, wounded at the barricade of the Rue Soleil d’Or, May 28th, 1871; denounced as Communist by Andre Fort; executed on the spot.” Nevertheless, for once the police were wrong. Jean was not shot, though it was true he was shot at. Fear, or loss of blood, or an instinctive effort at self-preservation, caused him to reel and fall just a second before a couple of bullets which should have found a home in his body, spent themselves in the blood-stained wall over his head. The tide of slaughter ebbed away, leaving ghastly heaps of dead men. From one of these a shadow by-and-by detached itself, and drifted homewards, to the spot where Marie was waiting in terrible anguish.

Her courage came back with the need for it; it took very little to add to the disguise which fire and a wound had brought upon him; the people in the house were at that moment much occupied with dragging down the papers they had pasted over their windows. He crawled upstairs, and when she had hastily bound up his wound, and given him some food, he managed to get out on the roof through the trap-door. There he spent three days, coming down at night, till she was able to put up her new chintz curtains, and here in the garret he had remained ever since, sometimes fairly patient, sometimes finding his lot insupportable, and railing at fate, at Marie, and at Providence. He had had a few narrow escapes, but his wife was as cunning as a fox when he was concerned, and fortune had favoured him.

Perine’s presence had a double aspect. The loneliness of the position was so difficult for a man of his temperament to support, that he welcomed it at times as a distraction, and these exercises of the strange ingenuity of brain which she possessed, at the cost, as it seemed, of all other intelligences, would very often interest and amuse him. On the other hand she was quite as valuable as a grievance. If he had no other fault to find with his wife, he could always blame her for suffering the idiot girl to hang about the place, and the relief of this was enormous. On the present occasion he contemplated her broad back with displeasure.

“Wretched creature! There she sits, and will sit till Marie comes back; I wonder what she thinks would happen to her if she were to look round? Lucky for me if she pictures some terrible fate. What sort of confused nonsense is running through her head now? Soup and Marie take a prominent place, I wager. So precious hard up does one become in this rat’s hole, that I make her my problem as she makes the soup hers, poor wretch! Yet, my excellent friend, Jean Didier, I would counsel you to keep your compassion for yourself, for, believe me, you want it at least as much. As much? Rather, a hundred times more! For she—she knows nothing of the blessings she has missed, while I—Heavens, I know too well! To be cooped up here, to see no one but Marie and this idiot; to be aware that at any moment any thing, the merest trifle, might betray me to death, or at least transportation to New California,—was ever man so unhappy in this world!”



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Jean, who had a turn for the melodramatic, tugged despairingly with both hands at his hair, Perine, meanwhile, intent upon the soup, bent forward and stirred it.

“Soup for mother and Perine,” she muttered.

“What red hands she has!” continued Jean with a grimace, “and I hate to hear her call Marie, mother. But it’s just Marie all over. She never could see a poor wretch, were it only a hunted rat, but she must take it up, and give herself all the trouble in the world, when she might have left it alone. She was just the same as a little girl, I see her now, in her little round cap and woollen frock, scattering food for the frozen-out birds in the hard winters. Such a pretty, rosy-faced little thing as she was, and they all so fond of her! I recollect taking her to school in my wooden sledge, and she—What’s the girl about now? Why—what dog has bitten her! She has taken my tobacco from the shelf—she—not—! Yes, by heaven, she has poured it all into the soup!”

“Perine heard mother say she wanted something to make the soup good,” laughed the girl, nodding her head, and quite unconscious that behind her the enraged Jean was violently shaking his fist.

“Horror! To see tobacco, dinner, everything ruined by that creature without being able to say a word! It is simply atrocious of Marie to go away, leave her to do all this mischief, and then expect me to put up with it! My pipe, my one comfort! Ah-h-h-h! if only I could box her ears and stop her from grinning away as if she had done a clever thing!”

It was at this moment that Marie returned, carrying in her arms a cabbage. At the door, seeing the angry and distracted gesture of her husband, she paused in consternation.

“But what then? Has anything gone wrong? The soup—Perine, you unfortunate child, have you touched the soup?”

The girl pointed with triumph to where the tobacco had been.

“Good stuff, mother,” she said, nodding.

“The tobacco! You have it put in!—Oh, my poor friend, no wonder you are angry!” said Madame Didier in an undertone.

“Out with her!” cried her husband in a fierce whisper.

“Perine, Perine, and I have warned you so often to touch nothing without leave! Now you have spoilt the soup, and we can have no dinner.”

There was this inconvenience in the quick remorse which seized the girl when Marie reproved her, however gently, that she broke at once into sobs, which were as clumsy and unmanageable as her hands and feet. Jean disliked them intensely, and he now



made frantic signs to his wife that she was to be sent away. “But she is as hungry as we are,” pleaded Marie, “and see, M. Plon has given me a cabbage, I can manage something.”

He was, however, inexorable; and his wife, always afraid of his committing some imprudence, though on the whole Jean might be trusted to take care of himself, said sorrowfully:



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“Perine, my poor child, you must go; there is no dinner for you today. Don’t cry, don’t cry; you meant no harm—you did not know, and Heaven is witness how sorely we sometimes suffer for that!”

Between her sobs the girl jerked out piteously:

“Perine come back?”

Marie looked imploringly at her husband, but he shook his head.

“Not tonight, not to-night, my child. As you go out beg for a bit of bread from M. Plon, he is in a splendid temper, and will not refuse it. There make haste, go!”

She took her by the shoulders and pushed her towards the door, but when she left her outside, kissed her.

PART II.

Perine had no sooner gone than Jean came out and flung himself angrily on a chair.

“I shall stand this no longer. I give you notice of my determination, Marie. You have her here, I believe, solely to torment me. Figure to yourself having to stand by helpless, and see the creature put an end to both one’s dinner and one’s pipe! She is not to come here any more, those are my orders. Do you hear?”

“Yes, I hear,” said Marie quietly, “but I beg of you to change your mind. We are badly off, I allow, yet somehow or other we can always rub along, and this poor child is in worse plight than we are.”

“Worse? Nonsense. No one can be worse off than I am. Denounced, executed, for I assure you I felt that bullet go through my brain, saved just by the hair of my head—”

“Such a mercy!” breathed the wife.

“A mercy, yes—but you who can go and come and amuse yourself, never think what this life must be to me, cooped up like a rat in his hole. There are times when I believe I should do better to give myself up.”

“For the sake of Heaven, Jean—!”

“At any rate,” said Jean, descending from his heights, “I will not have that *imbecile* here. You understand?”

Marie looked at him indulgently. “Yes, my friend, I understand.”



“I’ll lay a wager you never got that journal from old Plon-Plon?”

“He had not finished with it.”

“Of course not. Then I shall go to sleep, for there is nothing else for me to do.”

He flung a handkerchief over his eyes as he spoke, put his feet on Perine’s stool, and his elbow on the table. Marie moved quietly about, set the saucepan again on the stove, and taking some needlework from a box, sat down near her husband, stitching rapidly. Every now and then she glanced at him, and her mind was tenderly busy over his concerns all the while, so that tears would have stood in her eyes if they had not had other work to do.



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“How sad the poor fellow looks!” she thought. “I’m glad he’s asleep, after that unfortunate affair with the pipe. When I remember how hard it is to get tobacco for him, for I am dreadfully afraid that some one will suspect me when I ask for it, I must own that Perine is an unlucky child. But as for her not coming again, he doesn’t mean that, no, no—he’s so kind hearted that he would be the last to keep her away; besides, I know very well that while he grumbles he feels an interest in hearing her do those wonderful sums. Anything is better for him than seeing no one but stupid me from year’s end to year’s end—my poor Jean! Three years! I declare it quite hurts me to go out and about, though to be sure I must. But it seems so selfish.”

There is no knowing to what depths of accusing wickedness Madame Didier’s meditations would have led her, but that presently she heard a heavy creaking step upon the stairs; and flew to awake her husband and to hustle him into his refuge. M. Plon’s visits were rare, and she discouraged them with all her might, yet when he arrived panting and puffing at the door, she was standing by the stove working, with a little coquettish air of greeting about her.

“You don’t mean to say that you have brought the journal yourself, M. Plon! Now that is kind of you, but it is disarranging yourself too much to climb up those steep stairs, when I could have fetched it with pleasure.”

“Ugh, ugh, they are steep, there’s no denying it,” said Plon, sinking into the rickety chair. “But what would you have? Up here on the sixth, you can’t expect all the luxuries of the first or second.”

“Heavens, no!”

“You should cultivate a contented frame of mind. Madame Didier, and beware of grumbling.”

“Was I grumbling?”

“You were complaining—complaining of the stairs, and it is a pernicious habit. Don’t encourage it.”

“But, indeed—” Marie was beginning with a smile, when he interrupted her with a majestic wave of his hand.

“*Halte la!* Now you are contradicting, and that is another bad habit, particularly for a woman. But nobody knows when they are well off in these days. I often say to my friends: ‘There is Madame Didier, she lives in that nice airy attic of ours; she has no one to think of but herself, no cares, no responsibilities; she ought to be as happy as a bird.’ Look at me, I entreat you; what a contrast! At everybody’s beck and call, cooped up in a draughty little den, making shoes with a thousand interruptions. I ask you what sort of a



life is that for a man of my stamp? If you were to try it for a week, you'd find out whether you were not a lucky woman! But, there, as I said before, nobody ever knows when they are well off—not even widows. I say all this because I take a real interest in you.”

“I know you do, M. Plon, if only for the sake of my poor husband,” said Marie demurely. To say the truth she was often in a state of uncomfortable doubt as to whether M. Plon's interest might not be going to take a warmer form, in which case it might be more difficult than ever for Jean to forget that he was no longer in the land of the living.



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“But I must say I don’t think you are the best of managers,” said M. Plon with a magisterial sweep of his hand which took in all the poor surroundings. “With your earnings you might do better than you do, Madame Didier. One mouth to feed, one person to dress—”

“There is Perine,” faltered poor Marie.

“Yes, there is Perine, and it is true those imbeciles have appetites like wolves. Still—well, well, you must not suppose that I am blaming you; on the contrary, it might surprise you to hear—”

M. Plon was edging his chair a little nearer to Madame Didier, and she thought it was time to interrupt his explanation, so she said briskly:

“Ah, by the way, what news is there to-day in *Le Petit Journal*?”

“There is the great robbery.”

“The great robbery! Where?”

“In the Rue Vivienne. The paper is full of it—jewellery, diamonds, plate, treasures of all kinds carried off, chest and all, that’s the wonderful part of it, for a chest is not a thing to hide in your pocket.”

“And have they no clue?” asked Marie, much interested.

“Not yet, but there must have been a cart or a cab, or some vehicle in the affair. It is clear enough that this belongs to the *haute pègre*, none of your common burglars would have attempted such a daring stroke; and I would lay a wager, too, that they’re not so far off from here, if they’re in Paris, that is. I shall keep a sharp look-out, for the reward is fabulous.”

“Really!” said Madame Didier with a sigh.

“One would suppose you wanted it yourself,” said Plon angrily. “Now what possible good could it do to you? It is extraordinary that people—women especially—can’t be contented, but must always be wishing for what they haven’t got.”

“I was only thinking,” Marie answered apologetically.

“Then don’t think. Women should leave that to others,” Having delivered which sententious maxim, M. Plon rose with some difficulty from his chair, and gazed round the room. It was a habit of his, but it always frightened Marie, and it frightened her yet more when he turned towards the recess and stood contemplating the curtains. “You keep those so tightly drawn one would—Eh! what’s the matter!”



For Madame Didier, stooping over the stove, had uttered a sharp feminine shriek.

“I have burnt my finger?” she exclaimed, wringing her hand.

“That comes of thinking. Does it hurt?”

“Hurt! Of course it does.”

“Let me see,” he said coming over.

But Marie hastily bound a bit of rag round her hand.

“The great thing is to exclude the air,” she said quickly. “Then you mean to be on the lookout for these grand robbers, M. Plon?”

“Yes, instead of idling away my time up here,” he said, rolling towards the door. “But you women dearly love a little gossip, don’t you? And though you are not the best of managers, Madame Didier, no one can say you don’t work with industry. So keep a good heart. You shall hear if I get the reward.”



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As the sound of his heavy footsteps creaked down the stairs, Jean came out and flung himself on the chair which M. Plon had occupied.

“Now that that old idiot has taken himself off, let’s see what he was talking about.”

“Is it true about the robbery?” asked Marie, leaning over his shoulder.

“So it seems.”

“And the reward?”

“Twelve thousand francs.”

“Twelve thousand francs!” repeated his wife in amazement. “Oh, you must be mistaken!”

“There are the figures at any rate, see for yourself.”

“Yes, I see. I suppose it must be so, as it is in the paper; but—but—if we could only have a little part of it!”

“Ah, if!” said Jean with a shrug. “But how will you manage? Stand about the corners of the Streets and ask every *escarpe* that passes?”

“I could almost do that,” his wife answered stoutly, “when I reflect that with money we might have an advocate, and you might be free. My store grows so slowly, Jean!”

Jean dashed the paper to the ground, and thrust his hands through his hair.

“Don’t talk of it, if you wouldn’t madden me!” he exclaimed. “Might—might—I am sick of might! Cooped up here I can do nothing, but if I had only common luck I might get the end of a clue as well as any other poor devil. I tell you, Marie, I have half a mind to give myself up, and end everything.”

She clung to him, pale as death.

“No, no!”

“You’d get on better without me.”

“No, no!”

Jean’s tragic air vanished in a rush of real emotion. He put his wife from him and looked at her sorrowfully.



“Poor soul!” he said slowly. “And you really mean that I haven’t tired you out yet with all my moods and cross words? No? Then, decidedly, we must rub on a little longer still.”

She embraced him with all the gratitude a woman feels when her good offices are accepted.

“To-morrow,” she said cheerfully, “to-morrow will bring you some tobacco.”

“To-morrow will also, I imagine, bring Perine,” he replied, with a laugh, and when he laughed it was possible to see what a handsome young fellow the haggard man had been. “Well, I am not sure that Perine isn’t preferable to old Plon-Plon. When I hear him prosing away to you on the duty of being contented, it’s all I can do not to knock him down. You a bad manager, indeed!”

“Do not talk of anything so imprudent.”

“He would roll like a ball,” said Jean longingly.

“Jean!”

“Bah, you need not fear. To do things sometimes in imagination is the only way of keeping my muscles in exercise. Oh, if I could only get a little fresh air, or drop in at the *brasserie* and hear what is doing!”

“See, here,” said Marie, true to her mission of comforter, “to-night we shall have a luxury, for this work must be finished and carried home to-morrow morning, and so I shall allow myself a candle. Sometimes I am afraid that I want more light than in old days, but I daresay that is a foolish fancy. The cabbage will be ready in a few minutes; meanwhile, tell me what more news you have got there in the paper. M. Plon has a great respect for my scholarship, but he is afraid I waste my time over his journals—aha, M. Plon, you little know that I have got my reader!”



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“Plon is an ass,” said Jean gruffly, for he did not like any one to find a flaw in the wife whom he often scolded himself.

“Perhaps,” said Marie happily. “But now, find me something horribly delightful to-night, something to make me shudder.”

“Capture of a wolf in Auvergne.”

“Of a wolf! Is it possible!” demanded Madame Didier, much interested. “And how many people did he eat?”

“Only one.”

“Only one! What a stupid wolf! Go on, my friend.”

“Suicide of a husband.”

“Not that, I do not like anything so sad,” she said in a changed voice. “And where was his wife all the time, that she could not prevent it, I should like to know? No, let me hear a little more about this robbery, and then we will have our dinner.”

PART III.

The hours passed, the light faded in the little garret where Marie’s busy fingers toiled day after day to add to the little hoard so slowly accumulating, and Marie’s cheerful heart brought out greater treasures of unselfish devotion, if her husband had only known it. Perhaps he did know it—in a fashion. Through the night, when it came, she thought often uneasily of Perine out in the heart of the great wicked city. But Perine had a haunt or two of her own, and Marie said prayers for her, and slept, hoping the girl would be safe.

She got up early the next morning while Jean was yet asleep, and cheered herself as she looked at her scanty supply of poor coffee with the thought that she would be paid for her work in the course of the day. Meanwhile the breakfast would not be a very rich affair, and she was pondering whether she could be so extravagant as to run to a *cremerie* near at hand for two *sous*-worth of milk, when an unexpected sound filled her with dismay. It was Perine’s shuffling steps upon the stairs, and she was by no means sure how Jean would receive such an early visitor. Moreover, she did not care that he should be disturbed, and she went hastily to the door to moderate the noise of the girl’s awkward entry. For a wonder no word or look of hers could do this. Perine, who generally was obedient to her smallest sign, was in a state of uncontrollable excitement; she fled to Marie’s arms, buried her rough head there, sobbed her loudest, and presently, in the thick of incoherent lamentations, pulled down her dress, and showed a



heavy bruise on her shoulder. Then she sobbed again, and implored Madame Didier not to let them beat her.

“Come, come, come!” said Marie reassuringly, “tell me a little more about this, and don’t be a baby, Perine. Remember that you are a big girl. No one will come here to beat you; if they did, good M. Plon would not let them come up the stairs. Tell me who did it?”

She sat down on the stool as she spoke, and let the poor clumsy creature rest on her knee.

“The man, the bad man!” howled Perine.



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“That I hear; but what were you doing to make any one so cruel?”

“Perine only looking at pretty bright figures, mother; so pretty with the light on them. 7639.”

“What is she talking about?” said Madame Didier, puzzled, “7639?”

“Yes, yes,” said the girl eagerly, and then she broke off again into her lamentations, which lasted until Marie had bathed her hurt, and soothed her by degrees. But when she proposed to take her to the *cremerie*, Perine began to wail again, and it was evident that something had so terrified her, that it would be cruelty to force her out into the streets. Every now and then she let drop another word or two on the subject of her fright; her poor disconnected brain seemed unable to grasp anything as a whole; something would float across it and be lost. Marie had grown apt at gathering together these cobweb strands, and disentangling them, but now even her ingenuity was at fault, and the number was the only point which stood out clearly from wavering words about a man and a box. She gathered at last that somewhere or other this number with the light shining on it had attracted Perine’s attention, that she went to look, and that a man pushed her away with a blow, and with threats which had been strong enough to send her terrified from the spot. Evidently she scarcely felt secure in her present quarters, and piteously implored Marie not to suffer him to come. Marie soothed her, and hoped that Jean’s compassion might be as strong as her own. Had she not been taken up with Perine, she would have more quickly caught the impatient scratching like a mouse in the wainscot, with which he summoned her.

He made signs that he must speak, and with some difficulty she got Perine into the landing, thrusting into her hands the bread which would have been her own portion. Then she locked her door and went back to Jean, who was eagerly waiting.

“Marie, I have a thought,” he began. “What do you make out of all she says?”

“Next to nothing,” said his wife, shrugging her shoulders.

“No?” said Jean, feverishly and a little contemptuously. “Suppose I suggested that she saw the figures on the lamp of a cab, what then?”

“What then?” repeated she, puzzled.

“And a box, and a man angry with her for looking. What then?”

“Oh, I don’t understand!” said Marie, shaking her head.

“Heavens, that any one should be so dense! Have you forgotten the robbery?”



“In the Rue Vivienne—oh, do you mean—do you think it possible! Jean, how clever you are! I wonder whether—shall I run to the place and see?”

“To the place, and even if they were still there, get yourself knocked on the head!”

“I should not mind,” cried Marie eagerly. “I should mind nothing with such a hope before me.”

“No, my good Marie,” Jean returned grandly; “you have excellent intentions, but it is well you have some one to guide you. The first thing is to find a *commissaire* of police.”



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The name seemed terrible; she turned pale, but he hurried on, losing himself again in his excitement, and with all his haggard features working:

“Yes, yes, I know what you will say, but do you not understand that if this is what I believe, anything will be forgiven to the man who can put the *sergent de ville* on the track?”

“If! At any rate I will do what you bid me,” the young wife said, trembling. “There is a *bureau* not so far away. Only promise me you will be prudent, for I must leave Perine here, though I will lock the door. Remember, M. Plon has his own keys.”

Nor would she relax one of her precautions in spite of his heated impatience. But she had spoken truly, for after the daily fear of years, the personal danger of encountering the robbers assuredly seemed nothing in comparison with having to do with the police. She told Perine where she was to sit, and tried to extract more coherent details, but only as to the figures was Perine clear. These she repeated again and again, while more than once Jean’s sharp whisper reached his wife’s ears. “Make haste, make haste!” and she signed caution in return.

When she had gone there was for some time absolute silence in the garret, Jean having flung himself on his bed, and given himself up to a wild delirium of hope. By-and-by this took the form of restlessness. He tossed and tumbled on his bed, and, his ear full of sounds which expectation and imagination brought there, sometimes started up, keen to listen, and the next moment pressed his fingers into his ears, to try to shut out these delusive sounds. Then he became almost as reckless as to Perine; what did her seeing him matter when so soon he would be a free man? Once or twice the bed creaked and groaned under his tossings, so that he imagined she would surely look round. But no, the girl was blind and deaf to everything but Marie’s orders, she sat squarely on the wooden stool with her elbows on her knees, and her chin on her hands, every now and then uttering a disjointed sob, until fatigue and tears brought about their natural consequence, and it became evident that she was asleep.

Jean got up and shook himself and looked out at her, his head in a whirl. He began to think that Marie was long absent, and to lay the blame on the back which was always ready to bear his burdens.

“She will not know where to go, she will stand gossiping with any fool who asks her a question, and in this time I would wager a piece of twenty *sous* the police or some other busy-body will have got on the track. What more likely? And there’s an end to our luck. Why did I let her waste all these moments? Why didn’t I go myself? Women always muddle things. There would have been a scene, beyond doubt. ‘*Hola!*—thunder and lightning, who may this be?’” Jean planted himself in an attitude, and struck his chest violently. “Then I should have drawn myself



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up, always with dignity—thus—'This, gentlemen, is none other than Jean Didier!'—'Who? What!'—'Jean Didier, at your service, gentlemen, falsely denounced as Communist, executed and reported dead, but, as you see alive, and able to render an important service to an ungrateful country.'—That sounds sublime! I flatter myself it would have produced an impression. Why didn't I go? Women, with all their good intentions, haven't an idea of the value of a stroke like that! It requires genius. And I foresee my excellent Marie will muddle the whole affair, very likely allow them to pick her brains and cajole the number out of her, then one of these *messieurs* will slip off and secure the reward." Excitement got a strong hold upon Jean as this idea presented itself, and his castles toppled over. "That's it, that's how it will go! And I deserve it for having left such a delicate affair in the hands of a woman. I could have managed it to a turn, and here I have let her go off, and the whole thing will slip through her fingers. I could beat myself with vexation."

In effect, he stamped his foot with such violence that Perine jumped up and, looking round, saw him vanishing behind the curtains. She shrieked with terror, "The man! Oh, it's the man!"

White as death, Jean rushed out and tried to calm her.

"Hush, child, hush! it's only me!"

But Perine was past all control, she screamed for "Mother!" for "M. Plon!" until it seemed to Jean that not only the house but the whole neighbourhood would presently be on him. He tried coaxing, he tried menace, but Perine shrieked the more.

"Will you hold your tongue!" he cried, with a wild thought of strangling her. "I'm a friend, I'm not the man; I won't touch you. Perine, Perine, don't cry out so, look at me!"

At this appeal she hid her eyes with her hands.

"The man! the man! Mother! Help!" Nevertheless, though it seemed to poor Jean that the very streets must tingle with her cries, it is possible, for the upper-stories of the house had early risers for their dwellers, that the deaf old woman left on the fifth floor might have heard nothing; but unfortunately M. Plon had taken it into his head to make a visitation to those uninhabited rooms of his in which some one had housed his furniture, and at this moment was on his way. He knew that Madame Didier was out, and Perine's screams seemed to point to fire or something equally disastrous. The door was locked, but he had all his keys about him, and soon succeeded in opening it, when Perine in a transport of terror rushed at him, and flung herself into his arms with a force which might have knocked over a less ponderous rescuer, and effectually blocked the door at which Jean glanced longingly.

“*Hola!*” cried the astonished landlord. “*Que diable!* A man in Madame Didier’s room! What’s the meaning of all this? Police!”



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Jean advanced with a threatening gesture, and the valiant Plon quickly retreated. For one wild moment his lodger contemplated the chances which lay in knocking him down, and taking refuge in flight, but he reflected that if the house were alarmed he would not get off, and if not, it might be possible to enlist M. Plon on his side. He therefore went quietly back into the room, saying, "Do not fear, M. Plon.... I give you my word, I am not going to fight."

"You had better not," said the other blusteringly. "You had better not!"

"Oh, as to that ..." said Jean with anger.

M. Plon retreated a second time before this demonstration, and again lifted his voice for the police.

"They'll be here fast enough, no doubt," said Jean quietly, though there was a bitter feeling of downfall in his heart. "Meanwhile, perhaps it might be as well for me to tell you who I am."

"Who you are?" repeated M. Plon indignantly. "It's easy enough to see that, my fine fellow, though what you could expect to steal here is not so clear. You've got the air of a gallows bird, and it's well this poor child has me—the brave Plon—to protect her."

"Come, come, M. Plon—listen to reason. I'm the husband of Madame Didier."

"The husband of Madame Didier? What, when she hasn't got one!" cried the other, now fairly enraged.

"Nevertheless, you might remember Jean Didier—if only you would," said Jean imploringly, for he began to think there was yet a chance for him if he could conciliate his landlord, and he made a few steps towards him holding out his hands. But Perine screamed and Plon waved him energetically back. Finding his prisoner cowed he launched some strong invectives at him.

"You're a thief and a cut-throat, that's what you are!" he said, shivering. "Keep off, keep off! You could no more stand in Jean Didier's shoes than you could in mine, for he was a decent, peaceable young fellow, and more than that, he was shot. So you've got hold of the wrong story here, Monsieur Blacklegs, and one that won't serve you much in the *violon*."

"It's true, I give you my word," said Jean.

"They did their best to shoot me, but I was only wounded. Marie got me up here, and here I have been ever since."



“Was there ever such a cool hand!” cried Plon wrathfully. “And you absolutely think to persuade me of this when not a soul comes in and out of this house without my knowing. A pretty tale!”

Jean muttered “Blockhead!” under his breath. Aloud he said, “But—M. Plon—am I not here now?”

“No, you are not!” Plon retorted,—“or if you are, you shall soon be out of it again. Police! Help, help!”

“If only Marie were here!” groaned Jean. “M. Plon, I implore you to have pity! wait until my wife arrives; you will believe her if you can’t believe your own eyes. Lock me into the room, do whatever you like—only wait!”



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If M. Plon had indeed had sufficient calmness to contemplate the figure before him, it is probable that in spite of alteration he would have found something to recognise. But he was in a state of perturbed excitement which altogether confused his judgment, and only inclined him to refuse all his prisoner's suggestions. He therefore set himself more vigorously than ever to bawl for help, and Perine seconded him with all her might. The next moment Jean went back to the table, seated himself upon it and crossed his arms. He had recognised Marie's step.

She came into the room pale as death, and even as she came, hesitated, and held up her hand, as if she would have prevented a man who was with her from following. But seeing that she was too late, and that Jean was already discovered, she rushed into his arms, crying out:

"What has happened?"

M. Plon took up the parable, quite regardless of her action.

"What has happened, Madame Didier? There is no saying what might not have happened if I had not been on the spot. Here is a rascally, black-guardly, good-for-nothing!" and as he uttered these bold invectives, he advanced and shook his fist in Jean's face. "You see him, *M. le Commissaire*, you behold what a villain, what a desperate villain he looks? Listen, then, I hear screams, I meet this poor imbecile flying out in terror, I rush—I seize—I overpower—I make him my prisoner—"

At this point the police officer interposed a question:

"You used force, M. Plon?"

"I used—but certainly—moral force. He had made his way into this room through the window, Monsieur—Monsieur—?"

"Leblanc, at your service," said the commissioner carelessly. "Did you say through the window? That seems scarcely probable."

But Plon was positive there was no other way by which he could have entered unseen by him. And now he would give *M. le Commissaire* a dozen guesses to find out what this rascal had the villainy to pretend. To look at him, would any one suppose now that he could be the husband of madame?

"Apparently," said the other, glancing at them, "Madame herself is not averse from that opinion."

"Her husband—hee, hee!" said M. Plon, getting red. "Poor Jean, who was shot in *emeute* three years ago! See there, monsieur, it is ridiculous! If any one should know anything about those times, it is I. I was myself on the very point of becoming a martyr



for my country; and as for Jean Didier, whether rightly or wrongly, he was shot, and there was an end of him. To pretend that he turns up three years later....”

Marie was crying, and M. Plon thought his eloquence had provoked her tears, but she put aside his hand, walked to the commissioner, and dropped on her knees before him.

“Monsieur, if you have a wife—”

“I have not,” said the man roughly.

“But your mother! If her son—”



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"I have my duty, that is enough," he said in the same tone, "Get up, Madame Didier, and let me know the truth of all this matter. This explains your unwillingness that I should return with you. Who's the man?"

"My husband, monsieur," sobbed Marie, springing up and putting her hand in Jean's.

"How came he here?"

"Monsieur, he escaped and crawled here."

"And how has he been supported?"

"By me," said the wife simply.

Plon had recoiled during this explanation, and gazed helplessly from one to the other.

"Go on," said Leblanc, taking out a note-book.

"He has not been out of this room for three years—three years! That is a long time for a man to be shut up," pleaded Marie, with her heart in her eyes. "And, *M. le Commissaire*, you must understand it was all a mistake. He tried to stop them, but they dragged him along, the Communists, and then one of them turns round and denounces him. There are very wicked people in the world, *M. le Commissaire*."

"His name?"

Jean answered for her:

"The name of that man was Fort."

Leblanc turned the pages of his note-book more quickly." Dumont—Court—ah, here it is, 'Jean Didier, glazier, with insurgents; pointed out as Communist by one Fort; executed on spot.' Is that correct?"

"He was innocent," said Marie, nervously twisting her fingers.

"But am I to understand that you deny his identity?" said the officer, turning sharply on Plon. "Speak up, man!"

M. Plon looked round, bewildered. "How could he have got into the house?"

"Never mind that. What we want is 'yes' or 'no' Is it Jean Didier? Come close and see for yourself."

"It is like him," said the landlord, examining him from head to foot, "certainly it is like him; I could almost believe it was he, only—how could he have got into the house?"



“As to that—where there’s a woman—” said Leblanc, turning away. They were all watching him, except Perine, who was sobbing stormily on the wooden stool, and he said shortly, “There is something more in my note-book.”

“More!” repeated Jean with alarm.

“Would you rather not have it?”

Marie, who had not taken her eyes from him, advanced with her hands pressed upon her heart.

“Courage, my friend,” she said breathlessly. “Yes, *M. le Commissaire*, we will hear.”

It had struck her that he was smiling.

He began to read in his sing-song voice, “Fort, convicted of forgery, died last month in the Grande Roquette. Before his death he confessed his denunciation of Jean Didier to have been false.”

Jean Didier’s wife turned round, opened her arms and fell upon her husband’s neck, speechless.

* * * * *



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So this was the end of that affair. As for No. 7639, which had brought Leblanc in pursuit of Perine, it did not turn out so romantically as might have been desired, having nothing to do with the great robbery of the Rue Vivienne, which remains a mystery—to most people—to this day. But oddly enough, it set the police on the track of a smaller crime; a certain reward was handed over to the Didiers for the use of the poor girl, and no one will deny that it was her unconscious instrumentality which brought their change of fortune. Jean is almost always kind to her, but Marie treats her with a sort of reverence.

You may see them sometimes, of a summer evening, walking along the quays. The great river sweeps slowly down, the busy lights which flit about the houses or point the span of the bridges with golden dots, fling long reflections on its surface. Overhead, more peaceful lights are shining. All about us is the rush of tumult and change, men drifting here and there, struggling, weeping, jesting, passing away; but over all God watches, and His world goes on.

FRANCES MARY PEARD

GONERIL

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER 1.

THE TWO OLD LADIES.

On one of the pleasant hills round Florence, a little beyond Camerata, there stands a house, so small that an Englishman would probably take it for a lodge of the great villa behind, whose garden trees at sunset cast their shadow over the cottage and its terrace on to the steep white road. But any of the country people could tell him that this, too, is Casa Signorile, spite of its smallness. It stands somewhat high above the road, a square, white house with a projecting roof, and with four green-shuttered windows overlooking the gay but narrow terrace. The beds under the windows would have fulfilled the fancy of that French poet who desired that in his garden one might, in gathering a nosegay, cull a salad, for they boasted little else than sweet basil, small and white, and some tall grey rosemary bushes. Nearer to the door an unusually large oleander faced a strong and sturdy magnolia-tree, and these, with their profusion of red and white sweetness, made amends for the dearth of garden flowers. At either end of the terrace flourished a thicket of gum-cistus, syringa, stephanotis, and geranium bushes, and the wall itself, dropping sheer down to the road, was bordered with the customary Florentine hedge of China roses and irises, now out of bloom. Great terracotta flower-pots, covered with devices, were placed at intervals along the wall; as it



was summer, the oranges and lemons, full of wonderfully sweet white blossoms and young green fruit, were set there in the sun to ripen.

It was the 17th of June. Although it was after four o'clock, the olives on the steep hill that went down to Florence looked blindingly white, shadeless, and sharp. The air trembled round the bright green cypresses behind the house. The roof steamed. All the windows were shut, all the jalousies shut, yet it was so hot that no one could stir within. The maid slept in the kitchen; the two elderly mistresses of the house dozed upon their beds. Not a movement; not a sound.



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Gradually, along the steep road from Camerata there came a roll of distant carriage-wheels. The sound came nearer and nearer, till one could see the carriage, and see the driver leading the tired, thin, cab-horse, his bones starting under the shaggy hide. Inside the carriage reclined a handsome middle-aged lady, with a stern profile turned towards the road; a young girl in pale pink cotton and a broad hat trudged up the hill at the side.

“Goneril,” said Miss Hamelyn, “let me beg you again to come inside the carriage.”

“Oh, no, Aunt Margaret; I’m not a bit tired.”

“But I have asked you; that is reason enough.”

“It’s so hot!” cried Goneril.

“That is why I object to your walking.”

“But if it’s so hot for me, just think how hot it must be for the horse.”

Goneril cast a commiserating glance at the poor halting, wheezing nag.

“The horse, probably,” rejoined Miss Hamelyn, “does not suffer from malaria, neither has he kept his aunt in Florence nursing him till the middle heat of the summer.”

“True!” said Goneril. Then, after a few minutes, “I’ll get in, Aunt Margaret, on one condition.”

“In my time young people did not make conditions.”

“Very well, auntie; I’ll get in, and you shall answer all my questions when you feel inclined.”

The carriage stopped. The poor horse panted at his ease, while the girl seated herself beside Miss Hamelyn. Then for a few minutes they drove on in silence past the orchards, past the olive-yards, yellow underneath with ripening corn; past the sudden wide views of the mountains, faintly crimson in the midst of heat, and, on the other side, of Florence, the towers and domes steaming beside the hazy river.

“How hot it looks down there!” cried Goneril.

“How hot it *feels!*” echoed Miss Hamelyn rather grimly.

“Yes, I am so glad you can get away at last, dear, poor old auntie.” Then, a little later. “Won’t you tell me something about the old ladies with whom you are going to leave me?”



Miss Hamelyn was mollified by Goneril's obedience.

"They are very nice old ladies, I met them at Mrs. Gorthrup's." But this was not at all what the young girl wanted.

"Only think, Aunt Margaret," she cried impatiently, "I am to stay there for at least six weeks, and I know nothing about them, not what age they are, nor if they are tall or short, jolly or prim, pretty or ugly; not even if they speak English!"

"They speak English," said Miss Hamelyn, beginning at the end. "One of them is English, or at least Irish: Miss Prunty."

"And the other?"

"She is an Italian, Signora Petrucci; she used to be very handsome."

"Oh," said Goneril, looking pleased. "I'm glad she's handsome, and that they speak English. But they are not relations?"

"No, they are not connected; they are friends."



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“And have they always lived together?”

“Ever since Madame Lilli died,” and Miss Hamelyn named a very celebrated singer.

“Why?” cried Goneril, quite excited; “were they singers too?”

“Madame Petrucci; nevertheless a lady of the highest respectability. Miss Prunty was Madame Lilli’s secretary.”

“How nice!” cried the young girl, “how interesting! Oh, auntie, I’m so glad you found them out.”

“So am I, child; but please remember it is not an ordinary pension. They only take you, Goneril, till you are strong enough to travel, as an especial favour to me and to their old friend, Mrs. Gorthrup.”

“I’ll remember, auntie.”

By this time they were driving under the terrace in front of the little house.

“Goneril,” said the elder lady, “I shall leave you outside; you can play in the garden or the orchard.”

“Very well.”

Miss Hamelyn left the carriage and ascended the steep little flight of steps that leads from the road to the cottage garden.

In the porch a singular figure was awaiting her.

“Good afternoon, Madame Petrucci,” said Miss Hamelyn.

A slender old lady, over sixty, rather tall, in a brown silk skirt, and a white burnouse that showed the shrunken slimness of her arms, came eagerly forward. She was still rather pretty, with small refined features, large expressionless blue eyes, and long whitish-yellow ringlets down her cheeks, in the fashion of forty years ago.

“Oh, *dear* Miss Hamelyn,” she cried, “how *glad* I am to see you. And have you brought your *charming* young relation?”

She spoke with a languid foreign accent, and with an emphatic and bountiful use of adjectives, that gave to our severer generation an impression of insincerity. Yet it was said with truth that Giulia Petrucci had never forgotten a friend nor an enemy.

“Goneril is outside” said Miss Hamelyn. “How is Miss Prunty?”



“Brigida? Oh, you must come inside and see my invaluable Brigida. She is as usual fatiguing herself with our accounts.” The old lady led the way into the darkened parlour. It was small and rather stiff. As one’s eyes became accustomed to the dim green light one noticed the incongruity of the furniture; the horsehair chairs and sofa, and large accountant’s desk with ledgers; the large Pleyel grand piano, a bookcase, in which all the books were rare copies or priceless MSS. of old-fashioned operas; hanging against the wall an inlaid guitar and some faded laurel crowns; moreover, a fine engraving of a composer, twenty years ago the most popular man in Italy; lastly, an oil-colour portrait, by Winterman, of a fascinating blonde, with very bare white shoulders, holding in her hands a scroll, on which were inscribed some notes of music, under the title Giulia Petrucci. In short, the private parlour of an elderly and respectable Diva of the year ’40.



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“Brigida!” cried Madame Petrucci, going to the door. “Brigida! our charming English friend is arrived!”

“All right!” answered a strong hearty voice from upstairs. “I’m coming.”

“You must excuse me, dear Miss Hamelyn,” went on Madame Petrucci. “You must excuse me for shouting in your presence, but we have only one little servant, and during this suffocating weather I find that any movement reminds me of approaching age.” The old lady smiled, as if that time were still far ahead.

“I am sure you ought to take care of yourself,” said Miss Hamelyn. “I hope you will not allow Goneril to fatigue you.”

“Gonerilla! What a pretty name! Charming! I suppose it is in your family?” asked the old lady.

Miss Hamelyn blushed a little, for her niece’s name was a sore point with her.

“It’s an awful name for any Christian woman,” said a deep voice at the door. “And pray who’s called Goneril?”

Miss Prunty came forward; a short, thick-set woman of fifty, with fine dark eyes, and, even in a Florentine summer, with something stiff and masculine in the fashion of her dress.

“And have you brought your niece?” she said, turning to Miss Hamelyn.

“Yes, she is in the garden.”

“Well; I hope she understands that she’ll have to rough it here.”

“Goneril is a very simple girl,” said Miss Hamelyn.

“So it’s she that’s called Goneril?”

“Yes,” said the aunt, making an effort. “Of course I am aware of the strangeness of the name, but—but in fact my brother was devotedly attached to his wife, who died at Goneril’s birth.”

“Whew!” whistled Miss Prunty. “The parson must have been a fool who christened her!”

“He did, in fact, refuse; but my brother would have no baptism saving with that name, which, unfortunately, it is impossible to shorten.”



“I think it is a charming name!” said Madame Petrucci, coming to the rescue. “Goneril: it dies on one’s lips like music! And if you do not like it, Brigida, what’s in a name? as your charming Byron said.”

“I hope we shall make her happy,” said Miss Prunty.

“Of course we shall!” cried the elder lady.

“Goneril is easily made happy,” asserted Miss Hamelyn.

“That’s a good thing,” snapped Miss Prunty; “for there’s not much here to make her so!”

“Oh, Brigida! I am sure there are many attractions. The air! the view! the historic association! and, more than all, you know there is always a chance of the Signorino!”

“Of whom?” said Miss Hamelyn, rather anxiously.

“Of him!” cried Madame Petrucci, pointing to the engraving opposite. “He lives, of course, in the capital; but he rents the villa behind our house—the Medici Villa; and when he is tired of Rome he runs down here for a week or so; and so your Gonerilla may have the benefit of *his* society!”

“Very nice, I’m sure!” said Miss Hamelyn, greatly relieved; for she knew that Signor Graziano must be fifty.



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"We have known him," went on the old lady, "very nearly thirty years. He used to largely frequent the *salon* of our dear, our cherished Madame Lilli."

The tears came into the old lady's eyes. No doubt those days seemed near and dear to her; she did not see the dust on those faded triumphs.

"That's all stale news!" cried Miss Prunty, jumping up. "And Gon'ril (since I'll have to call her so) must be tired of waiting in the garden."

They walked out on the terrace. The girl was not there; but by the gate into the olive-yard, where there was a lean-to shed for tools, they found her sitting on a cask, whittling a piece of wood and talking to a curly-headed little contadino.

Hearing steps, Goneril turned round. "He was asleep," she said. "Fancy, in such beautiful weather!"

Then, remembering that two of the ladies were strangers, she made an old-fashioned little curtsy.

"I hope you won't find me a trouble, ladies," she said.

"She is charming!" said Madame Petrucci, throwing up her hands.

Goneril blushed; her hat had slipped back and showed her short brown curls of hair, strong, regular, features, and flexile scarlet mouth, laughing upwards like a faun's. She had sweet dark eyes, a little too small and narrow.

"I mean to be very happy," she exclaimed.

"Always mean that, my dear," said Miss Prunty.

"And now, since Gonerilla is no longer a stranger," added Madame Petrucci, "we will leave her to the rustic society of Angiolino, while we show Miss Hamelyn our orangery."

"And conclude our business!" said Bridget Prunty.

CHAPTER II.

THE SIGNORINO.

One day when Goneril, much browner and rosier for a week among the mountains, came in to lunch at noon, she found no signs of that usually regular repast. The little maid was on her knees, polishing the floor; Miss Prunty was scolding, dusting, ordering dinner, arranging vases, all at once; strangest of all, Madame Petrucci had taken the oil-



cloth cover from her grand piano, and, seated before it, was practising her sweet and faded notes, unheedful of the surrounding din and business.

“What’s the matter!” cried Goneril.

“We expect the signorino,” said Miss Prunty.

“And is he going to stay here?”

“Don’t be a fool!” snapped that lady; and then she added—“Go into the kitchen and get some of the pastry and some bread and cheese, there’s a good girl.”

“All right!” said Goneril.

Madame Petrucci stopped her vocalising. “You shall have all the better a dinner to compensate you, my Gonerilla!” She smiled sweetly, and then again became Zerlina.

Goneril cut her lunch, and took it out of doors to share with her companion, Angiolino. He was harvesting the first corn under the olives, but at noon it was too hot to work. Sitting still there was, however, a cool breeze that gently stirred the sharp-edged olive-leaves.



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Angiolino lay down at full length and munched his bread and cheese in perfect happiness. Goneril kept shifting about to get herself into the narrow shadow cast by the split and writhen trunk.

“How aggravating it is!” she cried. “In England, where there’s no sun, there’s plenty of shade—and here, where the sun is like a mustard-plaster on one’s back, the leaves are all set edgewise on purpose that they shan’t cast any shadow!”

Angiolino made no answer to this intelligent remark.

“He is going to sleep again!” cried Goneril, stopping her lunch in despair. “He is going to sleep, and there are no end of things I want to know. Angiolino!”

“Sissignora,” murmured the boy.

“Tell me about Signor Graziano.”

“He is our padrone; he is never here.”

“But he is coming to-day. Wake up, Angiolino. I tell you he is on the way!”

“Between life and death there are so many combinations,” drawled the boy, with Tuscan incredulity and sententiousness.

“Ah!” cried the girl, with a little shiver of impatience. “Is he young?”

“Che!”

“Is he old, then?”

“Neppure!”

“What is he like? He must be *something*.”

“He’s our padrone,” repeated Angiolino, in whose imagination Signor Graziano could occupy no other place.

“How stupid you are!” exclaimed the young English girl.

“May be,” said Angiolino stolidly.

“Is he a good padrone? do you like him?”

“Rather!” The boy smiled, and raised himself on one elbow; his eyes twinkled with good-humored malice.



“My Babbo has much better wine than *quel signore*,” he said.

“But that is wrong!” cried Goneril, quite shocked.

“Who knows?”

After this, conversation flagged. Goneril tried to imagine what a great musician could be like: long hair, of course; her imagination did not get much beyond the hair. He would, of course, be much older now than his portrait. Then she watched Angiolino cutting the corn, and learned how to tie the swathes together. She was occupied in this useful employment when the noise of wheels made them both stop and look over the wall.

“Here’s the padrone!” cried the boy.

“Oh, he is old!” said Goneril; “he is old and brown, like a coffee-bean.”

“To be old and good is better than youth with malice,” suggested Angiolino, by way of consolation.

“I suppose so,” acquiesced Goneril.

Nevertheless she went in to dinner a little disappointed.



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The signorino was not in the house; he had gone up to the villa. But he had sent a message that later in the evening he intended to pay his respects to old friends. Madame Petrucci was beautifully dressed in soft black silk, old lace, and a white Indian shawl. Miss Prunty had on her starchiest collar and most formal tie. Goneril saw it was necessary that she, likewise, should deck herself in her best. She was too young and impressionable not to be influenced by the flutter of excitement and interest which filled the whole of the little cottage. Goneril, too, was excited and anxious, although Signor Graziano had seemed so old and like a coffee-bean. She made no progress in the piece of embroidery she was working as a present for the two old ladies; jumping up and down to look out of the window. When, about eight o'clock, the door-bell rang, Goneril blushed, Madame Petrucci gave a pretty little shriek, Miss Prunty jumped up and rang for the coffee. A moment afterwards the signorino entered. While he was greeting her hostesses, Goneril cast a rapid glance at him. He was tall for an Italian; rather bent and rather grey; fifty at least, therefore very old. He certainly was brown, but his features were fine and good, and he had a distinguished and benevolent air that somehow made her think of an abbe, a French abbe of the last century. She could quite imagine him saying "Enfant de St. Louis; montez au ciel!"

Thus far had she got in her meditations, when she felt herself addressed in clear, half-mocking tones—

"And how, this evening, is Madamigella Ruth?"

So he had seen her this evening, binding his corn.

"I am quite well, padrone," she said, smiling shyly.

The two old ladies looked on amazed, for of course they were not in the secret.

"Signor Graziano, Miss Goneril Hamelyn," said Miss Prunty, rather severely.

Goneril felt that the time was come for silence and good manners. She sat quite quiet over her embroidery, listening to the talk of Sontag, of Clementi, of musicians and singers dead and gone. She noticed that the ladies treated Signor Graziano with the utmost reverence; even the positive Miss Prunty furling her opinions in deference to his gayest hint. They talked, too, of Madame Lilli; and always as if she were still young and fair, as if she had died yesterday, leaving the echo of her triumph loud behind her. And yet all this had happened years before Goneril had ever seen the light.

"Mees Goneril is feeling very young!" said the signorino, suddenly turning his sharp kind eyes upon her.

"Yes," said Goneril, all confusion.



Madame Petrucci looked almost annoyed; the gay serene little lady that nothing ever annoyed.

“It is she that is young!” she cried, in answer to an unspoken thought. “She is a baby!”

“Oh, I am seventeen!” said Goneril.

They all laughed, and seemed at ease again.



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“Yes, yes; she is very young,” said the signorino.

But a little shadow had fallen across their placid entertainment. The spirit had left their memories; they seemed to have grown shapeless, dusty, as the fresh and comely faces of dead Etruscan kings crumble into mould at the touch of the pitiless sunshine.

“Signorino,” said Madame Petrucci, presently, “if you will accompany me, we will perform one of your charming melodies.”

Signor Graziano rose, a little stiffly, and led the pretty withered little Diva to the piano.

Goneril looked on, wondering, admiring. The signorino’s thin white hands made a delicate fluent melody, reminding her of running water under the rippled shade of trees, and, like a high, sweet bird, the thin, penetrating notes of the singer rose, swelled, and died away, admirably true and just, even in this latter weakness. At the end, Signor Graziano stopped his playing to give time for an elaborate cadenza. Suddenly Madame Petrucci gasped, a sharp, discordant sound cracked the delicate finish of her singing. She put her handkerchief to her mouth.

“Bah!” she said, “this evening I am abominably husky.”

The tears rose to Goneril’s eyes. Was it so hard to grow old? This doubt made her voice loudest of all in the chorus of mutual praise and thanks which covered the song’s abrupt finale.

And then there came a terrible ordeal. Miss Prunty, anxious to divert the current of her friend’s ideas, suggested that the girl should sing. Signor Graziano and madame insisted; they would take no refusal.

“Sing, sing, little bird!” cried the old lady.

“But, madame, how can one—after you?”

The homage in the young girl’s voice made the little Diva more good-humouredly insistant than before, and Goneril was too well-bred to make a fuss. She stood by the piano wondering which to choose, the Handels that she always drawled, or the Pinsuti that she always galloped. Suddenly she came by an inspiration.

“Madame,” she pleaded, “may I sing one of Angiolino’s songs?”

“Whatever you like, cara mia.”

And standing by the piano, her arms hanging loose, she began a chant such as the peasants use working under the olives. Her voice was small and deep, with a peculiar



thick sweetness that suited the song, half-humorous, half-pathetic. These were the words she sang:—

Vorrei morir di morte piccinina,
Morta la sera e viva la mattina.
Vorrei morire, e non vorrei morire,
Vorrei veder, chi mi piange e chi lide;
Vorrei morir, e star sulle finestre,
Vorrei veder chi mi cuce la veste;
Vorrei morir, e stare sulla scala,
Vorrei veder chi mi porta la bara;
Vorrei morir, e vorre' alzar la voce,
Vorrei veder chi mi parta la croce.

“Very well chosen, my dear,” said Miss Prunty, when the song was finished.

“And very well sung, my Gonerilla!” cried the old lady.



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But the signorino went up to the piano and shook hands with her.

“Little Mees Goneril,” he said, “you have the makings of an artist.”

The two old ladies stared, for after all Goneril’s performance had been very simple. You see they were better versed in music than in human nature.

CHAPTER III.

SI VIEILLESSE POUVAIT!

Signor Graziano’s usual week of holiday passed and lengthened into almost two months, and still he stayed on at the villa. The two old ladies were highly delighted.

“At last he has taken my advice!” cried Miss Prunty. “I always told him those premature grey hairs came from late hours and Roman air.”

Madame Petrucci shook her head and gave a meaning smile. Her friendship with the signorino had begun when he was a lad and she a charming married woman; like many another friendship, it had begun with a flirtation, and perhaps (who knows?) she thought the flirtation had revived.

As for Goneril, she considered him the most charming old man she had ever known, and liked nothing so much as to go out a walk with him. That, indeed, was one of the signorino’s pleasures; he loved to take the young girl all over his gardens and vineyards, talking to her in the amiable, half-petting, half-mocking manner that he had adopted from the first. And twice a week he gave her a music lesson.

“She has a splendid organ!” he would say.

“Vous croyez?” fluted Madame Petrucci with the vilest accent and the most aggravating smile imaginable.

It was the one hobby of the signorino’s that she regarded with disrespect.

Goneril, too, was a little bored by the music lesson; but, on the other hand, the walks delighted her.

One day Goneril was out with her friend.

“Are the peasants very much afraid of you, signore?” she asked.

“Am I such a tyrant?” counter-questioned the signorino.



“No; but they are always begging me to ask you things. Angiolino wants to know if he may go for three days to see his uncle at Fiesole.”

“Of course”

“But why, then, don’t they ask you themselves? Is it they think me so cheeky?”

“Perhaps they think I can refuse you nothing.”

“Che! In that case they would ask Madame Petrucci.”

Goneril ran on to pick some china roses. The signorino stopped confounded.

“It is impossible!” he cried; “she cannot think I am in love with Giulia! She cannot think I am so old as that!”

The idea seemed horrible to him. He walked on very quickly till he came to Goneril, who was busy plucking roses in a hedge.

“For whom are those flowers?” he asked.

“Some are for you, and some are for Madame Petrucci.”

“She is a charming woman, Madame Petrucci.”

“A dear old lady,” murmured Goneril, much interested in her posy.



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“Old do you call her?” said the signorino rather anxiously. “I should scarcely call her that, though of course she is a good deal older than either of us.”

“Either of us!” Goneril looked up astounded. Could the signorino have suddenly gone mad?

He blushed a little under his brown skin, that had reminded her of a coffee-bean.

“She is a good ten years older than I am,” he explained.

“Ah well, ten years isn’t much.”

“You don’t think so?” he cried delighted. Who knows, she might not think even thirty too much.

“Not at that age,” said Goneril blandly.

Signor Graziano could think of no reply.

But from that day one might have dated a certain assumption of youthfulness in his manners. At cards it was always the signorino and Goneril against the two elder ladies; in his conversation, too, it was to the young girl that he constantly appealed, as if she were his natural companion—she, and not his friends of thirty years. Madame Petrucci, always serene and kind, took no notice of these little changes, but they were particularly irritating to Miss Prunty, who was, after all, only four years older than the signorino. That lady had, indeed, become more than usually sharp and foreboding. She received the signorino’s gay effusions in ominous silence, and would frown darkly while Madame Petrucci petted her “little bird,” as she called Goneril. Once indeed Miss Prunty was heard to remark it was tempting Providence to have dealings with a creature whose very name was a synonym for ingratitude. But the elder lady only smiled, and declared that her Gonerilla was charming, delicious, a real sunshine in the house.

“Now I call on you to support me, signorino,” she cried one evening, when the three elders sat together in the room while Goneril watered the roses on the terrace. “Is not my Goneril a charming little bebe?”

Signor Graziano withdrew his eyes from the window.

“Most charming, certainly; but scarcely such a child. She is seventeen, you know, my dear signora.”

“Seventeen! Santo Dio! And what is one at seventeen but an innocent, playful, charming little kitten?”



“You are always right, madame,” agreed the signorino; but he looked as if he thought she were very wrong.

“Of course I am right,” laughed the little lady. “Come here my Gonerilla, and hold my skein for me. Signor Graziano is going to charm us with one of his delightful airs.”

“I hoped she would sing,” faltered the signorino.

“Who? Gonerilla? Nonsense, my friend. She winds silk much better than she sings.”

Goneril laughed. She was not at all offended. But Signor Graziano made several mistakes in his playing. At last he left the piano. “I cannot play tonight,” he cried. “I am not in the humour. Goneril, will you come and walk with me on the terrace?”

Before the girl could reply Miss Prunty had darted an angry glance at Signor Graziano.



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“Good Lord, what fools men are!” she ejaculated. “And do you think, now, I’m going to let that girl, who’s but just getting rid of her malaria, go star-gazing with any old idiot while all the mists are curling out of the valleys?”

“Brigida, my love, you forget yourself,” said Madame Petrucci.

“Bah!” cried the signorino. He was evidently out of temper.

The little lady hastened to smooth the troubled waters. “Talking of malaria,” she began in her serenest manner, “I always remember what my dearest Madame Lilli told me. It was at one of Prince Teano’s concerts. You remember, signorino?”

“Che! How should I remember,” he exclaimed. “It is a lifetime ago, dead and forgotten.”

The old lady shrank, as if a glass of water had been rudely thrown in her face. She said nothing, staring blindly.

“Go to bed, Goneril!” cried Miss Prunty in a voice of thunder.

* * * * *

CHAPTER IV.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

A few mornings after these events the postman brought a letter for Goneril. This was such a rare occurrence that she blushed rose red at the very sight of it, and had to walk up and down the terrace several times before she felt calm enough to read it. Then she went upstairs and knocked at the door of Madame Petrucci’s room.

“Come in, little bird.”

The old lady, in pink merino and curl-papers, opened the door. Goneril held up her letter.

“My cousin Jack is coming to Florence, and he is going to walk over to see me this afternoon. And may he stay to dinner, cara signora?”

“Why, of course, Gonerilla. I am charmed!”

Goneril kissed the old lady, and danced downstairs brimming over with delight.

Later in the morning Signor Graziano called.



“Will you come out with me, Mees Goneril,” he said; “on my land the earliest vintage begins to-day.”

“Oh, how nice!” she cried.

“Come, then,” said the signorino, smiling.

“Oh, I can’t come to-day, because of Jack.”

“Jack?”

“My cousin: he may come any time.”

“Your cousin?” the signorino frowned a little. “Ah, you English,” he said, “you consider all your cousins brothers and sisters!”

Goneril laughed.

“Is it not so?” he asked a little anxiously.

“Jack is much nicer than my brothers,” said the young girl.

“And who is he, this Jack?”

“He’s a dear boy,” said Goneril, “and very clever; he is going home for the Indian Civil Service Exam; he has been out to Calcutta to see my father.”

The signorino did not pay any attention to the latter part of this description, but he appeared to find the beginning very satisfactory.

“So he is only a boy,” he muttered to himself, and went away comparatively satisfied.



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Goneril spent most of the day watching the road from Florence. She might not walk on the highway, but a steep short-cut that joined the main road at the bottom of the hill was quite at her disposal. She walked up and down for more than an hour. At last she saw some one on the Florence road. She walked on quickly. It was the telegraph-boy.

She tore open the envelope and read: "Venice.—Exam. on Wednesday. Start at once. *A rivederci.*"

It was with very red eyes that Goneril went in to dinner.

"So the cousin hasn't come," said Miss Prunty kindly.

"No; he had to go home at once for his examination."

"I dare say he'll come over again soon, my dear," said that discriminating lady. She had quite taken Goneril back into her good graces.

They all sat together in the little parlour after dinner. At eight o'clock the door-bell rang. It was now seven weeks since Goneril had blushed with excitement when first she heard that ring; and now she did not blush.

The signorino entered. He walked very straight, and his lips were set. He came in with the air of one prepared to encounter opposition.

"Mees Goneril," he said, "will you come out on the terrace?—before it is too late," he added, with a savage glance at Miss Prunty.

"Yes," said Goneril, and they went out together.

"So the cousin did not come?" said the signorino.

"No."

They went on a little way in silence together. The night was moonlit and clear; not a wind stirred the leaves; the sky was like a sapphire, containing but not shedding light. The late oleanders smelt very sweet; the moon was so full that one could distinguish the peculiar greyish-pink of the blossoms.

"It is a lovely night!" said Goneril.

"And a lovely place."

"Yes."

Then a bird sang.



“You have been here just eight weeks,” said the signorino.

“I have been very happy.”

He did not speak for a minute or two, and then he said:—

“Would you like to live here always?”

“Ah, yes! But that is impossible.”

He took her hand and turned her gently so that her face was in the light.

“Dear Mees Goneril, why is it impossible?”

For a moment the young girl did not answer. She blushed very red and looked brave.

“Because of Jack!” she said.

“Ah!”

“Nothing is settled,” added the young girl, “but it is no use pretending not to know!”

“It is no use,” he repeated very sadly.

And then for a little while they listened to the bird.

“Mees Goneril,” said the signorino at last, “do you know why I brought you out here?”

“Not at all,” she answered.

It was a minute before he spoke again.

“I am going to Rome to-morrow,” he said, “and I wanted to bid you good-bye. You will sing to me to-night, as it will be the last time?”



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“Oh, I hope not the last time!”

“Yes, yes,” he said a little testily; “unless—and I pray it may not be so—unless you ever need the help of an old friend.”

“Dear Signor Graziano!”

“And now you will sing me my ‘Nobil Amore’?”

“I will do anything you like!”

The signorino sighed and looked at her for a minute. Then he led her into the little parlour where Madame Petrucci was singing shrilly in the twilight.

A. MARY F. ROBINSON.

OUT OF THE SEASON.

“But why not? There isn’t a soul in London—who’s to see? What harm is there in it?”

“Oh, none of course—a cup of tea is a cup of tea, and whether you drink it here or there, what matter!—only—well, the thing I think of is, would Rowley mind?”

“Mind his own business, I should say, rather! That’s what they have to swear to do in the marriage service, haven’t they?”

The lady to whom this question was addressed, Mrs. Rowley Dacres, shook her head reprovingly. She was young and very pretty; and Teddy Vere—known among certain of his friends as the Fledgeling—was not averse to seeing her make a pretence of being angry.

“Don’t let me hear you speak so flippantly of matrimony,” she began severely; “and for your future edification, it is not the man but the *woman* who swears to obey.”

“Then why in Heaven’s name don’t you do as I bid you?”

“As *you* bid me! Come, that’s rather strong form, I must say! You’re not Rowley, are you?”

“No, worse luck for me, I’m not,” and the good-looking fair face put on such an intensely woebegone expression that the resolution of the beholder gave way.

Poor boy! it really was dreadfully unlucky that he should be so desperately in love with her, more especially since Rowley had taken to be absurdly jealous of him, as if—now



that she was married—she could ever think seriously of anybody. Only after you'd been brought up—to cut your teeth, as one might say—flirting, well, it was just a little bit hard to give it up at twenty-three. Besides, it wasn't as if she meant anything—except in Rowley's case she never had; and as far as Teddy went, scores of mothers had said before her, dozens of times, that they were only too delighted to see their sons attach themselves to a married lady—it kept them out of harm's way; so that instead of mischief, it was a service she was doing Teddy. The two had been of the same party during Goodwood week. Teddy had joined them after on board Lord Datchett's yacht at Cowes; and, his leave up, and he forced to stop in London during the end of August, what more natural than that when she came up to town for a few days' shopping, Teddy should offer to act escort to her?—it was such a pleasure to him, poor fellow! And as there wasn't a single soul left to see them, what harm could there be!



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Notwithstanding, the little lady never lost sight of propriety—Garden was always near enough for her to be able to say, “I’ve my maid with me;” and added to this, “Bella Chetwode was in town, very much occupied it’s true, but still that same staunch friend, always good at a pinch, who, if told that you had been met going to see her, invariably answered that she expected you. Life is full of surprises, and if one is armed at all points matters go on so much more smoothly.”

Now it happened that on the previous evening Teddy had shown visible signs of becoming unruly. He didn’t see why he should be sent away. Why could he not stop—stop and have dinner with her?

“Why? Because, in the first place, it wouldn’t do; and in the second—I forgot though,” she said; “being a man, I ought to have reversed the order—there’s nothing to give you.”

“That don’t matter,” said Teddy heroically—“I don’t care what I eat.”

“Oh, don’t you; but I do—you might be wanting to eat me.”

Teddy threw a look intended to convey that he could conceive no more delicious morsel.

“There there, say good-bye and go away, do!” she cried. “I declare you’re beginning to get cannibalish already.”

And in spite of all further entreaties and a goodly show of ill-humour, which experience had taught him to keep handy for display, Teddy was forced to obey her command that he should take his departure.

“I must take care not to let that boy go too far,” Nina reflected when he had gone. “He wants his paces pulled up now and then, or else he’ll get trying to kick over. However, it’s only for a day or two, and then I shall be off; and by next season—Oh, he’ll have forgotten me, I daresay.”

She did not “daresay” anything of the sort—there was a deal too much vanity in her composition to willingly give up any homage that had once been offered to her; but the supposition served as a salve for her conscience, which in the matter was not altogether easy, for in her letters to Rowley, and she wrote to him every day, she had never said a single syllable of having seen Teddy. It was not that she had any wish to be sly with him; but, reasoning in her own way—what good was there in telling any one things which would make them uneasy, and Rowley was such a good fellow, so wrapt up in and devoted to her,—he’d be wretched if she told him that Teddy was in town and came to see her every day. No; where ignorance was bliss it was folly to let it interfere with fishing; much better let Rowley continue in peace and tranquillity; and on Saturday he and she were to join each other at the Twyford Junction, on their way to Scotland to pay



a heap of visits together, some new gowns for which had brought her to London; and her face softened with a smile that flitted across it as she assured herself that ten minutes with Rowley would make her forget the existence of Teddy. Poor infatuated boy!



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Possibly Mrs. Dacres' velvety brown eyes would have opened a trifle wider could she have followed the footsteps of her devoted admirer. Teddy, wise in his generation, made the provision of a consolation a matter of principle; therefore when the door closed behind him at one house, he quickly hailed a hansom which should take him to another, where he would not only be welcomed, but instead of having to beg for a dinner he would be begged to eat one. Matters turned out as he premised, and he only picked up his grievance against Nina the next day when he was urging her that they should go to his rooms and have tea.

When this proposition was started Teddy wasn't particularly keen as to whether she came or whether she did not; but, ill luck would have it, Nina chose that very opportunity for asserting her dignity—and after that the question of the tea became a question of who should be conqueror.

"If I give in again, I'll be hanged," said Teddy to himself, and he brought to bear the various resources he was master of with such effect that Nina, driven into a corner, was fairly beaten and confessed to herself that it served her right—"he's been allowed to go too far, and this is the upshot of it."

She made these reflections however with a face that told no tales, stepped into a hansom with a pretty air of being overruled by a will stronger than her own, and only insisted on keeping up her ungainly sized parasol because "the sun in one's eyes is so disagreeable."

Now, as chance would have it, instead of fishing in the country, Captain Rowley Dacres was spending that day in London. Circumstances had brought him to town early in the morning; but, to his discredit do I tell it, he hated shopping, and hadn't Nina told him in every letter she sent that she was with the dressmaker every hour of the day? If he went home he should have to go with her there, or to some other confounded place, for so long as a shop was near, Nina would be safe to have something to buy in it. During those few months they were engaged, what a purgatory he had gone through. He was a lover then—he was a husband now, and he whistled the air of a popular tune known by the name of "Not for Joe."

The first few bars had but just escaped him, when who should he stumble across but an old chum, Nick Walcot, who, hearing that up to seven o'clock—when he was going to pop in upon Nina—Rowley had nothing to do, gave a mysterious wink of his eye saying, "All right, old fellow; I'm going somewhere, and I'll take you."

The somewhere proved to be a small bijou residence in the neighbourhood of Thurloe Square; and, arrived at the door, it suddenly struck Rowley who lived there.

"Oh come, I say," he began, drawing back a step or two. "I don't half think this'll do. I'm married now, you see, and I've given up this sort of society."

Nick looked at him with an air of injured surprise.



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“What do you mean?” he asked. “There’s nothing against Miss Fisher that I know of; it’s simply that I’ve been asked to lunch with her, and as I know she’ll have a friend, I take ditto because I’d rather sit down four than three.” Rowley hastened to disabuse any prejudice against Miss Fisher, whom he felt sure was the very soul of propriety, “Only, don’t you know, women get an idea, and though my little wife’s the best sort in the world, if she got scent that I’d been lunching with an actress instead of going straight to her, there’d be the very deuce to pay.”

“Fiddle de dee! besides, how is she to know? who’s to tell her?” and before there was time to answer, a vigorous pull was given to the bell.

“Confound this fellow; I wish I’d gone straight off to Nina. What a fool I am!” These were the reflections of Captain Dacres as he followed his friend into the presence of Miss Fisher, who received him with easy cordiality.

“Good gracious on me! Captain Dacres,” she said, “what a time it is since I’ve seen you, to be sure; I took it for granted you were dead.”

“Dead!” repeated Nick Walcot. “Why he’s married; didn’t you know?”

“Oh, it’s about the same to me,” laughed the lady, and then tilting herself back in her chair so that her voice might reach the further room more easily, she called, “Doady I say, come in here—there’s a surprise for you.”

And in answer to the summons a young lady appeared, who threw herself into a dramatic attitude exclaiming, “What! Captain Dacres? Well I never! Why—who’d a thought of seeing you?”

Certainly it was not Captain Dacres who had anticipated that pleasure, for while responding with the best grace he could command to the chaff and banter which began to be darted at him, he was consigning Miss Fisher, and more especially the effusive Doady, to every depth between this world and the one below.

The announcement of luncheon opened a more cheerful vista. “Here I am, and I must make the best of it,” thought Rowley following, in company with Doady, Nick Walcot and Miss Fisher. “But if ever anything of the sort happens again may I be tarred and feathered. To think I ever thought this woman pretty, and to fancy that to this day Nina is jealous of her.”

The luncheon, commenced at an unusually late hour, took a long time getting through; the two ladies were excellent company, and notwithstanding the invectives he had indulged in, five o’clock struck very quickly. Then it was discovered that everybody was going the same way, and it ended with two hansoms being called. Miss Fisher and Nick Walcot got into one, Captain Rowley and Doady Donne occupied the other.



“How tiresome the sun is, let me put up your parasol?” said our friend Rowley, with evident anxiety to screen her; but Doady begged he wouldn’t trouble.

“I don’t mind the sun a bit,” she said. “And I’m not in the least afraid of any one seeing me, since you’ve married you’ve grown so very respectable.”



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“Confound her,” ejaculated Rowley mentally, and he congratulated himself on the emptiness of London, resolving to keep his head well back and sit a little on one side as they went through Piccadilly. Doady asked a question about some friend in whom she had formerly felt an interest; this led to past reminiscences and the telling of some good story, over which Rowley was still laughing when there came a crash, followed by a bump and a swaying forward and back. “Hang the fellow, he’s run into another hansom!”

In an instant Rowley had dexterously jumped out on to the pavement; the occupant of the other hansom, whose wheel was locked into theirs, obeying the same instinct, had done the same.

“Why, if ain’t Teddy Vere. Oh my!” ejaculated one feminine voice shrilly, while from under a red parasol, still open, another groaned, “Rowley! it can’t be! Oh, what will become of me?”

Self-preservation is the first law of nature; the woman who hesitates is lost. Before another minute had passed Nina was out of one cab and into another close by.

“Drive off as fast as you can—never mind where! I’ll tell you when we get further on,” and five minutes later she gave the cabman the address of Mrs. Chetwode’s house.

Bursting into the room she cried, “Oh, Bella, such a horrible thing has occurred! Do help me.” And she told her the whole story, ending by saying, “I left word at home, when I went out, that I was going to see you.”

Mrs. Chetwode said something by way of calming her, and then she rang the bell.

“Tell Martin to go to Mrs. Dacres’, and say she will not return to dinner, I’ve prevailed on her to stop with me. Now, my dear, try and keep calm and put on the best face you can, and we must trust to Providence to help us through.”

“But suppose he saw me”

“Oh, no, we’ll suppose he didn’t see you; and I think you may trust to Teddy—he’s got his head screwed on the right way.”

Nina wiped away the tears which had flowed over. “Nothing can excuse me for being so imprudent,” she said with a half sob; “all the time I knew how wrong it was of me; and the worst is, Bella, I didn’t care.”

“Didn’t care! How?”

“I mean I didn’t care for Teddy. What could a boy like that possibly be to me? Why, of course I love Rowley dearly—more than I could tell you; and to think I should risk it all in



this stupid way. Oh! it's my abominable vanity; that's what it is. Aunt Jane always said it would be my ruin, and so it will be—after this, you see, Rowley will believe anything of me? Oh, Bella, what shall I do? I shall die.”

“Well, my dear, it's the best thing that could happen to you if you are going to behave in this absurd manner.” Mrs. Chetwode saw that strong measures must be resorted to; she quite intended reading Nina a lecture; but the time to do so was not now. “There's no doubt but that you *have* been imprudent, *very*; but if I am to help you it's not by letting you sit there and cry.”



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“Wh—at do you wish me to do?”

“To dry your eyes and come down with me to dinner and chat away as we always do. If your husband was going home Martin will bring back word that he is there, or else he will come here and fetch you.”

“You took the message?” Mrs. Chetwode asked as the two ladies descended to dinner.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Really, Nina, I ought to have ordered a better dinner for you.”

“Oh, I’m not a bit hungry.”

“But you ought to be after going about so much as we have to-day. By-the-by, how did you decide about that hat I saw; do you think it will suit you? Describe it to me.”

Forced to answer, Nina was trotted by her friend from one subject of toilette to the other, until in the midst of a got-up argument concerning trimmings, there came a thundering knock at the door.

“Dear bless me! What a late visitor! Who can it be? Martin, just go out and look—never mind the door,” and Mrs. Chetwode jumped up and stood so that she could hear the inquiry: “Is Mrs. Dacres here?”

“Yes, sir, the ladies are at dinner.”

“Oh! Ah!”

“Captain Dacres, is that you?” Bella had run out to meet him. “Why, what a surprise—Nina, fancy, here’s your husband, dear,” and she preceded Rowley back into the dining-room.

“Rowley!” For her life Nina couldn’t say more—every atom of colour had forsaken her.

“My dear child, have I frightened you? I’m so sorry, but I found after all I had to come to town. Carne has made such an awful mess about the gun he was to get for me, and so I didn’t write. I thought I’d surprise you.”

Nina laughed out like a boisterous child. “What a silly thing I am,” she said, “I was afraid something had happened.”

Rowley put his arm round her, for though she was laughing, her voice sounded like crying all the time.



Under other circumstances he might have been more struck with the little embarrassment which she could not perfectly control, but at the moment he was not quite himself either. That impudent Doady Donne had played a shameful hoax on him, had actually had the audacity to declare that she had seen his wife—Nina, Mrs. Dacres—in Teddy Vere’s hansom! He hadn’t taken what she said very pleasantly, for the bare notion made him furious, and—though telling himself all the while that he didn’t believe it—until he had found Nina seated with her friend, it was impossible to feel any security.

“Pon my life, it’s too bad!” he was saying mentally. “I don’t know what things are coming to; there ought to be a stop put to it, a line must be drawn somewhere; and such women oughtn’t to be permitted to speak of a lady in that chaify way.”

While these reflections occupied his mind he was giving scraps of news to Nina, and answering Mrs. Chetwode, who was frankly saying that she hadn’t a morsel of dinner to give him.

“But I don’t want any, I’ve only just had a most enormous luncheon.”



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“Luncheon! Where?”

“Why, my dear, at the station—ham, beef, beer—you know—veal pie—that sort o’ thing.”

“Rowley! how could you! You’ll be awfully ill, you know.”

“Not a bit of it, not I. I—” but at this moment rat-tat-a-tat-tat went the knocker.

Oh! agony—there wasn’t a doubt this was Teddy!

“I say, what a game—here’s another visitor!” remarked Captain Dacres cheerily.

“One who is expected, I shouldn’t wonder.” Mrs. Chetwode, as usual, rose equal to the emergency. “We may as well let the cat out of the bag, Nina, and tell him.—We’ve got a young man coming to take us to the play,” and turning to Martin she said, “Show him into the boudoir if that’s Mr. Vere.”

“Mr. Vere! What, Teddy! Here, stop, I’ll open the door!” exclaimed Rowley hastily “Don’t you go”

“But why?” interposed Mrs. Chetwode amazedly.

“Because it’s interrupting you so awfully in your dinner. No, no, we’ll go up stairs together—it’ll be all right you’ll see”

He was already in the hall, had opened the door—their voices, laughing it seemed—sounded together.

“What can it mean?” said Nina anxiously

“Never mind, one thing is certain—he didn’t see you”

“Perhaps it’s the beer—he seems a little excited, don’t you think?”

“I’m not going to leave them together Teddy,” called out Mrs. Chetwode, “come in here. Have you brought tickets for the comedy?”

“Tickets, eh?”

“Oh, it’s no use disguising; we’ve—”

“No, no!” broke in Rowley, “not a bit, I know all about it, old fellow; they’ve told me what you’ve come to do—I’ll go with you. By Jove, capital idea! Ha, ha.”



“Oh, it must be the beer,” thought Nina, and watching Bella’s eye she tapped her forehead with her finger to indicate that there was no doubt that Rowley’s head was slightly affected.

“Mrs. Chetwode, I’m awfully sorry,” began Teddy, “but do you know, I’ve made such a mess about the comedy; they aint playing that piece at all there now. I hope you’ll both forgive me.”

“How tiresome! What a naughty boy you are!” said Bella. “Now there’s nothing for us to do.”

“Nothing to do,” said Rowley. “Not a bit of it; we ain’t going to be stumped for one failure; we’ll go somewhere—where shall it be, Nina, eh?”

“Any place you like, dear,” so long as I am with you, the big brown eyes seemed to say; and Rowley, looking back again, thought, “And I could doubt her—bless her heart, the darling!” while Nina kept repeating, “This will be a lesson for me as long as I live. Never again, no more flirtation—never, never, never!”

Later in the evening when it was decided that they should all go to the Fisheries, without hesitation as to the other two, Nina and Rowley went off together.

“Are we to follow the turtle doves?” said Teddy with sarcasm.



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“As you please,” said Bella, “but it doesn’t in the least matter—you know I’ve a scolding in store for you, Teddy?”

“No, not now,” and he held up his hands pleadingly.

“Yes, but you’ve been most imprudent, and it’s by the very greatest luck in the world that Rowley didn’t see you. If he had, it would have been anything but pleasant for Nina.”

“Hm!” and Teddy gave his nose a screw. He was terribly tempted to tell what he looked on as the very best joke in the world—only—well—no—perhaps better not—if you once let a thing slip out it often gets spoken of, nobody knows how; and as Rowley had whispered at the door, “Teddy, I say, not a word about having seen me before,” and he had answered “Honour bright, old chap; you may trust me,” he’d keep the matter dark; only there was one to score against Miss Doady Donne for telling him last night at dinner that she was going to play propriety to a friend that day. He hated a lie without a reason; and as it seemed to him he’d gone quite far enough in that direction, this would serve as a capital peg to hang a quarrel on.

“Shall we say good-night?” said Bella.

“Do you want to get rid of me?”

“N—no.”

“Oh, I see you do,” and he held out his hand to her.

“Good-night,” she began, trying to hold herself very severely, “and let this little adventure be a lesson to you. All’s well that ends well, but remember *all* doesn’t always end so.”

“Quite true,” he said, feigning to have listened penitently. “By-the-way, would you mind repeating that same little sermon to our friend Rowley?—it might be of service to him. What do I mean?—oh nothing—only that one good turn deserves another.”