# THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

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*The*
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*Love*

# The Challenge of Love

By

WARWICK DEEPING

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THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To*

MY VERY DEAR FRIENDS

*Arthur and Mary Spurgeon*

*The*
*Challenge*
*of*
*Love*

# *CHAPTER ONE*

A WET, winter dusk tangled itself among the oak woods west of Navestock town, making the blacks and greys of the landscape seem colder and more sad. The grinding of wheels and the "plud-pludding" of drenched horses drifted along the high road with the galloping of the wind. Old Tom Tyser, muffled up on the box of the "White Hart" coach, shook the rain from his hat-brim, and grumbled.

"Never knowed such weather! I've come home these seven days a-sittin' in a puddle."

Wet it was, and Navestock Valley might have been some primeval sea-bottom suddenly upheaved, still drenched and running with the backwash of the sea. The land lay sodden and tired; the trees shook the rain from their boughs with petulant imprecations. As for the grey coach-horses, their ears flopped dejectedly, and did not prick up at the sound of the postman's horn. Mr. Winkworth's red-wheeled coach laboured and squeaked, and strained. A decrepit veteran, it crawled daily between the railway at Wannington and Navestock town, its black panels needing paint, its musty interior smelling of stable dung and straw.

The passenger on the box beside old Tom Tyser saw Navestock town draw out of the dusk like a great rock in a grey sea. At first it was a mere black mass in the valley, but lights began to blink as the coach passed the lodge gates of "Pardons" and swung along beside the swollen river. Darkness blotted out the cloud scud above the swaying tops of the elms, and in Navestock lights blinked more and more, isolated yellow specks upon the outskirts, but clustered like star clusters towards the centre of the town. By old Josiah Crabbe's stone house, where the row of Lombardy poplars whistled with the wind, the cobbles of West Street clashed a welcome to the horses' hoofs. The sounds reverberated in the winding street, where empty footpaths gleamed wet in the light from cottage windows.

A church tower, more elm trees, and the black mouths of side streets and alleys drifted by before the coach crunched across the market-place and drew up outside the White Hart Hotel. The darkness of a wet February evening hid the utter unimportance of this old-world event. The coach arrived, that was all. It carried just

three passengers, and they abandoned it, and went their several ways. There was no stir of ostlers, no fluttering of curtains at the windows, no fat Mr. Winkworth standing under the "White Hart" portico. A single oil lamp flickered on its iron bracket over the hotel door. The pavement and square were crowded with nothing but puddles. All the upper windows in the big, white-fronted, square-built inn were black and lifeless patches. The bar and the billiard-room alone were steamily and huskily alive.

The tall man in the ulster had climbed down from the box-seat and deposited a shabby leather portmanteau under the portico of the "White Hart." He glanced about him, took off a rain-splashed top-hat, and smoothed the nap with the sleeve of his ulster. The light from the oil lamp dribbled down on him with a draughty waywardness. He was tall, with a gaunt breadth of shoulder that wedged out his ulster into sharp, square corners. The lamp-light fell on his face and ran off it like water off a crag, an ugly face with a big nose and a square chin. He was clean-shaven about a straight, terse mouth, and his eyes looked very steadily and very intently at life, as though determined to see nothing but the truth.

A boy came splashing through the puddles in the market-place, and stared doubtfully at the young man under the "White Hart" portico.

"Be you for Dr. Threadgold's, mister?"

He was a fat boy, with blown-out cheeks, a white muffler that bulged under his chin, and trousers that fitted very tightly over a certain portion of his figure. The man studied him with that indescribable gleam of the eyes that goes with a lively sense of humour.

"That's right—Mr. Pickwick. I've just come by the coach."

"My name's not Pickwick."

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure."

The boy eyed him suspiciously.

"My name's Sam, Sam Perkins, and I carry out the bottles."

"That's something to begin with. Can you manage this bit of luggage?"

The boy heaved at the portmanteau, and found that it came up quite easily. The tall man's voice had had a peculiar effect upon him. It was a deep, yet quiet voice, a voice that suggested a reserve of breath stored away in a capacious chest, a voice that would grow quieter and quieter under stress, like the smile of a man who is doggedly good-tempered and knows how to use his fists.

"Anything else, sir?"

The "sir" was a distinct uplift.

"No; that's the lot."

The portmanteau was exceedingly light, and its lightness filled the fat boy with

speculative surprise. He remembered that when young Surgeon Stott came as assistant to Dr. Threadgold at Navestock, that gentleman's luggage had filled the "White Hart" hand-cart, and that Fyson, the coachman, had broken his braces in getting it upstairs. Sam balanced the portmanteau on his shoulder, and made an imaginary inventory of its contents. He allowed the big man one night-shirt, a razor and washing-bag, a pair of slippers, two shirts, a pot of jam, and a second-best pair of trousers. Nor were Sam's calculations far from the actual facts. Dr. John Wolfe had all his worldly possessions in that leather portmanteau.

Dr. Montague Threadgold's house stood on the north side of Mulberry Green, the long windows in its flat red front overlooking the old mulberry trees, and the white posts and chains that bounded the stretch of grass. A solid and portly house, it had for its neighbours a dozen other solid and portly houses, all built of red-brick with white stone cornices and ashlar work at the angles, all with massive front doors and lion-headed brass knockers, and door-steps white as newly starched aprons.

Sam gave a tug at the bell-handle.

"I'll take the box round the back, sir."

John Wolfe nodded to him, scraped his boots on an iron scraper let into the wall, and saw the great green front door of Prospect House swinging back over a brown doormat that carried the word "Salve."

"Dr. Threadgold at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Dr. Wolfe. You might take my ulster, and get it dried. Mind your apron. The thing's wet through."

The maid smiled at the big man with the quiet voice. He was laughing to himself over that word "Salve," and his mouth and eyes looked very pleasant when he was amused. A few details are full of significance to a man who has learnt to observe and to weigh impressions. Dr. Montague Threadgold was either a wag of a fellow or an affable person with no real sense of humour. Salve! Turn the word from Latin to English, and the mat might as well have whispered "pills."

A mahogany door at the end of the hall opened, and a short, stoutish man in a neat pair of black-and-white check trousers came sailing out.

"Mr. Wolfe, I presume. Glad to see you, sir, glad to see you."

Dr. Montague Threadgold was the most affable of men. He was round, pink-faced, wore gold-rimmed glasses, and spent twenty minutes each morning in training a number of well-oiled hairs across the bald crown of his head. His affability and his energetic worthiness expressed themselves even in the play of his check-patterned legs. They were legs that twinkled, went at a quick strut, and pattered up and down

stairs very quickly. His mouth was one of those prim mouths that purse themselves into a straight line and insist on seeming shrewd and determined. A little wind-bag of a man, he bounced and floated through the life of Navestock and its neighbourhood, bringing children into the world with unction and patting them on the head three years later, with still greater unction; uttering sweet, shallow solemnities at bedsides; drinking his port at dinners and twinkling through sly, beaming spectacles; subscribing his guinea to all charities, and living very fatly behind the heavy rep curtains of Prospect House.

Dr. Threadgold's chubby hand disappeared into Wolfe's great fist. Urbanity hid some of the elder man's condescension. He looked through his round spectacles at Wolfe and seemed a little bothered by the surgeon's height and by the grave and steady way he had of staring people in the face.

"A wet journey, I'm afraid." Dr. Threadgold always looked on the point of saying "my young friend." "It is a disgrace that there is no branch line to Navestock, a positive disgrace. But privilege, vested interests—ah, well, I'm a bit of a Liberal, Mr. Wolfe. And luggage—what about your luggage?"

"I think I heard it going upstairs."

"Ah—to be sure. I expect you would like some supper. We take that informal meal at half-past seven—precisely."

"Very good, sir."

"Ah—let me see—your room, yes—Sykes will show you your room. You will find Mrs. Threadgold and myself in the drawing-room. No, no professional questions to-night. They can stand over till the morning."

Threadgold had begun to talk very fast, as though his composure had run away from him, and he was trying to catch it again. His affability appeared a little hurried and out of breath. All because this tall and rather ugly young man had a reserved air, and steady, watchful eyes.

"Sykes—Sykes——"

"Yes, sir."

"Conduct Mr. Wolfe to his room, Sykes."

And Sykes led the way up three long flights of stairs.

John Wolfe's room was on the top floor of Prospect House, a room whose single window opened upon a leaded gutter and the brick face of a parapet. By standing on one of the chairs he could have seen over the parapet and, by daylight, the mulberry trees and the green below. The furniture of the room was very simple, a three-cornered mahogany washstand with a blue Spode jug and basin, a wooden bedstead, painted yellow, a chest of drawers of the same colour, a couple of chairs,

and for a dressing-table a plain deal table draped with pink glazed calico and muslin, rather dirty. Over the bed hung a text, "My God, Thou seest me." The carpet was in four strips, arranged about the bed.

Wolfe stood in the middle of the room, and his head came within six inches of the ceiling. He looked round critically, with just the slightest twitching of the upper lip. The text over the bed interested him. He went and unpinned it, and turned it with its face to the wall.

He moved next to the little Georgian fireplace, put a boot into the opening and felt for the register.

"Down—of course!"

Wolfe kicked it up, and a shower of soot descended upon the white shavings and the pink paper fronting that decorated the grate.

"I'll wager that man's an old duffer. Fussy and amiable. I wonder what sort of life they lead down here? Quiet and sleepy and harmless."

He laughed and turned to the portmanteau that the fat boy had left at the bottom of the bed. Nor was his unpacking a very lengthy business. Out of the portmanteau came two shirts, rather ragged; a pair of slippers; a washing-bag; a comb and brush; a pair of boots that had been re-capped at the toes; a razor; a strop; a brown leather instrument case; a meerschaum pipe wrapped up in a paper bag; two pairs of trousers; a tail coat; two night-shirts, with the buttons showing metal; five collars; a tie, and two or three well-worn books. Wolfe packed most of these possessions away in the chest of drawers before he went to the wash-hand stand and washed himself in the blue Spode basin.

As he stood by the dressing-table where the maid had left the candle, his hand went reflectively into the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out a faded green silk purse. He shook the contents out on to the dressing-table, and counted one sovereign and nine shillings in silver. An investigation of his trousers pockets disclosed the sum of ninepence in coppers. Wolfe eyed the money thoughtfully, picked it up piece by piece, and put it back, all save the coppers, into the green silk purse.

This green silk purse had shared with Wolfe all the lean years of his student's life. No romantic associations belonged to it. He had bought the purse seven years ago at a little fancy shop in Islington, in the days when, as a young man of twenty-one, he had taken the £100 a Quaker aunt had left him. Those seven years would have killed or crushed a man with less toughness and less heart, for no fanatical or mediæval scholar could have suffered more in the pursuit of philosophy. One shirt, one pair of boots, one meal a day; heroic hoarding to pay for fees and books; a genuine garret

to cook and sleep in. He had not only to learn, but to earn money to learn with. For three years he had acted as night dispenser at a surgery. More than once he had spent a part of the summer travelling the country with an itinerant "boxing booth" and acting as "bruiser" at country fairs. He had sung songs in London taverns for a shilling and a pot of porter a night, and worked for three months as a navvy in the cuttings and on the embankments of a new south-country railway. At the hospital he had been called "The Wolf," and the name had suited his lean, predatory look. A quiet man, the best "heavy weight" in the London hospitals, clean to the point of ferocity in his living, shabby, a hater of snobs, he had a few good friends, and a fair number of shy enemies.

Those seven years had left their mark upon the man, and upon his belongings. He was hard, grim, straight as his own "left," absolutely fearless, an enthusiast who had fought through. Wolfe had been thorough. He had not scraped a little knowledge and the lowest possible qualification, and then disappeared to make a little money. He had served as house-surgeon and resident obstetric surgeon, and had spent some months studying that elemental science—public health. Wolfe was a sound man, a man who could not bear not to know what could be known.

Yet he had come by more things than knowledge and thoroughness. No true man who has struggled and suffered loses in heart by these strugglings and sufferings. For these things are life, and without them a man does not understand half the things that he sees. Insight, sympathy, humour, a deep tenderness, you find them in the men who have come with sound hearts through the rough and tumble.

And now, at the end of these seven years, John Wolfe found himself in Navestock town as assistant to Dr. Montague Threadgold. Experience in general practice and money to save for a career—these were his necessities. If Navestock had known the contents of John Wolfe's portmanteau and his green silk purse, it would have attached no great importance to the fact that Dr. Montague Threadgold had taken a new assistant.

"Old Monte's got another bottle-washer!"

Yet the man who was descending Dr. Threadgold's stairs and pausing to decide which was the door of Dr. Threadgold's drawing-room, was fated to shake the torpor out of the bones of that most corrupt of towns. The great, outer world had dropped a live shell into Navestock market-place.

A high-pitched, serene squeak of a voice gave Wolfe the clue as to the position of Dr. Threadgold's drawing-room door.

"Montague," it said, "Montague, be so good as to put two more lumps of coal on the fire."

And Wolfe heard the scoop of a shovel as he put his hand to the white china handle.

## *CHAPTER TWO*

THE drawing-room of Prospect House reminded Wolfe of the conventional idea of heaven, in that it was full of much gold and of things that glittered. The pictures were all in gold frames, and the mirrors vied with the pictures. Lustres glittered on the great central chandelier and on the candlesticks upon the marble mantelpiece. The clock was a monstrous creation in gold. The turkey-red curtains were edged with gold braid and looped back with gold tasselled cords. Purplish red tapestry covered the sofa, ottoman, and chairs, the upholstering being finished off with red gimp and brass-headed nails. On the wall-paper yellow roses rambled through festoons of orange ribbons. The antimacassars were in red and yellow wool, and the carpet was not unlike a glorified antimacassar.

Beside the fire sat a very regal little person in a huge crinoline, black bodice, and lace cap. Her round, puddy, exquisitely complacent face looked out from between clay-coloured ringlets and from under the lace, ribbons, and jet ornaments of the aforesaid cap. Her nose was a little beak, and her blue eyes protruded slightly and always retained the same hard, staring expression. Her mouth drooped at the corners over a dumpy and formless chin. As for her dress—it was of black silk, and rustled whenever she moved.

Dr. Threadgold jumped up from mending the fire.

"Ha—Mr. Wolfe. My dear, permit me to introduce Mr. Wolfe to you. Mr. John Wolfe—my wife, Mrs. Threadgold."

Wolfe's bow did not equal the sententious dignity of the doctor's introduction. Mrs. Threadgold gave the new assistant a very slight inclination of the head and went on with her knitting. She felt it to be part of her business in life to counteract the effects of her husband's intense affability.

"Draw up a chair, sir, and get warm. That's right. Never mind the hearthrug."

"My dear Montague, I—must put in a word for the hearthrug, especially when the edge is all crumpled up."

Wolfe thrust the arm-chair a yard farther back. He caught Mrs. Threadgold's eyes fixed upon the extreme length of his outstretched legs, and upon the muddy pair

of boots that he had forgotten to change. A nervous man would have drawn up his legs and tucked his feet under the chair. Wolfe did not move.

"Well, sir, and how do you like Navestock?" Threadgold's spectacles beamed —"not much opportunity to judge yet, eh? We are quiet, humdrum people, but I think you will find us quite alive after our fashion. In politics, though, I am a bit of a Liberal."

"Montague, you know that you are nothing of the kind."

"My dear——"

"Dr. Threadgold must have his facetiosities, Mr. Wolfe. The most eminent men are sometimes the most playful. I may inform you that Navestock is one of the most loyal and Conservative towns in the kingdom; as it should be, and as it will always be so long as Lord Blackwater is Lord of the Manor, the Brandons hold 'Pardons,' and the old families remain. I must say that the neighbourhood is a most aristocratic one, and that the gentry——"

A gong sounded downstairs. Mrs. Threadgold ignored it.

"That the gentry realise their responsibilities to the poor, without needing any impertinent, vulgar clamour on the part of low Radicals."

Dr. Threadgold pulled out his watch.

"It is exactly one minute before the half hour, Montague."

"So it is, my dear."

"I think it right that a young man in Mr. Wolfe's position should receive some instruction as to the character of the neighbourhood in which Dr. Threadgold is the leading physician and surgeon. I need not say that in a practice such as this——"

The gong sounded a second time.

"Good manners—and tact—are of great importance. Was that the gong, Montague?"

"My dear, it was."

"Then we will go down to supper."

Mrs. Threadgold possessed the power of making nervous people lose their appetite and refuse with a fluster of self-consciousness the second helping that they so much desired. John Wolfe was as hungry as a man could be, and not being troubled with shyness, he listened gravely to Mrs. Threadgold's tittle-tattle and kept on good terms with the round of roast beef at the end of the table. Threadgold helped him generously, for his good humour was not a surface virtue, and the doctor and his dining-room harmonized admirably. Everything was solid, comfortable, and opulent. Old portraits in oils hung upon the brown-papered walls. The sideboard was a fine piece of Sheraton, the chairs Hepplewhite, and upholstered with red

brocade. The Turkey carpet claimed part of the prosperity of the practice.

Mrs. Threadgold had an eye on Wolfe's plate. She had been studying the new man, noticing the faded edges of his tie and the shiny buttons of his coat. Her observation dealt mainly with external details. She did not go below the surface, for to Mrs. Sophia Threadgold life was all surface, a matter of gilding, glass, fresh paint, pew cushions, silk, pasteboard, and fine linen. Wolfe impressed her as a raw gawk of a man who was inclined to be silent and sulky. He had come into her drawing-room with dirty boots, and eaten three helpings of cold beef, and these details were full of significance.

It was an understandable impulse that drove her to talk about Sir Joshua Kermody, the senior physician at Guy's, a gentleman with a fashionable consulting practice and a decision in the dieting of dukes and yet more distinguished persons.

"Sir Joshua has often stayed a night with us here at Navestock. He and Dr. Threadgold were students together and great friends——"

"O yes—I knew Kermody pretty well."

"One of the most perfect gentlemen I have ever met. I suppose you have often listened to Sir Joshua's lectures, Mr. Wolfe?"

"Yes, for one whole year."

"And you have followed him round the wards, too?"

"Miles."

Mrs. Threadgold's face showed some transient animation.

"What an opportunity for you young men. Quite an education—in manners. I have often heard that medical students are such vulgar young fellows. Sir Joshua is just the one to provide them with a little polish. The hospital should be very proud of Sir Joshua."

Wolfe laid his knife and fork side by side and looked in his grave, penetrating way at Mrs. Threadgold. He knew old Kermody and his reputation, a man with the tastes and the manners of a Brummell, spruce, bland, and untrustworthy, obsolete in his knowledge, a man who had always refused to accept anything that was new. Kermody was one of the handsomest old snobs in London. He had grand manners and the heart of a cad.

"We have plenty of good men at Guy's, madam."

"I don't doubt it, sir. Sir Joshua has often said that Dr. Threadgold would have been one of the leading physicians in London, if he had cared to stay there. I have no doubt that you will find Dr. Threadgold's experience of infinite service to you. It is good for young men to sit at the feet of experience."

Wolfe's eye caught the doctor's.

"That's what I've come for, sir."

Dr. Threadgold blinked, beamed, and moved uneasily in his chair.

"Ha—one lives and learns, lives and learns. Our responsibilities, Mr. Wolfe, thicken as we grow older. Now, you young men——"

"I think we have more to carry."

"Oh!"

"We have our unmade reputations on our shoulders."

"Ah, that's true."

"Quite a sensible remark, Mr. Wolfe. Montague, perhaps Mr. Wolfe will take—a third helping of that sponge custard."

"Allow me, sir."

"Thanks. I will."

It had begun to rain again, and what with the wind blowing the rain full upon the windows and howling through the mulberry trees upon the Green, none of the three at Dr. Threadgold's supper table heard the rattle of a horse's hoofs over the cobbles. The stones gave place to gravel in front of the sententious, red-coated house on the north side of Mulberry Green, and a gig that came swinging round the white posts and chains drew up briskly outside Dr. Threadgold's door. A loafer who had been following the gig at a run, gave a pull at the doctor's door-bell, and set up a tremendous hammering with the lion-headed knocker.

Dr. Threadgold still had the spoon in the dish of sponge custard.

"Hallo, hallo, do they want to knock the house down!"

"Montague, if that is old Crabbe's boy, I wish you would box the little wretch's ears. He always makes noise enough for Lord Blackwater's footman."

They heard Sykes, the maid, cross the hall and open the front door. A gust of wind whirled in with the sound of men's voices.

"Confound it, Ruston, don't touch that side of me!"

The door closed again, shutting the voices into Dr. Threadgold's hall.

"This way, sir, please."

"What? Is he in? Deuce take——"

A second door closed on the snarling voice, cutting it off sharply. Sykes came whisking into the dining-room with a scared white face.

"Please, sir, it's Sir George Griggs. He's met with a haccident, sir, 'unting."

Dr. Threadgold pushed his chair back, put his napkin on the table, and gave his waistcoat a tug, the unconscious gesture that betrayed the professional dignity putting itself in order. His prim little mouth straightened into a tighter and more emphatic line.

"Excuse me, my dear."

"Most certainly, Montague."

She turned to Wolfe, who was on the point of rising, and treated him as though he had asked her a question.

"Certainly, Mr. Wolfe. By all means accompany Dr. Threadgold. I know that a young man in your position——"

Wolfe was up, and had given her a slight, stiff bow.

"Go and watch Dr. Threadgold, sir. No doubt you will learn something."

In Dr. Threadgold's consulting room a huge, bullet-headed man in a red coat was striding to and fro from corner to corner, a splash of blood over his left temple, and his left cheek brown with mud. His riding breeches were ripped along one thigh and soaked with mud and slime. The man was like a great beast in pain. He swore —in gusts—as he stamped to and fro, holding his left arm folded across his chest, the right hand under the left elbow. A younger man stood leaning against the bookcase, looking on rather helplessly, and pulling the joints of his brown whiskers.

Dr. Threadgold bustled in with John Wolfe at his heels.

"Come, come, bless my soul! what's all this about?"

The big man turned like an angry bull.

"Matter? Shut that door. I don't want to have the whole house hear me swearing. Swear, confound it, I must."

"My dear Sir George—swear."

"The devil take that new hunter of mine. I'll have the beast shot to-morrow. Played me a dirty trick. What!"

The young man by the bookcase emitted sympathetic language through a cloud of hair. His nose and eyes looked like the beak and eyes of a bird all puffed up with feathers.

"Ged, sir, never saw a beast refuse more scurvily. I nearly rode over you. Why ——"

"Look here, Threadgold—man, something's pretty well messed up. The beast refused at a big ditch, and banged me over his head into an oak stub. We were down Bordon way, ten devilish miles. Thought it would be quicker to drive straight here in Ruston's gig. Confound it—this shoulder kicks like an old duck-gun!"

Threadgold took off his spectacles, wiped them with a silk handkerchief, and replaced them with an air of "now—for business."

"Please sit down, Sir George. You say you fell on your shoulder. That's right, Mr. Wolfe, you might light that other gas jet. Now, sir. I'm afraid we shall have to have your coat off."

Threadgold made little, soothing gestures with his hands.

"Coat off? Of course. But how the——"

"I am afraid, Sir George, we shall have to sacrifice the coat."

"Confound the coat, cut it into ribbons."

"Mr. Wolfe, sir, you will find a pair of scissors in that drawer. What?"

He found Wolfe standing at his elbow with a sharp-bladed knife.

"Shall I slit the sleeve for you?"

"Please do so, sir."

Wolfe went to work, and peeled the red coat from the injured man by slitting it along the seams. He was very dexterous and very gentle. Sir George watched Wolfe's hands, keeping his jaw set for the moment when the surgeon should hurt him. But Wolfe had the coat off without causing him a pang.

"By jove, that was smart!"

Mr. Ruston of the hairy face chimed in with "Ged, it was, sir."

Wolfe threw the coat aside, slit the baronet's waistcoat across the shoulder, unbuttoned it, handed it to Mr. Ruston, saying, "There's a watch there, I think." Then he dissected away the sleeve of Sir George's shirt, and laid bare the bruised and swollen shoulder.

Threadgold, who had grown rather fidgety, stepped forward, and reassumed his authority.

"Thank you, Mr. Wolfe. Now, sir, we will see what is the matter."

Wolfe drew aside and watched Dr. Threadgold make his examination. His first impressions had tempted him to mistrust the little man's ability, nor had he watched Dr. Threadgold's chubby hands for half a minute before he knew him for a fumbler and no surgeon. A craftsman is very quick in judging a fellow craftsman, and Threadgold was fussy, ineffectual, and uncertain with his hands. He chattered half to himself and half to his patient, with the busy self-consciousness of a man of poor capacity.

His hands gave Wolfe the impression of not being quite sure of what they ought to do next. There was no decisive, diagnostic intelligence about them. Moreover, Threadgold caused the big man a great deal of unnecessary pain.

"Acromion process—hum—exactly. Clavicle a leetle bit up—perhaps. Swelling very pronounced, very pronounced——"

Sir George writhed.

"Confound it, Threadgold."

"One moment, sir. I assure you——"

"How much longer do you want to mess me about?"

Threadgold patted the swollen joint, looked wise and sympathetic, and glanced

at Wolfe.

"Support Sir George's arm, Mr. Wolfe."

He pursed up his lips, and frowned over the gold rims of his glasses. Wolfe had a shrewd suspicion that Dr. Threadgold was none the wiser than when he began.

"There is a great deal of swelling there, Sir George, a very great deal of swelling. I should prefer to have the injured part rested, ice applied, and a second examination made to-morrow."

The big man stared.

"What! You don't mean to say——"

"My dear sir, in a case such as this, when some hours have elapsed——"

"Oh, bosh, man, I want the thing settled. Do you mean to say I've driven ten miles—for nothing? You've pulled me about enough——"

Dr. Threadgold went very pink.

"My dear Sir George, let me assure you that a diagnosis can only be hypothetical under such conditions."

The baronet looked ugly. He was one of those plethoric, short-tempered men who lose all self-restraint under the influence of pain or of much provocation. He stared hard at Threadgold, and then turned his bristling eyebrows towards Wolfe, who was supporting the arm.

"Look here—just take this on. I don't want to be fooled about any longer."

Wolfe glanced at Threadgold. The little man's face looked pink and suffused. His eyes were big behind his glasses.

"If you care to let my assistant examine you, Sir George——"

"Yes, I do."

"Very well, sir, very well. I have nothing more to say."

Threadgold pivoted round on one check-patterned leg, strutted to the hearthrug, pulled the lapels of his coat forward, and stood with chest expanded.

In five minutes Wolfe had Sir George Griggs stretched upon the sofa. The surgeon had taken off his left boot and was sitting on the edge of the sofa with his heel in the baronet's armpit.

"I shall have to hurt you badly—for about ten seconds, sir."

"Go on. I'm not a baby."

"Catch hold of Mr. Ruston's hand. Nothing like something to grip. Now, hold on."

There was a moment of writhing, of grim, clenched anguish as Wolfe pulled at the arm and worked at the dislocated shoulder.

"In. That's good."

"What—all over?"

"Yes."

The big man lay on the sofa and panted, while Mr. Ruston flapped his hand.

"I say, that was a twister!"

"Ged—you gave me a squeezing!"

"Get me a 'peg,' someone; it's made me feel pretty funny."

He was sweating. Dr. Threadgold turned and rang the bell.

"Head of the bone was out, was it?"

"Yes. If you can sit up in a minute, sir, I'll just see that everything is all right."

Sir George sat up readily enough while Wolfe manipulated the left arm very gently and made sure that the head of the bone was back in its normal position.

"Yes, that's all right, sir."

"Sykes, a glass of brandy and water."

Dr. Threadgold lingered at the door.

"I say, sir, I am confoundedly obliged to you."

Wolfe smiled.

"Oh, that's all part of the campaign. I shall have to tie you up to keep that shoulder quiet. What about your forehead?"

"A little gravelling, isn't it?"

"Yes, nothing serious. I'll wash it, and patch you up with a bit of plaster. By the way, though——"

He remembered suddenly that he was in Dr. Threadgold's consulting-room, and that a hot and rather humiliated little man was fidgeting on the hearthrug.

"Dr. Threadgold will tell you what precautions you ought to take."

"Oh, all right," said the baronet, gulping brandy and water.

Half an hour later Mr. Ruston was driving Sir George Griggs homeward in his gig. It was still raining hard, and the wet streets of Navestock were deserted. The big man had so far recovered himself that he was able to see the humour of much that had passed.

"What a confounded old woman! I always knew Threadgold was a duffer. I wouldn't have come within a mile of him only I knew Odgers of Hinkley was in London."

"Well, that other chap——"

"Jove, that's the sort of man for me. Plenty of grip there. I can't stand these counter-bouncing little beasts like Threadgold. He's only fit to slosh people with treacle and water."

"Mrs. T. ought to run the practice."

“Sophia Pudson—don’t, my dear chap, don’t! That woman’s face always acts on me like an emetic. You should hear old Johnson’s parrot next door shouting ‘Monte, Monte,’ all day in summer. A man like Threadgold ought to be shot for marrying such a woman.”

And the gig, with its lamps flaring through the rain, rolled out of South Street into the wet night.

At Prospect House Wolfe sat on the sofa in the consulting-room, smoking a clay pipe. There had been a slight scene after Sir George’s departure. Dr. Montague Threadgold had got upon his dignity and spoken with some heat.

“Mr. Wolfe, sir. I reproach myself with having allowed you to behave with such rashness. A swollen joint like that ought to be treated with the extremest caution.”

Wolfe had a big heart and no pettiness. He was rather sorry for Dr. Threadgold.

“Well, sir, I felt convinced——”

“When you are a little older, Mr. Wolfe, you will not be convinced so easily. Experience teaches a doctor to be cautious.”

Dr. Threadgold retired to the drawing-room, where his wife was sitting before the fire. The faint tinkle of a piano came from the next house, and the mellow piping of a flute. The Misses Johnson and the Rev. Charles Chipperton of St. Jude’s were playing old Johnson, the wine merchant, to sleep.

Mrs. Threadgold looked up with one of her expressionless smiles. If you could ascribe any colour to smiles, Mrs. Threadgold’s resembled the yellowish wool in her lap.

“Everything quite successful, Montague?”

“Most successful, my dear.”

“A serious accident?”

“Dislocated shoulder. Mr. Wolfe and I reduced it.”

Mrs. Threadgold looked gratified.

“I thought the young man ought to profit by your experience, Montague, so I sent him after you.”

“Exactly, my dear, exactly.”

“Rather a raw young man, and very ugly, but I have no doubt that you will polish him and improve his manners.”

Dr. Threadgold poked the fire rather testily.

“Mr. Wolfe,” he said, “seems to be a young man of some ability. But a little forward, a little inclined to be above himself. I shall have to modify that.”

# *CHAPTER THREE*

PEOPLE with a sense of the picturesque, who drove for the first time over Tarling Moor and saw Navestock—the town of the southern midlands—lying far-away in the green valley below them, thought of it as a dream town, hidden away among innocent, wooded hills. Even in later years, when a more restless generation began to run about the world in a mad hurry to admire anything that was "antique" and "quaint," Navestock remained the quintessence of "quaintness."

Artists came to paint its old inns, its stretches of red roof, and the mellow gloom of its alleys. It still kept much of its mystery, much of its crowded colour, much of the "quaintness" that earnest and dreamy persons seek so loyally.

From the distance Navestock looked like a red heart transfixed by a silver bodkin, red roofs on either side of the River Wraith. It was compact, and crowded, all mellowed to a warm maturity, from the garden houses on Peachy Hill to the hovels by the river alleys. The Builder Beast of the late 'sixties and the 'seventies had not then scented the town and scattered filth in the fields and gardens.

Those people who were in search of old-world quaintness found pieces of many centuries jumbled together like the pieces of a puzzle. Georgian gentlemen might still have strutted in the market square, their coats of red and green and blue brightening the grey cobbles, the powdered heads the colour of the clouds that floated over the town. In Bung Row and Bastard Alley by the river loitered those broad-hipped, snub-nosed slatterns whom Hogarth would have painted. If you desired a setting for some sweet serial in a Sunday magazine, you had but to walk past the Brandon Almshouses and along Green Street where the timber and plaster houses overhung the road. Noble young cavaliers came riding by, and sweet Dorothies flung red roses out of the casement windows. Then bells tolled by St. Jude's Church, and Grey Friars came sweeping along, two by two, hairy, barefooted men, with hungry faces and wolves' eyes. Let but a trumpet blow and young Mortimer clashed by in full war gear upon his great white horse, the tall spears of his men-at-arms moving after him like the masts of ships in a Dutch town. One artist, who came to paint Navestock's queer corners, swore that if he watched the green doors in the red houses at

Vernor's End, he saw sentimental young women in huge bonnets and loose muslin gowns glide out and shake their curls at him in the sunlight. But this artist was a very impressionable man. He painted Navestock as a town of horsemen and of coaches, of blue wagons thundering along the narrow streets at the tails of huge, black horses. He painted it also as a town of gables and dormer windows, of high brick walls with roses and fruit trees showing over the tops thereof, of rich unsuspected gardens, of still more unsuspected foul, back yards. Strangers thought Navestock a sweet, innocent, peaceful old place where quiet and kindly people lived quiet and kindly lives.

It is to be feared that Romance hides a number of dirty garments under her gay-coloured cloak, and that Navestock was a thoroughly dirty and corrupt old town. She may have had pots of musk in her windows, but her back yards, her alleys, and her lanes were full of many odours. Nor was the town's morality particularly clean. In the river alleys children swarmed like cockroaches, and family relationships were a matter of speculation. Inns and little beer-houses were plentiful. They leered at people round unsuspected corners and winked knowingly at the thirsty.

Behind the gardens belonging to the houses on the north side of Mulberry Green ran Snake Lane, and from Snake Lane a passage branched off between high brick walls that were topped with broken glass. A black door, with "Surgery" painted upon it in white letters, opened out of this passage. Daily, between the hours of nine and ten and six and seven, the sickly lees of the life of this old town oozed into Dr. Threadgold's surgery. Threadgold had no rival in Navestock, and so far as his practice was concerned, his patients were divided into the blessed and the damned. To his assistants—such as they were—had been given the river alleys and their hovels, the sots and incurables, the miserable old men and women, the strumous, rickety children. Dr. Threadgold moved in the upper regions. He did not climb dirty stairs and knock his head against sloped ceilings. That chubby little hand of his went gliding up mahogany banister rails, and felt pulses under skin that was white and clean.

"Mr. Wolfe, sir, have you nearly finished with that case?"

There was some asperity in the elder man's voice as his head and one check-patterned leg appeared round the edge of the door that led from the consulting-room into the surgery. Wolfe was seated on a chair by the window with a baby howling on his knees. A thin woman stood beside him, blinking away tears, and the crowded bottles on the shelves seemed to blink in sympathy.

"In one minute, sir."

"My carriage has been waiting for half an hour."

"I can't leave the child for the moment, sir."

Nor could he, since he was in the act of snipping an over-tight ligament that tied down the baby's tongue.

Wolfe found Dr. Threadgold warming his feet at the fire. He turned briskly, and began to speak with a certain forced rapidity.

"Mr. Wolfe, I have drawn you out a list of patients who will be under your charge. And since you are new to the place I have ordered Samuel, the surgery boy, to go round with you and act as guide. Here are the list and the addresses."

Threadgold handed Wolfe a strip of paper, and turned rather hurriedly towards the door. There were some twenty names on the list, and against each name Dr. Threadgold had written a diagnosis—in red ink.

"I shall be glad if you will be guided by my experience, Mr. Wolfe. If you have any suggestions to make as to treatment, I shall be pleased to consider them."

He swung the door open, and then turned as though he had suddenly remembered something.

"And, by the way, sir, Mrs. Threadgold has asked me to tell you that she cannot allow the smell of tobacco about the house."

Wolfe glanced up from the list that he had been scanning.

"Mrs. Threadgold, sir, is exceedingly sensitive to the smell of tobacco. Moreover, this house is a house of very frequent entertainment. In fact——"

Wolfe cut him short.

"I quite understand, sir. I'll smoke in the garden—or in the stable."

Threadgold gave a mild stare.

"Anywhere you please, Mr. Wolfe, in private. But of course not in public. I could not see a representative of mine walking the streets of Navestock——"

"No, sir, I quite understand you."

Threadgold bounced out like a timid man who has been ordered to say his say, leaving Wolfe standing by the window with a queer and thoughtful smile upon his face.

The people of Navestock stared a good deal at John Wolfe as he spent his first morning striding about the town with fat Samuel plodding at his side. Most of the patients on the list that Dr. Threadgold had given him belonged to the lanes and alleys near the river. The very names of these places were suggestive—Bung Row, Bastard Alley, Dirty Dick's, Paradise Place. The lanes were mere crevasses into which very little sunlight fell, and in winter, when the Wraith was in flood, half the low-lying ground would be under water. The whole neighbourhood was like a rabbit-warren, full of winding ways, black holes, and dark entries, and to judge by

the condition of the yards and gutters—the art of scavenging was unknown.

Wolfe had to visit three cottages in Bung Row, and he felt himself back in the familiar London slums. In the first cottage, he found a frowsy woman sitting before a bit of fire, holding a baby to her breast, and trying to smother a cough. Wolfe sat down on a chair that had lost its back and talked to her with the ease of a man who is too interested and too much in earnest to be self-conscious. The woman was pitiably servile, and seemed surprised that this new doctor was not in a curt and casual hurry.

"It's me soide, sir, I've got such a pain in me soide."

She reiterated the cry, screwing her mouth into a queer triangular slit, so that Wolfe, struck by some ludicrous memory, had to get up and appear interested in her back.

"Much coughing?"

"It's the coughing as pulls me to bits, sir. I coughs until I retches, and the pain in me soide, sir, is fair awful. Sleep? Wish I could, sir. It's cough, cough, cough the whole blessed night. And my man—he's that disagreeable, talks of stuffing a stocking in me mouth. And I'm getting that thin."

A lean girl of twelve came and took the baby, and Wolfe examined the woman's chest. Dr. Threadgold had given a diagnosis of bronchial catarrh. Wolfe very soon satisfied himself that the woman must have been suffering from consumption for months.

"Ever spat blood?"

"Blood, sir? Pints, sir."

"You told Dr. Threadgold?"

"He only saw me once, sir, and he was that hurried. It was after Mr. Timmins left. He didn't thump me and listen, like you do, sir."

"No?"

"He said I'd caught a bit of a cold."

Wolfe sat in silence a moment, his grave eyes fixed on the woman's face. One of those flashes of understanding that strike suddenly across a man's mind touched him as he looked at her. He realised what it was to be in the hands of an indifferent, bungling, careless old man, to have one's miserable life curtailed amid such miserable surroundings. It was as though Navestock lay betrayed before him in the body of this woman; betrayed with all its inward sores, its ugly outward blemishes. Wolfe was a man who was very open to impressions, and almost like an artist in the way he caught the atmosphere of his surroundings.

"Did Dr. Threadgold give you any medicine?"

“Some pinky stuff, sir. But it’s the pain in me soide!”

Wolfe no longer had any desire to laugh. He gave the woman what advice he could, picked up his hat, and went out into Bung Row.

It seemed that his first impressionist sketch was to have the details blackened in that morning with heavy and emphatic lines. In three more cases Wolfe found that old Threadgold had blundered badly. The picture of the plump, spruce, affable little man kept jigging before Wolfe’s eyes as he realised how people were doctored in these Navestock alleys. He began to get a surer grip of Dr. Threadgold’s character. He could imagine this soft and incompetent little man pottering here and there with affable indifference, bungling glibly, too easily satisfied with the good things of life to realise perhaps that he was bungling. How did a man come to such a state? Wolfe, with all his grim and almost fanatical thoroughness, could hardly glimpse the psychology of the thing.

Genial cynicism! He supposed such a state of mind existed. And in such a town as this! And it was here that another side-gleam of understanding struck slantwise across his consciousness. Ignorance and cynical indifference may produce identical results, and the dirt and the insanity squalor of these Navestock lanes were facts to be laid at somebody’s door. Who was responsible? Who owned these rat holes in the river bank? Wolfe asked himself these questions, and in the asking the beaming face of Dr. Threadgold assumed another meaning. He remembered the good lady’s remarks in the drawing-room over night. Old Sir Joshua Kermody was her ideal—was he? And Navestock was the most Conservative of towns! Faugh! His nostrils contracted as he followed fat Sam past a slaughter-house yard that was an abomination even in winter.

He turned into Bread Street, and stopped to glance at Dr. Threadgold’s list and to consult with Master Sam. Bread Street ended at the river in a narrow old red-brick bridge that gave room for only one cart to pass at a time. At this moment the bridge happened to be choked with a group of children who had gathered round a girl who was wheeling a couple of infants in a very battered “pram.” A straight road bordered with willows cut across the meadows on the other side of the river, and a boy on a black pony was cantering along it towards the bridge.

Wolfe, who was looking towards the river, saw the boy on the pony brandish a switch and ride straight at the bridge as though he were charging the crowd of children there. They scattered like rabbits, the girl with the perambulator making a dash for Bread Street, the iron wheels bumping over the cobbles. One youngster refused to budge, standing sturdily with his back to the parapet, his fists thrust into his trousers pockets. The boy on the pony slashed this upholder of liberty across the

face with his switch as his pony cantered past.

Bread Street was a dirty street, pitted with large puddles, and about thirty yards from where Wolfe stood a little servant girl in a clean print frock was picking her way over the cobbles. The boy on the black pony saw another chance of amusing himself. He made his pony swerve, and, cantering close to the girl when she was on the edge of a puddle, splashed the muddy water over her dress.

Wolfe stepped out into the road. The mannikin on the black pony came cantering up the street, glancing back once or twice to laugh at the servant girl's rueful face. He was dressed like any dandy of thirty, in neat little trousers, a green waistcoat, a well-cut coat, and a high hat. A gold watch chain and gold seals showed on his waistcoat. The child was not more than twelve years old, and yet had all the airs and assurance of a very complacent man. His flat and colourless face with its faded blue eyes and impertinent nose had a queer resemblance to the face of some old roué.

The boy rode straight at Wolfe, waving him aside with his silver-handled switch.

"You, there, out of the way."

He looked greatly astonished when Wolfe caught the pony's bridle and pulled the beast up. The little gloved hand raised itself threateningly, but the man's eyes met the boy's, and the switch fell cowed.

"Hadn't you better ride a little more quietly, Master Tommy?"

Master Tommy, indeed! This—to Aubrey Brandon, Esq., of "Pardons," who in a certain number of years would have half Navestock in his pocket.

"What the deuce d'you mean, sir! Let go of my bridle."

Wolfe smiled in his face.

"You have got a big voice for your years, Tommy. If I were you I should go back and tell that girl you are sorry you dirtied her dress."

"Confound you, it's no business of yours."

"Cut along, then, Master Cub; I'm not your tutor."

He let the bridle go, but still looked at Master Brandon in a way that made the boy feel angry and discomfited.

"And who the dickens are you, sir, stopping gentlemen in the public streets?"

"Oh—I'm nobody, Tommy."

"You look like it, sir—you look like it."

Wolfe gave a quiet, yet hearty laugh.

"It's a pity someone does not give you a thrashing," he said; "but as you say—a cub's manners are no concern of mine."

Young Master Brandon went trotting on up Bread Street his sallow face a little flushed and frightened. No one had ever interfered with him in Navestock before,

save once on Peachy Hill, where old Josiah Crabbe's Calvinistical gardener had threatened him with a thrashing for knocking over a little girl. Most of the Navestock folk were afraid of the youngster and his mother, and had agreed to regard his little arrogances as the ebullitions of the spirit of youth.

Wolfe turned to Sam, the surgery boy, who was looking up at him with comical respect.

"Who was that youngster, Sam?"

"Lor', sir, that was young Master Brandon."

"Brandon, and who's he? Lead on to Paradise Place, Sam. It is marked down as being near Bread Street."

Sam led on.

"That was young Master Brandon, of 'Pardons,' sir, Mrs. Brandon's only son."

"Big people, are they?"

"Tip toppers."

"Own much of the town?"

"About half, sir, so I've heard say."

"Mr. Brandon seems to do as he pleases."

"Lor', sir, who's to stop him? I've seen him ride his pony half into Mr. Hubbard's shop and swear like a lord at the old gentleman."

Wolfe looked amused.

"Do lords swear so very furiously, Sam?"

"Sure, I don't know, sir. I don't know as I ever seed one."

"And there is no Mr. Brandon?"

"Father—you mean, sir?"

"Yes."

"No, sir. He died a sort of idiot quite a long while ago."

They had made their way up a back street to Paradise Place, a row of brick and timber cottages, each with a small square of garden spread like a mat before it. How the place had earned its name it would be difficult to say, unless the person who had christened it had been blessed with a sardonic sense of humour. The bits of gardens were mere patches of dirt, and the casement windows, many of them stuffed with rags, looked out on the high brick wall of Miller Hansell's great wagon-shed. A pump stood in an enclosure half-way up the place. People called it the "Paradise Pump," though how many cesspools leaked into the well below no one troubled to consider.

Wolfe spent an hour in Paradise Place, and ended it with an inspection of the Paradise Pump. He decided that he would have a sample of that water, and examine

it. An analysis might explain sundry phenomena that he had observed in the neighbouring cottages.

Walking homewards towards Mulberry Green he cast a critical eye over the fat boy and confessed to himself that the lad looked particularly healthy.

"You take plenty of physic, Sam?"

"Me, sir?"

"Yes."

"Ain't had a drop of physic since the measles five years ago."

"Whereabouts do you live?"

"Up Peachy Hill, sir."

"You're a rogue, Sam! Many people get ill, living near the peaches?"

"Not much illness our way, sir. It's mostly down along the river."

"And who's your landlord?"

"Mr. Crabbe."

"And who is Mr. Crabbe?"

"Why, Mr. Josiah Crabbe, sir."

Sam was out of breath, since Wolfe had been striding at full speed up Market Hill. He gasped out information between heavings of the chest.

"Does Mr. Crabbe own much property?"

"All about Peachy Hill, sir."

"And the places we have been to this morning?"

"Part, Brandon's, sir; part, Mr. Turrell, the brewer's, so far as I know."

"I expected as much. You are getting pumped, Sam, in more ways than one. What's that striking? One o'clock! I shall be late for dinner."

But Wolfe did not hurry himself. He appeared to be thinking hard all the rest of the way to Mulberry Green, and Sam, who was a lethargic lad, was content to wonder whether the cook at Prospect House had made a jam-roll for dinner.

# *CHAPTER FOUR*

WHEN a man marries Sincerity he marries a strong-willed young woman whose strenuousness may drive him into many complicated situations.

John Wolfe was one of those detestably sincere people who cannot stand by and see a fellow man lie down to doze on a muck heap. It has been said that we create our own problems in life, and that the more sensitive we are the more we react to the imagined wrongs of others. Nor had John Wolfe been ten days in Navestock before he was faced with a problem that lay in the very path of his career. Most men who go out into the world of action meet this first crisis that rises like a bullying giant to try their strength. As a rule, all the advantages are on the giant's side. He has the big club, the furious arrogance of a great beast, and—above all—a friendly grin for those who prefer to surrender rather than fight. Life is much smoother for those who learn to adopt a habit of genial cynicism. Such men learn to shut one eye, to bend their heads, and to squeeze through narrow places.

Often after the day's work, Wolfe would sit on the edge of his bed and stare hard at the pink crimped paper in the Georgian grate. Someone had refixed the text in its proper position over his bed, and Wolfe had smiled when he had first noticed the readjustment. "My God, Thou seest me." And it is an echo of this cry that sounds in the hearts of the most unorthodox of men whose aim is to grasp life honestly, and to tolerate no excuses. We struggle on towards something even in the teeth of our desires. We may not argue it out, or even reason the question. The choice is there. We take the rougher road, grumbling perhaps, calling ourselves fools, but taking it none the less. Always in the best man there is the sense of uplift against odds, that driving instinct that forces him forward towards something better. He is like a tired man digging a garden plot. Another weed! Why not bury it, leave it, pull it up in the spring? But the instinct of thoroughness is too strong for him. He stoops and pulls up the weed, swearing perhaps that it shall be the last.

Wolfe went about his work with a quiet thoroughness that soon began to accumulate facts. South London was not one of the cleanest corners of the earth, but the things that John Wolfe found in Navestock were more astonishing and far more

scandalous. As for the people, they appeared surprised that he troubled to stay more than five minutes in each cottage, and the more servile among them tried to flatter him by contrasting his keenness with the hustling methods of his predecessors. Wolfe felt a peculiar interest in the men who had preceded him. He wondered how much they had troubled to discover; whether they had been true men or mere lick-spittles running a daily round. From what he heard, Wolfe judged that Dr. Threadgold's former assistants had been very easy-going young men, rushing through the day's work in order to play billiards at the "White Hart" or run after a petticoat. They had not dug under the surface of things to vex themselves with problems.

Wolfe bought some sheets of cartridge paper at Mr. Galpin's shop in Queen Street, and began to draw maps of Navestock, working at night by candlelight in his bedroom, with his portmanteau and the top of a box for a table. He kept a notebook, and jotted down his observations day by day, pushing his investigations into all manner of queer corners, hunting odours to their lairs, peering down surface wells, and scrutinising ditches. He was unostentatious in his methods, and the people of the lanes and river alleys were too ignorant to trouble their heads about such eccentricities. They thought the new doctor a quiet, masterful, and rather rough young man. Malingerers grew afraid of him. The people who were really ill felt better when he had seen them.

On the mantelpiece in Dr. Threadgold's consulting-room, covered by a glass case, stood a very fine high-powered microscope. It was a "show piece," like the *chef d'œuvre* displayed in the window of a craftsman's shop, suggesting what the expert could produce on great occasions. Dr. Threadgold had not touched the microscope for years, and though he possessed a fine collection of instruments he did not know how to use half of them. They were part of the general impressiveness of Prospect House, with the carpets, the plate, and the neat pair-horsed brougham.

Wolfe had had an eye on the microscope, and one day after lunch Threadgold found him cleaning the lenses and the mirror.

"You don't mind my using this, sir?"

Threadgold showed benignant condescension.

"By all means use it, Mr. Wolfe. What is it to be? A little botanising—a little physiology?"

"I have a few things I want to study. Pond-water and protozoa."

"A most interesting recreation. I often wish that I had the leisure for such scientific relaxations. Cultivate your enthusiasms, sir, when you are young."

Dr. Threadgold might have shown less complaisance had he guessed the aim of

Wolfe's investigations. He imagined that he had reduced this young man to a proper sense of his position, for Wolfe had seemed quiet and tactful and ready to accept any quantity of work. Wolfe's thoroughness made him cautious. He was not one who shouted upon impulse, but observed things and reobserved them before he uttered a word. He had said nothing to Threadgold of the many carelessnesses he had discovered, but had quietly altered the treatment without making any remark. Dr. Montague had in some measure forgotten the incident of Sir George Griggs and the dislocated shoulder. He had always had to deal with cheerfully compliant young men, men who had had the instincts of boys and who had done just as little as was required of them, and then run off to play. Threadgold told his wife that Wolfe was giving every satisfaction, and since Wolfe did not smoke in the house, kept out of the drawing-room, and did not show such a gluttonous hunger as he had shown on the first night, Mrs. Threadgold was inclined to consider him a very passable person.

It was on a March day that a message came in from Moor Farm on the northern edge of Tarling Moor. Dr. Threadgold was out, and Wolfe at work in the dispensary making up physic. The maid took Mrs. Mascall's note to Mrs. Threadgold, who exerted her jurisdiction in such matters when Dr. Montague was absent. Snob though she was, Mrs. Sophia had a shrewd knowledge of the neighbourhood, and had an experienced finger for the pulse of the local pride. To send an understrapper into certain houses would be an act of indecent folly.

Mrs. Threadgold decided that Wolfe could deal with the case in question. Mrs. Mascall was a fat, good-tempered old person. Montague could drive up to-morrow. And the Mascalls were abominably healthy.

"Sykes, take this note to Mr. Wolfe, and tell him to attend to it at once."

"Yes, ma'am."

And Wolfe had his orders.

Threadgold kept a spare horse for his assistant's use, and since the animal had been broken to both saddle and trap, Wolfe, who preferred the saddle to the little old black-and-yellow-wheeled gig, rode out for Tarling Moor. It was a clear, still afternoon, and Navestock lay like a toy town in the valley below. The Lombardy poplars beyond Josiah Crabbe's house at the end of West Street looked like the stiff wooden trees from a child's Noah's ark. Wolfe passed Beech Hill, Turrell the brewer's pretentious battlemented house. It was a great white building set in the midst of beautifully kept grass and splendid trees, but the house reminded Wolfe of a fat man in a white waistcoat. The windows of Beech Hill overlooked Navestock town, and Wolfe wondered whether Jasper Turrell realised how his tenants lived down by the river. The Turrells were ostentatious people. The brewer made a boast

of everything that belonged to Beech Hill, but no one would have mentioned Bung Row at his dinner-table. In all probability very few of the local gentry remembered that such a place as Bung Row existed.

Moor Farm was a group of red-brick, red-tiled buildings set on the first ridge-spur of Tarling Moor. It was a grazing farm, and its grasslands swept in green slopes towards the valley of the Wraith. A white gate opened into the home paddock where geese gaggled and a fat, brown pony nosed the grass. The house faced the south, with orchard and garden ground gathered about it, the byres, barns, and cattle lodges standing towards the north. Two huge cypresses grew in the garden in front of the house, their dusky spires visible for miles above the outlines of the moor.

Moor Farm itself was a long, low house with casement windows, stone mullions, and a great, brick porch. A mellow and homely solidity possessed it. Standing within a stone's throw of the wild and primitive moor, it threw back the southwest wind from its walls and roof, and glimmered its casements in the sunlight. Holly hedges, eight feet high and a yard thick, stood squarely round the orchard and the garden. A brick terrace ran along the front of the house, with grass below it that was kept sleek and smooth.

Wolfe whistled to a boy, who was carrying a bucket across the paddock, and the youngster ran to hold the doctor's horse. A path paved with rough stone slabs led to the porch. Moss and grass grew between the stones, and in one place the roots of one of the cypresses had lifted the flags. There were flower borders under the house, full of old-fashioned black velvet and old gold polyanthuses, Lent lilies, and London pride. The date 1678 was carved on a stone let into the brick face of the porch.

Wolfe had his hand on the iron bell-pull when the oak door swung open, and he found himself looking into the eyes of a tall girl whose black hair fell over her shoulders. Lithe, dark, and alert, she had come sailing down the broad oak stairs, hair flying, brown eyes full of a glitter of haste.

The door was hardly open when Wolfe saw the girl's face change its expression. There was a mobility about her that was quick and free as the sunlight over the moor.

"I thought Dr. Threadgold——Are you a doctor?"

"I am Dr. Threadgold's assistant."

The girl had no self-consciousness. She was an intense and rather passionate young person, whose pale face radiated an impetuous sincerity. She looked at Wolfe with unsophisticated displeasure, and kept one hand on the edge of the door.

"We sent for Dr. Threadgold——"

“Dr. Threadgold was out. I came to see if I could be of any use.”

The girl’s eyes looked into Wolfe’s eyes. For the moment she appeared to challenge him, and to stand waiting at the doorway of her intuition. Wolfe looked back at her with a frankness that did not intend to suffer a repulse.

“It is Mrs. Mascall who is ill, is it not?”

The girl still seemed to be waiting for some decisive impression.

“Yes.”

“I have left my horse at the gate. If you prefer to wait three or four hours I can ride back to Navestock and send Dr. Threadgold over.”

She looked at him fixedly. There was the faintest glimmer of amusement in the man’s eyes.

“That sounds silly.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

She began to smile.

“You know—I felt——”

“Of course you did.”

“Dr. Threadgold’s young—his assistants——”

“Young fools—shall we say!”

“I never meant that——”

“Say fools and we will shake hands on it.”

She stepped back with a frank, girlish laugh and let him in. Impetuosity was part of her nature. She was a moor child, bred to galloping ponies and the rush of the wind.

“I’ll run up and tell mother. Oh, I say, what’s your name?”

“Wolfe.”

The quip took them at the same moment.

“Wolf! Well, I did my best!”

“I’m a tame one. People don’t trouble to slam the door.”

She looked him in the eyes, and her frank glance said: “I like you.” Wolfe watched her go running up the oak stairs, her short green skirt dancing about her slim black ankles.

She had left him in a great stone-paved hall, a dim place, full of queer perfumes, old furniture, and old prints. A blunderbuss hung by a strap from a nail. In one corner stood a huge oak cupboard, its scutcheon plates and hinges bright as silver. A stone-paved passage disappeared under a heavy green curtain. Oak doors opened here and there. A red cloak and a whip lay tossed upon a round, pedestal table with claw feet.

The girl came back for Wolfe, and her face looked a little anxious.

"Please come up. Mother seems very ill. She can hardly get her breath—though she never will make a fuss."

Wolfe climbed the stairs, looking up into the girl's face. It was a face that had none of the beauty of regularity. The chin was a trifle too strong, the mouth too large, the cheeks not sufficiently rounded. But like many irregular faces it had the fascination of its irregularities, its characteristic and provoking flashes of expression that leaped out with the swiftness of sunlight from behind a cloud.

Wolfe felt the lure of the child's free, flashing spirit. Her perfect health seemed to live in the black masses of her hair.

"I hope I shall soon put things right. Are you Miss Mascall?"

"Yes, I'm Jess."

"Jess?"

"Just Jess—as father used to say."

"Was that because you were—naughty?"

"I won't say that it wasn't!"

In one of the big south bedrooms Wolfe found a rosy, middle-aged woman in the thick of a bad attack of asthma. She was propped up in a four-post bedstead, her handsome and good-tempered face suffused and anxious, her black hair braided under a neat muslin cap. She smiled at Wolfe through the labour of her breathing, and nodded Jess out of the room.

"It's good of you to come so soon, doctor. I do hate making a bother——"

"We live—by being bothered."

"Well, that's honest, isn't it! Sit down, doctor. I haven't had an attack like this for years. I used to hang on to the mantelpiece, or anything I could get hold of. The fact is——"

"Don't talk if it bothers you."

"I'm a terrible talker, you know, doctor."

She looked it, with her round, handsome, lovable face, her generous, voluble mouth, and her motherly hands. Mary was her name, and a Mary she was.

"You know, doctor, my kitchen girl and I cleaned out the old lumber-room. It must have been the dust that did it."

"No doubt. Now, don't worry yourself for a moment."

Wolfe made his examination, and then sat down on a chair beside the bed.

"I think we can soon make you easy. Has Dr. Threadgold ever given you medicine for this?"

"Not for years, sir."

"You are careful about your food?"

Mrs. Mascall looked guiltily cheerful.

"I'm afraid I'm a regular girl, doctor. When something good comes——"

"I know. You are too—happy."

"Now, that's just the word. I never worry about anything. And I never feel like being ill. But I do hate giving trouble."

"Nonsense. It's a pleasure to take care of happy people. Now, I'll ride back at once and make you up some physic. Can you send anyone over?"

"Bob can go on the pony."

"Good. Keep to light food, and have the windows open. I'll ride off at once."

Mrs. Mascall gave him a grateful hand.

"You've made me feel better. I do dislike your undertaker sort of man."

"So do I. Shall I send your daughter up?"

"Yes, please do."

Jess Mascall was waiting in the hall. Her brown eyes were anxious, but very friendly. Wolfe reassured her.

"We will soon put your mother at ease."

"Then it's not dangerous?"

"No. Bob, the boy, is to ride over at once for medicine. I am going straight back to Navestock. Your mother would like you in her room."

Jess followed him to the porch.

"I was a silly," she said, as he turned to give her a lift of the hat.

"I think you were very sensible."

"Oh, what a word!"

"Don't you approve of it?"

She laughed.

"It's mother's word!"

"Then I'll leave it alone. Supposing we say—wise?"

She looked at him, smilingly thoughtful.

"If you like."

Wolfe went down the stone-paved path with a sense of the freshness of spring in the air. His moods for the last few weeks had been intense and grimly practical, and he had been too much with people who needed lifting up out of the mire. Navestock had saddened him, even though it had gripped his intellect. He had felt rather lonely on the road that afternoon, but these people at Moor Farm had touched and warmed his heart.

# *CHAPTER FIVE*

WOLFE had been nearly three months in Navestock, and his map of the town had grown into a gaily coloured patchwork, with the River Wraith running through it as a silver streak, and the outlying meadows and gardens coloured a vivid green. A box of crayons had served to give breadth of expression to his researches. Red was his colour of utter condemnation. Brown stood for strong censure; yellow for milder offences; blue for the neighbourhoods that were comparatively healthy. A mere glance at this colour plan showed red extending over all the low-lying ground about the river. Streaks of red spread themselves like veins over the whole town. Brown predominated in the crowded streets about Turrell's brewery. The market square, some of the main streets, and the more aristocratic residential quarters were coloured yellow. The only blue areas were Mulberry Green, High Elms and old Josiah Crabbe's quarter of Peachy Hill.

On the map were little symbolic signs drawn with a fine pen. A circle denoted a polluted well; a deep black line, a foul ditch or open sewer; a cross, an insanitary backyard; a square, an accumulation of rubbish. Facts had crowded in upon Wolfe. It was as though they had been waiting for years for someone to notice them, and sprang at the first man who did not wish to have them ignored. Yet Wolfe lost no opportunities. There were few places in the poorer parts of the town into which his work did not take him, and he toiled through a dozen of old Threadgold's day-books and death-registers, sifting and grouping statistics. The better-class quarters were beyond him in some measure, but he was content to conclude that they were not of great importance. His researches were concentrated upon the low-lying quarters by the river; upon Peachy Hill, because of the contrasts it appeared to offer; and upon the crowded streets about Jasper Turrell's brewery.

A large part of the town was a mere mass of pollution, sodden with sewage, and heaped up with refuse. There was no system. Everything had been done haphazard. Such drains as existed delivered themselves into the river. The town was pitted with closed and unventilated cesspools, and seamed with noisome ditches. The people were ignorant, degenerate, and abominably dirty.

With the exception of the better quarters, such as Mulberry Green and High Elms, the drinking water was obtained from surface wells and the river. So far, Wolfe had been unable to find a surface well that contained good water. They were polluted with sewage that leaked from the cesspools and with the washings by rain of the foul yards and courts. The river water was drunk by scores of families.

Most of the cottage property was in a state of dilapidation, and the alleys and lanes were damp and dirty. Nothing whatever appeared to have been done to evolve some system of scavenging. Many of the back gardens and yards were mere refuse heaps. Slops were thrown out into the lanes or on to the ground outside the back doors.

The general mortality in the town appeared to be very high. Consumption scoured the damp, low-lying quarters by the river. Many diseases that arose out of insanitary surroundings were endemic. The infant mortality was no worse than in other towns, nor had rheumatism crippled the people as much as Wolfe would have expected. It seemed certain that most of the common diseases of everyday life were both more prevalent and more disastrous in their effects. In the case of a "filth disease" getting a foothold in the town, its ravages were likely to be catastrophic.

The great exception that discovered itself to Wolfe's researches was old Josiah Crabbe's quarter of Peachy Hill. The fact that it stood on comparatively high ground did not explain its healthier record. There were three deep wells on Peachy Hill. The cottages had good gardens, and were in excellent repair. The sanitation was fairly sound; no refuse was allowed to accumulate, old Crabbe keeping two scavengers at work, and paying them out of his own pocket. His carts carried away all refuse. The useless stuff was pitched into a disused stone quarry a mile from the town; all material that could be used as manure was carted to old Crabbe's farms. On Peachy Hill, Wolfe found that a shrewd and orderly brain had been at work, not for philanthropic ends, but because it loved order and cleanliness and sound profits. Rents were higher here. The pick of artisans and town workers lived in old Crabbe's cottages on Peachy Hill. Yet the old man was hated. To judge by popular report he was one of those men who court hatred, who delight in it, who feel well fed when they are feared.

Wolfe had gone to work without ostentation, but in a town such as Navestock anything unusual attracted notice as sweetened beer attracts flies. One or two rent-collectors were the first to hear of the new doctor's idiosyncrasies. The more ignorant people wondered what he was after, and in some of the beer-houses Wolfe's "inquisitiveness" became a joke. But Navestock was full of people to whom inquisitiveness was an abominable indiscretion. Some of the landlords were not blind

fools, and here was an officious young man pushing his nose into matters that did not concern him. Perhaps Wolfe foresaw the storm that might burst about him; perhaps he was not sufficiently cynical for so much foresight. He was minded to get to the bed-rock of things, and it may not have occurred to him that he would be spat upon for having the impertinence to remind other people of their responsibilities.

At the back of Mr. Jasper Turrell's brewery was a place called Virgin's Court, a collection of rickety cottages built round a stone-paved yard. In one corner stood the pump that was used by the dwellers in and about Virgin's Court, a pump that had seen better days, to judge by its stone pillar and its elaborate iron snout and handle.

As St. Jude's clock was striking eleven a clerk ran up to Mr. Jasper Turrell's private room in the brewery and gave that gentleman a rather ambiguous message.

"Dunnet says you'll find him in Virgin's Court, sir."

Jasper Turrell appeared to understand what Dunnet meant, and who the "him" was referred to in the message. He put on his hat, crossed the brewery yard, passed along Malt Lane, and turned into the narrow entry that led to Virgin's Court. Mr. Turrell paused in the entry, and stood watching John Wolfe, who was walking to and fro across the court, sounding the stones with an oak stick. Wolfe was very leisurely and very methodical, and Jasper Turrell stood and stared at him with the air of a god who has caught some insolent mortal tampering with the secrets of Nature. The brewer's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "I've just caught the fellow!" said the lines about his mouth. He watched Wolfe leave his stone-tapping and cross the yard towards the pump.

Jasper Turrell had the reputation of being the worst-tempered man in Navestock. He was a notorious bully, and had bred his son Hector to be a bully, only old Turrell used his mouth, and young Turrell his fists. He did not trouble to approach Wolfe, but followed his usual habit of bellowing, even as he bellowed at his work-people and servants.

"Hallo, you there!"

Wolfe saw a big man in a black coat and white waistcoat filling the narrow entry to Virgin's Court, his top hat cocked at an angle, his long, sandy whiskers sweeping the lapels of his coat. Turrell was an ugly man, repulsively ugly to those who happened to hate him. His very sandiness was insolent, and his grey-green eyes could glare like the eyes of a cat.

Wolfe stared at Mr. Turrell a moment, and then went on with the work he had in hand. He had taken a bottle from his pocket and was holding it under the snout of the pump, while he dribbled water into it by working the handle gently.

Turrell bawled again.

"Hallo, you there! Come over here, will you?"

Wolfe ignored the summons, but a number of Navestock heads appeared at the doors and windows. Turrell went very white when he was angry. He had a trick, too, of masticating his words, as though tasting their offensiveness before he hurled them at an enemy's head.

"Hi, you there!"

Wolfe turned an imperturbable face.

"I beg your pardon——"

Turrell flung across with jerky, violent strides. He was very well aware of the grinning faces at the windows.

"Here, what do you mean by ignoring me, eh?"

Nothing could have been franker.

"I never answer, sir, when I am shouted at."

"Oh, you don't, don't you! Nice manners for an understrapper! Now, what I want to know is, what you think you are doing here on my property?"

"Doctoring, sir."

"You don't physic the pump, do you? Look here, young man, you keep to matters that concern you."

Wolfe corked the bottle with pleasant deliberation.

"They do concern me, Mr. Turrell."

"They concern your confounded impertinence. No bluster, if you please. We don't take our orders from young carpet-baggers who come into the town with a toothbrush and a pair of slippers. I'm not here to argue, sir, only to instruct you to mind your pill-and-ointment business. The water in that bottle is my property. Hand it over."

"The bottle, sir, belongs to me."

"Look here, young man, has old Threadgold put you up to this?"

"Dr. Threadgold has done nothing of the kind."

"No, curse him, he's too much sense. Very good. He is the responsible person in this town, not any officious young bonesetter who gets two pounds a week. We kick such folk out, sir—if they put on airs. See? Hand me over that bottle."

Wolfe uncorked it, and turned it upside down. The water went "gollop, gollop," and splashed the stones at Mr. Turrell's feet.

"There is your property, sir."

He looked Turrell in the eyes, recorked the bottle, and put it in his pocket.

"I am glad we understand each other, Mr. Turrell. Even an understrapper has responsibilities. Good morning."

“Confound your insolence. Do you think——”

He found himself addressing John Wolfe’s back. Moreover, the heads at the doors and windows were all a-grin. The “gallery” might well smile over two grown men quarrelling about eight ounces of water in a blue-glass medicine bottle.

# *CHAPTER SIX*

ON Tarling Moor the gorse was still in bloom, though the full glory of gold had deserted it for the waving branches of the broom. Great white clouds sailed over Beacon Hill, and the slanting sunlight smoothed the slopes of the moor, burnishing them into sleek colour masses of green, purple, and bronze. Tarling Moor was a rare galloping ground for a man whose blood had been over-heated. Beacon Hill lifted a calm and unfretful forehead against the sky, and the shadows of wind-driven clouds raced with the sunlight over the hills.

John Wolfe came riding back from the direction of Herongate, where he had been called to see a shepherd who was ill. The climb out of that rotten, worm-eaten old town towards the wide spaciousness of the moor had cleared Wolfe's brain and steadied his heart. Only a few hours had passed since Jasper Turrell had tried to bully him in Virgin's Court, and that one incident seemed likely to make of Navestock a battleground or a tilting-yard.

Wolfe had felt a desire to be alone, to thrash things out in his own mind, to climb up above the little dust storms of the moment and gain a broad view of his own horizon. The ride over Tarling Moor had given him the calmness of outlook that he needed. Wolfe knew that he had been warned off that morning, and that Jasper Turrell had thrown a stick at him, as he would have thrown a stick at a dog that had shown an inclination to trespass under his garden gate. And Jasper Turrell's attitude was likely to be the attitude of Navestock. The incident of that absurd quarrel had opened Wolfe's eyes. The little people would not only twist their mouths at him and gibber maliciously; they would gather like apes and try to pelt him out of the town. Turrell had bellowed a warning. The people who owned Navestock would tolerate no man who attempted to tell them unpleasant truths.

Now Wolfe was a born fighter, one of those men whose chin and fists go up even in the face of a crowd. He had glimpses of what might happen in Navestock, the anger and malice he might arouse, the abuse he would receive, the influence that would be exerted against him. It takes a man of great courage to stamp the faces of his fellows with the seal of hate. Few of us find pleasure in offending those who dwell

about us. Our amiability is apt to make us cowards. But Wolfe had that touch of fanaticism that compels a man to utter what he knows to be the truth.

Across the sterner gloom of his thoughts rose the sun-splashed spires of the Moor Farm cypresses. Wolfe saw the red house with its holly hedges spreading along the ridge below him as he descended the moor. An impulse stirred in him, bidding him turn aside towards Moor Farm. More than once since his first visit he had passed across the paddock and up the stone-paved path. These people of the moor did him good when he was lonely. There was a charm about the old house, and Wolfe had seen the orchard in bloom, and the daffodils nodding their heads over the rich green grass. The comely, smiling good-will of the mother contrasted with the wind-blown hair and sparkling frankness of wild-eyed Jess. These were people who filled the heart when it felt empty, and made a man's sad thoughts grow mischievous and young.

As Wolfe neared the white gate he saw a short, brown-smocked figure come running across the paddock. The figure waved an arm and shouted. It was Bob, the carter's boy, who had bumped in and out of Navestock on the back of the brown pony.

"Mr. Wolfe, sir, you be wanted."

He ran up and opened the white gate.

"I was just a-coming for you, sir."

Wolfe rode in.

"Somebody ill, Bob?"

"The missus, sir. That there thasthma."

"I take your word for it, Bob. You are an excellent diagnostician."

The boy grinned.

"Thank yer, sir. I be'unt much of a chap at words."

Bob ran at Wolfe's side, and took his horse when he dismounted at the end of the holly hedge. The geese had followed them, gaggling in line, with the old one-eyed gander at their head. They made a cheerful noise; and the humming of the wind in the cypresses was like the humming of some great happy spirit watching the sunlight race over the grass.

Wolfe had reached the porch, when a black cat came whisking out, followed by a flying figure with a round basket set helmet-wise upon its head. The flying figure saved itself within six inches of Wolfe's waistcoat, and fell back with a flush of colour and a glimmer of mischievous confusion.

"Oh—Mr. Wolfe!"

The black cat had fled terror-stricken into the summer-house. Wolfe's eyes were

full of laughter.

"Is this the latest fashion in bonnets?"

Jess tossed the thing off into a corner of the porch.

"Don't be silly. I was only frightening old Thomas. It's the egg basket."

"Oh, the egg basket?"

"Yes."

"I see."

She looked at him with a moment's gravity and then fell into a glorious laughter, the free, bubbling laughter of a healthy child. The sound thrilled through Wolfe like the joy of a perfect morning. He laughed, too, quiet, deep-chested laughter that sang second to her ringing treble.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you are silly."

"Why, indeed?"

"What is there to laugh at?"

"Ask Thomas and the basket, and——"

"And what?"

"Me."

"You?"

"And yourself."

She shook her hair, as though shaking her laughter off like spray. Her eyes became serious.

"You are a nice doctor, to stand laughing here——"

"Oh, come, now. It was lucky that Bob caught me. I've been up Herongate way. Your mother—is it——"

"Yes."

"I'll go up at once."

"Please do. It's Flemyng's Cross to-night. Mother won't be able to go. She says I must."

"What is Flemyng's Cross? An out-of-door service for bad-tempered people? If so, your mother certainly needn't be there. I forbid it."

"What nonsense you talk!"

She was climbing the old oak stairs, and turning back to look at him. A stream of sunlight from a window splashed the panelling behind her, so that Wolfe saw her hair black against a background of glimmering light.

"It's one of the Manor Courts, and the steward of the Lord of the Manor has held it for hundreds and hundreds of years. All the tenants have to take their dues,

and no one must speak above a whisper."

"And Mrs. Mascall is going to send—you?"

"I can whisper. I'll show you."

"Do."

"Not now. You've got to be serious."

In the sunny south bedroom Wolfe found Jess's mother sitting in an arm-chair by the open window. There was a bowl full of bluebells on a table beside her, and she had been trying to write a letter, for a writing pad still lay upon her knees.

Her eyes welcomed Wolfe, though she was in too great distress to talk much.

"You're a good angel, doctor."

"They caught me as I was passing."

"I ought to be at the Manor Court at Flemyng's——"

"But you'll not go. Miss Jess has been explaining."

He stood and looked down at her in that grave penetrating way that made women and children trust him.

"Jess must go. I've been trying to write to Lawyer Fyson, Lord Blackwater's steward."

"Now don't worry about all this. It bothers you to talk. I'll sit down and plan things out for you. Stop me if you have anything to suggest."

He sat down at the table, reached for the writing pad, and began to write.

"Here's a certificate for Mr. Fyson. That settles that gentleman. Let's see; Miss Jess will have to act for you, and she'll drive down in the gig. Master Bob goes off to Navestock at once for medicine, and with a message to say I'm detained. That's it. I stay here, ride to Flemyng's Cross with Miss Jess, deliver my certificate to Mr. Fyson, see your daughter through the ordeal, and then ride home to Navestock. That sounds very practical."

Mrs. Mascall's eyes brightened.

"How you do think of things! I've been putting Jess through her paces; old Fyson's a kind sort of man. Three dozen fresh eggs, that's what the tenant of Moor Farm has to give the Lord of the Manor. You all have to whisper. They call it the Whispering Court."

"So Jess told me."

"Call the girl, doctor. Oh Jess, child, you're there? Dr. Wolfe's going to Flemyng's Cross with you. It's a weight off my chest. He'll stay and take tea. And Jess—the eggs?"

Jess had one of her solemn moments.

"I haven't got them yet, mother."

"Good gracious, child, go out and get them."

Wolfe had been writing a prescription.

"And Bob had better take this. I see no reason why I shouldn't go egg hunting."

"You! Oh, come along; what fun! I bet I'll find more eggs than you will. And Sally can get tea."

They left Mary Mascall smiling in her chair. She was one of those women who could enjoy the playfulness of life, even in the midst of an attack of asthma. Jess might rush out on one of her escapades, and her mother would laugh over it and share in the girl's spirit. Mrs. Mascall had no particular liking for your Goody Two-Shoes child, who darned stockings, was fussily and piously sentimental, and played the sweet angel with bleatings of "dearest mamma."

In the porch Wolfe picked up the egg basket.

"Yes, you can carry it," said Jess.

He made her a grave bow.

"Madam, your very humble servant."

Bob was sent to the stable with Wolfe's horse, and told to saddle the fat pony and take the prescription and the note that Wolfe had written to Dr. Threadgold at Navestock. The serious man of eight-and-twenty and the tall girl of sixteen plunged in among the out-buildings and stacks of Moor Farm that were jumbled together with the picturesque complexity that belongs to old towns. Great black doors let one into huge, cool interiors where sunlight crept in through chinks in the walls, and sparrows fluttered about the beams. There was the red-brick granary, where you might wade knee-deep in golden grain or be weighed on the sack-weighing machine in the corner. There was the wagon shed, where the swallows built; the cakehouse, a queer, dark, fragrant place with its cake breaker ready to reduce the brown slabs to fragments. Cattle sheds abounded, clean, white-washed loggias with sunlit yards yellow with straw.

Jess made for the largest of the cattle sheds.

"Come along."

She did not unlatch the byre gate, but was over it with the flick of the skirt. Mrs. Mascall had abetted Jess in a wild revolt against crinolines. No girl walking in a species of tent could have trampled like Jess Mascall over the yellow straw. As for climbing gates! Wolfe blessed mere Nature, and vaulted after her.

"You ought to be handicapped."

"And you call yourself a man!"

She made for the long manger, the recess below it being a favourite haunt of matronly-minded hens. Wolfe made a rush. A brown bird fled in absurd terror,

flustered round Wolfe's legs, and flew cackling over the gate.

"Here—one, two, three——"

"I say, wait a moment, let me have a chance!"

"Well, look then, don't stand and——"

"I was feeling sorry for that hen."

"Four, five——"

Wolfe made a dash for the far corner, and pounced on an egg lying amid the straw.

"I've got one, anyhow."

She came up, laughing in his face.

"It's a chalk one!"

"Oh, confound it!"

"And I've got six in my skirt. Where's the basket? You'll have to be very careful."

"I'll walk like an old maid. Just like this—see!"

"Oh, you great silly! We mustn't waste time."

They adventured into all manner of dim interiors, dark and musty corners, and narrow ways between the stacks. Jess knew the idiosyncrasies of all the Manor Farm hens. There was one that persisted in laying her eggs on an old sheepskin that had been thrown into the tool loft in the wagon shed. Wolfe was made to scramble, using a cart wheel as a ladder.

"Done, by George! Dusty knees—and no egg!"

"Poor Doctor Wolfe!"

He looked down at her from above.

"Why poor?"

"I didn't mean you were poor. Only——"

"Just a touch of sympathy, eh? You are a sweet young woman, Miss Jess."

She laughed, and flushed momentarily with a touch of sudden self-consciousness.

"Am I? It's nice of you to say that. We've got three dozen and a half. And there's the tea bell."

They walked back to the farm-house very sedately.

The Whispering Court at Flemyng's Cross was held at nine o'clock, and at eight Joe Munday, the carter, dressed in a black coat for the occasion, came round from the stable with the red-wheeled gig. The farm labourers had gathered under the great cypresses in front of the house, each man carrying a lighted lantern, and a pitchfork, crook, or pole. Jess had gone to her mother's room to dress, and Wolfe went out

into the garden and joined the white-smocked group under the cypresses.

"A fine night."

"It be."

There was a sort of grumbling acquiescence, but the men did not appear interested in Wolfe or his opinions. As a body they stood and stared at the house, like boors in a strolling theatre, waiting for the curtain to go up. Wolfe had a feeling that he made these men uncomfortable. He could see a light in Mrs. Mascall's room. Presently a shadow came across the blind, and there was a tapping at the window.

"Listen to't."

"She be comin'."

The labourers ranged themselves on either side of the stone-paved path. Wolfe stood back from them a little, and nearer the gate. He saw the porch door open, and Sally, the maid, standing there, holding her skirts back proudly to let her lady pass. Jess came out, wearing a red cloak with the hood turned up, a green skirt, and green stockings. Resting against her bosom she carried the basket of eggs, decorated with red and green ribbons and with flowers.

The men held up their lanterns, and louted to her with quaint gravity.

"God keep thee, good Mistress."

"May the beasts be fat in your fields, and the bins packed full o' corn."

"God's blessing on thee—and the merry month o' May."

They were old-world phrases that had passed from generation to generation, and had been spoken by the forebears of the men gathered before Moor Farm. Wolfe stood and watched Jess Mascall as she came slowly down the path. The girl seemed to have grown taller and older of a sudden. She carried herself with a grave and simple stateliness, looking at each man in turn and saying: "Thank you, Joe—thank you, Barnaby." She passed under the cypresses, and her eyes met Wolfe's. He was standing bare-headed, a man touched and charmed by many suggestive memories. He bowed to Jess, and she gave him a grave curtsy, holding her head high, and looking him in the eyes.

The moon was ten days old, and the night clear and fine, and as the Moor Farm company crossed the moor, Wolfe, who was riding beside the gig, saw many other lanterns moving in the distance. They glimmered here and there, faint points of yellow light coming and going like the lights of boats on a rolling sea. Flemyng's Cross lay westwards of Beacon Hill on a low ridge where the old coach road topped the moor. An ancient inn stood on the hill-top, with its sign of "The Rising Sun" swinging on a post before the door. It was in a little paddock behind the inn that the Lord of the Manor's Whispering Court was held.

The lanterns came jogging over the moor, some of them following mere sheep-tracks, others moving along the roads. As they neared Flemyng's Cross the Navestock road began to fill with silent, shadowy, striding figures, all moving towards the hill-top. The lanterns that were carried gave rise to curious illusions. In a dark cutting under the shade of a clump of firs Wolfe saw a pair of white-gaitered legs moving as though they had no body belonging to them. Nothing but the white legs and the lantern were visible, and the effect was so quaint that Wolfe pointed it out to Jess.

"Look there, somebody's legs have walked off on their own—and left the rest behind."

She laughed.

"Aren't they just sweet! They'll get lonely presently, wandering about all by themselves."

A man on a big grey horse blundered out from somewhere, and nearly rode Wolfe down. The surgeon drew closer to the gig.

"Hallo, sir, look out——"

The gig lamps gave him a momentary glimpse of a powerfully built young man, in smartly cut clothes, who glared at Wolfe as though he had no intention of apologising for having nearly ridden over him. The young man took off his hat to Jess, but she did not seem to notice him. They left him behind them somewhere in the darkness.

"You didn't see your friend."

"Oh, yes, I did."

"Who was it?"

"Hector Turrell. He's a beast. I don't like him."

"Turrell the brewer's son?"

"Yes. He's always riding along the road when I come back from Miss Plimley's at Navestock. He's an awful bully; always knocking someone about."

"That's rather a dangerous game."

"People are afraid of him, or of his father, I suppose. What do you say, Joe?" This to the driver at her side.

Joe Munday was terse and laconic.

"The chap learned of a swell prize fighter in Lunnon, so I've heard tell. Besides—he's Turrell's son. 'Tain't worth no chap's while to get old Turrell's spite on him."

And Wolfe supposed not.

The Lord of the Manor's Court at Flemyng's Cross proved to be a quaint affair, picturesquely staged. Lawyer Fyson, the steward, stood by the white post in the paddock, a brazier full of burning coal beside him, and a staff of office in his hand.

Behind him were ranged his bellman, stave bearers, and foresters, while the tenants of the Court gathered in dead silence about the white post, their heads uncovered, their lanterns glimmering in a great circle. The only bold and blatant voice was the voice of the big hand-bell. The steward read the roll in a whisper, his officers proclaimed in whispers, the court-tenants swore to their pledges in whispers.

When Jess Mascall carried her basket of eggs towards the white post and the red brazier, Wolfe followed her, and thrust the certificate he had written into old Fyson's hand. The bell gave three sharp clangs, and Wolfe found himself taken by the shoulders and marched back over a furrow cut in the turf. The ground about the white post appeared to be privileged ground, sacred to the feet of those who were tenants of the Court. In the old days Wolfe would have been whipped with furze branches over the moor, instead of being marched gravely beyond the formal furrow.

He laughed good-humouredly, and, turning to where the Moor Farm labourers were grouped with their lanterns, mounted his nag and watched the procedure of the Court. The whispering voices, the queer solemnity, the glimmering lanterns were part of the mystery of Tarling Moor. It was when Jess had played her part, and was being escorted back by the two staff-bearers towards her supporters and her gig, that Wolfe again caught sight of Mr. Hector Turrell. He saw the man moving his horse round the circle of figures as though to meet Jess as she came through the crowd.

It was something more than an impulse that made Wolfe forestall Hector Turrell. If he had made an enemy of the father, his enmity might just as well include the son. Jess went to the gig with her hand resting on John Wolfe's arm.

At the Moor Farm gate she would have had him come in, and join the farm hands at the state supper in the kitchen.

"Just for half an hour."

"I may be wanted down at Navestock. I have let Dr. Threadgold in for the surgery work, as it is."

"It won't hurt him."

"No, I must go—Jess."

She gave him a quick look and said no more, but she watched him ride across the paddock.

Wolfe felt that the black mass of Tarling Moor was behind him, and he saw the lights of Navestock shining in the valley. These lights had a quick and powerful effect upon him, blinking their message up out of the darkness, and recalling grimmer moments of responsibility and effort. For so many hours Wolfe had been a great, playful child, half-boy, half-man. Jess had called to him with the voice of her youth. Her infinite freshness and her laughter had made him laugh with her, and forget. He

had felt the sunlight upon the open moor, and those queer moments of solemnity that had turned the eyes of a child into the eyes of a woman.

# *CHAPTER SEVEN*

BOTH Dr. Threadgold and his wife were out when Miss Priscilla Perfrement's maid rang the bell at Prospect House. John Wolfe was in the surgery, and he was called upon to speak with Miss Perfrement's maid, a lean woman with haughty eyebrows and a negligible bust.

"Dr. Threadgold must come at once."

"Dr. Threadgold is out."

"Then he must be sent for."

"Dr. Threadgold is out on a country round. He will not be back till dinner-time."

The maid looked Wolfe over, summed him up after her fashion, and decided that he was not a raw boy.

"You're the assistant?"

"I am."

"Miss Perfrement has one of her heart attacks."

"I'll come at once."

Miss Priscilla Perfrement lived in a narrow, red-brick house that was squeezed between two of the stouter mansions on Mulberry Green. No male thing intruded here. The neat, druggeted hall had no hat-stand, no cupboard as the pit of a man's untidiness, no weather glass to be rapped and abused. The lamp was held by a nymph in plaster set tripping upon a pedestal of imitation marble. But the nymph had been defrauded of her nakedness. She wore a sort of white night-dress that was changed monthly and sent to the wash.

"Doctor, dear doctor, I'm dying!"

Where Death had stationed himself in the neat, stuffy, over-furnished room, was a matter of speculation. Wolfe saw a yellow-faced little woman in black alpaca, with grey side curls and a twittering face, propped against cushions in a plush-covered arm-chair. The heels of her shoes beat the carpet under the edge of her crinoline, and the crinoline itself had cocked itself forward with unseemly arrogance, giving glimpses of convulsed, white-stockinged legs.

"Dr. Threadgold is out, miss."

"Oh, oh!"

"I've brought the assistant."

Miss Perfrement jumped, and gave Wolfe a shocked stare. Her limbs twitched like the limbs of a choreic child.

"Oh dear, oh dear; Eliza, I'm dying!"

Wolfe looked at her very gravely, very judicially, and understood with what sort of sentimental sickness he had to do. Here was a good lady whose troubles had been so many pin-falls in the closeted selfishness of her little life, and who had been compelled to draw attention to herself by means of childish screams and tantrums. When Miss Perfrement felt unimportant and neglected, she had a "heart attack," and her friends and neighbours would see Dr. Threadgold's brougham rattling over the cobbles. These hysterical outbursts were essays in dissipation, and methods of attracting sympathy and notice.

Wolfe made a beginning.

"Will you let me see what I can do for you?"

"It's my heart. I'm dying. Eliza, I'm dying. Where is Dr. Threadgold?"

Wolfe imprisoned Miss Perfrement's wrist. She gave a rebellious squirm and then went rigid, but Wolfe was able to feel her pulse.

"Now, my dear madam!"

"Eliza, I'm dying!"

The gaunt maid came to Wolfe's elbow.

"D'you think, sir, you understand Miss Perfrement's case?"

"Kindly keep quiet a moment."

Eliza stared and knitted up her black eyebrows, but Wolfe's tone had smothered her officiousness. Dr. Threadgold was a very different sort of man. He was always polite to Miss Perfrement's maid.

"How often does your mistress have these attacks?"

"Very often."

"Thank you. Now, Miss Perfrement, I shall want to examine your chest. If you will let your maid unfasten your bodice."

"Sir!"

Miss Perfrement stiffened.

"Sir, Dr. Threadgold never—Eliza, my smelling bottle."

"Very well; I dare say I can manage without."

Miss Perfrement's maid stroked her mistress's hair, and looked down at Wolfe with sceptical contempt. Dr. Threadgold could always manage matters without all this fussing. He had only to look at a patient, and to listen sympathetically to a vivid

description of the symptoms in order to discover what was wrong.

Wolfe stood up and looked steadily at Miss Perfrement.

"I can assure you that there is no cause for alarm."

"I'm dying. I know I'm dying! My heart's turning over and over!"

"My dear madam—it is not. You are worrying yourself into a panic. Will you give your mistress a tumblerful of hot water, and send round for some medicine?"

The gaunt maid looked shocked. Hot water, indeed! A wail came from the arm-chair.

"Send for dear Dr. Threadgold, dear, good, clever, Dr. Threadgold!"

"You don't realise, sir, how ill Miss Perfrement is."

"I beg your pardon. I shall be obliged if you will follow my instructions."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, sir. You ain't grasping Miss Perfrement's case."

Wolfe looked at the woman, and then at her mistress. He was not tempted to dissemble the truth, and to give honey and humbug where asafœtida was needed. He and Miss Perfrement were better apart.

"I will send out and see if Dr. Threadgold can be found."

"Do so, sir. I should think you had better, sir."

And Wolfe took up his hat and left them.

Dr. Threadgold kept the midday meal waiting for more than an hour. He had been caught on the way home and hurried in to minister to Miss Priscilla Perfrement in her anguish. At the dinner-table Threadgold appeared perturbed and testy. He contradicted his wife without sweetening the contradiction, looked at Wolfe severely over the rims of his spectacles, and talked with pompous irritability on the responsibilities of public men. He glanced at Wolfe as they pushed back their chairs.

"For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful. My dear, tell the cook not to send up onions. Mr. Wolfe, I have a few words to say to you in the consulting-room."

Wolfe went, following the twinkle of his employer's stout little legs. Threadgold was solemn and sententious. He was slightly afraid of Wolfe, and his nervousness made him prance.

"What did you say, sir, to Miss Perfrement this morning? You seemed to have treated her with extreme brusqueness. She was greatly upset."

"I told her the truth."

"What do you mean by the truth? Do you know that Miss Perfrement is subject to heart attacks?"

"It was not a heart attack this morning, sir. And yet her maid told me it was typical."

"Indeed, indeed. And what do you suggest?"

"Miss Perfrement appears to be a lady who likes little scenes and has a rather foolish thirst for sympathy."

Dr. Threadgold's white waistcoat was like a great, round, scandalised countenance.

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Wolfe, that you told Miss Perfrement she was a fool!"

"I told her that there was no cause for alarm. And she did not appear satisfied."

"No!"

"I suppose——Oh, well, I think you had better warn me, sir, against such cases."

Threadgold strutted irritably across the room.

"Mr. Wolfe, sir, when shall I teach you tact! Tact is the one thing that a doctor must cultivate. It is one of the essentials."

"I quite understand you."

"I must insist upon your using proper discretion. And by the way, there is another matter about which I wish to speak. We are using more drugs than usual. I see that two large orders have gone out to Murchison and Company in the last three months. We have never used anything like the quantity before."

Wolfe stood like a watchful, silent spirit that busies itself with observing petty things.

"I have given what was necessary, sir."

"No doubt. But I see you have a liking for the more expensive preparations. Probably you are ignorant of the relative cost, and you have dispensed away gallons of tinctures. It is unnecessary extravagance. In most cases the simple preparations are just as efficacious, and I can't afford to pour expensive medicines down the throats of paup—of half the town."

"I have only given what I considered right. I suppose, sir, you don't want me to withhold the proper drugs?"

Threadgold flared up.

"Mr. Wolfe, sir, you misunderstand me. I am a gentleman and a Christian. But sheer waste, the needless using of expensive preparations!"

"I will try to exert my tact, sir."

Threadgold glanced at him, and suddenly became deflated like a child's balloon pricked with a pin.

"We will say no more, Mr. Wolfe, we will say no more. You have a very clumsy touch, sir. You will have to lighten it in order to succeed in general practice."

Wolfe had the curiosity to look up Miss Perfrement's record in the day-book

and account ledger. He found a great number of entries. They occurred with valuable regularity, like the entry "Dined out" in the diary of a precise old bachelor.

Miss Perfrement.
Attendance.
Mist. Antispas. VIII.
Miss Perfrement's maid.
Advice.
Pil. Cal. Sac. Haust. Mag. Sulph.
Miss Perfrement's dog.
Advice.
Unguent. Sulph.
Miss Perfrement.
Att.
Mist. Aqua Sac. VIII.

Such were these entries, and Wolfe smiled over them—placebos, sugared waters, and sulphur for the lady's pug. The account ledger showed that Dr. Threadgold's exchequer profited heavily by Miss Perfrement's "heart." She was a valuable patient, and worth humouring. Wolfe closed the ledger with a slam.

Wolfe had many things to worry him when he made his way to George Lane on the afternoon of the day of his visit to Miss Perfrement. George Lane ran close to Turrell's brewery, and at the back of the lane were the brewery stables, where the great, black dray horses had their quarters. Piled against the low brick wall that closed the back yards of George Lane lay the refuse from Turrell's stables. It was allowed to accumulate there for months at a time.

As Burgess the cobbler said to Wolfe:

"It's treating us like pigs, sir. You can't get away from the smell—nohow. It's in your food; it goes to bed with you, and you get up with it in the morning."

Wolfe had suggested an appeal to Mr. Turrell.

"Speak to him! What's the use, sir! Ain't we his tenants?"

"Well he ought to clear it out."

"Clear me out first, sir. Turrell won't put up with a grumbler."

It happened that Wolfe walked straight into Jasper Turrell at the corner of Malt Lane. The battle of Virgin's Court had been fought a week ago, but Wolfe stopped and nailed his man.

"Mr. Turrell, may I have a word with you?"

"Twenty, sir, if you want to apologise."

“It’s about that stable-yard of yours at the back of George Lane.”

“Oh, is it!”

“I don’t suppose, sir, you know the conditions there.”

Turrell drew in a breath, and his cheeks showed hollows.

“Look here, sir, what do you mean?”

“I mean, sir, that that yard of yours——”

“Upon my word, it is absolutely preposterous—a young fellow coming into a town like this, and trying to teach all of us our business. Dr. Threadgold is the responsible person here. Remember that, sir, and take yourself a little less seriously.”

His eyes threatened Wolfe, and Wolfe looked at him curiously.

“It is to your interest, sir, as much as to anybody else’s.”

“Oh, is it? Well, you leave it at that. See?”

# *CHAPTER EIGHT*

WOLFE was in a mood of deep disgust as he rode out towards Herongate to pay a last visit to the shepherd who had been ill in his cottage on Tarling Moor. Certain things that had happened in Navestock during the week had made Wolfe ask himself what was the use of attempting to better the state of such a town. Some of the people whom he had tried to help had turned and snapped at him. He had contrived to make himself more enemies because of his frankness in dealing with facts.

There was the case of Mrs. Lucy Gollop, who took in babies to nurse at twopence a day. Wolfe was called to her cottage to find five infants half-dead from overdoses of opium. Mrs. Gollop was in tears, and none the better for too much gin.

"Oh, dear, doctor, I can't think what's come to the poor little souls. They won't wake up, sir, they won't wake up."

"What have you been dosing them with?"

"They were so fretful-like, and the neighbours be that nasty. The poor dears do scream——"

Wolfe looked grimly at the clay-faced, blue-lipped infants, each lying in a deal box stuffed with rags that served as a cradle.

"Show me the bottle."

Mrs. Gollop, in a large, loose frenzy, brought him the gin bottle by mistake.

"Not that!"

"Oh doctor, don't be cross wi' me."

The overflowing creature snivelled about the room.

"'Ere 'tis. Palfrey's cordial."

"I thought as much. Where did you get that?"

"At Mr. Hubbard's, doctor."

"I see."

Then had followed ministrations upon the part of Wolfe to the narcotised infants in the deal boxes, a process that had entailed energetic rescue work in the mixed atmosphere of Mrs. Gollop's cottage. A neighbour had been sent running to Burrell's the chemist's, in High Street. Wolfe, minus coat and waistcoat, had put a foot

through a rotten board in the floor and discovered other rottenness to disgust him. Later had come the adjournment to Mr. Hubbard's general shop, and the asking of direct and impertinent questions.

Mr. Hubbard was a good little man with a religion and no morals. He had one of those big, round, hairless faces, mild as a full moon, and very solemn. He blundered along cheerfully in the path that his predecessors had followed, selling groceries, hardware, clothing, and drugs. The cheerful innocence with which he handled these things was characteristic of the man and his surroundings. That bottles containing tinctures of nux vomica and senna stood next to each other in a dark corner gave him no qualms of alarm. He kept kegs of plaster of Paris and white arsenic next to each other in his store-room. Old women stood under bladders of lard, bundles of brushes, and hanging clusters of pails and coal-scuttles, and bought packets of Glauber-salts and rhubarb powder, and bottles with gaudy labels that contained—Heaven knows what.

Wolfe had shown Mr. Hubbard the bottle of cordial, and Mr. Hubbard had blinked at him across the counter. His white apron cut his white waistcoat in two, and above the dividing line protruded pencils, a cheese scoop, an order book, and a red-leather spectacle case.

"I suppose you sell a good deal of this?"

"We do, sir, we do. It is very popular."

"Do you know what it contains?"

Mr. Hubbard had asserted that it was not his business to know such things.

Wolfe had enlightened him.

"Treacle, infusion of sassafras, and opium."

Furthermore, Wolfe had made certain statements that had left pink wrath upon Mr. Hubbard's face. Perhaps Wolfe was unfortunate in his methods of expression, but elderly men in Mr. Hubbard's position do not care to be told that they cannot escape responsibility by pretending to be ignorant.

Later in the day Mr. Hubbard had toddled up to Prospect House, a respectable citizen, with a still more respectable grievance.

"To be spoken to, sir, like that, sir, in my own shop, sir! I'm not an analytical chemist, sir, but I am a conscientious man, sir, and I've been here thirty years."

Dr. Threadgold and Mr. Hubbard had mingled sympathy and indignation. Nor would Wolfe have felt old Threadgold's scolding so much had not the woman Gollop arrived that evening and accused Wolfe of hinting "that she had poisoned the poor babes." There had been a further scene with Threadgold, and Wolfe had gone to his bedroom in great disgust.

Over Tarling Moor a thunderstorm was passing, with the blue blur of a clearing shower trailing over the distant uplands. Lightning still flickered about Beacon Hill, and the thunder rumbled southwards, with the sound as of an army retreating under the cover of its smoking guns. Great streams of sunlight came splashing upon the world out of a vivid west. There was moisture everywhere, on the trees, the grass, the roses over the cottage doors, on the wet tiles and the glistening thatch. Pools in the road shone like shields of gold, thrown away in the thunderflight. The warm, wet earth streamed perfumes.

It was under the beech trees beyond Beacon Hill that Wolfe overtook Jess Mascall, a bag of books in her hand, her mouse-grey skirt and bodice splashed by the rain. The sunlight came under the brim of her straw hat and made her face very white and clear. It was a pleasure to see her feet go to and fro under the short grey skirt, for she was so slim and straight from the hips downwards that she could run like a boy. The beech leaves shook their rain drops into her hair, and the blurred sunlight played about her face.

As she turned and looked up at Wolfe under the beechwood shade the white line of her chin and throat were the curves of romance and daring.

"Hallo!"

Her absolute healthiness, and a certain adventurous audacity in her eyes rallied him.

"Miss Plimley has packed you off early to-day."

"Oh, has she! I have just been putting old Plimley in her place."

She smiled up at him, her eyes glittering over some vivid adventure, some feminine onset that had been carried through to victory.

"What, have you had a battle?"

"Rather!"

"With Miss Plimley—the Miss Plimley?"

"I never was afraid of the old crow."

"Oh, come now!"

Wolfe dismounted and walked beside her under the beech trees. He knew that Jess Mascall went three days a week to Miss Plimley's establishment for young ladies at High Elms, and that Bob Munday drove down to meet her with the pony cart. Miss Plimley had been "finishing" Jess, though it appeared from what she told him that Jess had finished Miss Plimley. Jess's French was quaint and impulsively original, and a certain gift for caricature had put an end to her drawing lessons, though no one ever discovered who drew the famous sketch that was found pinned on the blackboard, a sketch that had represented Miss Plimley, in bridal attire,

dragging the Rev. Charlie Clipperton to the altar at the end of a string. Miss Plimley had never urged an investigation. She was a dapper and decisive little woman, with a nose whose bones looked as though they were wearing through the skin. Wolfe knew her very slightly. He could imagine her giving music lessons, rapping her pupils' knuckles, and counting "one—two—three," the words snapping out like notes from a guitar. Jess and Miss Plimley in conflict would be something epic.

"You had a difference of opinion?"

Jess lifted her chin and laughed.

"I have dismissed Miss Plimley."

"Dismissed her! Bravo."

"Plimley's a snob. You should see her with those Dudeny girls. Pah! she was rude to me to-day. I've been waiting for her for a long while. We have a reading class, you know; wretched stuff—Macaulay and Cowper, and all that. She put me on to read to-day, and we fell out over a word."

"One little word!"

"It was like this. Mother always says 'crownation' for coronation. It's her way, and it's as good as any other way. So I read 'crownation,' just to see what Plimley would say.

"'Cor-o-na-tion, Miss Mascall; only vulgar people say crownation.'"

"That made me cross, because Mother says it, and she isn't vulgar.

"I said, 'My mother calls it crownation.'"

"She said, 'No person of education pronounces the word so.'"

Wolfe's eyes glimmered.

"That was tactless. And you?"

"I got up, and put my books away, and I said, 'Miss Plimley, my mother is not a person, and she pays your fees.'"

"Then there was that thunderstorm."

"Plimley splittered. Do you know people who splitter? She said, 'Miss Jessica Mascall—' but I got in first."

"One from the shoulder?"

"I said, 'Miss Plimley, I have no further need of your services. Good afternoon.'"

"I say, that was good!"

"Wasn't it! I haven't felt so well this year."

She looked it, too, with a gleam of audacity in her eyes, fine frank eyes that made some of her more sentimental school-fellows foresee for her all manner of romances. Little Rose Steyning, who scribbled verses in old sermon books of her

father's, would hold to Jess and make love to her. "Jess has such wonderful eyes." And they were the more wonderful because Jess Mascall made no cunning use of them.

She broke out into impetuous confidences.

"Old people are always talking to young people about manners, but why should we say nothing when old people are rude to us? Does being very old make us important, and able to say the nastiest thing that we please? I like to take people like I take dogs and horses. I'm not afraid of them, and that's everything."

Wolfe looked at her thoughtfully.

"Most of us—when we grow up—are so shy and so afraid of staring too hard at someone else's crooked legs that we play a game of peep-bo round corners."

"You don't."

"Thank you!"

"I shouldn't think you were ever afraid of anything. That's why I like you."

Wolfe winced inwardly, as a man should when he is a keen and honest critic of self.

"Men are afraid of things that you have never thought of."

"What things?"

"Losing money or losing work; offending people who are useful; getting themselves laughed at or hated."

"But if I felt myself in the right?"

"Well?"

"I'd never give in, never."

"By George, I don't believe you would."

He looked at her with a kind of awe, the awe of a man for something that is terribly and beautifully sincere. In the old tales of chivalry strong men knelt and took some young girl as their Lady of Honour. Wolfe understood the human significance of the spirit of chivalry. It was the bowing down of the man before cleanliness, beauty, and truth.

"Then you wouldn't think much of a fellow who met a savage dog in a lane, and slunk round by another way?"

Her eyes met Wolfe's.

"No, I shouldn't."

"No; that's right."

They had passed from under the beech trees, and down the wet, sunlit road came Bob Munday in the Moor Farm pony-cart. The boy had a way of staring wonderingly at Jess. He would have jumped into the great duck pond if she had so

much as hinted that it would please her.

"Hallo, here's Bob. I must be riding on, or I shall not be back by surgery hours."

He looked down at her gravely.

"Do you know, you have done me a great deal of good."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

And Wolfe rode on with the wave of the hat, and a heart that felt warmer and less cynical.

# *CHAPTER NINE*

MRS. THREADGOLD had chosen to be curious as to how this big, lean, brown man spent his evenings in his little bedroom at the top of Prospect House, and, since curiosity is the clockwork that moves many a small mind, Mrs. Threadgold remembered that Wolfe's shirt cuffs were badly frayed. It would be doing the man a kindness if she went through his linen, and arranged for one of the maids to sew new cuffs on Wolfe's shirts, and mend any socks that were in need of darning. Mrs. Threadgold accepted herself and her moral solidity with such complete seriousness that nothing that she ever did struck her as being mean and trivial. Self-criticism did not exist for her, nor did she ever catch a glimpse of her own smooth face reflected in the distorting glass of self-scorn. People who have no sense of humour will perpetrate the most astounding impertinences and convulse a whole household over the disappearance of a packet of pins.

Slyness was not part of the adventure. In fact, Mrs. Sophia felt no desire to conceal her exploration of Wolfe's room.

"Elizabeth, I am going to look through Mr. Wolfe's linen. I see that some of it is very shabby. We must see if we can do something for it."

"Yes, ma'am, some of the shirts are all holes."

"Indeed!"

"Mr. Wolfe has only four, ma'am."

Mrs. Threadgold may not have realised what she was saying when she remarked, "I must speak to him about it." She was always "speaking to people," and the phrase was a habit with her.

She went in and rummaged with true feminine thoroughness, and in the course of her rummaging she discovered Wolfe's map. Wolfe, like most large-natured men, had little secretiveness; moreover, the lock of his portmanteau was broken. Two well-worn shirts, and a couple of pairs of old socks lay on the bed. Mrs. Sophia stood by the window, holding Wolfe's map of Navestock that was pinned to a large piece of cardboard and staring at the multi-colored patterns, and the neat records written with a mapping pen. No great ingenuity was required to discover the true

meaning of the thing. Mrs. Threadgold had her spectacle case with her. She laid the map on the chest of drawers, put on her glasses, and went through Wolfe's researches at her leisure.

Dr. Threadgold, when he was not too busy, made a practice in summer of taking a glass of port under the lime tree in the back garden of Prospect House. His wife had her basket chair and her wicker work-table carried out into the shade, and the sunlight would come fluttering through the lime leaves upon these two people who looked so smooth and pleased and placid. The garden was nothing but gravel and grass, with a trellis covered with a vine at one end, and a single bed of geraniums in the centre of the grass plot staring heavenwards like a great red eye. A few laurels filled the corners, and there were a few fruit trees on the walls patterned out like the Tree of Life upon an Assyrian tablet.

In a town one may be made the victim of vulgarity of one's neighbours, and old Johnson, the wine merchant, who lived in the next house, kept a parrot and three musical daughters. Old Johnson and Mrs. Threadgold did not love each other. It was a case of "That underbred person, the wine merchant," and "That female next door." Mr. Johnson's green parrot was put out into the garden, and amused himself there by twanging the wires of his cage, squalling like a cat, and talking—as Mr. Johnson's parrot might be expected to talk. Dr. Threadgold, who was "Montague" in the house, and before visitors and servants, became "Monte" in the garden under the shade of the lime. Mr. Johnson's parrot had picked up the cry. He would bob up and down on his perch, and shout "Monte, Monte," in imitation of Mrs. Threadgold.

"Monte, Monte."

Mrs. Sophia was under the lime tree, watching her husband who stood at the study window turning over the pages of a book. They had finished dinner twenty minutes ago, and Wolfe had been called away suddenly to a case of sunstroke in the "Pardons" hay-fields. Mrs. Sophia had called twice to her husband, but apparently he had not heard.

"Montague."

Dr. Threadgold opened the french window and came out.

"Did you call, dear?"

"I called you twice before."

"I thought it was that wretched bird of Johnson's."

"Montague! Do you mean to say——?"

"No, of course not."

"Your wine is here."

"Chuck my chin, chuck my chin," said a voice over the wall.

Mrs. Threadgold watched her husband cross the grass, his hands behind him, a broad-brimmed hat throwing a shadow across his face. In the course of some twenty years Sophia Threadgold had come to know every hole, cranny, and corner of this little man's soul, his vanities and foibles, his genial strutting affectations, his sententious timidity, his horror of giving offence. She knew his moods, and the symptoms that characterised them; the remarks he would make upon any particular subject, the way he would jump at any given flick of her tongue. Her affection for him was a queer mingling of motherliness and contempt. She owned him, and padded his amiable flaccidity with the buckram of her rigid selfishness.

"Mr. Wolfe has gone out, Monte?"

"Yes. Something wrong in one of the hay-fields."

"There's your wine, dear. I want to talk to you about Mr. Wolfe."

"Oh!"

"Rats, rats, rats!" shouted the green bird on the other side of the red-brick wall.

Mrs. Threadgold trampled straight into her subject without any sensitive hesitation. She had gone to look through Wolfe's linen for him, and she had discovered more than ragged socks and torn shirts. That map of Wolfe's had amplified and explained certain broken pieces of gossip that had come to her ears. Like most selfish people, she was very shrewd when she had to deal with anything that affected the little world about her.

"I call it gross disloyalty to you, Monte. A sort of underhand spying, and scandal-mongering on paper."

Dr. Threadgold had poured out his port, but he forgot to touch the wine, and sat with blank blue eyes set staringly behind his glasses. Mr. Johnson's parrot was silent, listening with head on one side and an eye cocked cynically in the direction of the lime tree. "What a woman!" The bird stretched one leg with expressive leisureliness, nibbled at his claws with his beak, and then sat up with an air of interested attention.

"But, my dear——"

"You know, Monte, what Mr. Hubbard told you. It is very easy to see what this might lead to. What does the man mean by prying about in Navestock? He must have some object. You don't pay him to go about to set the whole town by the ears. You must speak to him about that map. It ought to be burned."

"But, my dear, I can't say——"

"What can't you say, Monte?"

"I can't know that the map exists."

"I have told you."

"But, my dear, be reasonable. How can I? Prying about in a man's room! Why

——”

“I did not go there to look for it. It was a coincidence, Montague, and a very fortunate coincidence, and you should have no hesitation of taking advantage of it. Supposing it gets abroad that this assistant of yours has been amusing himself by condemning half the property in the town? He may be a young fool, Montague, but would it do you any good?”

The parrot shouted “Hurrah!” Threadgold gave an irritable jerk of the head.

“Confound that bird!”

“You must speak to Wolfe about this, and absolutely forbid him——”

“My dear, I can’t. I can’t assume——”

“There is nothing to assume. Surely you are not afraid of your own assistant? We had better get rid of him at once if that is the case. I will go and fetch that map and show it you.”

“Sophia, please do nothing of the kind.”

“You ought to see it. I insist upon your seeing it.”

“My dear——”

The parrot twanged the bars of his cage, screamed, and then remarked in an undertone: “She’s a devil—she’s a devil.”

As Dr. Threadgold had said, a sunstroke in the “Pardons” hay-fields had hurried Wolfe away from the dinner table. A sunburnt man, coatless, his blue-check shirt open at the throat, had come running up from the river meadows, his brown face wet with sweat under his broad-brimmed hat. The sky was a clear, sultry blue, and the mulberry trees on the Green might have been carved out of green marble. The air shimmered with heat, and windows were open and blinds drawn. Shadows were sharp and heavy, and the glare of the sun upon the paving stones and cobbles dazzled and tired the eyes.

The Wraith glided sluggishly under the red-brick bridges, water-weeds trailing with a languorous motion, the pollard willows along the bank hanging drowsy and motionless heads. Dust lay thick upon the roads, and whitened the grass, the wild flowers, and the hedges. Blue haze covered Tarling Moor, and the sun was a great, blazing buckler heated to a white heat.

The sunburnt man led Wolfe along a path beside the river. The fields, shorn by the scythe, were a brownish yellow; and the scattered earth, ploughed up in lines and patches by the moles, a pale, dry brown. Westwards, “Pardons” rose as a great mound of green shadows, its twisted chimneys showing above the solemn spires of its cedars. The garden, sloping towards the river, was splashed here and there with colour. “Pardons” was famous for its lawns, sleek, sun-streaked stretches of grass

spreading in long curves under the motionless canopies of its trees. The place satisfied the eyes with its calm, cool opulence. Between the dark trunks of the cedars Wolfe saw the fish-ponds glimmering, studded with the green leaves and the white-and-yellow cups of the water-lilies. Beyond the house spread the park, clasped by a red-brick wall that rose and fell with the undulations of the ground. Deer herded there amid the bracken, and about the clumps of beech trees that were like great temples paved with bronze. Some of the old oaks were mere huge, grey shells stretching out a few twisted limbs like monsters defying Time. Ilexes had been planted a hundred years ago, and their leaves glittered when the wind blew. Between the park and the garden ran yew hedges twenty feet high, black as midnight, and as solemn.

The field under the park wall was fragrant with tossed and sun-scorched hay. Only half of it had been mown, the fresh swathes lying at the purple edge of the uncut grass. Men had thrown down their scythes, women their rakes and forks. They had huddled themselves in a group under the boughs of an oak that grew close to the park wall, the pink-and-white sun-bonnets of the women mixed with the hats of the men. A crowd never seems to think. It is a mere amorphous mass, an amœba-like thing that flows, and emits jelly-like protrusions when stimulated by curiosity, sympathy, and fear.

Wolfe pushed through.

"Get back, please, get back."

The circle enlarged itself like a smoke ring, with irregular undulations. At the foot of the tree they had laid a man on a couple of smocks and rolled up another under his head. His face was dead-white with a queer glistening whiteness, his body flaccid, his eyes closed. He was unconscious, and breathing very feebly. A woman in a blue-print bodice and a white apron was kneeling beside him, and mopping his face with a wet rag.

The haymakers stared at Wolfe, but Wolfe looked only at the man. He bent down, and put a hand inside his shirt.

"When did it happen?"

The woman with the wet rag answered him through her blubberings.

"Not an hour past, doctor."

"After a meal, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And plenty of drink?"

She looked at him with humid eyes pleading pitifully in a wrinkled, ugly face.

"'E be'n't dying, doctor?"

Wolfe was silent, feeling the beat of the man's heart.

"Oh, don't say it be death, sir. He was such a lusty chap. He was laughing over 'is beer."

"I'm sorry. But he's bad."

The woman began to sob, the strings of her sunbonnet twitching upon her shoulders.

Wolfe was raising the man's lids when a voice came from somewhere, a deep, languid, mellow voice, and if colour can be ascribed to voices, the colour of gold under trees at twilight. The country folk moved aside. The woman in the blue bodice sat up and wiped her eyes with the wet rag.

"Who is it?"

"Tom Bett, ma'am."

"A sunstroke."

"Dr. Threadgold's man be here."

Wolfe, half turning, saw a woman in a white dress moving from the open sunlight into the shade of the oak. She seemed to glide rather than to walk in the cloud-like expanse of her crinoline. She was a very tall woman, and a mass of auburn hair surrounded a face that was white and smooth as ivory. This hair of hers was the colour of copper in certain lights; in others—all dusted over with reddish gold; and though her face was so smooth and white, the red mouth streaked it with a colour that was almost the colour of blood. Her eyes, dark and large, were filled with an expression as of inexpressible *ennui* that drowned the light in them, and made them resemble the eyes of one who suffered.

Wolfe rose. He knew by instinct that this woman was the mistress of "Pardons," owner of a third of Navestock town, mother of that rough-riding youngster whom he had pulled up once in Bridge Street. Mrs. Brandon moved across the grass under the shade of the oak. She was still young, not more than thirty, but her face lacked all animation, the proud, bored, dead face of a woman who no longer enjoyed anything. She looked at the unconscious man and the weeping woman as though she were staring at some picture crowded amid a thousand others into the gallery of life. She had grown tired of looking at pictures. Her eyes said as much.

"Is it a bad case?"

"I am afraid so."

"Give any orders that you wish. He can be taken up to any of my cottages."

"Thank you."

Wolfe called some of the men and told them to fetch a hurdle or a door and a sheet wrung out in cold water. Happening to turn again towards Mrs. Brandon, he

found her eyes fixed on him with a vague and careless curiosity.

Wolfe was struck by one of those flashes of surprise that strike across the clear calm of a strong man's consciousness. He felt suddenly and unaccountably embarrassed, like a raw youth in a drawing-room. He looked at her and realised that she was a woman to whom he had nothing at all to say.

His abrupt uneasiness betrayed itself in a certain brusquerie.

"I may send to the house for anything I want?"

"Please do."

"I suppose there is not such a thing as ice to be had?"

"No, I suppose not."

She turned away to speak to the woman in the blue bodice and white apron, and Wolfe bent over the unconscious man. Yet he could not prevent himself from listening to the beautifully casual voice of the woman in white. She spoke as a statue might be expected to speak, coldly, perfectly, yet without sympathy. Wolfe felt a strange mingling of repulsion and interest. He found himself wondering whether this woman who had so fair a face and body had always carried a half-dead soul.

When he rose again, Mrs. Brandon had moved away, and her hair gleamed in the sunlight. The white figure showed up in isolation against the shorn grass. The sunlight seemed to fall away from it as though there was nothing that the golden arms could clasp.

The men came back with a hurdle covered with horse-cloths, and one of them carried a wet sheet. The summer day, that had stood slothfully still in the presence of the great lady, moved on again into action. Wolfe drew a deep breath of relief. Here was something to fight for, the life of a man.

# *CHAPTER TEN*

THE Rev. Robert Flemming was making an infusion of quassia for the benefit of the green fly on his roses, when Jasper Turrell was shown into the rector's study. Flemming, like many country parsons, was a man with a multitude of hobbies, and a friend might find him at work at his carpenter's bench, ankle-deep in shavings, or forking potatoes in his vegetable garden, or busy making trout flies with his big, but dexterous fingers. His study was a long, low, pleasant room, its big french windows looking like painted panels let into the wall, each with its glimpse of sleek grass, flower borders piled high with colour, grey old walls, and splendid trees. Pleasant disorder prevailed here. Fishing-rods, butterfly-nets, guns, a bow, and walking-sticks were piled in the corners. The book-shelves held not only books, but collectors' boxes, cork spreaders for setting butterflies and moths, fishing-reels, canvas bags, a hunting crop, and gloves. Disorder prevailed also over the rector's desk. Sermons, florists' catalogues, bills, circulars, pamphlets, fly-books, odd knives, and pipes lay as they pleased. The carpet, that had been worn to no colour in particular, had a big hole in the centre of the floor.

It was the room of a man who led a large, pleasant, placid life, a man who read old books, preached his old sermons, and was an expert in the matter of wild life and of flowers. Turrell found him kneeling on the hearth-rug in front of a fire of chips and broken wood, stewing up his infusion of quassia in a big black saucepan. As he knelt, his boots showed two worn places at the treads. He had taken off his coat, and the sleeves of his grey flannel shirt were rolled up to his elbows.

"Good heavens, Flemming, that's a nice game for a day like this! Why don't you let your cook do it?"

"It's not soup."

"That makes it worse. Jove! it's the hottest day this year."

The brewer put his white top-hat on the desk, sat down in an arm-chair, spread himself, and wiped his forehead. The two patches of colour on his face, shaped like the wings of a butterfly, stood out red and injected. His sandy hair looked clammy, his eyelids pink along their edges.

"What's that stuff, Flemming?"

"Quassia."

"Green fly, eh? I can't get my chaps to syringe properly. When I rate 'em, they always say that the glass and the grass take all their time. I've never yet had a man I could trust."

The rector settled the saucepan on the fire, and got up. He was a very big man, grey-haired, slow, and a little sleepy, his massive, fresh-coloured face healthy as the face of a boy. His blue eyes moved slowly, and dwelt a long time upon any object they happened to notice, like the eyes of a man who had never been hurried. Grave, pleasant tranquillity possessed his face. Robert Flemming was an aristocrat even in the thick of his hobbies and his old clothes. He had something of the grand manner, a quiet, drowsy graciousness that reflected the calm of a quiet, drowsy life.

"Eighty-three in the shade yesterday."

"It's more to-day. Nearer ninety, I should imagine."

Jasper Turrell lay back at his ease. For many years he and Robert Flemming had shared in the life of Navestock town. They were fellow-citizens rather than friends, accustomed to meet here, there, and everywhere, to share in the patriarchal government of the place, to administer justice, and to deal with the poor. Robert Flemming was chairman of the Navestock Board of Guardians, and Turrell the people's church-warden at St. Jude's Church.

"I hear there was a case of sunstroke at 'Pardons' last week."

"Yes, the man recovered."

"Threadgold's assistant pulled him through."

Turrell stretched out his legs and stared at the toes of his boots.

"We shall have trouble with that young man, Flemming."

"Oh!"

The rector took his coat from a chair and hunched himself into it, wrinkling up the cloth across his back.

"What makes you think that?"

"Officious young fool."

"I haven't come into touch with him. Besides, he's only an understrapper——"

"Exactly. A question of putting him in his place, or getting Threadgold to shift him, if necessary. We don't want that kind of man in the town, Flemming."

"What annoys you?"

"He's one of those fellows who can't mind their own business, meddlesome and dictatorial. I'm not a man to be dictated to."

The rector nodded.

"Of course not."

Turrell sat up with a jerk, as though his indignation straightened like a bent spring.

"You know the kind of people we are, Flemming; we like to go our own way, and work in our own way. We are independent, shrewd, strong-willed. We don't like being talked to or interfered with. We manage our own affairs in our own fashion, and I'm not accustomed to being yapped at by a puppy."

Flemming picked up a pipe from his desk, and began to fill it from the tobacco-jar on the mantelshelf.

"Has Threadgold's youngster been yapping?"

"He has tried it. I'm not the old dog to stand that."

"But what about?"

"The property here. As if I hadn't managed property before he was born. His officiousness doesn't come your way."

Flemming gave one of his sleepy, thoughtful stares.

"No. But you say——?"

"I had to put the fellow in his place. He was beginning to give me instructions."

"Was he, indeed!"

"No sense of humour in the cub, Flemming, no sense of humour."

He broke off with an irritable, rattling laugh, showing his teeth and glaring. Flemming had lit his pipe. He stood on the hearth-rug, feet spread, hands behind his back. His face expressed the heavy surprise of a quiet and placid-tempered man who was asked to be angry about something that appeared utterly unimportant. Turrell was hot-tempered, touchy, and vindictive, but the rector saw that Wolfe had angered him pretty seriously.

"I don't see——"

"Confound it, Flemming, supposing some youngster came and told you that you ought to alter your sermons, or have your church reseated?"

Flemming smiled, his healthy face pleasantly amused.

"I don't think that would bother me."

"You are too good-tempered a man. I'm not; if I see a cub I must kick him. Well, let's leave it at that. I dropped in to ask when you want to have your summer school treat. You can have one of my fields."

"Thanks."

"Mrs. Turrell will provide the tea, and all that sort of stuff. We shall be away part of August, and I want you to fix the date."

"Supposing I fix the first Wednesday in August?"

"That will suit us. Do you remember last year? By George, what a day it was! Talk about Providence and the weather!"

Robert Flemming puffed steadily at his pipe. He stared at the hole in the carpet with the far-away look of one who has discovered the skull of some old friend.

"Do you care to come and see my roses?"

Turrell acquiesced.

"I wish you would come up some time and convince my man Walker that he's a fool."

Flemming looked quizzically at the bowl of his pipe.

"One of the most difficult things in the world, sir. If a stranger came into the town and asked for 'Mr. Fool,' we should all of us send him next door."

When the brewer had gone, his white top-hat bobbing above the laurel hedge, where the public path ran between St. Jude's churchyard and the rectory garden, Robert Flemming loitered among his roses, cutting off dead blooms and taking some of the choicest flowers between two fingers in order to scan them with the quiet delight of an expert. But there was not that pleasant abandonment in his mood that characterised his idle moments among his flowers. He would pause and stare at nothing in particular, sometimes rubbing a leaf between finger and thumb, or snipping at the air with his gardening scissors.

It could not be said that Robert Flemming had either love or respect for Jasper Turrell. He was part of Navestock, and as such Flemming had accepted him, and ceased to be piqued by anything the brewer did. People may be classed with poisons, small doses given at frequent intervals producing immunity and no violent reaction. Flemming had come to Navestock as a man of forty. He had lived in the town some twenty years, and had sunk into it like a big and rather indolent man into a comfortable bed. Outside the walls of his garden Flemming was not much of an observer. He had a mind that took things for granted, kindly, patient, not given to asking questions. Evil existed, and he had long ago accepted it as part of the mystical scheme of life. Death, pain, and poverty were stones strung upon the rosary of his religion. They were facts which he had learned to look at through the golden haze of a mellow mysticism. Flemming, like many a good man, left everything in the hands of God. He stretched out a compassionate hand to touch the sufferer, but he did not draw aside the cloth that covered the sore.

Sometimes, though very occasionally, he had been troubled, waking from his pleasant, patriarchal lethargy with the start of one who is wakened by a vague cry at night. Things had occurred that had shaken his placid optimism. He had rubbed his eyes and looked about him, only to see what seemed to him inevitable suffering and

poverty that his own creed had sought to beautify. Moreover, a man of Robert Flemming's sociability could not have lived for twenty years in a town without being moulded to some of its characteristics. We are like stones in a stream, rubbing and polishing one another. The people of Navestock—that is to say, those who had some say in the life of the town—detested interference. Bob Flemming was a man of the world—so far as Navestock was concerned. The old machinery jolted on, rustily, clumsily, and without coercion. Now and again Bob Flemming had roused himself to pour in a little oil.

The rector went in to his tea, taking it like a bachelor on a small table in his study. His brown spaniel came waddling in, and laid himself down in a patch of sunlight at his master's feet.

"What about this fellow Wolfe?"

It was Flemming's hour for reading *The Times*, but, though he opened the paper, the subject of his conversation with Jasper Turrell intruded itself, and edged the paragraphs aside.

"A young man—of course. That is to say—very old. We grow young again. Toby, sit up, old chap. Time for sugar."

The spaniel sat up on his hind legs, caught the sugar on his nose, made it bounce in the air, and then swallowed it at the second fall.

"Strawberries. This hot weather will soon bring 'em to an end."

He had pulled the dish towards him and was lying back comfortably in his chair when one of the maids came in with a message.

"There's a woman, sir, from Bung Row."

"Well, Jane?"

"She says Mrs. Baker is dying, and they'd be pleased if you'd go."

Flemming put down his paper.

"Tell them I'll come, Jane, I'll come at once."

The room in Bung Row where the woman lay dying was like a dark hole when compared with Robert Flemming's sun-lit study. A wooden bedstead stood in one corner with one of its legs propped on half a brick. The woman lying there had been brought to the very last stages of emaciation. Her nose was pinched, and no broader than a child's little finger, and the back of her head was a bulging protuberance overhanging her miserable neck. The face was the colour of parchment, and made up of bony ridges and starved hollows that caught the shadows. Her hands rested palm upwards on the coverlet. Her lids were half-closed, and between them showed the dull, glazed eyes of one starved to death. A faint movement of the bed-clothes showed that the woman still breathed.

The rector came in, bending his head, and holding his hat in his hand. He saw a tall man rise from the chair beside the bed. The latch of the door that led into the back kitchen was clicking up and down, and something scuffled and rubbed against the door.

"The doctor, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Wolfe?"

"Yes. I am afraid it is too late, sir."

Robert Flemming set his hat on the window-sill, and glanced at the woman in the bed. He put his hand into his pocket for the little Bible that he carried, but the action was slow and almost half-hearted, as though Wolfe's words had inspired him suddenly with curious self-consciousness. He was caught between the act and the thought, like a man brought to a halt by a hand on his shoulder.

The latch kept clicking up and down.

"Someone shut out?"

Wolfe turned a grave and shadowy face.

"The child."

"Ah!"

Flemming moved towards the bed, but the woman did not notice him. The eternal sleep was weighing upon her eyelids.

"They ought to have sent for me before."

"It was very sudden at the last. I believe they sent yesterday."

"No. I heard nothing of it. I must ask."

He stood heavily irresolute, and then sat down on the chair beside the bed. His hand still groped in his pocket, but presently he withdrew it without the book, as though a feeling of ineffectualness possessed him.

"She won't know you, sir."

"No? Nevertheless——"

He went down on his knees and prayed.

The latch of the inner door rattled despairingly.

"Muvver, Muvver!"

Wolfe's mouth twitched. Robert Flemming raised his head.

"Oughtn't we——?"

"I think it better not."

"Muvver!"

"I would."

Wolfe went to the door and drew back the wooden bolt. As he did so the

woman ceased to breathe. The door was pushed open and a little fair-haired chap came squeezing through. He dodged under Wolfe's arm, gave a stare at the rector, and then scrambled up on to the bed.

Wolfe turned and saw everything. The boy had clutched the woman's hands. He drew himself up, snuggling up to her with a look of wide-eyed eagerness. The thin face rolled to one side of the pillow.

The boy threw his head back and gave a queer, wailing cry.

"Muvver! What's the matter with Muvver?"

Wolfe took three strides across the room. He bent over the bed, caught the child and took him in his arms. The youngster began to scream and kick and to beat Wolfe's face with his fists.

"There, there, quiet, sonny, quiet."

Robert Flemming had a glimpse of the young man's face, and a queer shock of awe went through him. He remained on his knees, silent, motionless, his hands resting on the edge of the bed. He saw Wolfe go to an old sofa at one end of the room and sit down there with the boy in his arms.

"There, there, sonny."

The child broke into wild wailing, such an outcry as can never be forgotten by one who has once heard it. Wolfe rocked him to and fro, his long arms holding the boy close to his own body. The man's attitude was almost as pathetic as the agony of the child.

Robert Flemming's head bowed itself. He was unable to pray, but listened to Wolfe talking like a woman to the boy in his arms.

"There, there, old chap, mother's gone to sleep. She was tired, sonny, so tired. She'd got pain, bad pain, but the bad pain's gone now. That's right; cry it out. Hold on to me—hold on tight."

A woman's head appeared in the doorway. Robert Flemming rose clumsily, and stood staring at Wolfe and the boy. He brushed a hand over his eyes, and then glanced at the figure on the bed.

The neighbour came in, a big, square, frowsy woman with a red face. She was crying. And she looked at Wolfe and the child.

"Can you take him, Mrs. Budge?"

His voice was soft, and solemnly tender.

"Dear Lord, sir! Poor things! Come, lovie dear, you come along with me."

She held out her fat, red forearms.

"Now, sonny."

The boy clung to him a little, but the woman took the child, and smothered him

against her bosom, one great hand spread out and patting the boy's back.

"I'll take 'im next door, sir."

"Yes, it's better."

And all the while Robert Flemming stood in the dark little room like a stranger who had no share in the things that were passing.

Wolfe and the rector left Bung Row together. They were going in the same direction, and for some reasons Robert Flemming wished that they were not. He walked with his head slightly bowed and his eyes fixed on an imaginary spot on the pavement about five yards in front of him. The man's usual attitude was one of serene and erect solidity. He marched through Navestock, looking people in the face with genial confidence, without self-consciousness, fresh-coloured, smiling, and courtly. But those few minutes in Bung Row had brought him into a state of vague embarrassment. He had been over-shadowed there, in no uncertain way, by the more powerful personality of this younger man. His own uselessness had troubled him. Moreover, some voice within him had echoed the wild cry of the motherless child.

"A sad case."

He raised his head, and his eyes came round half-timidly to scan the face of the man at his side. Wolfe seemed to be thinking. His profile was grave, and a little grim.

"Very."

"One of the inevitable, I suppose?"

"Inevitable?"

Wolfe's eyes caught Flemming's as one foil presses upon and feels another.

"Yes, perhaps here."

"You mean?"

"Such things are inevitable in certain places."

Robert Flemming's eyes fell. He was a bigger man than Wolfe, both in actual bulk and in reputation, but he felt smaller and slighter than the man at his side.

He hesitated, and then forced himself to follow the subject further.

"You mean to say that local conditions may be held accountable?"

"I do."

"How—in Navestock? I have lived in the town for twenty years."

"I know. That complicates one's view of things."

"Oh!"

Flemming felt a slight flushing of his face. Turrell's words recurred to him, but somehow things fell away from the figure of the man who had held that wailing child in his arms.

“That’s fairly frank of you.”

“I meant to imply that all of us are apt to take familiar things for granted.”

“Like the stains on our old clothes. Quite true. But do you mean to say that you believe——”

“I believe what I have been taught to be the truth. These things have been proved. The best of our younger men—well, every generation has its ideas.”

Flemming was silent a moment. Then he said:

“We need young blood. I know it.”

They had come to a point where their paths diverged. This parting of the ways may have had some symbolism for both of them. Robert Flemming held out a hand.

“I’m sorry that we haven’t met before. I hope we shall remedy that.”

Wolfe’s hand went out frankly.

“I hope so.”

And they parted with a keen meeting of the eyes.

Robert Flemming walked on slowly, his hands behind his back. Now and again he glanced up to acknowledge the salutations of those who passed him. Yet his mood was one of detachment. He was lifted up out of Navestock, and out of his own familiar, easy-going self.

# *CHAPTER ELEVEN*

A GIRL lying under the shade of a furze bush with a romance under her chin may be a more interesting study than a professor prone at the edge of a pond, groping for slime among chickweed and rushes.

Jess Mascall had a retreat of her own on Tarling Moor, where she would hide herself like a wild moor-maiden, with brown legs and eyes as black as sloes. It was a little hollow where stone and gravel had once been quarried, changed now into a green and flowery pit, and hidden away amid masses of billowing furze. The white clouds and the wind slid over it, and the sky gave it a blue lid. There were sunny banks where one could bask in the sun, or lie in the shade of a furze bush and read. In spring, summer, and autumn this diminutive dell looked as though some rich piece of tapestry had tumbled into it out of heaven. Anemones, primroses, violets, bluebells, pink centaury, foxgloves, stitchwort, ragged robin, golden rod, mauve scabious—all these flourished in their turn. Jess had brought Lent lilies from the orchard and planted them in the banks. In the centre was a black circle and the ashes of a fire, for Jess had her gipsy moods and would brew her tea in a pot slung upon a tripod of sticks.

The furze pods were crackling in the sunlight and scattering their seed very early because of the hot summer. Along the crumbling lip of the dell bracken rose in delicate curves, and here and there where the earth had been washed away the black roots showed in the stony soil. A tall foxglove, a spire of seed vessels, had lost all but its two top-most bells. Jess lay in a patch of shade with masses of yellow flowers spread like golden rays about her. Ivanhoe had just overthrown Bois Guilbert and rescued Rebecca from death by fire.

Jess put the book aside—she had read it twice in the last two months—and lay on her back with a feeling of delightful languor. Romance was so splendidly satisfying on a summer day when the white clouds went drifting, and the furze pods cracked in the sun. Moreover, Miss Jess had her head and body packed with romance. She was at the age when heroism is a necessity, and adventure part of the sap of life. Her own vitality was romance itself. She dreamed through all these strenuous happenings,

and commented on them with naïve sincerity.

"I think Rowena was rather a fool. I'm not sure I don't like Rebecca better. But then, you see——"

Her thoughts fled off on a side issue, and she lay and stared at the fern fronds that fringed the edge of the bank.

"I wonder if there are any men now like Ivanhoe? I am sure there must be. Only he was fair, and I don't think I like fair men. I like them tall and dark and sinewy, though I suppose I oughtn't to, because I'm dark myself. Fair men often look such sops. There's young Turrell, too, only he's sandy; I should like to see someone give him a thrashing; I should like to have seen Ivanhoe smash him into the dust. John Wolfe would look fine in armour. He's so strong, and he'd never be afraid. I believe he would do all sorts of wonderful things. But then Navestock's a dull place. Fancy a man finding a dragon to fight down there! Old Plimley might do. But I have beaten her myself."

She drifted away into more picturesque and ingenuous dreams, thoughts that were too quaintly sacred to be thought out loud. They were iridescent cobwebs spun by fairies before the eyes of a young girl. Jess lay and traced in imagination their glistening and tremulous patterns. She forgot that she existed, in the glamour of her dreams.

"Jess, Jess!"

Someone was calling her. She sat up, shaking her black hair with the slightest flash of irritation.

"Jess, are you there?"

The voice was a thin and useful voice, suggesting something with an edge to it. Jess knew the sound. She stood up and waited.

"It's Edith Wilks! What does she want to come here for? I don't want her."

It seemed that Miss Edith Wilks would be out of place in this nest of wild flowers. The name itself was like a piece of crochet work, busy, finicking, thinly feminine, Edith Wilks indeed; with her long legs, high French boots nearly up to her knees, sharp nose, and streaky hair! Jess was a girl of impressions and prejudices. She wished Miss Wilks at the bottom of the sea.

A straw bonnet appeared above the furze bushes, moving along the winding path that led to Jess's sanctuary.

"Are you there, Jess?"

"Yes, I'm here."

Out of temper with the furze bushes, and rather concerned about her clothes, Miss Wilks reached the edge of the pit. She was a sallow-faced, lanky girl with a

high, round, shiny forehead, and a thin nose. One of those colourless types, her hair, eyebrows, and lashes were almost white, and her red eyelids made her eyes look pale and strained. Her mouth was her most characteristic feature, a straight, lipless slit out of which acrid little speeches slipped with perfect facility. Miss Plimley had provided her with genteel refinements, and, having no good looks, she dressed herself up in manners.

"Hallo, Edith!"

"How do you do, Jessica? I have just walked over to ask you to come to our party next week. Mother had bespoken the carriage. They informed me I should find you here."

"What, have you got a carriage now? Come and sit down."

The carriage was still a chaise, but the tall girl did not explain. She descended very carefully, holding up her frock, and Jess could not help thinking that Miss Edith's legs needed a little bombastic padding.

"What an odd place to choose, dear!"

"Why?"

"It's so rough."

"Well, what d'you expect on a moor? You can sit on 'Ivanhoe' or my old straw hat. I think—the hat. There."

"Thank you, dear."

And Miss Wilks sat down.

She kept her heels and knees close together, her toes in line, her elbows close to her sides, her hands folded in her lap. Jess lay as she pleased with all the easy relaxation of a wild thing whose limbs never fall into stiff and ugly poses. Edith Wilks had begun to talk about her party. It was to be quite an elegant affair, with music, archery, and croquet. The Rev. Charlie Chipperton, Mr. Flemming's curate, had promised to bring his flute. Eudoxia Brown was to play the piano.

Jess said that she would come.

"Just to see Mr. Chipperton piff away at that flute of his. He ought to do a sort of dance, too. Chipperton! It's just like a nigger's feet pattering. And his mouth always makes me laugh."

Her companion did not see the humour of the thing. She was ladylike and correct.

"How can you be such a baby, Jess?"

"I can't help it."

"The empty laugh. You don't remember that in our readings. Mr. Chipperton is such a gentleman. It is a pity some of the other young men don't imitate his manners.

Vulgar things; they make me shudder!"

"Ugh! It's terr-rr-ible! Who are they?"

"Oh, Percy Tangs and young Garvice, and the two Studleys who grin like apes. I am sure that Mr. Flemming is very fortunate. Mother was saying only yesterday that Dr. Threadgold might envy him."

Jess looked up alertly.

"Dr. Threadgold, dear old ba-lamb?"

"Yes, with that gawk of an assistant."

"He is rather tall, isn't he?"

"Have you seen him?"

"He has been to see Mother."

"Good gracious, Jessica, we could not have him in our house."

Jess had a shrewd knowledge of girls, and divided them into two groups of "sporters" and "cats." Miss Wilks belonged to the latter class. She had always been ready to cheapen a friend's frock.

"We think Mr. Wolfe very clever."

"Clever! You should hear what Miss Perfrement says."

"Another of them!"

"Another of what, Jess?"

"Oh, nothing."

Edith Wilks became the woman of the world.

"Everybody thinks Mr. Wolfe a conceited young man. Father says that he won't stay long in Navestock. He is so rude and meddlesome, a regular jackanapes."

Jess's face was very attentive and very quiet.

"Oh!"

"You see, people who have lived in Navestock all their lives do not tolerate an uppish, underbred young man like that. We wonder Dr. Threadgold has not got rid of him before this. Father said that he will have to give Dr. Threadgold a hint."

"What has Mr. Wolfe done to offend your father?"

"I don't know; I don't bother about such a man. I believe he said something very rude to Father about his cottages down by the mill. As if it was any business of his! Good gracious! I'd put him in his place."

Jess's eyes began to glitter.

"I know. Those terrible old cottages that look as though they were going to fall into the river."

"My dear!"

"Why, one could push them over by leaning against them. And the smells!"

Miss Wilks became haughty.

"Jess, how can you be so vulgar?"

"Well, it is true, isn't it? Why should people always be so shocked by the truth?"

"How absurd you are!"

"Mr. Wolfe speaks the truth, I suppose."

"He is a young man with no manners."

Jess lay back and stared at the sky.

"Mr. Chipperton would never tell any nasty truths, would he? Have you noticed how his knees bend? I am always afraid they will burst through his trousers."

Miss Wilks's nose was elevated above the level of such humour.

"You are not at all funny, Jess."

"I'm only standing Mr. Chipperton up beside Mr. Wolfe. Now I think of it, he does look like a bent nail. I like Mr. Wolfe. That's a fact."

She turned over on her side, and stared at her companion with a frank challenge in her eyes.

"Oh, I see."

"What do you see?"

"Nothing; nothing worth mentioning."

Jess laughed.

"Don't look like a hen on an egg, Edith."

"Oh, indeed!"

"I must say, 'Ssh—ssh,' and see you cluck, and fluff up your feathers. I'd just love to roll you in the heather. I'd just love it."

She sat up with threatening restlessness. Miss Wilks stiffened, and seemed to grow narrower, and a little nervous.

"Don't be foolish. I think I ought to be going. Mother asked me to be back in good time."

"You'll stay and have tea."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. You will come on Thursday?"

"Yes, I will come."

And Miss Wilks rose to go.

Jess did not attempt to hinder her. She walked back with Edith Wilks to Moor Farm, but left her to cross the paddock alone. Nor was she much troubled when Billy, the one-eyed gander, took it into his head to conceive a sudden furious prejudice against Miss Wilks, and led his wives in an obscene and abusive concourse at her heels. Billy made one or two jabs at Miss Wilks's legs, straightening his neck and flapping his wings. The girl had no sunshade to hit him

with, and her retreat towards the white gate was somewhat flurried.

Jess stood at the corner of the holly hedge, and, though her eyes glimmered, they were not empty of anger.

"Good old Billy! You've set the sticks going!"

Now "Sticks" was the name by which Miss Wilks had been known at Miss Plimley's academy. Trust young girls for a certain devilish quickness in tagging a nickname to something or somebody that they do not love.

Jess Mascall went into tea, throwing "Ivanhoe" into a chair. The long low room was full of pleasant shadows, and of the warm smell of summer. Mary Mascall had had the gate-leg table set by the open window. She sat there, placidly busy, a handsome presence that radiated cheerfulness and energy. Mary Mascall made her farming pay. The men worked for her as they would have worked for few masters.

"Where's Edith, dear?"

Jess had a serious face.

"She wouldn't stay. And Billy did not want her."

"Billy?"

"You see, her legs annoyed him. Billy's a dear."

Mother and daughter smiled at each other. But Jess was still serious. Her eyes fixed the sugar bowl, and studied it with dark gravity.

"What kind of a man is Mr. Wilks, Mother?"

"Zachary Wilks, my dear? A mean little man, so I have always heard. Most of the Navestock folks have their faults that way. They are bad farmers down yonder, so far as property is concerned."

"How?"

"If you don't put good food into your beasts, rich stuff into your ground, your farming's mere foolery. All the world knows that. And yet here are these Navestock gentry dragging all they can out in rent, and putting nothing back so long as they can help it. House property's like any other kind of property. It isn't all take and no give. But it's been like that in Navestock for these fifty years."

"But it's a shame, isn't it?"

"Landlords are queer folk, my dear. There are not many like Lord Blackwater, and it's a pity the Brandons and the Turrells and the Wilkses don't learn of him. Why, even old Josh Crabbe, the atheist, knows better than to let his places rot, just for the sake of a few years' greed. I wouldn't be under a Navestock landlord, not I. Lord Blackwater's a man and a gentleman. He does not want his people to live like pigs."

Jess stirred her tea, and watched the bubbles that went round and round. She

understood suddenly that a man of John Wolfe's build might make himself hated in such a town as Navestock. Jess had all the woman's quickness in leaping at conclusions. It was the opening for her of that most fascinating of books, the book of "Things as they are."

# *CHAPTER TWELVE*

WOLFE walked into Dr. Threadgold's study, and stood with one hand gripping the edge of the door.

"I wish you would come and look at this preparation under the microscope, sir."

A figure that was lolling in an arm-chair, uncrossed its legs, and sat up with a great rustling of paper. Threadgold had been dozing with the daily paper over his head.

"What, Mr. Wolfe, what?"

"I have something under the microscope that I should like you to see."

They went into the surgery where Wolfe had the microscope arranged on a deal table by the window. Threadgold cocked up his coat-tails and sat down, curling his legs round the stool. He took off his spectacles, put his left eye to the eyepiece, closing his right eye with something of the look of a raw recruit squinting for a sight along the barrel of his rifle.

There was silence for a while, Wolfe watching the little man at the table, and noticing the lines of fat above his collar, and the way his thin hair was raked carefully across the crown. He felt a kind of pity for Threadgold, and it was this same pity that was prompting him to open the man's eyes, and to insist upon his realising what might happen in Navestock.

"A great deal of movement down here, Mr. Wolfe."

"Yes, plenty of life."

"Pond-water?"

"No, well-water."

"Dear me, indeed!"

"From Paradise Place."

"Ah!"

"That was a case of diphtheria that I was called in to see this morning."

Threadgold straightened himself on the stool, pulled out a silk handkerchief, and began to polish his spectacles. Both men were conscious of a feeling of tension, but Wolfe was the first to speak.

“I am glad of this opportunity to mention a matter that has long been on my mind. I have not spoken of it before, because I wanted to make sure of my facts.”

Threadgold still had his back to Wolfe. He was putting on his spectacles, and Wolfe saw his ears redden very perceptibly.

“Well, Mr. Wolfe, what is it?”

“With regard to the sanitary condition of the town. I happened to be interested in this class of work before I came here. Navestock is rotten.”

Threadgold left the stool, but stood staring out of the window. Wolfe closed the line of retreat towards the door. Moreover, some overmastering moral force held the elder man like a child in a corner. His first impulse had been to bluster himself free of the interview, and refuse to have the incubus of this terrible young man’s thoroughness thrust upon his shoulders.

“Indeed, sir! That is rather a bold statement.”

“It is a serious one.”

“Do you realise that you have not been very long in the town?”

“Six months. I should like to show you the result of my researches.”

Threadgold fidgeted with his hands in his trouser pockets. An acute self-consciousness held him by the throat. He could not bring himself to turn and meet Wolfe’s eyes.

“You need not be in such a hurry, sir. I do not know that I asked you to include sanitary inspection among your duties.”

“I am sorry, but it became the logical consequence.”

“You mean——?”

“One was driven to look for causes when one had seen the effects.”

“I do not see how you could be driven, Mr. Wolfe. An assistant never bears the full responsibility.”

“I feel that I am responsible—even in your interests.”

Threadgold tossed his coat-tails with absurd yet pathetic petulance. He looked like an agitated bird.

“Very well, Mr. Wolfe, very well. I will look over all this material of yours. But I may as well tell you that young men fresh from academic work do not understand the realities of general practice. We have a different stock here, and different conditions, and these conditions have prevailed for centuries. Theorists are very dangerous people. They are apt to think that the game of life can be played like a game of chess.”

Wolfe smoothed his chin, and stared hard at the back of Threadgold’s head.

“I wonder what the rate of mortality has been here during the last hundred

years."

"I cannot tell you. We have no figures."

"Have you ever had cholera in Navestock, sir?"

"No, we have not."

"Or typhoid fever?"

"No."

"Well, God grant that neither of them should ever come."

A wasp might have stung the elder man upon one of the pink creases at the back of his neck. He turned sharply, breathing hard, his fists doubled up in his pockets. Wolfe had touched him to the fighting point. Timid, sententious, a shirker of awkward corners, he was lifted at last into an outburst of stuttering anger against this man whose abominable sincerity refused to take account of the delicately adjusted hypocrisies of life.

"Mr. Wolfe, has it occurred to you that all this is grossly insulting to me?"

Wolfe looked very grave.

"I thought, sir, that you might be glad of the facts."

"Indeed!"

"I am perfectly ready to accept all the responsibility."

Threadgold's face expressed bewildered disgust.

"Absurd, preposterous! You don't grasp my position—my position, the conditions that prevail in Navestock. It is possible——"

He stopped, took off his glasses, and wiped them with much agitation.

"You mean, Dr. Threadgold, that the local conditions are too strong for us?"

"Please do not put your words into my mouth. I have been responsible for the health of this town for twenty years. And then you, a young man, come, and work in a sly and secretive sort of way, and insinuate that I have done less than I should have done. I can't follow your line of feeling, sir, or understand your idea of loyalty."

Wolfe stood his ground.

"I am sorry. Certain facts forced themselves upon my notice. Perhaps they were more obvious to a man fresh from a course of public health. These observations of mine—such as they are—are yours. Take them, criticise them, use them as you please."

Threadgold stared like a man who has caught a sudden glimpse of a mad bull charging at him down a narrow passage.

"Do I understand you to say——?"

"I will place my notes and papers in your hands. The material is yours, since I am paid for my time here. I have no desire to usurp any of your authority."

Threadgold would like to have thrust the responsibility from him with gestures of violent dismay. He faltered, clutched at the thought that it would be best to temporise, to get these papers into his hands, and examine them. Weak men have a fatal affection for vague promises and careful circumlocutions. They are afraid to speak out, afraid even to be completely, decently, and damnably selfish.

"Very good, Mr. Wolfe, very good. Let me have these papers."

"You shall have them at once."

And in half an hour they were locked up in Dr. Threadgold's desk.

Few people can keep to the truth when describing a battle they have fought, some fracas of words in which they have been worsted. Those deadly sarcasms that so often arrive too late upon the field of action, are too brilliant to be ignored, and are dragged cunningly into the tale. A weak and pompous man must lie with emphasis when he is explaining a squabble to his wife. He has his domestic dignity to consider, and words—like a sword—are easy things to flourish when no one is there to cut in with a contradiction. "He won't forget that in a hurry, eh! I had him there. Much too sharp for the beast. I said so and so, and so and so, and so and so. Yes—I did. You should have seen him squirm. A few home truths, my dear. Nothing like letting a man know that he is a cad!" But the curious part of it is that both the combatants go home and crow in the same strain. However bloody one comb may be, the other cock's comb is sure to be bloodier.

About three in the afternoon Dr. Montague Threadgold took a glass of port, shook his feathers, and fell into meditation like an old barn-door rooster who has been dusted round the rickyard by some fierce and lanky game-cock. The experience had been humiliating, and the little man saw further humiliations before him unless he could strike an attitude that would be convincing. A second glass of wine helped him to think better of his own dignity. By tea-time he was able to stand sententiously upon the hearthrug and give Mrs. Sophia an account of the affair.

"My dear, I was compelled to have a talk with Mr. Wolfe after dinner to-day. I don't think he fully realised his position till this afternoon."

Mrs. Threadgold's face was non-committal. She read the level of her husband's sententiousness as she read the barometer in the hall.

"I am glad to hear it."

"I detest scenes, my dear, but a scene was absolutely necessary. I had to pitch into the young man, to show him that I could not and would not stand any nonsense. Wolfe appears to be one of those self-assured fellows, utterly lacking in sentiment, and devoid of the more delicate instincts of a gentleman."

The largeness of the declamation was excellent. Mrs. Sophia's hand hovered

over the sugar basin.

"You told him about that map?"

"My dear—the result of our interview was that Mr. Wolfe offered to surrender all his notes and plans to me."

"Yes, Montague, but have you got them?"

"I have. They are locked up in my desk."

He threw out the lower part of his white waistcoat, and stood with pursed lips, spectacles glimmering, a little bladder of a man inflated with words. Threadgold and his wife had fitted themselves into the trivial scheme of mere physical appearances. The little etiquettes and diplomacies of a carefully planned professional career had become for them the whole Book of the Law. Their whole consciousness was posted round with notice boards on which were inscribed "Good Form," "Gentility," "Niceness," "Tact." They asked themselves by a natural impulse, "Will this please So-and-so? Will So-and-so be offended? If I do this or that, will it be profitable and in proper taste?"

Mrs. Threadgold handed her husband his tea.

"Now that you have got these papers, Montague, the matter is easily settled."

"I am going to look them over."

"All you have to do is to burn them."

"My dear, one moment——"

"I said burn them. And send Mr. Wolfe about his business without further delay."

Dr. Threadgold's face fell very perceptibly. He had assumed a lofty and autocratic pose, and, like many a boaster before him, he found that he had created new complexities and terrors. He had given his wife to understand that he had humbled Wolfe and torn these papers from him as a victor seizes the arms of the man he has vanquished. The wine had a very different flavour, and Threadgold knew it. It was Wolfe who had been the moral victor. He had fastened the bonds of a responsibility upon the older man's wrists.

Burn these papers!

He found that he was desperately, nay, ludicrously, afraid of Wolfe, and that the younger man had cowed him into an eager desire for dissimulation.

"My dear Sophia, I must make an examination of these papers first. I must say that I am not altogether satisfied in my mind about the sanitary condition of the town."

Mrs. Threadgold knew these wobbling moods.

"That's as it may be. My advice to you, Montague, is—burn these papers, pay the man a month's salary, and pack him out of the town."

“My dear, one moment——”

“Act at once.”

“My dear, there are some things that you do not quite understand.”

“I understand them a little too well. Fancy a man of your age letting himself be tyrannised over by his assistant.”

# *CHAPTER THIRTEEN*

JASPER TURRELL and his son were walking their horses up the road that led through Herongate Gap on the eastern slopes of Tarling Moor. They had ridden over to look at the old "Full Moon" Inn at Staggscross, a rambling ruin of a place whose chimney-stacks sloped this way and that, and whose gables had sunk forward like the bowed heads of old men. The "Full Moon" was for sale, and since it was a free house, and yet had always filled its cellars from Hambleton's Brewery at Wannington, Jasper Turrell had a mind to make it his own. He owned nearly all the inns and public-houses in Navestock and the neighbourhood. They were tied to his brewery. He was always on the alert to seize on new ground, enlarge his horizon, and keep out possible competitors.

Turrell had chosen for his ride one of those clear, blue days before rain, a day that drew out of Tarling Moor all the subtle and rare colours that lurked in the wild hills. No man who was not wholly taken up with the game of profit and loss could have failed to feel the mystery of this interplay of tones and shades, of sunlight and of shadow over rich purples, greens, and golds. One rode high on the top of the world, where the wind blew and the larks sang, and the stonechats played in the furze. Far horizons lured the heart on towards dreams. The great hills seemed to breathe with rhythmical, languorous movements as though inhaling the clean, fresh air.

The Turrells were not sentimental people. They had been talking of the "Full Moon" at Staggscross, but fell across another topic as they walked their horses up the long slope to Herongate Gap. Young Turrell had a peculiar way of sitting a horse. He slouched in the saddle, drooping his heavy shoulders, and thrusting his head forward like a rower who leans forward over an oar. His lower jaw protruded, giving him a dogged and quarrelsome expression, and his flat, round face looked hard as an oak post.

Jasper Turrell was screwing up his eyes, a trick of his when he was pleased with his own cleverness.

"Sure enough, Tor, I'll get this chap kicked out of Navestock. I can see further than most men. Cubs of this kind can cause one a lot of trouble."

Hector Turrell had a certain cynical shrewdness. But a young man who feels that he can thrash any man within twenty miles of his own home, is apt to be casual and over-confident.

"I'm blessed if I can see how the chap can bother us."

"You can't, eh? Well, it's like this. The country is getting into the hands of a lot of confounded pettifoggers who can't let well alone. Some of these fools would like to legislate us to death. I have seen it coming for a long time. They are agitating for all sorts of high-handed powers, and, confound it, I don't know that they won't get them."

"But what has that to do with a bottle-washer like this chap Wolfe?"

Jasper Turrell sucked in his lips.

"If you have got a lot of rabid fools, cranks, enthusiasts, and what not, on the watch for something to meddle with, any jackass can bray them into action."

"But they can't touch us. Property is property."

"I am not crabbing my own property, Tor. It's in good enough condition for most men. But I'm damned if I'm going to have any interference in the management of what's my own, and if a man chooses to put my back up, so much the worse for him."

Hector Turrell stared straight ahead with his opaque, steel-blue eyes. These two men were on excellent terms with one another, having the same love of absolutism, the same contempt for all those who receive orders. A feeling of *camaraderie* existed between them, and a kind of crude, coarse affection that resembled the love of two swashbucklers who had drunk and fed and fought in company. Turrell admired the brute strength, and the arrogant, thrusting confidence of his son. As for the younger man, he knew his father to be a shrewd old dog whom few people cared to snap at.

"Well, Dad, about this chap Wolfe?"

"He's been damned impertinent; he has put my back up."

"Turn him over to me."

"That's good."

"I'll give him something to think about."

Jasper chuckled a dry, hard sound like beans rattling in a box.

"No need for that, Tor. He is going to vanish out of Navestock."

"How?"

"Wilks and Crump and several more are with me. We are going to old Threadgold and say quite simply, 'Look here, this chap of yours smells. We don't like him. Get another.'"

"And Threadgold will do it?"

"Do it? Like a shot. There isn't a flabbier fool in Navestock."

The Turrells "talked of the devil" that afternoon, for half a mile beyond the point where the road branches to Flemyng's Cross, they overtook a man who was picking a stone out of his horse's shoe. Wolfe was on the near side, and he glanced up as the Turrells rode by, in time to catch a significant exchange of smiles. The elder man said something when they had trotted on about ten yards, and young Turrell burst into a loud laugh.

"A good shining pair of breeches, ha—ha! If I had had a gig whip——" and the voice lost itself in the noise of their horses' hoofs.

Wolfe finished his job, let go of his horse's foot, and standing up, looked broodingly at the two trotting figures that were disappearing beyond a rise in the ground. A man who happened to make himself unpopular in Navestock was not suffered to remain in ignorance of his state. Wolfe had begun to walk up against this unpopularity of his on most days of the week, and a man must be very cold-blooded and stubborn not to be discouraged by meeting a succession of sour and suspicious faces. The poorer people liked him well enough; many of them were grateful, and that was his one compensation. But he had made enemies, enemies who were ready to talk him out of the town. Wolfe had found himself treated with insolence. He had been shut out of certain houses. Worthy bourgeois folk refused to see him in the street. Gossip had branded him as a dangerous and aggressive young man whose head was far too large for his hat.

Moreover, the life at Prospect House had become utterly detestable. He sat down daily at a table where two people maintained a sullen and mistrustful reserve, or talked in that constrained and jerky way that betrays to a third person how sincerely he is detested. Mrs. Sophia no longer attempted to be civil to Wolfe. If he spoke to her, it was more than likely that she would not hear. His cup came to him with a perfunctory thrust of the hand. Sometimes he would catch Mrs. Threadgold eyeing him with a dislike that did not trouble to conceal its sincerity. Threadgold was pompous, constrained, and jumpy. He rarely looked at Wolfe, and when he did, it was with an uneasy sidelong glance that was far more repellent than his wife's blank and contemptuous stare.

Loneliness, too, had begun to weigh upon him, for Wolfe had a nature that loved to live face to face with the world. There was not a person in Navestock to whom he could speak frankly and without constraint. He fancied that Robert Flemming was shy of him and avoided him in the street. All the propertied folk in Navestock seemed to hang together like beads on a string. There were a few dissenters and the

like, who seemed willing to accept Wolfe as a sane man. But they were cautious—a little reserved—shrewd people who could not wholly forget their pockets. As for Josiah Crabbe, that grim old man who lived like a hermit in his stone house below Peachy Hill, Wolfe had never so much as seen him. The only warm grip of the hand that he had received had come from the Rev. Peter Rowbotham, the Methodist minister, a short, shiny, bumpy-faced little man with bandy legs and a huge voice.

It was not to be wondered at that Wolfe had days of depression and of disgust, days when he asked himself why he loitered on in this corrupt old town, gaining bitter experience and ten pounds a month. Navestock would have none of him. The fighting spirit was well enough in its way, but what was the use of playing the free-lance against such absurd odds? He was wasting his time here, battering at closed doors.

Wolfe mounted his horse again, and, following the Turrells over Tarling Moor, saw the Moor Farm cypresses against the blue. Quarrel with his present position as he might, the very impulse that seized him was a tug at the roots of his stronger manhood. Wolfe's eyes were fixed upon the red house lying down yonder in the sunlight. He was drawn instinctively towards it, a lonely man who had often drunk comfort and courage there. For him the place was full of scents and pictures. Red roofs and thatched roofs, great holly hedges glimmering in the sunlight, orchard trees in bloom, wild purple-mouthed moorland, shimmering hay, the radiant and half-rebellious candour of a girl who was half a child. The thought of Jess had kept him often from too much bitterness. She was the cleanest thing that had come into his life.

Moor Farm lay close on his left, and Wolfe turned in at the white gate, letting it swing to behind his horse with a clang of the iron catch. The house and buildings looked sleepy and deserted, though down in the big pond the geese were paddling to and fro. Wolfe rode across the paddock, and round the corner of the holly hedge to the front of the house. He hung his bridle over the gate-post, and walked up the stone path with a sudden cloud of sadness overshadowing him. The grass growing between the stones had been browned by the sun. A slight breeze swayed the tops of the cypresses, and under the eaves of the house and upon the mellow roof tiles sparrows chirped and fluttered.

No one appeared when Wolfe rang the bell. The door stood open, and he could see a broad band of sunlight cutting across the stone flagged floor of the hall. Bees worked the flowers in the borders under the windows, humming by the score about the burning steeples of a group of hollyhocks. Moor Farm house itself seemed sleepy and very still.

Wolfe rang again, and then stepped back from the porch. The smell of

honeysuckle in flower seemed to intensify the feeling of loneliness that had made him turn aside from the high-road. No one was at home, and Wolfe's disappointment was wholly out of proportion to the cause. He walked back slowly down the stone path and had his hand on the gate when he heard Jess's voice in the paddock.

"Let him go, Bob, let him go."

"I wouldn't be for riding him, Miss Jess, I wouldn't, now! Woa, Turpin, coom down!"

"Let him go, Bob. Do as I tell you."

Wolfe passed out by the gate and along the holly hedge to the corner where an old yew threw a dense shadow. Half hidden by the hedge he had a view of the paddock with its scattered chestnut trees and its white and winding road. Fifty yards away stood a black colt, head up, bridle dangling, fore hoofs planted wide apart. Bob's brown smocked figure was moving aside, and in front of the colt and about three yards from him stood Jess in a green skirt and red "Garibaldi."

"I wouldn't touch him, Miss Jess, he be nasty. He tried to bite me when I was a-saddling of 'im."

"Shut up, Bob. You don't know how to handle him, that's all."

Jess moved very slowly towards the colt. She raised a hand, but the colt threw his muzzle up and edged back some paces. Jess followed him, holding out a hand, and speaking in a low and soothing voice. For fully a minute both girl and horse stood absolutely still, eyeing each other cautiously. Then Jess's hand went up to the colt's black nose.

"Poor old Turpin, then, poor old fellow."

This time he did not flinch or throw his head up, but let her stroke his nose. One hand crept gently towards the bridle. She moved slowly to one side, still stroking the colt's nose. He began to shiver and fidget a little, but did not break away from the soft voice and the subtle hand.

Wolfe glanced back momentarily at his own nag, and when he looked again Jess was in the saddle and the colt standing still and looking puzzled. In a flash he kicked out, swerved, and then went away at a gallop, heading straight for the lower end of the paddock where the geese were swimming in the pond. Wolfe felt fear leap up into his mouth. He started forward, and then stood absolutely still under the shade of the yew.

Jess turned the colt within ten yards of the pond. He swept aside along the line of the hedge, and came up again towards the buildings. The girl was getting him in hand. Wolfe held his breath. She looked superb as the horse came swinging over the sun-scorched grass, her hair blowing from her shoulders, her head thrown slightly

back. She saw Wolfe and waved to him. Turpin went galloping by within ten paces of the yew, and the curves of the girl's throat and chin were happy and exultant.

Jess took the colt three times round the paddock before she reined in close to young Bob, who had been turning slowly on his heels like a wooden figure on a pivot. Wolfe left the shade of the yew tree and walked across the grass. Jess was out of the saddle, patting and fondling the colt who appeared to have surrendered to her magic. Young Bob's face was the shiny white face of a boy who had been badly scared.

"My Lord, Miss Jess, you shouldn't 'a' done it."

She laughed, kissed the colt's nose, and told Bob to take the bridle.

"There's no real temper in him. He just felt strange."

Jess turned to meet Wolfe.

"I didn't know you were here."

The expression of his eyes startled her. They were almost stern, and there were no smiling lines about his mouth.

"You gave me a most confounded fright."

"Did I? Turpin has been broken. It was my first ride on him—that's all."

"You oughtn't to do it. You are all pluck and spirit, but then——"

She looked at Wolfe with wide, dark eyes, very grave of a sudden, and a little puzzled. His voice had a vehemence in it that she had never heard before. It seemed to make the air quiver.

"Why, I believe you are ready to scold me! I'm never afraid of a horse, and that's everything. One never ought to be afraid."

Wolfe looked at her with a kind of pride.

"I have just come from the house. I thought no one was at home."

"Mother's at Wannington, and I suppose Sally was feeding the calves. Bob and I were in the stable. It's just tea-time."

"I am afraid that I must be getting back."

Her eyes showed surprise.

"Oh, no. Stay and have tea. We will have it in the orchard."

Wolfe looked at her and was silent a moment.

"I should dearly like to."

"Why shouldn't one do what one likes—sometimes? I'm sure old Threadgold gives you enough work. And it is early yet."

"Very well, I'll stay."

A man's career may depend at times upon a single impulse that shines out like a distant light in a window when the world is in darkness. Wolfe found himself sitting in

a wicker chair under an apple tree, and watching the white clouds moving across the gaps in the orchard foliage. The short grass was covered with shadow patterns, and the boughs and the trunks of the trees ran into all manner of queer shapes. Away in a far corner blackbirds were chuckling thievishly in the foliage of a yellow "sumerling." Blue-tits flittered from tree to tree, and sometimes a great bumble bee went burring by.

On the other side of the rough wooden table sat Jess, her hands in her lap, her eyes fixed on Wolfe's face. Tea was over, and they had been talking, much longer, too, than either of them imagined. Jess's face had assumed a grave and mysterious maturity. She was no longer the rough-riding girl. Her head was poised intently above the white lines of her slim throat.

"It must be hateful for you down there."

Wolfe stared at a patch of blue sky. This gaunt, strong, and rather silent man had found himself pouring out his loneliness into Jess's lap.

"Yes, in a way."

"But it will get better—when you have been there longer."

"I am wondering whether it is worth it."

"What?"

"Staying on in Navestock. Most of the people want to get rid of me. I am a nuisance. Perhaps you would not understand why."

She watched him with grave, reflective eyes.

"I think I might."

"There are things in Navestock that ought not to be there."

"Yes, Mother told me. And you have been trying to get them altered."

"A man in my position cannot do much."

"And yet——"

"He does not like running away."

"You—couldn't run away."

Wolfe's eyes left a patch of blue sky for her face. He sat up sharply, his hands on his knees.

"Say that again, Jess."

A slight tremor flitted across her mouth.

"I did not mean——"

"No; but you said it; that's good. You don't know what it is for a man who has been snubbed to death to have a little courage poured into him."

They sat and looked at each other in silence. Wolfe's eyes were shining like the eyes of a man who has just taken the Sacrament before some great enterprise. Jess's

face had gathered a white light under the shade of the tree. She leant forward, lips parted, eyes questioning.

"Do you mean—they want to turn you out of Navestock?"

"I have no doubt about it."

"Because you have discovered things?"

"Because I have tried to tell some people the truth."

She remained in thought a moment, and then her face blazed up.

"How mean and cowardly! But you won't let them?"

"Let them do what?"

"Drive you out."

He sat back, looking at her with proud intentness.

"Have you ever thought, Jess, how people live?"

"You mean—money?"

"Yes, just that—money."

She drooped a moment.

"I know I am ignorant—and all that."

"I would not ask you to be anything but what you are. If we could only keep our courage and our sincerity! If I can see my way!"

She broke in suddenly.

"Don't go. Don't let them drive you out."

"Well?"

"Think—how splendid! You could do it—I know you could."

His eyes lit up and flashed to the youth and the valour in her.

"By George—yes."

"You could do it. Besides, I should not like to see you beaten."

One of those flashes of intuition came to Jess and made her look at a child's enthusiasm with the eyes of a woman. Wolfe saw colour climb into her throat and face. She was confused for the moment, vividly self-conscious, dowered suddenly with the sensitiveness of sex.

"You see, I believe——"

Wolfe got up abruptly. A strange feeling of exultant and chivalrous guilt swept through him. He felt that he must rush at something, swing his fists, hit out, and shout like a man heading a charge of horse. Yet, above all, he was possessed by the thought that he must get away from the place; that he had no right there, that Jess should be alone.

"Good heavens—the time! Don't come, Jess, I'll get my horse."

A queer, inarticulate confusion held her.

“No, stay there. You know I’ve been——You have done me all the good in the world.”

He glanced down at her as though he would have liked to take one of those slim, brown hands of hers and kiss it.

“Good-bye.”

And he went away hurriedly between the trees.

Jess sat for a moment, with her elbows on the table, and her chin in her hands, bewildered. What had happened to them both? Why had John Wolfe gone off in that strange and abrupt way? She lay back in her chair and stared into the distance, her hands smoothing the bosom of her dress.

# *CHAPTER FOURTEEN*

MR. JOSIAH CRABBE was considered to be the most eccentric man in Navestock. In his early days he had been christened "The Atheist," largely because of his violent sincerity and his half-savage way of throwing his sarcasms into the faces of his neighbours. Nor can it be denied that the title had taken Josiah Crabbe's fancy. The early "forties" had been godly, long-faced, money-getting days in Navestock, and the maltster's son had had a bitter upbringing. He was one of those men who had been born with a strong hatred of all humbug and make-believe, and he had learned to hate early and to hate well. As for the name of "Atheist," he had accepted it with a subtle and sneering satisfaction, flaunted it, so to speak, with cynical arrogance, and even used it as a cap of darkness for the baffling and enraging of his enemies.

Josiah Crabbe had set himself to treble the money that had come to him from his sleek humbug of a father, and he had done it in the face of malice, fear, and all manner of interference. People had tried to keep the grim little man under, to snarl him out of countenance, to crowd him into a corner. He had provoked and courted antagonism. People had struck at him, and he had bided his time and then struck back, and with such ferocious ugliness that men had learned to leave him alone. He was cynical, shrewd, utterly fearless, scrupulously fair when he was treated with honour.

This house of his at the foot of Peachy Hill was the counterpart of its owner, a square, long-headed, grey-stone house that turned a contemptuous back to Navestock town. A high stone wall set with glass shut it in with its out-buildings and garden. The only entrance was by iron-barred gates backed with sheet iron so that no one could look through. Very few people went in and out, nor was there a glimpse to be had of the garden.

Josiah Crabbe himself was part of the picture, a little, lean, skull-faced man, with black eyes that gleamed and twinkled in a dead-white face. He looked as dry and as tough as a piece of leather, and his teeth were as perfect as the teeth of a boy. Scrupulously neat and clean, he dressed always in black, and in a style that was

some twenty years out of date. The plumpest parts of him were his hands. They were white, deft, and almost generous, with nothing suggestive of the claws of a bird.

For an hour every morning Josiah Crabbe would walk steadily round the gravel paths of his garden. If it rained he walked there just the same, carrying an umbrella, his legs cased in black cloth gaiters. His garden was almost as individualistic as himself, and into it he had projected his hatreds and his prejudices. There was one large lawn spread like a huge green-silk handkerchief in front of the house, creaseless, without a worm cast or a weed. Two big circular beds were cut in the lawn, but their decorative scheme did not admit of flowers. They were planted with green wine bottles sunk bottom upwards in the soil, and starred in between with little round blue-and-red tiles. When the sun shone the bottles glinted, and after rain Jabez, the gardener's boy, was set to clean and polish them with a rag.

At the end of the lawn was a yew hedge clipped square, while the head of each individual tree had been cut into the shape of a green ball. There were two square openings in the hedge through which the gravel paths passed into the fruit-and-vegetable garden. Here each square plot was shut in by a brick wall about two feet high. The vegetables were ranged inside like soldiers on a parade ground, rank on rank, squadron by squadron. The fruit trees were all espaliers trained against the main stone walls, and in one long border were grown the flowers and herbs that Josiah Crabbe approved of. They were mostly sinister and rather ogreish plants, tiger lilies, aconites, Solomon's seal—whose shoots strike through the soil like heads of snakes—torch lilies, snapdragons, and pansies. Crabbe liked pansies because they scowled. He had a fanatical dislike for roses. "Flowers for fools" he called them. As for weeds, it would have been difficult to find one in the whole garden.

One morning in August old Crabbe came out for his usual morning walk. He would toddle a few steps, and then stop to scan the grass or the paths. Sometimes he took snuff, using a little gold snuff-box with an emerald set in the lid. His chief desire appeared to be the discovery of a daisy root in the lawn, or some tiny green needle of grass thrusting itself out of the gravel of the path.

It so happened that he found a daisy root that morning, and the silver whistle that he carried in his waistcoat pocket sounded the alarm.

"Jabez, hallo, Jabez!"

A boy with bow legs, a broad, hollow chest, powerful brown arms, and a big black-stubbled head, came through one of the openings in the yew hedge. He looked sulky and very strong.

"Sir?"

Josiah Crabbe pointed a forefinger.

"What's that, eh? That's the second this week."

The boy pulled out a garden knife, went down on his knees, and prepared to extirpate the weed.

"No grass, mind, not a single blade of it."

"Yes, sir."

"Where's Adam?"

"Picking beans, sir."

"Humph."

Josiah Crabbe moved on. At the end of one of the walks a man with a back as broad as a door was bending between two rows of dwarf French beans. He had a great blue patch on his brown trousers. His forearms were the colour of copper, and so was his neck, that was criss-crossed with a multitude of wrinkles. Wiry grey hair stood out aggressively under the brim of a haymaker's hat.

"Morning, Adam."

"Morning, sir."

Adam Grinch was Josiah Crabbe's one friend. They were keen, laconic, hard-faced men, the one a Freethinker, the other a rigid Calvinist. How they contrived to suffer each other no one had been able to explain. Grinch had been with Josiah Crabbe for thirty years. They never agreed. They were never polite. And yet they suited each other like the two grinders of a mill.

"Any news, Adam?"

"Nothing of value, sir."

Grinch appeared to speak between his spread legs as he stooped. He did not stop gathering beans.

"Anyone grumbling?"

"Not as I've heard."

"People sick?"

"Not up our way. Heard there's that there diphthery down in the town."

Josiah Crabbe seemed pleased.

"That's good. Let the fools catch it. Make them yell some day. How's Turrell, have ye heard?"

"Been talking to some of his tenants about Threadgold's man."

"Threatening 'em, of course. That's Turrell! I want him to threaten me, Adam, but damn him, he won't do it. We'll see, we'll see."

Josiah Crabbe took snuff, with an air of elaborate enjoyment.

"Stubborn sort of young man—this Wolfe."

"Stiff as glue, sir."

"They want to get rid of him. Don't I know them?"

"He's a straight man, sir, saved or damned."

"Hum. Seen him, Adam?"

"Often."

"Eh?"

"Big lean man. Looks as though he could hit hard. Looks you straight in the face. Don't do much talking."

"They'll kick him out, Adam, they'll kick him out."

"I've heard Threadgold's afraid of him. He's learned a powerful lot about Navestock, so they say."

"What about Peachy Hill, Adam?"

"Never see the gentleman up our way much. Reckon he leaves well alone. It's down by the river."

Josiah Crabbe took more snuff.

"A dirty town this, Adam."

"Full o' sin, sir."

"Dirt."

"Dirt's a sin."

"Wants someone with a broom and a bucket. This man Wolfe! Make a confounded rumpus, turn the place upside down. Drive Turrell and the rest of 'em mad. Humph."

"They won't let him, sir. Be sure of that."

"Hum—they! They won't let him. That strikes me as queer, Adam, very queer."

He toddled up and down, chuckling to himself in a grim, dry way. Then he stopped, and turned to stare at the patch in Adam's trousers.

"Keep your ears open, Adam."

"What for, sir?"

"About this man Wolfe."

"Very well, sir."

"I may want to have a word with him. He's the kind of man who might doctor me."

Grinch looked round over one shoulder.

"Not feeling ill, sir?"

"Ill? You're an ass, Grinch. I never felt better in my life."

# *CHAPTER FIFTEEN*

IT happened that week that Dr. Threadgold received a number of personal calls from various influential men in Navestock. They did not come to consult him about their health, nor did they confess that they were perturbed about their pockets. They came one at a time and at intervals of a day or so, to sit in Dr. Threadgold's capacious leather chair, and lodge complaints, each after his fashion.

Old Hubbard, grocer and haberdasher, was the first, with his head like a big white bladder of lard. He was nervous and a little apologetic, and perspired excuses and explanations, and commented on the heat.

"You must reely excuse me, Dr. Threadgold, sir, but I reely can't put up with it any longer. Here's this young man of yours making my tenants grumble, sir, and setting people talking. Of course if you, sir, like to suggest any alterations in those cottages of mine, sir, that's a very different matter. I should be proud, sir, and obliged. But this inquisitive, masterful young man, sir; I reely can't put up with it."

Two more tradesmen followed Mr. Hubbard—Butler, the butcher, whose slaughter-house was an abomination; and Harrington, the dairyman, who kept four cows in a dirty stable at the back of his house in Bridge Street.

"Come down yourself, sir, and look over my place. Why, it was clean white-washed all through last month. I'm not going to have this chap of yours sniffing round my premises. He ain't got the ways and manners of a gentleman."

Later in the week Mr. Zachary Wilks strolled in and treated Threadgold to a quarter of an hour's thin cynicism. Wilks was a little, acid man, who had a knack of setting people's teeth on edge.

"My dear Threadgold, I thought I should like to ask you whether you hold yourself responsible for all the ingenious inquisitiveness of this assistant of yours. Really, a most pushing and enthusiastic young man. Expect to find him in my scullery any day. Of course, if he has your instructions I have nothing more to say. But I don't like it. I don't pretend to like it. It will spoil our good feeling, you know. One does not like to quarrel with a man who has brought all one's youngsters into the world."

Jasper Turrell followed these lesser men, reserving his thunder until the last.

"Look here, Threadgold, we have known each other a good many years; what do you mean by inflicting us with a meddlesome cub like this chap Wolfe? I don't take it kindly. What's more, I'm not going to stand it. If you can't show your old friends and patients a little more consideration, confound it—we shall go elsewhere for our physic."

These successive attacks had worked Montague Threadgold into a state of intense irritability. He was furious with Wolfe, and with a weak man's fury that bubbles and chafes in the pot of its own cowardice. Turrell's bullying tone brought the little man to boiling-point.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Turrell, that this young man has caused me infinite irritation. There is no need for any gentleman in Navestock to dictate to me. I have tried patience and advice, but without result. Mr. Wolfe is going."

"Then you are a wise man, Threadgold. The fellow is doing you a great deal of harm."

"My dear sir, I know."

"He will smash up your practice if you keep him another six months."

The brewer left Threadgold in a state of simmering excitement. He rushed upstairs, hesitated, rushed down again, ascended once more, and burst into the drawing-room, where his wife sat reading at one of the windows.

"Sophia, I can stand this no longer. I'm not going to have Wolfe here another day."

"My dear Montague, don't get so excited about a mere jackanapes!"

"I hate and loathe the very sound of his name."

"Then do what I tell you; get rid of him at once."

"Exactly—quite so. And as to those papers of his——"

"What! You haven't burned them yet?"

"No."

"Bring them up here. I'll see that it is done."

And done it was, in the black Georgian grate of the Prospect House drawing-room. Mrs. Sophia herself removed the pile of white paper shavings, and the big yellow fan that served as a screen. Wolfe's statistics disappeared in smoke, and the map remained as so much fluttering ash.

John Wolfe had had a long morning, and had dropped in to eat a lonely meal in the Turkey-carpeted dining-room. He had a country round that afternoon, a round that took him through the meadow lands of Fallow Green and Grazely, where willows and poplars overhung the road, and brown-backed cattle browsed in the

sun. He turned in to cottage gardens that were fragrant with thyme, lavender, and sheaves of sweet peas. Sunflowers stared him in the face. Yellow light slanted upon brick paths, and threw the casement patterns on the brick floors within. He rode on to Hawks Farm and Pollard Corner, where harvesters were busy in the fields. Sickles flashed; hot, brown faces looked at him over hedges. Women and girls in sun-bonnets stood leaning on rakes and watching him go by. The stubbles were sheets of gold, and the piled sheaves like yellow flames.

There was the freshness of falling dew in the air when Wolfe rode back beside the windings of the Wraith, and saw on the distant hillside the dark shapes of the Moor Farm cypresses. He had seen Jess but once since that hour in the orchard, and she had been a little shy of him, yet with a frank shyness that was very alluring. She had smiled less, looked at him less intently, and spoken as though words had come to have a new and deeper meaning. There had been just a flash of pride for him in her eyes, something dearer than sympathy.

Wolfe had found her a name by which he could name her to himself. "The Maid of Honour," that was what he called Jess. He looked at her and thought of her as a man of the spear and sword thought of the one woman who was his "Lady." She spread courage and cleanness and strength about him. No mean thing could come out of his heart or mouth. "To the uttermost, and without fear," that had been her message.

As John Wolfe rode through Navestock he could not help being struck by the quaintness and beauty of the old town. The calm of a summer evening lay over it, and the threads of blue smoke from the chimneys disappeared in a golden haze. The red-brick became a deeper, richer red. Casements caught the sunset. Trees and chimneys stood out against the western sky. Here and there, down passageways and narrow streets, Wolfe caught a glimpse of the river, black under the shadows of black roofs and gables. For an instant the little town was transfigured like an unclean and crippled beggar carried suddenly into Paradise.

Wolfe had left his horse in the stable and was pulling off his gloves in the half-darkened surgery when he heard footsteps coming along the passage that led to the hall. The door opened, and a white cap appeared.

"Is that you, Mr. Wolfe?"

"Yes, Kate."

"Dr. Threadgold told me to tell you that he wanted to see you, sir, directly you came in."

"Yes. Where is he?"

"In the dining-room, sir."

"All right. And, Kate, get me a cup of tea. I haven't had anything since dinner."

"I will, sir. I'll put it in here for you."

Wolfe made his way towards the dining-room. The lamps had not yet been lit, and the dusk that filled the house roused in Wolfe a feeling of vague melancholy. Intuition told him as he put out his hand to open the door that he was nearing the end of his sojourn in Prospect House.

The room was full of the twilight, and as Wolfe entered he saw reflected in a large, gilt-edged mirror the dark masses of the mulberry trees and a little streak of yellow sky. Threadgold was standing at one of the open windows. His back was towards Wolfe, and he did not turn at once, but waited till Wolfe had shut the door.

"You sent for me, sir."

"Ah, is that you, Mr. Wolfe? Yes, I left word that I wanted to see you. I have something serious to discuss."

Threadgold spoke these words half out of the open window. He turned slowly, holding himself very erect, his hands behind his back—a little man standing upon his dignity.

"Sit down, Mr. Wolfe."

Wolfe sat sideways on one of the Chippendale chairs, one arm resting upon the back. There was a moment's silence before Threadgold began.

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Wolfe, that I must give you your dismissal. You haven't been a success in Navestock, sir, not a success. I regret it, but that is the truth."

Wolfe did not move.

"I cannot say that this comes as a surprise to me," he said. "I don't think that there is very much to be discussed."

"Mr. Wolfe, I agree with you. But I feel that I am bound to explain my reasons to you. In the first place, sir, you are absolutely lacking in tact—tact, Mr. Wolfe, tact. You have offended old patients of mine. You have caused me infinite annoyance. Enthusiasm untempered by discretion, sir, is a dangerous thing, a very dangerous thing."

"No doubt."

Wolfe's eyes were turned towards the window where the little, short, black figure did not come into his line of vision. He was thinking. But to Threadgold—a weak man—a silence was a thing to be feared.

"I have already written to an agency in London, Mr. Wolfe, desiring them to send me one of their tried men. I shall expect him within a week. Our obligations to each other cease when I hand you a month's salary in advance. I shall not quarrel about that. No doubt you will like to be looking about for a new berth."

There was the clinking of coins. The little black figure moved from the window, counted out ten sovereigns, and placed them in two piles upon the table. Wolfe did not move.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Wolfe. I felt that it was necessary to be frank with you."

"And I may take it, sir, that we no longer owe each other anything?"

"That is so."

"Then I must ask you to return me that map and those papers that I handed you the other day."

Threadgold stood stock-still a moment. Then he went back three steps, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, inflated his chest, and stared hard at the opposite wall.

"Those papers no longer exist, Mr. Wolfe."

"Indeed!"

"They dealt with matters that form part of my practice, and you obtained this material while you were in my employment."

"You mean to say, sir, that you have destroyed them?"

"I do. They have been burned."

Wolfe rose up. To Threadgold the tall figure seemed to grow and to elongate itself in the dusk. Into the silence that filled the room came the fluttering of a breeze in the mulberry trees across the way.

"Dr. Threadgold, you had no manner of right to burn those papers."

"Indeed, sir, indeed! And upon what grounds?"

"I will tell you."

Wolfe's voice was very quiet, but it was a voice that gave Threadgold the impression that it might break out at any moment into ringing and passionate anger.

"Those facts that I laid before you are things that cannot be disproved or denied. In burning my papers you have assumed the attitude of a man who wishes to suppress the truth."

"Sir!"

"In your own interests and in the interests——"

The little black figure jerked its arms, vehemently and with indignation.

"Mr. Wolfe, not another word. I——"

"Wait."

It was a word thrown sharply at a rebellious dog.

"You have burned those papers. Very well. That act absolves me from any sentimental consideration that might have weighed with me in this matter. I shall let

this be known. I shall take care to let the facts be known."

Threadgold bubbled like a round pot on the boil.

"Mr. Wolfe, sir, will you kindly leave this house? Take your money, and don't talk impertinent nonsense. You have no further business in this town, and I don't think any of us will be sorry to see your back."

"I have not yet left Navestock."

"Braggadocio and insolence, Mr. Wolfe!"

"There is a possibility that I may remain in Navestock. We need not discuss it. If you will excuse me, I will go and put my things together."

Wolfe picked up the money, and turned towards the door. He paused for a moment as though about to say something, but thought better of it, and left Dr. Threadgold alone in the darkening room.

In the surgery the girl had lit the lamp, and covered Wolfe's tea-cup with a saucer to keep it warm. A plate of bread and butter stood beside the cup. Wolfe made his last meal in Prospect House.

## *CHAPTER SIXTEEN*

THE hour was the hour after supper, and Jess had dragged two chairs out into the broad porch at Moor Farm. The night was warm and very still. A harvest moon, yellow and huge, floated in a cloudless sky, its light splintering upon the holly hedges, silvering the grass and the stones of the path, and making the two great cypresses as black as ebony.

"Come and sit out here, Mother."

"My dear, I have got that dress of yours to finish."

"Oh, bother the dress! It's such a splendid night."

Mrs. Mascall was persuaded, though she was not a persuadable woman with regard to most of the questions that come up for argument in life. Warm-hearted, cheerful, and generous, she was yet one of the most independent of mortals, original in some of her views, and blessed with a good deal of foresight. A woman of intensely strong likes and dislikes, she could be a friend in the most vigorous sense, and an enemy who was contemptuous rather than aggressive. She formed and held her own opinions, and was quite ready to dissent frankly and forcibly from the opinions of her neighbours.

Jess brought a shawl and wrapped it round her mother.

"A nice scolding I should get if I let you catch cold! I'll shut the door so that there won't be any draught."

"Thank you, child."

Jess sat down, head thrown slightly back, the moonlight in her half-closed eyes.

"So Mr. Wolfe would be scolding you, would he?"

"And quite right. He has to look after people. It must be a splendid thing to be a doctor."

Mrs. Mascall's face was placidly thoughtful, but the mouth suggested a desire to smile.

"No doubt it's a fine life, dear."

"I think it must be almost finer than a soldier's. And you have to fight, too, in a way. Just think what it must be like to save people's lives; to have them rushing for

you when anything happens."

Mrs. Mascall nodded her head.

"I have known doctors—and doctors."

"Weren't they all—Of course, they couldn't all be like——"

"They weren't all like Mr. Wolfe, Jess."

There was a slight rustling movement in Jess's chair. But she sat back and looked at the cypresses and the moon, and her white face refused to be ashamed of thoughts behind it.

"Well, I was thinking of Mr. Wolfe, Mother."

Mrs. Mascall did not trouble to say that she had known it. She liked Wolfe, liked him very vehemently, and was not at all shocked by Jess's sincerity.

The girl was silent awhile.

"Doesn't it seem hateful, Mother, that money should be so important?"

"You think so, dear?"

"Well, you know that he has found out all sorts of things in Navestock. I told you he had told me, didn't I?"

"You were quite honest, Jess."

"And the Turrells and Edith Wilks's father and a lot more of them are being beasts to him because he is honest and won't be frightened. I call it cowardly. I should like to tell them all something."

Mrs. Mascall took a long breath. She was affectionately and inwardly amused.

"I am not surprised, Jess. When a big man comes and treads on people's toes they are apt to swear and get bad-tempered."

"Yes, but they shouldn't be mean and cowardly. They have all the money, too. And he's poor, I know."

"It is very awkward being poor."

"Now, Mother, you are not going to say that it's wrong to be poor."

"Of course not, child. Do you think John Wolfe would be the man he is if he hadn't had to struggle? He has struggle written all over him; he's a man, not a thing that has been fed out of its father's pocket. You aren't the only person he has talked to, my dear. To think of the way that man has had to work! It makes me want to mother him."

Jess bent over the arm of her chair.

"You are a treasure! We have always thought alike, haven't we?"

"There have been such things as slippers and corners and dry bread!"

"You dear old thing. But you know——"

She sat straight and serious in the moonlight, her left hand on the arm of her

mother's chair.

"You know, I feel like a sister to him. He is so lonely."

"Of course, Jess. There is no harm in that."

"They are making things so hateful for him down in Navestock. Do you think Dr. Threadgold will turn against him?"

"I know Dr. Threadgold well enough for that."

"You mean——?"

"I shouldn't wonder if he's like a man with a hot cinder in his pocket."

"Then he's like the rest of them. And they are all against him."

"And they will get rid of him, too. Don't you worry your head about that. A young man can't live on air. All this won't kill Mr. Wolfe. He's too good for Navestock; and he wasn't born a lame goose."

Jess stared hard at the moon.

"But I should just hate it."

"Hate what?"

"To see him beaten. It ought to be as it is in books. Ivanhoe wasn't beaten; brave men oughtn't to be beaten. It isn't right. There must be people in Navestock who know what he really is. Why, Mother, you'll never have old Threadgold again if ——"

"I shan't."

"There you are—we should have Mr. Wolfe! There's one patient for him."

"Thank you, my dear! You'd be praying for me to be ill, you know. And one old chicken——"

"Yes, but he would soon get lots more. I feel we all ought to help him. It makes me furious to think of that old beast Turrell, and that little rat of a Wilks doing all the mean things they please."

Mrs. Mascall unfolded and refolded her shawl. Jess noticed it.

"You don't feel cold, Mother?"

"No dear. But I think it will soon be time that we went in."

"I'll do just what you like."

"Jess, we'll always try to be kind to each other."

Something in her mother's voice went swiftly and surely to Jess's heart. She was out of her chair and into her mother's lap, her arms about Mary Mascall's neck.

"You are a dear. Don't think I ever forget it. And I do like people to be honest and brave."

"I shan't quarrel with you for that."

Mary Mascall sat thinking a mother's thoughts with this piece of fierce and

youthful sincerity lying in her arms. These thoughts of hers were half-happy and half-sad. She knew so much more of life than Jess did, and saw so much farther into the future. But she had come by the mature wisdom that realises that it is a pedantic and a thankless thing to damp and discourage youth. Courage calls to courage, and truth challenges truth. We talk of the arrogance, the folly, the wilfulness of youth, not remembering how often this same spirit of youth has soared and shown the way with the beat of its burning wings. Youth may suffer, or be fated to suffer. Some of us are not fit to be lived with until we have been made to suffer. The leather-jackets and slugs among us deserve nothing better than to be crushed under a stone.

The same round moon that looked down on Moor Farm stared, round-faced at Wolfe walking like an athlete in training along the Wannington road. He had had his belongings moved to the "Crooked Billet," a little old inn at the end of King Street, and had taken a bedroom there for a week. It was the one "house" in Navestock that did not belong to Turrell's brewery, and Wolfe knew something of the man who kept it. In fact, the "Crooked Billet" belonged to Josiah Crabbe, and Ragg, the landlord, had been Crabbe's coachman years ago.

"What, leaving Dr. Threadgold, sir?"

"Yes, I am."

"Sorry to hear it, sir."

"You must be one of the exceptions, Mr. Ragg."

"I don't know about that, sir, I don't know about that."

Mr. Ragg had carried Wolfe's baggage up on his own shoulders. He was an austere man, and kept an austere house, priding himself "that decent men could step in and have a decent glass of liquor, with no foul talk and no foul language desacritating my premises." Mr. Ragg would deliver little moral lectures from behind the bar, and drop pithy sayings while he filled the beer mugs. If such a thing as a Puritanical publican can be imagined, Mr. Ragg was one. His house was as clean and as burnished as the quarter-deck of a battleship. Wolfe found his bedroom to be a study in white, white walls, white chintz curtains, white coverlet, and the very furniture painted white.

"'Tain't none of your good old oak, sir, what you can rub your breeches on and daub your fingers over for fifty years, and it'll look ripe. Dirt shows, sir, on this stuff. Dirt ought to show, sir, like sin. Then you know when to get at it with your soap and your paint brush."

Wolfe had unpacked his belongings by candlelight, and then sat himself down at the dressing-table and made an examination of the funds in hand. He had received some £70 in all from Threadgold, but part of it had gone in new linen, boots, a suit of

clothes, riding-breeches, a few surgical instruments, books, charities, and tobacco. He had about forty pounds left, no great sum to stock a war-chest with, and, meditating upon the sincerity of these facts, he had gone down to the long, low room beside the bar to make a supper of beer, cold meat, and bread and cheese. Mr. Ragg had shown Wolfe great courtesy in his austere way.

"Look on this room as your own private apartment, sir. A few very quiet and respec'able gentlemen drop in on occasions for a whiff of tobacco. But they won't intrude on you, sir, they won't intrude."

After supper Wolfe had lit his pipe and gone out for a tramp along one of the high roads. He wanted to be alone with himself, to thrash things out, to get a grip of the immediate future. He had taken the Wannington road past the Lombardy poplars by old Crabbe's house, with "Pardons" a black mass in the moonlight on the opposite hillside, and white mists hanging about the valley of the Wraith.

The situation was about as desperate as any adventurous "dragon slayer" could desire. Wolfe doubted whether he had a single influential well-wisher in Navestock. A man cannot live and fight on air and honour, and this sum of forty pounds seemed almost too precious to be squandered in a mere skirmish. All the paraphernalia of the professional life were lacking. If he determined to stand his ground in Navestock he would start without a single patient; and even in the event of patients coming to him he would need drugs and instruments that he did not possess. He had not even a midwifery bag, that sacred symbol distinctive of general practice. He had no quarters, no brass plate, no horse to pull or carry him.

But as to retreating without a battle, that was another matter. Wolfe had not told Threadgold that he had duplicates of the map and papers that had been destroyed. Moreover, he was not without lines of advance for a possible attack. At Wannington, fifteen miles away, the Radical weekly paper had been pushing a campaign against certain corrupt conditions that existed in Wannington itself. The editor of the *Wannington Clarion* was one of those aggressive, red-headed, little men who are loathed with a great loathing by the representatives of vested interests. Wolfe saw a chance here. The *Wannington Clarion* circulated in Navestock, and the editor might be ready to publish a few facts in his columns.

In Navestock all local authority rested with the Navestock Board of Guardians. Montague Threadgold was the medical representative, and the doctor for the Navestock Union. Robert Flemming acted as chairman, and the men who served with him were the very men whom Wolfe would be attacking. Jasper Turrell was one of the gods behind the gods. The tradesmen, such as old Hubbard, and Butler the butcher, who served on the vestry and also as guardians, were bound by

considerations of trade to the territorial magnates. Again—among the Navestock justices who held ex-officio seats upon the Poor Law Board, were to be found Turrell, Wilks, and their intimate neighbours. The law itself was crude, complex, clumsy, and indecisive. As yet no central authority could compel the local authorities to remedy corrupt conditions. Reform and agitation were at work, but in the rural districts the people were at the mercy of privilege, apathy, and obstinate selfishness. Outdoor relief itself was still a scandal, a means by which local tradesmen could vote themselves money through the pockets of the poor.

Wolfe thought of the Rev. Robert Flemming. This man, as chairman of these ruling bodies, should have a leading voice in dictating local policy and local reform. It seemed good to Wolfe that he should go to Robert Flemming, lay all the facts before him, and appeal to him as a man of honesty and honour. It was possible that nothing much would come of it, but at all events these Navestock "Fathers" might have the truth thrust under their noses. They could talk the facts away, vote them into oblivion, yet there might be one or two men among them who had consciences and tongues.

Wolfe thought also of Jess Mascall and her mother, and here his manhood was concerned more deeply, and, whatever the future might bring him, this "Maid of Honour" would still hold her power. Wolfe felt very sensitively about Jess. He would sooner have forfeited the goodwill of a whole town than have cast the least shadow of a disillusionment across her mind. To Wolfe she was the mirror of what life should be, clear, frank, and untarnished. She stirred in him all the chivalrous tenderness and awe that are very passionate realities in the heart of a true man.

He told himself that he would go up to Moor Farm to-morrow and see Mary Mascall. She was a woman to whom he could open his heart. He felt that she would understand him and that he could trust her, and that she would trust him in return.

Meanwhile, in the little private parlour of "The Crooked Billet" Inn, Mr. Ragg and Adam Grinch, old Crabbe's gardener, had spent half an hour over their pipes. Grinch had left the inn before John Wolfe returned. He had gone straight to Josiah Crabbe's stone house where the Lombardy poplars struck like silver spires into the moonlight.

# *CHAPTER SEVENTEEN*

ROBERT FLEMMING had postponed the writing of his Sunday sermon until necessity and Saturday morning brought him relentlessly to his study chair. Flemming was a man without utterance. He had to labour things out, to heave himself restlessly in his chair, to struggle with the feeblest inspiration in order to compel it to serve him. His spiritual life had grown flabby and commonplace, even as he had put on flesh imperceptibly during the last ten years. Repetition had become a habit with him, and he distributed his teaching with the placid perfunctoriness of a baker delivering loaves.

When Wolfe rang the rectory bell that morning, Robert Flemming's sermon book lay upon his desk, with a few slovenly sentences written across the right-hand page. Flemming himself was standing by the window, sharpening a quill pen. Inspiration had failed him, and Flemming, like many a heavy man who finds it easier to use his hands than his head, would try to help his ideas to flow by fiddling with his knife or his fly-book, or with some mechanical crank he had in hand.

"Now that the harvest is being gathered in, I think, dear friends, that we should recall to ourselves the infinite mercies showered down upon us by Our Father in Heaven. When I look round this neighbourhood of ours, I often feel how blessed we are, how supremely happy in the peace and the goodwill that alone make life worth living.

"Do we not tell ourselves that God is good, and that——"

Flemming had become bogged here, and had been unable to extricate himself from the idea-less mood into which he had floundered. He had fidgeted, bitten his quill, got up and drawn the blinds, and felt vaguely irritated because the sun was shining and making it a penance for him to sit indoors.

His weekly sermon had become a task that wearied him more and more. His mood might so often be expressed by the words, "Confound it—what shall I preach about to-morrow?" He seemed to have said over and over again all that he had to say. The harvest, indeed! The dear old metaphors and parables, the trite and comfortable expressions of awe and gratitude! He had stuck fast on the edge of

them that morning, only too conscious of the blue sky and the sunshine and a kind of loathing that he felt for his pen and his desk. If only he could talk to these people about birds' eggs, fly-fishing, mushroom-beds, old oak furniture, the Crimean War! Each month he found himself retreating upon the sermons that he had written years ago. He felt a kind of prejudice against the subterfuge, a sporting unwillingness to acknowledge that he could not handle his gun so well as he handled it ten years ago.

The thought struck him as he stood by the window with quill and penknife.

"How is it I have so little to say to these people? The hot weather, perhaps! It dries one up like a pond."

But he felt irritated and dissatisfied.

"A gentleman, sir, wants to see you."

Flemming had not heard the door open. He turned rather sharply, his grey eyebrows coming close together.

"I cannot see anyone this morning. I am busy. Who is it?"

"Mr. Wolfe, sir."

"Wolfe?"

"Yes, Dr. Threadgold's assistant."

Flemming went to his desk, hesitated, and closed his sermon book.

"Show him in," he said.

The contrast between these two men was vividly marked that August morning, perhaps because the characteristics that differentiated them had swung to the uttermost extremes. Flemming, ponderous, stately, slow as to eyes and mouth, moved like a man whose heart was covered with fat, and who would be short of breath after climbing a hill. The lines of his face looked loose and flabby beside the keen purposefulness of Wolfe's profile. His big hand felt like a bundle of warm wool.

"Sit down, Mr. Wolfe. What can I do for you?"

Wolfe sat down with his back to the light.

"The matter is partly personal."

"Oh!"

"Dr. Threadgold and I have parted company, sir. In fact, we have quarrelled."

"I am sorry to hear that."

Robert Flemming did not appear surprised by the news. His eyes suggested that he was wondering how such a quarrel could concern him. Wolfe understood the look and answered it.

"It is possible that I shall have to leave Navestock. But before I go I have a kind of legacy to leave behind me."

"Oh! You have come to me about it?"

"Shall I explain?"

Wolfe leant forward with his elbows on his knees. He spoke slowly, watching Robert Flemming's face.

"I won't waste words, sir. I had not been a month in Navestock before I was compelled to realise the insanitary condition of the town. One is driven to hunt for causes. I had been taught this, and I began to make every investigation that I could. It was not long before I ran up against prejudice and opposition. Perhaps you will understand that, knowing Navestock as you do."

Flemming remained impassive, sitting well back in his chair.

"Well, Mr. Wolfe, go on."

"I grant that my enthusiasm may have seemed rather meddlesome and strenuous. Matters became unpleasant."

"So I have heard."

"I placed the results of my investigations in Dr. Threadgold's hands."

"You mean you considered him responsible?"

"He challenged it, sir."

"And what did he think of these records of yours?"

"He burned them, Mr. Flemming, burned them behind my back."

Flemming was not easily disturbed, but he sat up sharply, frowning, puzzled.

"You mean to say that Dr. Threadgold burned your papers?"

"That is a fact. At least, I have his word for it. I had had my dismissal. One thing I did not tell him. I have copies of all the papers that he burned. In burning them he destroyed my confidence, and my consideration."

Flemming's eyes met Wolfe's, and were held by them in a long and questioning stare. It was as though the rector looked through Wolfe's eyes into the soul within, and saw things there that disquieted him and filled him with something akin to dread.

"This is a very serious statement, Mr. Wolfe. Unless you are very sure of your conclusions——"

"They are facts, sir."

"Facts are elusive things."

"Are they, when you can smell them, see them, taste them, and touch them? I call these things facts."

Flemming got up, flicked back his coat-tails, and moved uneasily towards the mantelpiece. He picked up a pipe, opened his tobacco-jar, and began to fill the pipe, dropping shreds of tobacco upon the hearthrug.

"What makes you so eager to set yourself up as a reformer?"

Wolfe's face hardened. The question suggested either some ulterior motive on his

own part, or distinct moral dullness on the part of the man who asked it.

"I suppose it is a matter of conscience."

"Ah—perhaps so."

"I don't think that any further justification is needed."

He was watching Flemming, and saw a heavy flush go over his face. The rector was nettled. Men who have preached at congregations for thirty years are apt to feel irritated when laymen presume to answer back.

"Let us take your conscience for granted. I suppose you have some object in coming here to-day?"

"I want these facts recognised. I may not be here to watch the result. But I mean to have them made public before I go."

"Well, Mr. Wolfe, well?"

"I believe, sir, you are the chairman of the Navestock Board of Guardians. It occurred to me that you might be willing to use your authority in getting the insanitary condition of the town recognised."

Flemming gave Wolfe a frank and rather surprised stare over the bowl of his meerschaum pipe. He leant one elbow on the mantelpiece.

"My dear Mr. Wolfe, I make it a law never to meddle unasked in my parishioners' private affairs."

"But are these private affairs?"

"Certainly, in an indirect sense. It is not my business to go to my neighbours and suggest that they should clean out their stable-yards. Come, Mr. Wolfe, have a little more reason, a little more *savoir faire*. Changes are not brought about in this hectoring spirit."

"I am sorry, sir, but I'm afraid they are."

"I disagree with you."

"Then we must decide to disagree."

The rector walked to the window, his face flushed, his eyes obstinate. Like Montague Threadgold he was inclined to turn his back upon the question. Nor did he like to confess that Wolfe's presence dominated the room, and drove him to stare out of the window.

"I don't want to behave like a man with a swelled head, sir, but I assure you I am absolutely sincere in what I have said."

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Wolfe. What I contend is that you are ill-advised in your methods."

"People ought to be made to realise the truth."

"What is truth?"

“I do not pretend to be infallible.”

“That is what I suggested.”

“But supposing a man has a barrel of gunpowder under his hearthstone, and does not know it, I think one’s line of action would be clear.”

“Your simile, like your idea of reform, is exaggerated.”

“But were you to grant my facts?”

“I am not an expert on sanitation, but I am apt to distrust young men in a hurry. All that I know is, Mr. Wolfe, that people have lived here fairly contentedly for generations. And if you think that as a man of some authority in the neighbourhood I am going to spread discord and party strife, and rouse bad feeling, you are very much mistaken. I am a lover of peace. I am not going to make myself a temptation towards malice and uncharitableness.”

Wolfe got up. He had said his say; nor was he in a mood for pleading.

“That has been the difficulty with all reforms, Mr. Flemming.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t want to dogmatise, but until a question has become urgent and fierce enough to drive men to risk their friendships, no great change has been brought about. One has to face these things. I think that history teaches us that.”

Flemming half-turned from the window.

“The conditions of life change, Mr. Wolfe.”

“But have men changed, sir? Are we more generous, less ready to hug our own interests?”

“Bad blood justifies nothing.”

“When there is bad blood there is the proof of some sort of corruption.”

Wolfe took his hat from the table, stood a moment in thought, and then held out a hand to Robert Flemming.

“You are an older and more experienced man than I am, sir. What I have said I have said in all sincerity. Provided that a man hits straight, I am ready to take his blows.”

Flemming’s hand came out with a certain hesitancy.

“I don’t doubt your sincerity, Mr. Wolfe.”

“Thank you.”

Their hands fell apart.

“I will think over what you have said.”

“Any data you may wish to examine——”

“Yes, yes. Come in again some day. By the way, when are you leaving?”

He glanced sharply at Wolfe, flushing like a man who realises that he has said

something that might be misunderstood.

"I do not mean to imply——"

"No. I did not take it that way."

"Well, come in again. Bring some of your papers, if you like."

And the two men parted. As for Robert Flemming, he got no farther with that Sunday sermon.

It was not yet eleven o'clock, and Wolfe passed down St. Jude's Lane, crossed the Market Place, and struck along South Street towards the river. This interview of his with Robert Flemming had at least proved to him how great a mass of prejudice and apathy cumbered up Navestock town. If a man of Robert Flemming's position proved difficult to move, nothing short of a cataclysm might be needed to shake those in authority out of their indifference. The local interests were too strong, and too closely interwoven.

Wolfe took the Moor Farm road, thinking some rather cynical thoughts, and growing less and less tempted to trouble himself further about Navestock town. Turning at the top of Beech Hill and looking back upon the town, he smiled at the idea of some modern Jonah dressing himself in skins, and running through the streets of Navestock, crying, "Woe, woe unto this town!" The prophet would be picked up and landed in the workhouse as a lunatic, or he might even find himself in Wannington jail. Men have to be reformed at the point of the pistol. Few of us can claim exemption from the law of force. We are not to be persuaded until we have been scared.

Wolfe felt rested and tranquillised by the walk to Moor Farm. He had no misgivings as to his own future, having been too well hardened to become the victim of pessimism or panic. He strolled into the Moor Farm garden, a little graver about the face, perhaps, than usual, and not desiring to meet Jess for the moment. He wanted to see Mary Mascall and to see her alone.

Someone saw him from the keeping-room window as he came up the stone path. And from the very way the man walked, Mary Mascall guessed that he had come with a purpose.

"What, walking to-day?"

She met him at the porch door, sleeves rolled up, and face ruddy, for she had been preserving fruit all the morning.

"Am I in the way?"

"No, no, come in. I shall be sitting down to dinner in ten minutes. And I am all by myself to-day."

Wolfe looked relieved, and Mary Mascall noticed it.

“Jess has gone to Grazely to a harvest-home. She won’t be back till late.”

“Then I’ll come in.”

Mary Mascall was no dullard. Wolfe had come to talk to her about something. She called her girl.

“Sally, set a place for Mr. Wolfe. And put the dishes on the table. You needn’t wait on us.”

The first thing Wolfe said when they were left alone was, “I have had my dismissal.”

Mrs. Mascall did not look up from the cold joint that she was carving.

“I knew that the moment you came up the path.”

“Did you?”

“Well, I felt pretty sure that it was that.”

Wolfe turned a knife to and fro on the table, the sunlight flashing along the blade. He had certain very serious things to say, and he was thinking how best to say them.

“Threadgold and I quarrelled. It was all about the condition of the town. Things could not have gone otherwise. I see that now. I have just come from a talk with Mr. Flemming.”

Mrs. Mascall passed his plate.

“Robert Flemming’s a good man, but he’s grown heavy in the saddle.”

“That hits him exactly. What an eye you have!”

“I’m not so bad a judge of a man.”

“I am glad of that. It is confoundedly difficult for me in some ways. I want to stay on in Navestock and fight.”

“That’s you—all over. But——”

“But——?”

“What is the use, lad, of your going on all fours and running your head against the noddles of a lot of obstinate old sheep? That’s what it would come to.”

“You are not far wrong.”

“I suppose you haven’t much?”

“Forty pounds and my clothes.”

“There—there! And I don’t know of any decent man who could give you a mount. If you had something under you to start with, it would be different.”

“I am not afraid of roughing it.”

“No man ought to be. Now, Jess—well, we’ve no cause to bring in Jess.”

Wolfe looked straight at Mrs. Mascall.

“To be honest, that’s what I came up here for.”

“Did you now!”

"It is about Jess. It must be about Jess. You will let me say what I want to say?"

"I expect I should have to hear it, if I wanted to or not."

Wolfe's nervousness showed itself in a kind of tenseness, a brightening of the eyes, a lowering of the voice. It was not easy for him to say what he had to say, and his own sincerity kept nudging and prompting him at every turn. A curious and half-boyish diffidence made him seem ten years younger. He began sentences, altered them, dropped them, and started afresh. There was a certain fierce *naïveté* about him that made Mrs. Mascall glance at him with a flash of affection from under half-closed lids.

He made an end of what he had to say, and sat staring at his plate. Mrs. Mascall had remained quite silent, not breaking in with a single word. Wolfe seemed half-afraid to look at her. He was thinking what a mumble he had made of his confession.

"John, lad, you've said that like a man."

Wolfe glanced up sharply, with a queer start of emotion. The thing had been said so simply, so unaffectedly.

"I never got in such a tangle over anything in my life."

Mary Mascall's face had warmed towards him.

"'Tisn't easy to say some things."

"Not when one's in grim earnest."

"Come round here, lad, and kiss me."

Wolfe went and kissed her. His manhood seemed to rise up fresh and buoyant, like a swimmer who climbs up out of the sea after a plunge on a summer morning.

"You are just the man, John, I should want for the girl."

"But she mustn't know, not a word. It wouldn't be fair. You see what I mean. I don't know what is going to happen here. I may be out on the world in ten days. But I'll work through. I'll smash things if they get in my way. I only want you to trust me."

"I'll do that."

"And I might write once a month, just like a brother. If I'm not too far off I could run down here now and again when I can get a day or two. I want her to be free, free all round. I don't want her to think anything, to have anything pushed under her eyes. When I am the man I mean to be, things will be different."

Mary Mascall looked up at him with wet, bright eyes.

"You make me cry, lad, you do, sure!"

"But you don't mean that I must not——"

"You great goose, you, as if I wouldn't tie my conscience to every word you've said!"

# *CHAPTER EIGHTEEN*

UNDER one of the great cedar trees at "Pardons," a man dressed in a light summer suit lay very much at his ease upon a cane "reclining" chair. He had a little green garden-table at his right elbow, ready with books and papers, a whisky-decanter, soda-water, and glasses. The boughs of the cedar let golden blurs of sunshine through upon the grass, though the mottled shade seemed carefully suited to the cool serenity of the man who regarded comfort as a thing necessary to existence. The perfect lawns of "Pardons" unfolded themselves to right and left, while the man's feet pointed towards the terraced borders and the red-brick walls and grey-stone window frames and mullions of the Tudor house.

The air was absolutely still, and the smoke from the man's cigar floated upwards in blue, wavering lines. Sometimes he closed his eyes like a contemplative Buddha, whom no earthly happenings could disturb. The occasional burr of a bowstring and the faint thud of an arrow striking a target did not so much as persuade him to turn his head. A cynic had said of Percival Harkness that had the Last Trump sounded he would have turned his head half an inch to one side, and requested a waiter "to tell that fellow Gabriel not to make such a deuced noise." A remarkably self-satisfied man, sleek, particular, and infallible, he had a way of bidding the world withdraw itself to a distance, and await his pleasure. Put him upon his feet, and he was tall and arrestive, with a peculiarly cocky tilt to his nose and head, and a kind of superior amusement in his hard, blue eyes.

For twenty minutes a woman in a white dress and a big yellow straw hat had been shooting arrows down a miniature glade between broad grass slopes and the towering stateliness of the cedars. When she had exhausted her arrows she would stroll with an absolutely uninterested expression towards the target, count her score, gather her arrows, and stroll back again to her place. Sometimes she glanced at the man in the chair. She had a fine figure, and showed it to advantage when bending a bow. Moreover, she shot well, very few of her arrows streaking their way through the sunlight to stand slantingly in the grass. The leather brace on her left wrist was laced with a length of scarlet silk.

“Are you coming to shoot?”

The man opened his eyes.

“What energy you have! Besides, I should make no show against you.”

“But you would be impressed by my shooting. Other people like to make a little display!”

“I am quite ready to lie here and clap. Besides, to watch you I should have to get up and turn this chair round. What is the score, five bulls, six in the gold, and so on?”

She turned slowly and shot an arrow. It struck the edge of the target, and glanced upwards into the boughs of a cedar.

“That was a miss.”

“Oh, shame!”

“You never do anything, do you, unless it strikes you that the act is exquisite.”

“A man should never permit himself to do anything badly. He should live above criticism. Only barbarians run races, and that kind of thing.”

Mrs. Ursula Brandon fitted another arrow to her string.

“I have an idea, Percival, that I should like to put you down there in place of the target.”

“My dear Diana!”

“Would you play William Tell? No, you would run away, you know. I wonder how a man manages to run away—gracefully.”

“Only fools get themselves into such a predicament.”

“Then either you would not be there, or you would be shot?”

“Most probably I should not be there. If there I should manage to be shot impressively.”

“I believe you would.”

“Like the gentlemen at Fontenoy.”

He shifted his position slightly, and stared over the tops of his boots at the sunflowers, hollyhocks, and tall daisies in the terraced borders.

“What has become of Marjory?”

“I don’t know. I think she found it tiring trying to appreciate you properly.”

“That is not improbable. Contrasts are unpleasant.”

“I think you are abominable!”

“That is quite a clever adjective! If you can prove that Marjory has any good looks——”

“She has good dislikes.”

“Madam, a young woman of that degree of plainness must have a freckled mind.

The looking-glass must produce mental freckles in such a case. Really, you will exhaust me if you make me say all these brilliant things."

"I should go to sleep. I have one or two letters to write—indoors."

"That is excellent of you. The one thing I admire in a woman is sympathetic tact."

She gave him a queer, sidelong smile, left her bow against the trunk of the cedar, and crossed the grass towards the house.

These two people had known each other many years, though it had taken Percival Harkness some time to decide that it might be pleasant to marry Ursula Brandon. She had a fine presence, a fine house, and had bored him less than most women he had met. Above all, Ursula Brandon was not ecstatic. Harkness detested ecstatic women, women who "foamed at the mouth," as he expressed it. He preferred them to be silent, reserved, intelligently selfish, a little scornful. People who had developed intelligent selfishness are so much easier to live with. They neither give too much nor expect too much. Nor do they crowd the house with little bric-à-brac ideals that are made only to be broken.

Between Mrs. Ursula of "Pardons" and Percival Harkness there had been for some time a species of tacit understanding. They were both cultured people who did not indulge in crude emotion. Moreover, Harkness, an epicure, enjoyed eyeing his wine before he sipped it. He had no gross, impetuous tastes. Having travelled widely, he knew the importance of testing a climate thoroughly before trusting oneself in it for the term of one's natural life.

Looking at the Tudor house, the cedars, and the sumptuous maturity of the garden, he could tell himself that even a cynic might be content with less. It was like a well-cut gem in a fine setting. Moreover, Mrs. Ursula was as sumptuously mature as "Pardons," with its sleek, sun-bathed lawns and splendid cedars. She was a woman who had been disappointed, an excellent recommendation in Harkness's judgment. The shooting was excellent. The house was shut up after Christmas, when Mrs. Ursula preferred to remove to Italy, the south of France, or the north coast of Africa. Harkness approved both of her prejudices and her habits. He had a comfortable income of his own, and his inclinations were by no means a mere vulgar question of cash.

Harkness frowned at the boughs of the cedar. He had been obliged to confess that this last visit of his had not been wholly successful, and that he had detected a change in Mrs. Brandon's manner towards him. If it were a question of impatience she had not betrayed herself by showing it. On the contrary, Harkness had found himself walking round and round a smooth, high tower. At times he had fancied that a face had looked down at him half-scornfully, and that he had heard the sound of

laughter. He knew in his own heart that he would have married Ursula Brandon long ago but for the existence of that little cub of a son of hers, young Aubrey. Harkness disliked children; they got in the way of his cleverness and worried him. Nor were he and Aubrey Brandon on very excellent terms. Though there had been no open war between them, young Aubrey had refused utterly to sink his personality in Mr. Harkness's presence. The youngster would inherit the Pardons estate when he reached the age of five and twenty, a certain portion of the income being reserved to his mother for her life. This was a very serious consideration, even though Aubrey Brandon was not more than thirteen.

With highly sensitive people it is no uncommon experience for the intrusion of a hated personality into the circle of one's consciousness to be guessed at intuitively before the appearance of the person in the flesh. Some mortals appear to project a subtle and penetrating smell that betrays their approach even before they are seen. Sensitiveness and selfishness often go together, and Harkness had a keen mental scent for the skunks and he-goats of society. The very thought of that cub of an Aubrey Brandon made him restless and irritable, and spoiled his sensuous tranquillity. He felt the boy near him, and, leaning over and looking behind his chair, he found Master Brandon standing there cocksure and grinning.

"Hallo, Baron Puck!"

"Hallo."

"Soft footsteps lightly stealing, eh?"

The boy stared hard at Harkness with the air of an enemy.

"Come round and converse with me, my dear baron."

"I would, if you didn't talk such rot."

"Ah! Floreat Etona, bottles baked in the same oven!"

Harkness gave a sigh, and lay back at full length. He was alive to the fact that the boy detested him quite as vigorously as he detested the boy. Their attitude towards each other suggested a wet sponge held behind the back, ready to be thrown. In the matter of sheer, hard impudence the boy had the advantage of the man. Harkness was absurdly self-conscious when Aubrey Brandon came near him. There was an infernal shrewdness about the child that the man sought to keep at a distance by a constant discharge of brisk facetiosities.

Harkness took up a book, and settled himself to read, but he could not forget the boy's presence. His eyes felt a desire to follow all Aubrey Brandon's movements. The youngster warned him, threatened him, kept his dignity on the alert to ward off a possible handful of mud.

"Where's Mother?"

"Gone into the house to indite epistles, sir."

"Where's Marjory?"

"I am not responsible for that lady's movements."

"I say, what rot you talk!"

"My dear baron, I suit my conversation to my audience. If you have any further remark to make—please make it. I have a desire to read."

The boy's green eyes gleamed. He looked fixedly at Harkness for a moment, and then spun round on one heel, throwing out his other leg. Harkness had challenged the devil of malice in the youngster, and was soon made to feel the presence of the evil spirit. The boy slouched about with his hands in his pockets, kicked the legs of the chair, stood and stared at Harkness with flat-faced insolence, smelt the whisky-decanter, upset a glass, and fidgeted with the books and papers on the table.

"I say, my friend, you seem disturbed in mind!"

"You make yourself jolly well at home, don't you?"

"I do—most certainly."

"And so do I—most certainly. All the bally place belongs to me, you know."

"Excuse me—a little error, I think."

"Haw, excuse me; how we do shoot our cuffs! I say, though, you've got plenty of cheek!"

"Thank you."

"Going to stay much longer?"

"I have not asked myself that question. Your delightful company simply fascinates me."

"Does it, now! That's good."

He fidgeted to and fro, as though casting about for some subtle method of annoying the man in the chair. The bow that his mother had left against the trunk of the cedar caught his eye. He possessed himself of it, and began to make an ostentatious show of stringing it within a yard of where Harkness lay.

"I say, you had better leave that alone."

"Oh, had I!"

"Yes."

"It's no business of yours."

"Look here, young man, don't be impertinent."

Harkness made a clutch at the bow, but Master Brandon was too quick for him. He retreated three paces, grinning.

"Boss shot, that!"

He managed to string the bow, and then voyaged round in search of arrows. Harkness's eyes followed him nervously until he had disappeared from view behind the chair. Master Brandon tried one or two wild shots at the target before withdrawing himself into the open within full view of Percival Harkness. He began to shoot arrows straight up into the air. Some came back cleanly into the grass; others lodged in the boughs of the cedar; while one that came slanting through passed within a foot of Harkness's head.

He began to show heat.

"Here, stop that, d'you hear?"

Aubrey Brandon ignored him. He wheeled round under the tree so that he was out of Harkness's sight. One of the newspapers upon the table seemed seized with a sudden, miraculous activity. It leaped and fell three yards away with an arrow through its vitals.

Harkness sat up abruptly.

"Drop that bow instantly. Do you hear!"

"'Tisn't your bow, cocky!"

"By George!"

An arrow flew slap into the back of the chair, and protruded through the basket-work meshing.

"Bull's eye!"

The man of impressive leisureliness started up with his dignity bristling.

"Drop that bow."

By way of a retort he had an arrow pointed insolently at his legs.

"You dare!"

"Jump, Percy, jump!"

"Put that bow down, or——"

There was the quivering of the string, and the flash of an arrow. Percival Harkness bounded like a lamb, tore something from his right trouser leg, and charged round the tree. There was a scuffling pursuit. The bow was captured and thrown aside, and Master Brandon, taken by the collar, received vicious smacks about the ears and head.

"You young devil!"

"Shut up, beast!"

He twisted and kicked the man's shins with immense spirit. They were still scuffling when Mrs. Ursula Brandon surprised them under the cedar.

"Aubrey, go into the house at once."

The two combatants fell apart—the boy defiant, the man angry and foolish.

“Aubrey, go into the house.”

Master Brandon looked at his mother, cocked his chin at Harkness, and walked off with a kind of swaggering meekness. His mother and the man remained motionless and silent until he had disappeared.

“How dared you touch the boy!”

Harkness’s eyes were like the eyes of an angry dog. Yet even in the thick of his anger he was astonished by the passion in her voice.

“If you allow the youngster to bring himself up like a young beast, of course ____”

He had never seen her with such a colour. Her eyes blazed out at him. He did not know it, but this last incident had blown a long smoulder of impatience and contempt into full flame.

“I am glad this has happened. I have been waiting to say so many things to you. Has it not even struck you what paltry people we are, and what poor sort of lives we lead? It all disgusts me——”

“Indeed!”

“Why, yes. Do you, for instance, think one thought in the day that goes outside the circle of self? If I am utterly tired of myself at times, do you think that you could ever help me to live? It is a poor, thin, yawning life. Your eternal little clevernesses have made me want to cry out with a kind of horror.”

Her heat and her passion threw Harkness back into cool and steady composure.

“My dear Ursula!”

“Oh, have done with that. I don’t know which of us has been the greater fool. Perhaps I have. I ought to have had some penetration. To think that I could ever ____”

He broke in with sharp suavity.

“Don’t let us be so commonplace as to deal in personalities.”

“No. I have a contempt for myself.”

“Believe me, I am honoured!”

“Oh, yes, accept the inference. I am not ashamed of letting it go. I am grateful to Marjory. She has taught me a little. She has been a friend to both of us with that tongue of hers that stings like a whip.”

Harkness bowed.

“If that is so, I, too, am grateful to our plain friend.”

“How detestably little you are!”

“Thank you.”

“I am glad it is all over.”

She appeared to steady herself, to draw in a succession of deep breaths, and to recover her normal poise.

"You would like tea here, perhaps. By the way, I shall be going away to-morrow for a few days."

Harkness stood in the stiff attitude of a man who was deeply mortified, yet would not acknowledge it even to himself.

"I must really apologise. I quite forgot to tell you that I leave by an early train to-morrow."

"Indeed!"

"A fact. Letter I received this morning. Unexpected business in town."

"I know these things will arise. There is Marjory on the terrace. I will have tea brought out here. It will be pleasant in the shade."

A man of Percival Harkness's character was unable to understand the experiences that such a woman as Ursula Brandon had lived through in her last ten years. His moods were too shallow and evanescent to catch the deeper verities of life; and his extreme cleverness made him overlook the simpler things that lay at his feet. He did not realise that the woman had been bitterly lonely, that she had trodden the same path day by day till its monotonies had wearied her to death. She had hungered for companionship, sympathy, the nearness to someone to whom she was a necessity, some experience richer and more sincere than she had ever known in life. Ursula Brandon had lived largely for her boy, only to be convinced that there was little that was lovable about the child. Young Aubrey had been cursed before his father had begotten him. Even the mother's instinct, an instinct that Harkness would never have expected to find under that pale, stately exterior, had been unable to satisfy itself, to spend itself utterly as the woman in her had desired. A superficial coldness may be the most deceptive of garments, hiding too often a nature that has felt deeply and suffered deeply.

Ursula Brandon had spoken of her "paltry life." She had been driven at times to feel the ultimate emptiness of an existence that can show no thought for the lives of others. The soul must spend itself or die. A few intimate devotions, even one great love, may save it, though many of us need more than one gate to maintain some flow in the stagnant water of a self-centred life.

People believed Ursula Brandon to be a hard woman, save perhaps the one or two who had been suffered to step momentarily behind the veil. Going up to dress for dinner that same evening she was met in the long gallery by a little red-haired servant-maid who was crying very bitterly. The great gallery with its mullioned windows, oak furniture, and tapestries, made the little black-dressed figure look very

small and lonely.

"Why, what is it, Rose?"

"Oh, ma'am, Mrs. Burford says I mustn't go home. I can't stay—I must go home."

"Why, what is the matter?"

"Mother sent for me, ma'am. M' young brother's dying, with that there diphthera—or what they call it. Mrs. Burford says I mustn't go because the things 'fectious."

"Well, it is. But of course you can go, though I suppose you will have to stay there awhile. Where is it?"

"Navestock, ma'am. Paradise Place, ma'am. They say he wouldn't be dying if Mr. Wolfe hadn't been turned off."

"Do you mean Mr. Wolfe, Dr. Threadgold's assistant?"

"Yes, ma'am. He was such a good doctor, but they do say that he and Dr. Threadgold have quarrelled. Then Dr. Threadgold come himself, ma'am, but only once in three days. He didn't seem to trouble like about Paradise Place."

"You ought not to say that, Rose. But of course you can go home. And if anything is wanted you may send to Pardons for it."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am."

"Has Mr. Wolfe left Navestock?"

"I don't know, ma'am. But they do say he's been driven to go because he wouldn't put up with things."

"Oh, you have heard that! Well, you can go at once, Rose. Barclay can drive you down in the pony cart. I will ring for Mrs. Burford and tell her."

And Mrs. Brandon was surprised when the girl caught her hand and kissed it.

## *CHAPTER NINETEEN*

IT was on the Monday morning that the boy Jabez brought a message to "The Crooked Billet." Mr. Ragg, sitting at the receipt of custom, tortoise-shell glasses on nose, eyed Jabez over the top of the *Wannington Clarion*.

"Well, my lad?"

Jabez was blessed with a surly sense of independence. His bow legs and his big round head gave him the look of a bulldog.

"Well, my man?"

Mr. Ragg rustled his newspaper, and stared austerely over the tops of his glasses.

"No cheek in here, please. What d'you want?"

"Anyone of the name of Wolfe live 'ere?"

"Mr. Wolfe is residing in my 'ouse."

"Well, 'e's wanted."

"Who by?"

"Old Crabbe, and 'e's to come sharp."

Mr. Ragg laid his paper on the bar counter, and eyed Jabez with austere simplicity.

"Don't know the gentleman. Old who?"

"Crabbe."

"Don't know him."

"Josh Crabbe."

Mr. Ragg shook a solemn head.

"Mr. Josiah Crabbe."

"Why, there now, you should have said that before! But there—cut along, now. I'll see Mr. Wolfe has the message."

Nor did he smile till Jabez had left the bar.

"Funny; old Josh likes them like that! Can't abide an oily tongue! Well, here's something for him to bite on. Pair of nut-crackers! Get old Turrell's head into 'em! Boiled duck, but I should like to see it!"

He laid paper and spectacles down on the counter, got off his stool, and went with his slippers flip-flapping on the stones of the passage that led into the garden. An arbour, green benches, and white tables, and a small bowling-green were shut in by high red-brick walls. At one of the tables sat Wolfe, the bowl of a clay pipe visible over one shoulder, a book propped up before him on an upturned mug. Mr. Ragg looked at him with a kind of affectionate gravity.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir."

"Hallo!"

"Mr. Crabbe's just sent a message, sir. He wants you to oblige him by going to see him at once."

"Mr. Josiah Crabbe?"

"The same, sir."

"Is he ill?"

"Can't tell you, sir. Mr. Crabbe and you, sir, ought to be very good friends—if I'm taking no liberty."

Wolfe sat very straight, his chin turned towards one shoulder.

"Bit of a character, isn't he?"

Mr. Ragg rubbed his lower jaw.

"One word, sir."

"What is it?"

"He don't like jelly bags, nor oily tongues. You ain't that sort, though, sir. Just you spank it into him. Show him your forearm—aye, and a bit of your boot."

Wolfe laughed.

"That's the line, is it?"

"Let him think you're afraid of him, and he'll be at you like a nippy dog."

Josiah Crabbe's house was very much his castle, with its high walls set with glass, its massive stone gate-posts, and its iron gates. These gates were always kept locked, and Adam Grinch opened them to Wolfe when he had pulled the bell-chain that hung down one of the stone pillars. Grinch showed a grim courtesy to the few people whom he happened to like. He and Wolfe had never exchanged three words, but the gardener had often had a look at Wolfe, and knew pretty well what manner of man he was.

"Morning, sir. Mr. Crabbe's expecting you."

"I had his message."

Grinch closed the gates with a faint clang.

"No need to go to the door, sir. You can get straight in by one of the long windows. Them's Mr. Crabbe's orders."

There were clipped box-trees in green tubs ranged on either side of the front door. The door itself was Gothic, solid oak, studded with nails and hung with rough strap hinges decorated with scrolls. A broad gravel path led round and along the south of the house, the grass edging of the lawn rounding it with an absolutely straight band of shadow. The gravel had been rolled smooth and hard, not a pebble loose, not a weed showing. A french window stood open midway down the walk, its glass panels reflecting a portion of the garden. The sandstone walls of the house looked as though they had been built yesterday, the joints fresh and neatly pointed, white lines about the yellow stone.

Grinch thrust in a brown forearm, and held back a green curtain.

"Dr. Wolfe, sir."

"Show him in."

Adam Grinch dropped the curtain behind him.

Josiah Crabbe's dining-room was like a room in a Dutch house. There was very little furniture in it, and that as solid as could be had. A big oak bureau stood between the two windows, its flap down, its pigeon-holes neatly packed, no ink stains specking the baize. A square oak cupboard some eight feet high faced the bureau, and eight elm chairs were ranged at regular intervals down the two side walls. A grandfather clock stood across one corner. The floor was of oak, carpetless, and polished to a mellow, shining brown. The square fireplace, walled with Dutch tiles in blue and white, held a plain "goose-nest" grate. The mantelpiece was of plain oak, a mere massive shelf carrying two brass candlesticks and a brass sun-dial. The walls were papered a plain buff. There were some eighteenth-century prints, chiefly of Hogarth's works, one or two silhouettes, and a huge sampler in blue-and-yellow silk framed in a gold frame. In the centre of the room stood a round pedestal table of Malabar oak, its three brass feet in the form of claws. Heavy green curtains darkened the windows.

Josiah Crabbe was sitting in a cane-backed arm-chair between the round table and the fireplace. A red handkerchief covered his knees, and on the table within reach lay a little leather-bound book, a brass inkstand, and a long clay pipe. His black trousers were drawn up, so that the tops of a pair of white socks showed.

"Good morning. Come in."

"Good morning, sir."

Wolfe laid his hat on the round table. The little black-coated figure in the chair, with the red handkerchief spread like an apron, gave Wolfe an impression of surprising quietude and watchfulness. It did not move a finger or blink an eyelid. The only things that seemed alive were the two black eyes in the vellum-coloured face.

They were like two points of light in the shadowy interior of the room.

"Sit down, Mr. Wolfe. So I hear you are leaving Navestock."

"It is not quite decided yet."

"I know Navestock very well, sir. I have known Dr. Threadgold for twenty years or more. No; I can't say that he has ever been inside this house."

Wolfe took one of the elm chairs that were ranged along the wall. Being a man who had been trained to observe other people, he was quick to notice it when he was studied in turn. Josiah Crabbe's eyes were the eyes of a swift and keen observer. In manner he was abrupt, and quaintly familiar, a man who could not tolerate formalities and affections.

"You need not look me over, Mr. Wolfe."

"No?"

"I didn't send for you for the tongue-and-pulse business. Not for to-day, at any rate. I am a hard old party, hard as a nut. Though," and his eyes gave a queer twinkle, "I am disposed to be a little rheumatic now and again. Liver, too, a little sluggish, sometimes; but I'm hard—I'm hard."

Wolfe sat squarely, his eyes fixed on Josiah Crabbe's face.

"You look fairly tough, sir."

"A game bird, Mr. Wolfe."

"I would give you your fourscore and ten, barring accidents."

"What's my age now?"

"I should put it at seventy-three."

"Someone blabbed it, did they?"

"No."

"You are on the nail—square."

He nodded his head and looked pleased. His eyes gave his wrinkled face an expression of alertness and vivacity. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand went into his waistcoat pocket, and drew out the little gold snuff-box.

"Inquisitive man? Very fairly!"

"Some of us have to be inquisitive."

"Doesn't make one popular. Know why I sent for you?"

"Not in the least."

"The genteel people want you out of Navestock, eh?"

"You may put it in that way."

"And the town is a dirt heap?"

"Much of it."

"Except my property?"

"Except Peachy Hill."

Josiah Crabbe took snuff, sneezed at his leisure, and buried his face in his red handkerchief. His little black eyes gleamed out suddenly at Wolfe from behind the red bandana.

"Peachy Hill may be as bad as the rest."

"No, sir."

"Supposing I swear that it is."

"I shall have to contradict you."

"Got facts?"

"A fair quantity."

"Pretty damning, eh? Make you hold your nose! Turrell and company won't look at 'em, or smell 'em. I know, I know."

Josiah Crabbe spread the red handkerchief over his knees. He was very deliberate, smoothing it over and over. The wrinkles became more marked about his eyes and mouth.

"Well, Mr. Wolfe, well?"

"Well, sir?"

"A damned hypocritical world!"

"Parts of it."

"Love your neighbours, eh, and poison 'em with your drains! Peace and goodwill, and all that. Confounded nonsense! What the devil is Navestock to you?"

"Something—and nothing."

"They want to be rid of you. I know 'em. The pompous, upstanding, church-going scoundrels. What did I say—scoundrels? I meant the gentry, sir, the landowners, the pettifoggers."

He sat up straight in his chair, his hands twisting the red handkerchief. His voice became sharp and biting, but retained its noiselessness.

"Most men want to be loved, clapped on the back, slobbered over in the papers. Goodwill, eh—love your neighbour, pity for the widows and orphans! damnable! Learn first to be hated, hated, I say, and feared. Then you build on something solid."

Wolfe leaned his elbows on his knees, with body bent slightly forward, his chin resting on his fists.

"You are right there, sir. There is something solid about hatred."

"It's bed-rock—bed-rock. Popularity—sand and slush. Get on the rock; clamp yourself down on it. They can't wash you off, they can't shake you, they can't make you squirm."

"That takes time."

"It took me twenty years."

"And money."

The little man's eyes shone in his hard, flat face.

"Money—that's it. Get money. Hurt the beasts. Don't talk slush to 'em; damage their pockets. That's where an Englishman's heart lies. Get a grip on it, squeeze it, see 'em snarl and crumple up. I'm here, I'm on the rock. They are afraid of me, all these Turrells and Wilkses and Crumps and Johnsons, and the little peddling humbugs who cheat across their counters. They have been trying to drag me down for thirty years. Pooh! I'm solid. I have got solid stuff under me, money, property, fear. Don't talk about popularity. Sham stuff, mere pudding. I'm a bit of granite, sir. They can't bring up anything against me. I have been a straighter man than any of them—and they know it. Look at Peachy Hill! What's that but a knob of granite in the thick of a half-drained bog!"

Wolfe's face had grown keen and hugely intent. He watched this little man and felt a gradual and grim respect for him. Josiah Crabbe was what he pretended to be, a bit of granite, hard, clean, and solid. Men hated him—the men who were weaker and less sincere than he was—and he cherished this hatred, knowing it to be the surest homage that he could receive.

They stared at each other for a moment without speaking. Then Josiah Crabbe leaned back in his chair.

"Thirty years ago they tried to break me, to get me out of Navestock."

Wolfe nodded.

"They couldn't do it. I had my piece of rock. It was a small bit then. But they broke their picks on it. They are going to break their picks—on you."

He leaned forward with a certain dramatic fierceness, his hands gripping the arms of the chair.

"Do you take me? You are going to stay in Navestock!"

"How is that?"

"Because I have been waiting for you for the last ten years."

"My dear sir."

"I say that I have been waiting for you for the last ten years. That's plain, isn't it? Not an easy matter to find men, I tell you. Good Lord, just think of the flabby folk who swell themselves out to look big and solid. All wind! I want a man who has fought, who has roughed it—who can hit. A strong body and a long arm—you've got 'em. I'm a good judge."

"Thank you."

Josiah Crabbe whisked up his handkerchief, and waved it as a bull-fighter might brandish a red flag.

"See! Turrell and the whole crew, ready to charge you out of the town. Hang it all—are they going to do just as they please? I've been waiting to fight 'em for ten years. I was in no hurry; I could bide my time. I knew I could force this on some day. The town has been hanging rotten ripe for years. Old Threadgold knows it. You know it. I say that you are going to stay."

Wolfe tilted his chair on its hind legs, his face half-grim, half-amused.

"You may say that, Mr. Crabbe, but the staying is a different matter."

"You are going to attend me."

"If necessary."

"I say that you are going to attend me."

"What about Threadgold?"

"Threadgold be damned! I have not had a pill from him for twenty years. Do you think I would have that bag of chicken food inside my house! He's Turrell's man; he's in with the rest of them. You are my doctor. See?"

"No, I don't."

"Where's your objection?"

"You don't need a doctor."

"Don't I! Can't I have a man to look after me if I want him? Confound it, it's my affair! Look here, you will visit me three times a week at a guinea a visit."

"I can't do it."

"I say you shall."

"The money wouldn't be earned."

"Man, you're a fool! Don't you see I want to give you a start here without flicking your accursed pride? If an old man wants to do a thing—can't a young man grant him the favour?"

"In three months we might have quarrelled."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Men who can hit out square and straight may fight, but they don't quarrel."

Wolfe's eyes gleamed.

"That's true."

"We are going to hit straight—if we have a sparring match. But we shall shake hands. Listen. Navestock has got to be turned upside down. I want the man to do it. I'll have him, I mean to have him; I've been waiting ten years. Do you think I am an old fool talking twaddle? You are going to stay in Navestock. We are going to heave

up the foul crust of this town. You will visit me three days a week; you will overlook the state of my property; you will attend every man, woman, and child that lives on my land. They'll pay you, and they'll be glad. Plenty of people are sick of Threadgold. Do I know what I am talking about? I reckon I do."

Wolfe stared at Josiah Crabbe's pale face. This amazing old gentleman was as grim and as convincing as the solid house in which he lived. He was so real that he seemed eccentric, but his eccentricity was a sharp and naked sword. Wolfe felt the masterfulness of the man. He would sit still and watch for years, but when he moved, then things would happen.

He meditated, fingering his chin.

"This is rather astonishing."

"Not a bit of it. Because a thing is unusual it isn't nonsense."

"I am thinking about Threadgold."

"Turn him aside. What do you owe him?"

"Nothing."

"Professional sentiment—and that sort of stuff!"

"He burned papers I had trusted in his hands."

"There! God-fearing citizen! One of the shiny-faced worthies. And the papers?"

"Contained facts about Navestock."

"I could have guessed that."

"I did not choose to tell Threadgold I had duplicates."

Josiah Crabbe smiled for the first time. He smoothed the red handkerchief with his neat, white hands.

"Young man, don't these fools see what is coming? Are they blind? The land's moving, the whole world's moving. Folk are looking about them and tightening up their belts. All these old hole-and-corner businesses are going to be wiped out. God's getting down off his throne. He's coming round looking into factories and back-yards and account books. 'Tisn't going to be all Sunday jobbery in a soft-cushioned pew. There's a wind blowing everywhere. I heard it a long way off—years ago. It is going to flatten a lot of the rotten old trees."

Wolfe accepted these sayings. He remained in thought a moment, his eyes fixed on a spot in the floor where a streak of sunlight shone on a knot in the oak. His thoughts had passed out of Navestock, and had betaken themselves to Moor Farm.

Presently he said:

"A man cannot make war without guns and ammunition."

"What do you mean?"

"Drugs, instruments, bottles."

“Buy them.”

“I may not care to sink my piece of rock in a bog.”

“Buy them.”

“And take the risk?”

“If I put down fifty pounds on this table, you would throw up your chin. You are made that way. How much have you got?”

“Forty pounds.”

“Spend thirty.”

“Hum.”

“Take rooms. Put up a plate. Hire a nag.”

“And current expenses?”

“Listen. In a month you will be earning five pounds a week. That’s rock. In a year it will be ten pounds a week. I’ll put my word to that. In ten years——”

“That is looking rather far ahead.”

“John Wolfe, success is all looking ahead. In ten years you’ll have most of Navestock and all the country. Do you want more?”

“No.”

“You will have had your fight.”

“And be hated?”

“Bosh. Hatred’s your bit of rock. In five years it becomes respect. In ten years—if you care for it—you can have three feet of good earth piled round your rock, with all the pretty flowers and vegetables growing. Rock first, soil afterwards. The earth was made that way. Do you take me?”

“But you, Mr. Crabbe?”

“Sir, I never cared much for flowers.”

Wolfe rose, walked to the window, and remained there awhile in thought.

“Give me three days,” he said presently.

“Take them, and think it over.”

# *CHAPTER TWENTY*

HALF a dozen girls in a two-horse wagonette bound for a picnic on Beacon Hill passed John Wolfe about three hundred yards below the white gate of the Moor Farm paddock. The upward slope of the road was fairly sharp here, and the wagonette eased to a walk some twenty yards ahead of the man on foot. Half a dozen inquisitive profiles turned abruptly under the shade of straw hats and bonnets. There was a little tittering, and a significant nudging of elbows.

Miss Edith Wilks—the great dame of the party—occupied one of the end seats next to the door. Her skirts had lengthened a week ago, and her hair bundled itself into a black net. Erect and stiff, her gloved hands in her lap, she turned a condescending head for a moment, and gave Wolfe a very superior stare.

"What a vulgar person!"

"Look at his boots!"

"I thought the man had gone."

"Father said that he was staying at some common public-house."

"I think he is rather good-looking."

"Oh, Ethel, how can you!"

"Well, I like tall men. And he looks clever."

"What nonsense! And he's trying to be grand and haughty; just look."

"Well, anyway, he doesn't gawk."

These friends of Miss Wilks's were young ladies who had grown up in the rarefied atmosphere of genteel homes. Their correctness was the correctness of the backboard and the music-stool. They had family prayers every morning before breakfast, sedate walks, an abundance of piano rattling, edifying books, religious romances, hours of genteel boredom every Sunday. A narrowness that was absolutely nasty dominated much of the Navestock middle-class life. These girls were prim and cold on the surface. Their lives were packed so full of the proprieties that a kind of prurience grew secretly within, finding an outlet in unwholesome curiosities, prying, gossiping meannesses, and erotic sentimentality. They had not been brought up in the belief that they were to be healthy young women with healthy

bodies. Everything natural had been laced in.

Someone pointed, and whispered, “Jess!”

A tittering simmer of excitement spread through the party. Heads were turned abruptly away from Wolfe. One or two bonnets protruded over the sides of the wagonette.

“She’s there.”

“That old green frock, too, and no crinoline!”

“Has she got her basket? The plums and greengages ought to be ripe at the farm.”

“Ssh—don’t you see!”

“What?”

“He’s going there.”

“No!”

“Don’t giggle, Katie, it is not nice.”

The occupants of the wagonette were so intent upon Jess that they did not notice for the moment that the man with the dusty boots had overtaken the horses and was passing them, walking on the grass at the side of the road. He looked straight ahead as though this load of feminine curiosity did not exist. Jess, standing by the white gate with her picnic basket at her feet, saw him, and stood at gaze.

Wolfe reached her, twenty yards ahead of the wagonette. There was something in his eyes that beckoned.

“Are you going with our friends yonder?”

She looked at him, and her face flashed an understanding.

“I was.”

“Don’t let me interfere——”

“I don’t want to go. It is Edith Wilks’s party. They bothered me to go. I shan’t.”

It was as though the coincidence had touched her pride. She stood unconcernedly on the grass at the edge of the road, looking up at the impertinently interested faces of Miss Wilks’s friends.

“Here we are.”

“Isn’t it a lovely day?”

“Come along in.”

Jess was splendid. She picked up her basket, gave these inquisitive young sexmongers battle on the level of her calm self-assurance, and repulsed them with honour. Not one of the six had anything to boast of, no patch of colour, no flicker of an eyelid, no shred of confusion to be seized as a trophy.

“I’m sorry. I can’t come. I’ve brought you a basket of fruit.”

The young hens cackled in chorus.

"Oh, why?"

"You promised."

"Are they greengages?"

"Why can't you come?"

Wolfe stood by the gate, faintly amused, but wholly proud of Jess.

"No; I can't come to-day. Mother's not very well. I am going to stay with her. Here is the fruit."

She passed up the basket. It was clutched at and swung in. The driver of the wagonette appeared to be a judge of what was final. He flicked his horses and the wagonette rolled on. One girl had already opened the basket. Remarks were passed, with cynical frankness.

"She didn't want to come."

"I don't believe Mrs. Mascall is ill."

"I say, they are greengages!"

"Besides, Dr. Threadgold is Mrs. Mascall's doctor."

"Yes, I know. That man has been given the sack."

"He wouldn't be up here to see Mrs. Mascall."

"Silly thing!"

"He's spoony on Jess!"

"Well, I don't envy anybody. I know she likes him."

"Ssh, Jackson will hear!"

"Let's eat some of the greengages."

"They aren't squashy, are they?"

"Take your gloves off."

"Look he has opened the gate! He's going in with her!"

"Don't be so silly! Besides, men don't admire tom-boys. Jess never had nice manners."

John Wolfe had opened the white gate and had held it back for Jess Mascall to pass through, nor was Jess forgetful of the fact that she was being watched by the six young women in the receding wagonette. Her consciousness rebelled against the restraint that was placed upon it. Jess had that spark of devilry in her without which no woman can be convincing. Her sincerity was not a thing that muffled itself up in pleasant ambiguities.

They were well out in the paddock, walking side by side along the winding road, Jess with head up and eyes full of sparkles of light.

"Let's hold hands. Quick!"

"No, thank you. Not while——"

"That's just my reason. You are not afraid of them, surely? I hate their nasty, nudging ways. That's just my reason."

"I shouldn't bother——"

She flashed round at him.

"I know that kind of girl better than you do. It never does to be afraid of cats, you know; throw something at them, and have done with it. Come!"

Her hand challenged him, and he took it. She swung his arm and laughed, a gleam of devilry in the side glance of her eyes.

"Now they will have something to whisper about."

Wolfe looked serious behind a passing smile.

"But, Jess."

"Oh, you solemn old thing! I was supposed to be going with them. Mother is not very ill, though. I saw that you had come to see us."

"How could you tell that?"

"Why, John—you see, if I hold your hand, I am going to call you John—why, when you are bent on something serious you look as though you would walk right through people if they got in your way."

"Do I look serious?"

"You did—then."

"Perhaps I was feeling serious."

"Of course you were. You had come up to talk to Mother and me. I guessed that at once."

They reached the end of the holly hedge where the yew tree grew, and a shoulder of the moor hid the wagonette from sight. Jess swung forward suddenly, dropped Wolfe's hand, and stood directly in his path.

"Are you leaving Navestock?"

She looked at him for the truth, utterly unashamed in asking for it. Her sincerity was like white light.

"Jess, that is what I am asking myself."

"I knew it."

"How much do you know?"

"What Mother told me."

He looked at her searchingly.

"Well, I was driven into a corner, but a queer thing has happened. I came up here to tell you all about it. You have got to tell me whether it would be right or wrong."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"But, John!"

"Do you know what I call you? The 'Maid of Honour.'"

She looked at him steadily, a little troubled.

"Do you really call me that! But I am not like that at all. I am just terribly stupid about many things. And——"

"I want you to decide."

"But I don't know——"

"Yes, you will."

They remained there under the shade of the yew tree, two grown-up children looking solemnly into each other's eyes. Wolfe told her all that he had to tell about Josiah Crabbe's offer, putting it before her with frank simplicity, without persuasiveness, without prejudice.

"There; now you have it, what do you think of it?"

Her momentary silence was like the taking of a breath.

"I—I think it is just splendid!"

"You see no harm?"

"What harm is there? Fancy old Josiah Crabbe being all on your side. Why, I could kiss him."

"Doesn't it strike you that it is rather like a man selling himself?"

"You selling yourself, indeed! A nice quiet nag you'd be, John! I pity the man who tried to ride you."

Wolfe felt a great desire to sweep her up in his arms and hold her very close to him. But her very trustfulness, her complete sincerity, would have made such a thing impossible even to a far weaker man. This girl inspired reverence, humility, generous self-restraint.

"Well, that settles it."

"You mean, John——"

"The thing is clean if you can see no spot on it."

She looked at him a little questioningly, and then with a gradual dawning of sensitive distress.

"You mustn't take me so seriously! It makes me almost afraid. You seem to think ——"

"I do think it."

"But, John, I'm only——"

"Only what?"

“A bit of a girl.”

Wolfe could not trust himself much farther. The fresh perfume of her sincerity was like the scent of spring flowers on an April day. The tenderness she stirred in him yearned to satisfy itself with some slight physical touch that the sterner honour in him would not justify.

“I don’t want anyone else’s opinion, Jess. You have settled the question so far as I am concerned. Let’s go in and tell your mother.”

They passed through the gate, and up the stone-paved path together where the shadows of the cypresses fell sharply upon the grass.

## *CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE*

IT was a fine September morning when Wolfe walked from "The Crooked Billet" to the stone house on Peachy Hill, and had the iron gates opened to him by Adam Grinch.

Josiah Crabbe might not have moved from his chair in the dining-room since his previous interview with Wolfe, but remained there expectant and motionless like a little yellow-faced idol. The red bandana handkerchief covered his knees, and he had his ledger and his brass inkstand beside him on the table of Malabar oak.

Wolfe felt the old man's eyes scanning him from the very moment that he entered the room. He drew up one of the elm chairs and sat down.

"Well, Mr. Wolfe, what have we got to say to each other?"

"I have been thinking over your proposals, sir."

"Of course—of course."

"And I accept them."

"Unreservedly?"

"Saving my independence and my right to say what I please."

Josiah Crabbe nodded his head slightly, and his black eyes glimmered.

"That's good—that's good. Now—listen to me—John Wolfe, and don't interrupt me, without reason. What are we working together for? I'll put it plainly. To clean up this old town and to shake the very bones of men like Turrell and Wilks. I don't hide my motives, sir; take 'em or leave 'em as you please. I have made it my business to give Jasper Turrell a smasher before I die."

Wolfe looked grave.

"Am I to be nothing but the whip for you to handle?"

"John Wolfe, I was born a clean lad, a lad who hated dirt in body and mind and street. It's the way I'm made. I hate rottenness and disorder. They stink in my nostrils, sir. And these Turrells and Wilks are rotten men. I want them and the things they stand for pushed aside and damned."

"I understand."

Josiah Crabbe took snuff. He wiped his face with his red handkerchief, spread it

over his knees, and looked straight at Wolfe.

"How do things stand? What have we got? A mess of legislation, a lot of hypocritical nonsense that goes everywhere and nowhere. Poor Law Acts, Vaccination Acts, Public Nuisances and Sewage Acts. Poof! They are sly—these propertied people. They make a whip, but they take good care that it shall not reach the backs of those who need it. The cholera made us yell, eh? What about the London Water Companies? You know all about that, eh? By heavens—John Wolfe—these people spit in the very face of their own God!"

He was roused to white heat, and went on declaiming in that level and merciless voice of his, pouring out a mass of technical knowledge that astonished Wolfe. He appeared to be intimate with all the details of sanitary science, and to be familiar with its legal aspects and the futile inadequacy of the law.

"How do we stand, John Wolfe—how do we stand—here—in Navestock? The gentlemen on the Board of Guardians have the power to correct abuses. Jasper Turrell and his neighbours are the judges of what is clean and honest. An old sycophant like Threadgold is their adviser, a man who pants to give everybody syrup and sugar with never a touch of jalap! Look at it calmly, and see the idiotic, preposterous impertinence of it all! What happens when there is trouble? Take a case in point, the case of the Malling Guardians. Three parsons—mark you—three parsons complain of a nuisance. The Guardians refuse to amend it. The three parsons appeal to the Lords of the Council. The Lords of the Council scold at the Malling Guardians. The Malling Guardians say, 'You go to the devil.' The Lords of the Council consult the Attorney and Solicitor-General. What's the verdict? Why—that the Malling Guardians are lords of their own muck-heap. The law cannot compel them to administer the law!"

Wolfe nodded.

"Yes—that's how it seems to stand."

Crabbe gave a dry smile.

"Isn't it superhuman?"

They were silent for some seconds, looking at each other thoughtfully. Crabbe was the first to speak.

"What are we to do, John Wolfe; what are we to do, eh?"

"Agitate."

"Ah, agitate—agitate! Try and make these good citizens spend hundreds in cleaning their own nest! Agitate! You have got to whip them, sir, on the back, not on their consciences; there is too much leather about their consciences. That—or the fear of God, sir, the breath of the angel of death."

"There must be some reasonable men in Navestock."

"Where is the Englishman's reason? In his pocket. But we'll try, John Wolfe, we'll try."

"To get a majority on the Board of Guardians to side with us?"

"How many votes should we have at this moment?"

"I can't say."

"Not one—not one."

"We must win them over. There's Robert Flemming——"

"Robert Flemming! A good man gone to fat! I'm thinking it over, John Wolfe, I'm thinking it over. Now—about you yourself."

All that Josiah Crabbe had to say was wonderfully to the point. Wolfe found himself listening, and approving instinctively of all the old man suggested. It was not mere generalisation. Crabbe dealt out facts and necessities.

"You go and see the woman and her house, sir. She's a decent creature, and she has had a hint from me."

"I'll go at once."

"That's it."

"Mrs. Sarah Loosely, of Eve's Corner?"

"Just up the road, John Wolfe. And don't forget our terms, man. You visit me three times a week, and you attend all my people."

"But some of them are in clubs—and Threadgold——"

"They are seeing to that; Grinch is seeing to that. They are dog-sick of Threadgold. We are going to have a club of our own."

Eve's Corner was suggestive of all manner of quaint, feminine indiscretions. It was nothing more than an irregular, red-walled recess on Peachy Hill, with a cobbled path running round it, and three or four houses holding away from each other with an air of casual aloofness. The open space in the centre had been planted with shrubs and trees and railed round with a green iron railing. An apple tree had been planted among the rest, so that Eve's Corner should retain a touch of realism. The all-seeing eye of the Almighty was represented at night by a street lamp fastened by an iron bracket to one of the brick walls.

Mrs. Sarah Loosely's house stood on the western side of Eve's Corner. It was a squarish white house, with rounded, outjutting windows, a queer little classic porch, a bright-green door, and green window-sashes. An iron gate led through railings that looked like so many boar-spears set in a row. There were purple and white asters in the round flower beds cut in the grass, and box edging lined the brick-paved path.

The brass knocker, in the shape of a woman's hand, was irreproachable;

Wolfe's "rat-tat" seemed to startle the demure and prim little house. He could almost hear it catch its breath and exclaim, "Dear me, what's that!"

Mrs. Sarah Loosely herself opened the door.

She was a farmer's widow, and an Evangelical, one of those thin, pale, mildly austere women who go through life as though they were turning the pages of the "Pilgrim's Progress." She had a small, economical mouth, and eyes that had never glimpsed such a thing as humour. Life was a very serious thing to her. She had seen nothing laughable about it. Her morality was the morality that drives a woman to darn stockings gladly and to darn them well.

Wolfe stood hat in hand.

"Mrs. Loosely?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am Dr. Wolfe. Mr. Crabbe sent me——"

"Will you step into the parlour, sir?"

"Thank you."

Mrs. Loosely's parlour was Mrs. Loosely's parlour, and that describes it. Chintz, antimacassars, and curtains had nothing to be ashamed of, even though they resided in a place called Eve's Corner. The parlour was the museum of the Loosely family. There appeared to be photos of everything that had ever belonged to the Looselys, faded farm-houses, faded cows, faded children. Wolfe was afraid of knocking things over. There were chiffoniers crowded with china and knick-knacks. Even the round table in the middle of the room was covered with woollen mats, ornaments, and vases, a big black Bible rising like Mount Ararat in the midst of this deluge of trifles.

"Mr. Crabbe suggested that I should come to see you. The fact is, Mrs. Loosely—I am going to put up my plate in Navestock."

"Will you sit down, doctor?"

Wolfe sat down in a horsehair-covered arm-chair. Mrs. Loosely chose the edge of the sofa, holding herself very stiff and straight. Here again there was nothing reminiscent of the woman Eve.

"Mr. Crabbe told me that he had mentioned the matter to you."

"He has done so, doctor."

"You see—I want rooms in Navestock, and someone to look after me."

"And I would be glad in many ways to oblige you, sir. I have never taken lodgers into my house, but a professional gentleman, and a friend of Mr. Crabbe's, too——"

"Then you would be willing?"

There was a difficulty somewhere, and Mrs. Loosely's austere face showed it.

"Well—what is it that troubles you?"

Women react very quickly to a sympathetic and understanding spirit in a man, perhaps because so few men trouble to understand a woman's views.

"It's the bell, doctor."

"The bell?"

"I haven't got a bell, sir, and I couldn't have the people fingering my brass knocker and making a clitter-clatter all over the house. Then—they'd send their boys with messages, and you know what boys are, doctor, always leaving the gate open, and I can't abide an open gate. It's bred in me—I suppose always thinking of cattle straying."

Wolfe smiled one of his most conciliatory smiles. The older a man grows, the more he is astonished by the queer things that tyrannise over men and women.

"We could have a bell fixed, Mrs. Loosely."

"Then at night, sir! It would make me jump out of my sleep in a terror. I have led such a quiet life."

"The bell could ring in my room, and quite softly. I would see to that. As for the gate, we could put a spring on it to make it shut; and I'd make myself responsible for the door knocker. One thing—though—I smoke."

A queer little ghost of a smile seemed to gather memories about Mrs. Loosely's mouth.

"I don't object to tobacco, sir. Why—Loosely, he was a man for his pipe, though it worried my life the way he threw the spill ends about, and knocked his pipe out on the fender."

Wolfe laughed.

"I'm a tidy sort of man, Mrs. Loosely."

She eyed him critically but with friendliness.

"I should say as you are, sir."

They discussed terms, and Wolfe, who had some experience of landladies, decided that Mrs. Loosely was eminently just. She would not steal a pin from him, but she would charge for the pin if she were asked to provide it. That was the woman's nature, and such people are very useful to deal with. Wolfe would know to a farthing how he stood.

He asked to see the house, and Mrs. Loosely took him round with the gravity of a verger. The place promised to adapt itself admirably to his needs. There was a good back room with a smaller room opening out of it that he could turn into a surgery. Moreover, a side door opened into a passage leading into the main street,

and the lesser sort of patient could come in that way without disturbing Mrs. Loosely. The house had a yard and small stable attached to it, and a little coach-house with big green doors. Mrs. Loosely kept one servant and was ready to do all the catering and cooking, and to mend and wash John Wolfe's clothes.

The terms she suggested struck Wolfe as very fair. He accepted them, stipulating that he should be allowed to make certain alterations in the room he intended to use as a surgery, and promising to provide a door-bell and a spring for the front gate. He shook hands with Mrs. Loosely, and made his way back to "The Crooked Billet" to warn Mr. Ragg of his change of plans.

Passing along King Street he had a suggestion thrown at him by the window of Mr. Dendy's ironmongery shop. A door plate! That was about the first thing he needed in Navestock! He entered Mr. Dendy's shop, and found the ironmonger behind the counter.

"Good morning, Mr. Dendy, can you fit me out with a brass plate?"

"A brass plate, sir?"

Mr. Dendy was a heavy, sodden-eyed man, and of very low receptivity. He looked puzzled by Wolfe's order, as though the sin of originality lurked behind it. So far as Mr. Dendy's face expressed any glimmer of intelligence, the brass plate might have been needed as a chest-protector or a patch for somebody's trousers.

"What sort of plate, sir?"

"A door-plate."

"Finger-plate, sir?"

"No, a name-plate."

"Oh, I see, sir, a card-plate, sir, for visiting cards."

Wolfe smiled.

"A brass door-plate, Mr. Dendy, with my name on it, 'Mr. Wolfe, Surgeon.'"

Mr. Dendy's eyes grew more fish-like. The significance of the order burrowed its way into his brain.

"Then you are going to settle down among us, doctor?"

"I hope so."

"In partnership with Dr. Threadgold?"

"No, by myself."

Mr. Dendy's flat face looked heavily sceptical.

"Then you'd be wanting a pretty big plate, doctor?"

Wolfe was amused by the unflattering suggestiveness of Mr. Dendy's thoughts.

"About a yard square, Mr. Dendy. I think that would do!"

"A yard square, sir?"

“No, no, no bigger than Dr. Threadgold’s. Send a man round to have a look at his, and make one the same size. I want plain lettering.”

“P’r’aps you’d be so good as to write it down, doctor.”

He produced a bill-head and a stubby pencil. And Wolfe wrote what was to be—to all intents and purposes—a declaration of war.

# *CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO*

UP at Moor Farm there was an autumn feeling in the air, a delightful freshness, a clean and naked energy that leapt with glad white limbs out of the sloth of summer.

Wolfe saw life busy in the orchard as he crossed the paddock. There were blue-and-white-shirted boys in the plum and greengage trees, gathering the fruit, and hanging like monkeys in all sorts of attitudes. A couple of women served as rustic goddesses, holding out billowy aprons, and piling the fruit in the baskets under the trees. The white-shirted figures slid and twisted among the boughs, chattering, scrambling, smiting at wasps, dropping a plum like a hot coal when a yellow body was seen half-hidden inside it.

"You be careful, Lukie, that there bough won't hold ye."

A spread figure came dropping to earth, shaking an arm with emphatic alarm.

"I've got a wasp oop me sleeve, a wasp oop me sleeve!"

"Let him drop, Bob, let him drop! Don't angrify the creature!"

"He be a-ticklin' me with his little legs!"

They seemed merry in spite of the wasps, and Wolfe's spirits echoed their merriment. He would not have quarrelled with a scramble among the branches, feeling them bend under his weight and lift again like a wave rolling to the shore. He walked up the stone path, pulled the iron bell handle, heard a door open, and saw the red curtain across the kitchen passage swelling with the draught.

"Is it you?"

She paused, holding the red curtain aside, a glow of expectancy shining out on him. She shook her hair back from her shoulders, eager to hear proud tidings.

"I've settled it."

He threw his hat down on the oak table, laughing a little because there seemed so much zest, and contention, and joy in life. There was no need for him to tell her more. Her eyes glimmered as she held back the curtain.

"Come and tell Mother. We are so busy in here."

Busy they were in the farm-house kitchen, the white table and the long dresser covered with pots and jars, labels, jam covers, twine, and bowls of sugar and of

fruit. Mary Mascall stood by the fireplace, stirring a mass of purple pulp in a great preserving pan. She looked hot, zealously hot, with all the good humour of an enthusiastic housewife.

"Bless me—come in. You have caught us at it. I can't stop to be polite. It's stir or spoil."

He sat down in one of the Windsor chairs by the window, the red-brick floor sliding away on every side to the dark-brown woodwork and throwing up a warm light upon the white plaster between the dark beams. Everything that was of metal shone like gorgeous, barbaric brass.

Jess stood by the table, grave and expectant.

"We are cheating the wasps."

The yellow insects buzzed and bumped against the windows, and climbed and scrambled in pots of beer and treacle on the sill.

"I don't quarrel with nature, but why God let such creatures loose on the world I can't think. Now we do get something out of bees. They're human sort of creatures. But wasps!"

"Still—you seem to be doing well."

"I don't grumble, though young Lukie Vance came down a bit too previous and sat in one of the fruit baskets."

Jess's eyes met Wolfe's. Their eyes had a way of meeting, and flashing and laughing at life together.

"Lukie produced what the writers call a purple patch."

"He spoiled two gallons of fruit, and the wasps had it."

"Look, John, there's one on your coat!"

Wolfe shot it off with a flick of the forefinger.

"Excellent discipline. There will be hornets flying in Navestock."

Mrs. Mascall glanced round at him with her glowing, busy face.

"You have settled it—then?"

"Yes; taken rooms and ordered my plate. Dendy the ironmonger thought I ought to have a pretty big one, about the size of the market-place. Now—if I could have hung it on the church steeple——"

Mrs. Mascall's eyes laughed.

"There! I must keep stirring. Where have you gone for rooms?"

"To a Mrs. Loosely."

"What, Sarah Loosely?"

"Yes, at Eve's Corner."

Mary lifted her wooden spoon and letting the preserve run out watched it

critically.

"I've known Sarah Loosely all my life. She's an honest body. You'll get your cheese to the rind—all right."

"That is how it struck me."

"Well, as I was saying, Sarah Loosely is an honest body. But there is no fat about her. She'll shell your peas and keep nothing back but the maggots. What's she asking you?"

Wolfe described all his arrangements.

"I think that's fair," she agreed. "Jess, child, the stuff is ready. Set the jars nearer the edge of the table. We will get this boiling potted before we gossip."

Wolfe watched this solemn and hazardous affair in silence. Mrs. Mascall's face glowed with concentrated determination. There were to be no splashings or dribblings, no wasteful clumsiness.

"There!"

Four and twenty jam pots were filled and in order.

"I'll put on another boiling; and Jess, you can be tying on the covers and fixing the labels."

Wolfe said, "Let me help."

He drew up his chair, and reached for a ball of twine and a handful of covers.

"It is not so easy as you think."

"I never boasted."

They watched to see him tackle a pot and tie the cover down over the jam. Possibly they were ready for a little mischievous laughter and a chance to tease him, but the expected clumsiness did not mature. The deft way he noosed the string round the pot and had the cover taut and tight as a drum, cut his critics to the quick.

"Why, you must have done it before!" this from Jess.

"No, on my honour. Now—you show me how."

She looked at him with glimmering shrewdness.

"No. I know I should bungle with you watching me."

"That's not kind of you."

"Well, I'll do half if you'll do the other half—and not race me."

"That's a bargain."

They sat solemnly on either side of the table, tying on covers and applying labels, while Mary Mascall put on another pan of preserve.

She talked at Wolfe from the fireplace.

"Well, so you have thrown your hat into the ring. I must say I am astonished at old Crabbe. And yet I'm not, seeing the nature of the beast. He'll hold on fast

enough. No one ever made old Crabbe let go when once he had made up his mind to bite. You will have a warm time down yonder, Mr. John Wolfe."

Jess was watching his face, a piece of twine held slackly between her fingers. She had often wondered how soldiers looked when the bugle sounded the charge. Wolfe was smiling slightly and finishing off a knot with skillful deliberation.

"Most of them will be for having a whack at me. A regular Balaclava."

Jess flushed. There was something intensely stirring in the man's quiet courage.

"You will want a horse."

"Yes. That's a matter that has been giving me a lot of thought. I can 'job' at first, and send for a nag when I want one."

Jess broke in.

"But you must have a good horse, just to spite them all. And there will be so much work——"

He raised his eyes and looked at her with quizzical kindness.

"I shan't have to dash all over the country to begin with."

"But you will soon."

"It is good to hear such optimism."

"I am sure you will. Everyone will want you."

"Well, I can tie up jam pots—anyway."

And they laughed.

Lizzie was called in to preside over the preserving pan, and the three of them had tea together in the front parlour. Jess had grown silent, with big, preoccupied eyes that beheld visions. Wolfe and Mrs. Mascall discussed Navestock, and its inhabitants, and the eccentricities of Mr. Josiah Crabbe. Furthermore, Mary Mascall set out to instil some of the rudiments of housekeeping into Wolfe, but discovered that he knew nearly as much as she did about groceries, the amount of milk required in puddings, and the subtle ways of tradesmen.

"Bless my soul. I suppose you learned it all in London?"

"One has to learn a tremendous lot of things when one is poor."

"That's true. And Sarah Loosely won't rob you. She'd sooner tear the first ten pages out of her prayer book."

When Wolfe glanced at his watch and found that it was time to go, Jess woke up out of a secret reverie and looked at him with shining eyes. She went with John Wolfe across the paddock, as far as the white gate.

"You don't know how glad I am."

Her pride was veiled in a half-mysterious shyness.

"It was you who gave me the courage, Jess."

"No, I'll not believe that. But I know you'll beat them all down in Navestock."

"I'll try to, to justify your faith in me."

She smiled, gave him a queer, shy nod, and was gone. Her abruptness seemed a little whimsical, but Wolfe knew that he had nothing to quarrel with.

Returning to the farm, Jess fell upon her mother with a rush of enthusiasm and a glowing tongue. Mrs. Mascall was smothered and submerged for the moment. There was irresistible ardour even in the girl's black clouding hair.

"My dear Jess——"

"But, Mother, wouldn't it be splendid! I shan't be giving what's not my own."

"My dear child, you mustn't throw yourself into things as though you were jumping into a pond. Besides—John Wolfe——"

The argument lasted for an hour.

For the next three days the little coach-house at the back of Mrs. Loosely's house was the scene of Wolfe's labours. He had ordered in several hundred feet of deal boards and battens from a local builder, and borrowed a bag of tools from Adam Grinch. Two packing-cases served as a carpenter's bench, and the green doors of the coach-house propped open with bricks showed Wolfe in his shirt-sleeves busy knocking together a dresser and a set of standing shelves. They were to go in the back room or surgery where Wolfe had fixed up a slate sink, and a water cistern that could be filled by hand. Mr. Dendy's man, who was fixing Wolfe's brass plate to the front gate, was to come in and do the necessary plumbing.

Wolfe was pinning the mortices of his dresser when Mrs. Sarah Loosely crossed the yard. Her austere face wore a look of mild horror, and her agitation showed itself in the way her crossed forearms clasped her bosom.

"Dr. Wolfe—Dr. Wolfe——"

She had to hail him through the blows of the mallet on the mortice pins.

"Dr. Wolfe——"

Wolfe turned, mallet in hand. Mrs. Loosely had been showing wonderful patience in allowing him to hurl all manner of innovations into her quiet corner of life.

"Hallo! What is it, Mrs. Loosely?"

"It's the boys. I can't put up with it, sir, the racket they are making outside my gate."

"Why, what about——"

"Your brass plate, I think, sir. Dendy's man has just fixed it."

"I'll go and see."

He put on his coat, and going out by the yard gate, made his way round to the front of the house. Mr. Dendy's man had gone indoors to start work on the plumbing

and bell hanging. There were half a dozen boys and urchins in the middle of the road, though where they had obtained their supply of rotten plums from was a matter of conjecture. They were noisily exultant, taking pot-shots at John Wolfe's new plate whose yellow gloss was tarnished with spattered juice and skin.

Posed on the footpath with an air of authority, Wolfe saw Threadgold's surgery boy, not fat Sam Perkins, but a later importation with red hair, muddy eyes, and a mouth like a cut-throat. This boy's mouth was absolutely portentous. Half his face seemed swallowed up by a red chasm when he shouted or laughed. He had a basketful of bottles on one arm, and his professional pride was spending itself in applauding this desecration of a rival and upstart door-plate.

Wolfe was half-hidden by a laurel hedge, but he was forestalled in the routing of these youngsters by the unexpected appearance of a very serviceable partisan. Jabez, Josiah Crabbe's bow-legged lad, came round the corner, summed up the situation, and charged home with an indiscriminate cuffing of hard young heads. The rioters scattered like sparrows, but Threadgold's boy, mighty as to buttons and top hat, opened his huge mouth and cawed like an indignant bird.

"Who're yer 'itting of? You shut it——"

He was charged into abruptly by Jabez's shoulder, caught in the chest, and deposited with violence upon the cobbles. There was a great smashing of glass. Dr. Threadgold's tinctures and infusions oozed over the stones.

The red-headed boy arose and retaliated, but he was no match for Jabez of the bullet head and the broad, hollow chest. One nostril showed a red streak, and the huge mouth seemed to bruise like an over-ripe love-apple. He subsided once more, and blubbered.

Wolfe strolled up, his hands in his pockets.

"I'm much obliged to you, Jabez."

The lad grinned.

"Dirty town kids; don't belong to Peachy Hill. I'll clean your plate, sir."

"Thanks, Jabez. I see you know how to hit."

Threadgold's boy had picked up his basket, and slouched off with a dirty handkerchief stuffed half inside his mouth. And in less than an hour Dr. Threadgold had heard of the encounter, the red-headed boy woggling a loose front tooth with the end of a forefinger, and showing the broken bottles.

"I weren't doin' nothin', sir. Just watching some boys pelting that there Mr. Wolfe's brass plate."

Threadgold smelt the air, like an old spaniel.

"Hey? What brass plate?"

“Up on Peachy Hill, sir. They do say as Mr. Wolfe ’as set up there.”

This was the first warning that Dr. Threadgold had received. He took off his glasses and polished them, and pattered off to tell his wife.

“An extraordinary piece of news, my dear!”

“What is it, Montague?”

“Wolfe has put up his plate on Peachy Hill.”

It was a scandalous affair, against all etiquette, and gentlemanly feeling. Mrs. Threadgold possessed phlegm. She managed to look no more disturbed than if she had heard that Wolfe had hanged himself.

“Preposterous! That won’t last long, Montague. No decent people would ever countenance such conduct.”

Dr. Threadgold fussed to and fro, trying to feel contemptuous and not succeeding.

“Why—the fellow has no capital, hardly so much as a case of scalpels!”

“And his shirts and socks are in holes.”

They discussed the matter in all its bearings, two greedy and conventional people, vaguely disturbed, and secretly moved to encourage each other.

“Nonsense, Montague. There is no need for you to worry yourself about this ——”

“But, my dear—it may be a little awkward. Still——”

“Your position in the town is unassailable.”

“Of course, of course. It is not that——”

“You ought to have had an agreement, and a clause in it—forbidding——”

“Yes, yes, but who would have thought of it!”

Who would?

# *CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE*

WOLFE had dined at Josiah Crabbe's, sitting at the round table of Malabar oak and meeting the melancholy yet aggressive eyes of Samuel Boxall, editor of the *Wannington Clarion*. Boxall was but a modern rendering of a type that is as old as the dogmatic religions. He might have screamed and gnashed his teeth at Christ in Jerusalem, or exulted with the Alexandrian mob over Hypatia's body. Lean, red-headed, and bristling, with tawny eyes and an acid mouth hidden by wiry hair, he was on edge with discontent. A kind of hungry melancholy seemed to possess the man. He had a starved look, and chewed savagely at his words when he was excited. His voice had three distinct levels of expression. He could snarl, whine sentimentally over the woes of the world, or be unctuously, even sordidly, practical.

"The happiness of the great majority, Mr. Crabbe, sir. No more hungry forties, no more tyranny, no more Tory greed. With God's book in our hand, sir, we must carry on the flag——"

He was in his demagogic mood, darting rapid and half aggressive glances at Wolfe, and swaying backwards and forwards in his chair. Wolfe noticed that the man's masticatory muscles were wonderfully well developed.

"We must stand for cleanness, and justice between man and man. These privileged classes! Are they to be compared with the honest artisan?"

Josiah Crabbe had a most disconcerting eye. There was a sly and devilish sincerity about its twinkle that often brought verbose people into discomfited subjection.

"Libel; that's your great bugbear, Boxall, eh?"

"We must dare, sir. We must not flinch from denouncing the poison in the pot ——"

"Damages! Don't you forget 'em. The proprietors of the paper want their profits."

Boxall's yellow eyes glimmered at Josiah Crabbe. He appeared to rearrange himself of a sudden. His voice changed, and became smoothly practical.

"Assuredly, Mr. Crabbe, I am but an instrument, a tool, a chisel——"

"And if the handle splits—eh?"

"I take you, sir, I take you. We have our limitations. But since you are the chief proprietor of *The Clarion*——"

Josiah Crabbe chuckled. His eyes met Wolfe's, and a flicker of shrewd understanding passed between them. Neither of them liked this man with the red hair and the starved, aggressive face. He was a by-product, a purge, a concoction of the age, useful as a cholagogue or even as an irritant to raise a blister.

"Hard facts and a war-chest, Boxall. Paragraphs are so much pulp without them. Dr. Wolfe here is the man to deal with facts. The money is with me. Now, look you here, man, we are going to raise the wind, set you blowing your trumpet outside the walls of Jericho."

Boxall rubbed his hands together, eager and unctuous. He licked his lips as though he tasted the sweet gall of the ink he was to use.

"You can rely on me, Mr. Crabbe, I know how to handle a paper and to push a grievance. There's something of the stinging-nettle about me."

There was. The man had ability, and knew how to gloat over a scathing sentence.

"Look you, Boxall, we have seen Mr. Wolfe's facts. We have got to declare war, fire our first shot."

"Find a plain man with righteous discontent in him, sir."

"Bah! put it plainer, some cantankerous curmudgeon who likes to bray so long as no one can get at him with a stick. I have got a man to start with, a sulky, cross-grained beast."

The ends of Boxall's mouth curved upwards, and little wrinkles showed about his eyes.

"Ah!"

"A cobbler. Old Burgess of George Lane."

"One of the people—pre-cisely."

Wolfe's eyes travelled from one to the other. He was like a captain of free-lances, a man of the sword, waiting while these two shrewd, lean-jawed men of the closet whispered and schemed together.

"What are we to make it, Mr. Crabbe?"

"A nuisance. You have no doubts about that, John Wolfe."

"None. I was down there yesterday."

"It's a legitimate case?"

"You can put your consciences into it."

Boxall's nostrils contracted. He looked thinner, hungrier, more voracious.

"Whose property is it, Mr. Crabbe?"

"Turrell's."

"The Amalekite! We will smite him."

"A letter of complaint to the Board of Guardians, eh? A full report in *The Clarion*. Followed if necessary by public-spirited revelations."

Josiah Crabbe took snuff, deliberately and with sly satisfaction.

"That will make a beginning, eh? Throw down the hat!"

"And the man Burgess?"

"He is waiting in my study. We will have him in and concoct that letter."

The most vivid thing that Wolfe carried away with him was the expression of virulent happiness on Samuel Boxall's face. The opportunity was about as satisfactory as such a man could desire, the opportunity to set his trumpet blaring, to air a scandal, to pelt the people of property, and all this from behind the stone wall of Josiah Crabbe's authority.

Wolfe left to them the handling of Burgess the cobbler, and the writing of that letter. This aspect of the affair did not please him. There was too much whispering and scheming, too cunning an undercurrent. Moreover, Boxall inspired in Wolfe an instinctive disrelish, the dislike of the more courageous nature for anything that was slimy, vindictive, and circuitous. The Radical gnashed his teeth at those who happened to be born above him, and, putting on the armour of an altruist and a reformer, attacked these privileged ones with envy burning in his blood. Wolfe was too big for such feelings. A square fight with the obstinate and very natural selfishness of the little world about him, that was what he desired. It was natural that people should stand in the way of progress, and guard their own interests. It was the instinct of self-preservation.

And yet, walking back to Eve's Corner, he realised that Josiah Crabbe was justified in using this method of attack. England is a land of technicalities, and sign-posts stand pointing at most corners. A man might have the most passionate grievance, but should he go forth and speak eloquently in the market-place, some wiseacre would tap him on the shoulder and remark, "No use shouting like this. Go and consult your lawyer." Law! That is the great highway into which all the passions, greeds, ambitions, and agonies of the people are huddled—a carefully regulated system of knocking at doors, of paying out fees, of differing decently or indecently in public. All must be in order. Quibbles are to be met with quibbles. And Josiah Crabbe had trodden pretty frequently the queer, crooked, yet formal paths of legal procedure. It was like a game of chess. Only certain moves were allowed. The player who attempted to be imaginative and original would find himself disqualified.

It is easy to be tripped up by an aberrant particle, or to lose one's rights over the absence of a stamp.

Josiah Crabbe dined at the old-fashioned hour of twelve, and it was two o'clock when Wolfe reached Eve's Corner. He walked round to the back of the white house and as he unfastened the yard gates he heard the impatient stamping of a horse on the bricks of the yard.

The green gates, swinging apart, showed him old John Munday sitting on an upturned box and holding Jess's horse, Turpin, by the bridle. The horse was saddled, and he had been groomed till his coat shone like the gloss on a new silk hat.

Wolfe imagined that John Munday had brought a message from Moor Farm.

"Hallo, John. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No, sir. Not as I knows of, sir."

He rose, felt in his pocket, and brought out a rather crumpled letter. He had a solemn, ape-like face, and innocent, blinking blue eyes.

"I be to leave the 'oss, sir."

"What?"

Wolfe smothered his surprise, and ripped open the envelope. The letter was in Jess's bold and unacademic writing:

> "Dear John:
>
> "I have sent you Turpin. He is mine, and I want you to have him. You have ridden him, and you know his little whims and moods. Mother is a dear. Do take him, and don't be proud. You know what I mean.
>
> "Jess."

## *CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR*

WOLFE sent John Munday down to "The Crooked Billet" for some bread and cheese and beer, and mounting Turpin, he rode out for Moor Farm.

This act of Jess's had touched him very deeply. It was the generous impulse of the child sanctioned by the sympathy of the woman. But Wolfe felt that he could not take the horse, even though his refusal might pain Jess for the moment.

Mary Mascall, sitting in a basket chair under the shade of one of the cypresses, heard quick footsteps brushing across the grass. Glancing up from the work in her lap, she saw Jess before her, face flushed, her straw hat in her hand, her bosom rising and falling with swift, deep breaths.

"Why—what is it, child?"

"Mr. Wolfe is coming up the hill. I was at the white gate and saw him."

"Well, Jess——"

"He is riding Turpin. I—I can't see him. I'm going out on the moor."

Sudden panic had seized her, and she looked elf-like with wild eyes and wind-tossed hair. Mary Mascall glanced at her gravely, and was mute. Jess was at the age when the impulses of the child bring sudden flushes of alarm to the cheeks of the woman. Her self-consciousness, but half-awakened, suffered some boisterous impulse to slip forth, and then blushed for it and recoiled in hot confusion. Two selves still lived in Jess, two beings who talked different languages and thought different thoughts.

Mary Mascall understood. She could remember much the same outbursts of enthusiasm, the same moments of strange panic, the desire of the soft-skinned, sensitive, and newly-awakened self to flee away and hide.

"I will see John, Jess."

"Oh, do, Mother."

She kissed Mary and fled, dashing away into the orchard like some wild girl escaping from vague terror. She crossed the orchard, passed out by the gate in the far hedge and took to the moor, following a path that ran in a slight hollowing of the ground. Her reborn and virginal self was a coy, wild, quivering thing, tremulous as an

aspen tree in the windy sunlight of an autumn dawn.

Out of breath and panting she gained the disused sand-pit, scrambled down the bank, and threw herself down under the shade of the furze. An irrational timidity made her crouch like a hare. Her face burned, and her ears strained to catch some sound of pursuit, as though Wolfe might have seen her and followed her over the moor. She could not, and would not see him. She could not bear to think of being thanked, or to meet the protests he might utter against her romantic generosity.

Jess lay face downwards, pulling up grass, and biting at the juicy stems. She felt herself full of raw, confused, and hypersensitive emotions, and so strangely humiliated that she was ready to break into tears. The mood seemed inexplicably foolish, and yet passionately real. It was as though she had discovered unexpected depths in herself out of which welled amazing and whimsical impulses.

Down at the farm Wolfe was sitting beside Jess's mother under the shade of the cypresses. He had turned Turpin into the stable for little Bob Munday to unsaddle him, and had brought out a chair from the house. Mary Mascall's placid hands were busy with her needlework. She had the restful charm of a ready listener. Her eyes were eyes that a man could look into without reserve. He might see laughter there, a teasing shrewdness, but never shallow scorn.

"So you won't take the horse, John?"

He leant forward with his elbows on his knees, staring at the moor.

"No. Where is Jess?"

Mary Mascall turned the cloth she was hemming, and scrutinised it with her head slightly on one side. Then she glanced straight at Wolfe.

"You are quite boyish at times, John."

"Oh!"

"I wonder whether you know anything about—women."

"I don't know. Perhaps not. Why?"

"You rush along so, pushing things out of the way. You are so terrifically in earnest. Well, the child's had a panic."

"Who, Jess?"

"Yes."

"You mean——"

"Now, don't you breathe a word. It's better for me to tell you. She saw you coming, and ran to hide on the moor."

Wolfe looked troubled.

"So you can't make anything of that, John?"

"Wait. I don't know so much."

Mary Mascall went on with her sewing, her eyes fixed upon her work. Wolfe was staring at the moor, frowning slightly, and trying to feel rather than to think.

"I'm glad you told me. I might have gone blundering about. Besides I am not so tough—or so taken up with men's affairs as you seem to think."

"No?"

He sat back, his hands on his knees.

"I remember when I was a youngster of about seven, a fellow was painting the woodwork in our house. It was a little, shabby, old house, and we had a little shabby garden at the back. I was rather a queer youngster, and somehow I had taken a liking to the painter chap. I went out and picked a bunch of wallflowers in the garden, took them in, and offered them to the man. I don't know why, but he refused them quite curtly, and I slunk out with a kind of shame. Yes—why shame? It hurt ridiculously. I didn't know what to do with the flowers, and I threw them over the wall."

"Well, I can put a twin to that, John."

She laughed softly, her eyes shining.

"I suppose I was fifteen when I took a fancy to a man of forty, and a clergyman, too. It was a bunch of flowers, too, in my case, but he never had them, poor man. I remember, I managed to meet him in the churchyard path, and was scared to death when I was within six yards of him. I slipped away among the headstones, and those flowers went on old Miss Madlesham's grave, an old maid who had been buried a week before. I was that angry with myself, and hot from head to heel. Oh, we are queer, shy, touchy creatures—sometimes."

Wolfe lay back in his chair.

"Yet you allowed Jess——"

"I'm her mother, John, and the child has twice the heart and spirit of most girls. I wouldn't treat Jess as I'd treat some. She's passionate."

"She's splendid."

"Besides, I knew you. And, John, I know just how the child is feeling. She's at a sensitive age, and she's strung fine. It isn't that she's sorry."

"I know—I know that."

"Jess has seen the woman in herself, and been scared without knowing quite why. I don't know how to put it. Things are so tangled up in us."

Wolfe turned in his chair, and looked straight at her.

"I'll take Turpin."

"John, you've got understanding."

They were silent awhile, Mary Mascall's needle working steadily. Wolfe was

staring at his knees.

"What's best? It's like holding a naked soul in your arms, and trying not to hurt it. Shall I go?"

He nodded towards the moor.

"I think—John——"

"No, I had better not. I'll ride back. You tell her—tell her I'm proud of the horse, that I have never been prouder in my life. And I'll come up to-morrow."

He rose, and his eyes shone towards the moor.

"It is best so, John. I'm quite happy over it."

"You won't let me——"

"Not a farthing."

"Well, you'll never get a bill out of me."

She laughed slyly.

"So you have settled that you are to doctor me, have you? I can be as ill as I like, and call you out at all hours! I don't mind."

Wolfe had been gone an hour when Jess came back from the moor. She looked self-conscious and shy, but was able to smile and shake back her hair. Mary Mascall was still sitting under the cypress. She was not one of your women who gobble at news, or who put on an air of fussy sympathy and expect to be confided in.

"I've been waiting tea, child. John Wolfe had to get back."

Jess sat down on the grass with her arms about her knees.

"Was he——"

"What, Jess?"

"Angry?"

"Angry! I never saw a man more pleased. I told him you were out on the moor somewhere. He told me to thank you and to say he is as proud of Turpin as——Angry, indeed!"

Jess shaded her face between her two hands.

"I wonder why I ran away," she said. "Wasn't it silly!"

# *CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE*

JASPER TURRELL was in his grape-house at Beech Hill, nosing about in his keen, mistrustful way, his long lips puckered about the stump of a cigar. Turrell never fully enjoyed the good things that belonged to him, simply because of a natural meanness and thinness of disposition. Nothing ever quite pleased him. He was for ever grumbling at his gardeners, and suspecting them of selling fruit and vegetables behind his back. He made a habit of counting the peaches and nectarines on his trees, and any discrepancies had to be explained. If a friend admired his roses, he would sneer bitterly and say, "Nothing like what they should have been! I can't make these men of mine prune and syringe properly." He was for ever discovering ugly insects under the stones of life, focusing the one gap in a bed of gorgeous flowers.

"Are you there, Dad?"

The younger Turrell's figure showed through the glass, distorted slightly by crinkles in the panes.

"Hallo, Tor——"

Hector Turrell's typical attitude was one of lounging self-satisfaction. He was, what many a poor cad desired to be, the ideal of impossible dreams on thirty shillings a week. Young Turrell had his fists stuffed into the pockets of his riding breeches, his black-and-white-check waistcoat hunched up over them. He stood with his feet wide apart, and his lower jaw thrust out.

"I have just picked up a bit of news."

"News, eh!"

"That chap Wolfe has put up his plate in Navestock."

"Bosh!"

"It's true. Young Kinnis told me this morning. He's up on Peachy Hill."

Jasper Turrell's red eyelids came close together. He twisted the cigar round in his mouth.

"What the devil does he mean by that? Surely Threadgold had an agreement ——"

"What about old Crabbe?"

"Crabbe!"

"He may have taken the chap up."

Turrell snarled.

"What has it to do with Crabbe? He ought to be burned."

"The old beast doesn't love us."

"Do you think I want to be loved by a confounded infidel! I don't suppose he has anything to do with it. And if he has, what does it matter to us?"

The narrow, ugly look about the elder man's eyes showed that it did matter. Turrell had bullied and overborne people all his life until he had developed an irritable masterfulness that stormed over trifles. The self in him was red, raw, and touchy. If anyone disagreed with him, he conceived it to be a piece of studied insolence. If anything was done in Navestock that he disapproved of, he leapt to the conclusion that it was done to spite him.

"Old Crabbe's in his dotage, Tor. I mean to get hold of some of that property when the old rogue dies."

He flung the cigar end away and pulled out his watch.

"Did you see Burt at the door with the gig?"

"No."

"Confound that man, he's always late, just to rile me. I'll sack him. I must be at that Board meeting. Go round to the stables, Tor, and see what the fool's doing."

This particular meeting of the Navestock Guardians was destined to be memorable by reason of its implications. Robert Flemming held his usual place as chairman in the big, padded-leather chair, his fine floridity and whitening head deserving the brush of the portrait painter. The room was a dull room with long, melancholy windows looking out upon a yard. Turrell sat on Flemming's right, his long legs stretched out, a sprawling figure that sneered. Little Wilks always had a fistful of papers, which he sniffed at attentively, much like a squirrel devouring a nut. Landry and Petersen, two country members, sat side by side, exchanging scandalous stories in gloating undertones. The other members were tradesmen—heavy men who took their duties with a serious eye on personal economics. Old Crump, the clerk, leathery, pink-gilled, and sardonic, had mischievous twinkles in his porcine eyes. He turned his impertinent and abrupt nose this way and that like an old dog casting about for a scent. He was a cynic, and it delighted him to see people lose their tempers.

He had a chance that morning when it fell to him to read a certain formal letter that had been addressed to the Navestock Guardians. The letter complained of a "nuisance" in George Lane, and the writer desired to have the "nuisance" abated.

The details were put with strength and savour. Crump sniffed as he read it. A familiar and penetrating odour seemed to force its way into the room.

Crump took a delight in setting people by the ears, provided it could be done delicately and without personal inconvenience. There was an uneasy scraping of feet, a tilting of chairs. Queer, slanting glances were thrown at Jasper Turrell. His fellow Guardians watched him inquisitively, but they shirked meeting Turrell's eyes.

"George Lane, is it, Mr. Crump? And from Burgess the cobbler?"

"That's the signature, Mr. Flemming."

The silence was full of hesitancy. Turrell drew in his long legs, and sat up with a jerk of defiance.

"I am not shy, gentlemen. It seems that someone has a quarrel with my property. Let us have it out. If anyone wishes to discuss my management of my property——"

He looked round insolently, ready to thrust a challenge under his neighbours' noses. But though Turrell was an unpopular man, he was the chief of a clan, and his fellow-clansmen knew it. It was a subtle question of self-preservation, and these men of property instantly drew together when the interests of property were threatened. A common instinct made for unanimity. Like members of a big family they might quarrel among themselves, but they rallied and drew together when one of the clan was threatened by an outsider.

Johnson the butcher, the colour of his own raw meat, spoke up gruffly from a corner.

"Mr. Chairman, seems to me, sir, Mr. Turrell's a gentleman who can be left to look after his own property. We shake along very well in Navestock, sir. I don't hold with mischief-making."

Turrell smiled, his long mouth crinkling curiously between his sandy whiskers. He and Johnson had a proper understanding.

Robert Flemming's eyes wandered from face to face.

"Has anyone——"

Wilks's thin and acrid voice cut in.

"It appears to me to be a vexatious complaint——"

"Tss, that's the very word I was trying to think of, Mr. Wilks."

"It nails the thing to the counter, Mr. Hubbard."

"Like a bad coin, sir. I always say that things ought to be done with good feeling. I am against stirring up bad blood. The men of property in the town have public spirit."

Robert Flemming turned his head this way and that, gravely, questioningly. Turrell lay back in his chair.

"I am quite content to leave myself in your hands, gentlemen."

He was ready for nothing of the kind, but it was a courteous fiction that suited the situation.

"I propose, Mr. Chairman, that this matter shall be ignored. We all know Mr. Turrell——"

"But——"

Crump looked up sharply from the minute-book.

"We are legally in order, Mr. Chairman, in taking our choice. We are an arbitrary body."

The meeting heaved itself, exchanged stares, and appeared to know by intuition that it was in amicable agreement.

"I think we can leave a gentleman of Mr. Turrell's position to control his own property."

Wilks's eyes twinkled as though he had cracked an unusually fine nut.

"Very well, gentlemen——"

Turrell's half-closed eyes gleamed under their light lashes.

"You can leave the matter to me. I'll look into it, and have a proper opinion."

They had carried the question thus far, and there they dropped it. Crump was scribbling in a book. The Guardians decided that he should acknowledge the receipt of the letter, nothing more. They passed on to discuss certain items in the workhouse accounts.

From the meeting of the Board of Guardians, Jasper Turrell went straight to Dr. Threadgold's house on Mulberry Green. Threadgold was out, and Turrell was offered the urbanities of the new assistant, Mr. Talbot Tweedy. This young man wore spectacles, and had something of the look of a very wise guinea-pig. He was badly spotted with acne, and simpered like a nervous girl. Turrell had no use for him. He sat down and said that he would wait for Dr. Threadgold.

Turrell had to wait an hour; full time to think himself into an ugly temper. When Threadgold came in, buoyant and effusive, bumping like a cork on the froth of his own cheeriness, the very shine of the man's face made Turrell savage.

"Look here, Threadgold, I want you to go round to George Lane."

He explained the situation, letting his anger burst like water through an opened sluice. Some people seem created by nature to serve as broad-mouthed jars into which we can pour the fermenting pleasures of our wrath. Threadgold was some such vessel. He sat as though fascinated, letting himself be filled with the splashings of Turrell's anger.

Moreover, strong emotion in other men always frightened him, perhaps because

his flabby spirit was shocked by the sudden knowledge of its own lack of virility. He was one of those who nodded and acquiesced.

"I will go round this evening."

"You'll find nothing to quarrel with. But I just want an opinion for form's sake. You understand?"

Threadgold understood. Yet the acceptance of this rather dubious responsibility alarmed him. Wolfe's presence in Navestock had made him nervous and suspicious. He felt that this man's eyes were on him, that there were interested and hostile people on the watch.

"I must ask you to leave me some discretion in the matter."

Turrell knew the ways of flabby men. He held no pity for a mind that hesitated between sentimental rectitude, and honest, downright selfishness.

"There is nothing to quarrel with, Threadgold. You can take my word for it. Nothing has been altered there for the last twenty years."

Threadgold smiled uneasily.

"Rather like signing a blank cheque."

"If things are the same as they were twenty years ago, you would have found out if anything had been wrong, wouldn't you?"

He tapped his left palm with his right fist, emphasising this clever casting of a net.

"You are supposed to be responsible, you know. And if a man suddenly digs up a scandal after sleeping over it for twenty years, one is inclined to ask him why the devil he didn't do it before."

Threadgold winced, and took refuge in bland optimism.

"Of course. Everything is all right. A vexatious complaint, nothing more. I am not one of these new-fangled men who go about quarrelling with conditions that have been with us for generations."

"You have had experience, Threadgold. It is these young cubs who think they know so much better than anybody else. I know where all this originated. We must back each other up, and snub the young cad."

Threadgold got what comfort he could from the thought that he had the influential part of the town behind him.

Turrell went straight from Mulberry Green to George Lane. Discretion was not in him when he was angry. He never restrained himself, and his passions were emetic.

Old Burgess was at work in his shop, his bald head visible through the diamond panes of the window. The tap-tap of his hammer went on steadily. Turrell gave one stare and stood in the doorway.

"Hallo, you don't like this neighbourhood, Burgess! How's that?"

The cobbler glanced up with a sulky, browbeaten smile. His squatting, rounded figure with its white apron and blue shirt-sleeves seemed symbolical of Labour crouching half-rebelliously at the feet of Capital.

"You ought to know, Mr. Turrell."

An insolent slyness glimmered in Burgess's eyes, and Turrell, whose soul was sinewed with insolence, understood the look, and reacted to it.

"You have been put up to it. I know that. You have made your bargain. Clear out in a month."

"I was just going to say, sir——"

"I don't want to hear what you were going to say. You have notice to quit, and that settles it. I am not going to have mischief made behind my back. I'm not the man to stand it."

He walked on with fuming self-satisfaction.

The same evening Burgess appeared in his Sunday clothes at Josiah Crabbe's. The man was frightened. A sense of insecurity had chilled his ardour. Crabbe was amused.

"There's that cottage of mine waiting for you."

"I'm fearing, sir, I mayn't get the work as I did down yonder."

"That's it, Burgess, that's it. Twopence halfpenny for the rights of man! We lie snug in our pockets, and let liberty lie in the gutter! Don't you worry, my man, don't you worry."

"Right's right, Mr. Crabbe, but when a man's got a family——"

"You won't be worse off up here, Burgess. Don't be a fool, and don't whine. I don't like whining."

# *CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX*

COBBLER BURGESS'S cottage in George Lane had another tenant, and this appeared to be the sole result that could be attributed to the protest he had lodged with the Navestock Board of Guardians. No one seemed interested in the matter, and whatever Dr. Threadgold may have thought of Turrell's cottage property and the state of the stable-yard adjoining George Lane, the cynical persistence of the old conditions suggested either that Threadgold had thought it best to have no opinions, or that he had had no success in stating them. Someone had thrown a stone into a stagnant pond, and the ripples appeared to have died down. Josiah Crabbe, the man of property, knew otherwise. Men whose interests have been threatened are very sensitive. Even an abortive attack leaves them uneasy. They do not forget.

He had to hold Mr. Boxall back by the collar.

"Wait a few weeks, and we'll give them another dig, just when they are beginning to settle down comfortably. In birching a boy, Boxall, you shouldn't lay it on too fast. Give him time to think between the strokes, and to wonder when the next is coming. That was just a rap to begin with."

To Wolfe, who had commenced his three weekly visits, Josiah Crabbe opened his mind with sardonic frankness. There was something a little terrible about the old man's sanity. His foresight was a steel pointer irresistibly attracted towards the magnetic future.

"Do these people think, John Wolfe, that they are always going to run the world for the benefit of their own pockets? A queer sort of creed that! The big beast that is underneath will give its back a heave some day, and crack up the foundations of all these private privileges."

Wolfe's fees were paid him weekly, the money being folded up in an envelope and left on the hall table for him to take as he went out. But though Josiah Crabbe had no personal need of his services, he gave Wolfe opportunities of escaping from the feeling that he was getting something for nothing. Crabbe kept a complete register of his tenants. It was all written in his leather-bound ledger: their ages, resources, infirmities, and characters, like the records of sheep in a "flock-book."

Wolfe found himself in the position of a privately employed Medical Officer of Health. He was made responsible for the sanitation of Peachy Hill, and there were also a number of ancient folk whom Crabbe committed to his charge. Wolfe took the pensioners gladly, refusing to accept any fees for the work.

Moreover, several private patients had already come to him, people who had long been dissatisfied with Threadgold. Medical etiquette did not worry Wolfe here, for Threadgold's attitude towards him had quashed all sentiment, the elder man having so far lost his temper as to write Wolfe a furious, stuttering letter, accusing him of dishonourable behaviour in putting up a plate in Navestock. Wolfe played no questionable tricks to gain patients, but if they came to him he took them as the right of a competitor in an open market. Adam Grinch and a number of the better-class artisans had started a small Benefit Club, and had desired Wolfe to act as their doctor. At the end of the first month he balanced up his account book and found that he was earning five pounds a week.

A man must have his portion of materialism, yet Wolfe knew that the way to Moor Farm was a golden road now that autumn had come. The beech woods turned the high-road into a long aisle of amber and bronze, their smooth, mouse-coloured trunks, vast and grey below the gorgeous foliage. The gorse was blooming fitfully on Tarling Moor, and the bracken had turned colour. Children still came out with cans and crooked sticks for blackberries. Guns had long been popping in the stubbles and the turnip fields. The birds had grown wild, and the whir of their wings seemed part of the whispering, leaf-blown mystery of October.

Wolfe rode black Turpin often along that road, a lean, brown-faced Bayard, whom lesser men had begun to watch. He looked well on horseback, a more martial and compelling figure than little Threadgold's rolling along in its carriage with an increasing paunch between its fat little thighs. Wolfe caught the eyes of the women. They were faintly afraid of him, a subtle recommendation. With Jess Mascall it was pride, not fear. She had suffered from no more moments of panic. Wolfe on the black horse rode up to the high-towered castle of her youth, and romance shone upon his armour. It filled her with a shy exultation to see him come cantering across the paddock. And the way that somewhat stern face of his melted to hers gave her moments of wonder.

Wolfe was a man whose strength threw a challenge at meaner men of strength. Hector Turrell often passed him on the road, going by like an hereditary enemy with arrogant anger in his eyes. Young Turrell had the animal egoism of the bull. The first glance that he threw at a new male beast was at his horns, chest, and shoulders. How would the fellow fight? How long would it take him to lay him out? Wolfe had

piqued the younger Turrell's battle pride. The lean, proud face of the one tempted the fists of the other. There was a quiet loftiness about Wolfe that roused the savage in Hector Turrell. The higher type incensed the lower, and the physical antagonism of the two was sharpened by what had passed in Navestock.

It was late October, and the yellow leaves were falling from the Lombardy poplars on the road near Josiah Crabbe's house. At Eve's Corner, Mrs. Sarah Loosely went to and fro in Wolfe's sitting-room, a busy primness on her mouth. Visitors were to be there to tea, and the lace doylies on the dishes took an immense amount of delicate attention. She was indefatigable over trifles, and everything had to be geometrically arranged. The spoons in the saucers were made to trail their handles in the same exact line. It had been said that Heaven would have to be the perfection of tidiness, or Mrs. Loosely would not have consented to stay there. Palm branches would be sloped like muskets on parade, halos tilted at precisely the same angle.

Wolfe was busy in the coach-house, diving into the deeps of a monster hamper. Yellow straw and wisps of paper lay piled about, and files of bottles, green and blue, stood crowded like a mob along one wall. He was unpacking drugs that had arrived that morning from a firm of manufacturing chemists whom Josiah Crabbe had recommended.

His brown hands were groping in the bottom of the hamper when the door-bell rang. The clinking together of two bottles at the same moment masked the sound for him. There were greetings under the white Georgian porch between Mrs. Loosely and two visitors.

"Well, Sarah, it is a long while since I saw you. You don't look a day older."

"I don't feel it."

"Here's Jess, getting long in the legs."

Mrs. Loosely pecked at Jess's cheek.

"You are getting quite grown up, my dear!"

Jess laughed. Mrs. Loosely put it as though growth was a new and amazing phenomenon.

"Mayn't I grow? I'm seventeen."

"You ought to have your hair up."

"Oh—bother!"

"Mr. Wolfe's not expecting you till four."

"We came in early, Sarah, and I shopped quicker than I thought I should."

"He's head over ears in a hamper in the coach-house. Never knew such a gentleman to do things for himself. And as considerate as a curate."

Jess mouthed her scorn.

"Curate! Let's go and catch him at it, Mother. I'll leave the basket here in the hall."

So Wolfe was caught still groping in the hamper, his back towards the house, and the late October sunlight streaming in upon the yellow straw.

"You are a nice man to ask visitors to tea!"

He found the glowing, mischievous face of the girl setting off the maturer amusement of the mother.

"Hallo! I didn't expect you yet."

"I'm going in to have a chat with Mrs. Loosely, John."

"What a mess you are making!"

"Mess! Nothing could be more orderly. Look at those bottles."

Jess's eyes were full of glimmers of laughter. There was nothing very obvious to laugh at, but the vitality sparkled out in sheer joyousness.

"Aren't they dears! So solemn, with their little nightcaps tied on so neatly. I like the fat blue ones——"

"But the green ones are more aristocratic."

"Fancy having to take all that stuff! Poor people! Now what would you give me, John?"

He looked down at her with gleams of amused tenderness.

"You? Oh, nothing. On the contrary I should make you up into a mixture, and prescribe you to all my patients."

"Oh, John! And what sort of label?"

"The Elixir of Life. Red Rose Linctus. Syrup for the sweetening of crab-apples!"

She laughed and blushed.

"John, don't be silly."

"I am not wise. It is a pity we can't prescribe a few people to tune up the world. Come and see Turpin."

"I've brought him an apple."

"Poor Turpin has come to live at Eve's Corner!"

"And you are the snake, John."

"Well, I like that! Satan must have been a fine fellow!"

"What vanity!"

"Yes; what vanity! Don't you know that men are peacocks?"

This was Jess's first visit, and she had to be shown all that Wolfe had to show. She was a partisan from head to heel, taking things passionately to heart. Wolfe may not have seen the girl's pride in all that concerned him, but her mother saw it, and

smiled with her wise blue eyes. Jess was ready to turn Mrs. Loosely's house upside down in her enthusiasm, even to oust the good lady, and see Wolfe in full possession.

"The coach-house will do for your carriage, John. Now, I want to see the surgery and the room where you do everything."

She was shown the surgery with its rows of shelves and bottles, its instrument cabinet, and sundry ingenious contrivances that Wolfe had had rigged up. She noticed everything and asked about everything, with the keenness of youth supremely interested.

"Are those the little measuring glasses? And would you cut off a man's arm in here, John?"

The touch of awe in her voice was very naïve.

"Not quite that, Jess, unless it was a matter of life or death."

"How splendid to fight death. I have often thought I should like to be a nurse and do something really great, like Florence Nightingale. Now I want to see your other room. I do like the brass plate. It quite made me shiver."

The tea-bell rang, and Jess had an opportunity of criticising John Wolfe's more intimate surroundings. Mrs. Mascall took the tea-tray, Jess sitting opposite her mother with her face towards the light. Wolfe, watching her, knew that the room would be different to him from that very moment. The wonderful aliveness of the girl's face, the way her lips moved, the quick lights and shadows in her eyes, the fresh warmth of her skin, all these were unforgettable. And she was here in this room of his, glowing over his campaign, and proud of his beginnings. Her touch consecrated things. The tenderness of it all would linger.

"You ought to have a big arm-chair, John, where you can sit and smoke when you are tired. Don't you think so, Mother? These chairs remind me of Miss Plimley, and fancy sitting in Miss Plimley's lap."

"Bless the child!"

"There's no harm in that. Who'd want to? And do you know what I should do, John?"

"That is beyond me, absolutely."

"I would bring that big hamper in and tumble all these silly little ornaments into it. I hate ornaments. And they look absurd round you."

"Why?"

"You're so big. They'd do very well for Mr. Charlie Chipperton."

Wolfe and Mrs. Mascall exchanged glances and laughed.

"You would break Mrs. Loosely's heart, Jess."

"Should I? Poor old thing! I'm sure she is very nice to you, John, but I hope she

isn't fussy."

"Not very. Here, have some more cake. I got it specially for you."

"Did you? Give me just a little bit. I hope you don't count people's slices, John."

"Not yours, at any rate."

The front door-bell rang, and the brass knocker followed it up with a ponderous rat-tat. Jess sat alert and interested, a slight frown of impatience gathering between her black eyebrows.

"Now that's some wretched patient!"

"You ought to be glad."

"I am, Mother, of course I am. But just—this afternoon!"

There were voices in the hall. Someone was shown into the room on the other side of the passage. Mrs. Loosely appeared with an air of importance.

"Mr. Flemming wants to see you, sir."

"What, the rector?"

"Yes."

Jess flushed up sensitively.

"There! Isn't that just splendid! You must go, John. Don't let us be in the way. We can look after each other."

Wolfe found Robert Flemming standing with his back to the big gilt-framed mirror that hung over the mantelpiece in Mrs. Loosely's parlour. Flemming, like Wolfe, looked too big for this little bric-à-brac world, a human-headed Assyrian bull stranded in some curio shop with his head six inches from the ceiling.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wolfe. I have come to call on you in your new quarters."

It was a rare thing for Robert Flemming to feel ill at ease, and he was shocked by the constrained pomposity of his own voice. Absurd, puerile, this self-consciousness. He touched a sore and angry streak in the soul of his own dignity.

"Please sit down, Mr. Flemming."

The rector looked for a chair, but some vague prejudice kept him standing. An attitude of mind that approached the apologetic was absolutely new to him. It was like preaching in a strange language.

"You find yourself comfortable here?"

"Very."

Flemming himself was big with discomfort.

"I may as well tell you at once, Mr. Wolfe, why I have come to call on you. The fact is, I have been thinking over that conversation we had some time ago. I don't know that I am altogether easy in my mind."

Wolfe's heart went out suddenly to the older man. There was a labouring of the

heavy wheels of Flemming's mind. His handsome face had an expression of doubt, and of distress.

"Won't you sit down?"

"I can talk better standing."

"You are referring to the talk we had on the health of the town?"

"Yes."

Wolfe leant one shoulder against the window casing. Flemming was like a man trying to walk in deep mud, and Wolfe felt a desire to stretch out a hand to him.

"I shall only be too glad to give you any information. But as things stand——"

Flemming's eyes turned to him expectantly.

"Ah, that's where I feel my difficulty. My impression is that there is an aggressive and bellicose spirit at work in the town."

Wolfe's mouth grew sterner.

"I think I told you, sir, that there are times when a man must fight."

"Then, you allow——"

"I allow that I am against all compromise, and that there is a certain public spirit growing here that means to force reform."

"A few Radicals, eh?"

"I don't think you ought to put it that way. Besides, such a taunt cuts back."

"You are right; I withdraw. But are you determined to be bitter? I say bitter—because—well, it's human nature."

"It is not bitterness with me, but I can assure you it is war, if that is what you wish to know."

Robert Flemming looked grieved.

"Mr. Wolfe, I'm sorry. It is what I suspected."

"You mean, sir——"

"That there is something under the surface. Of course that Burgess affair, I understood it. It was the throwing down of the glove. I don't like such methods."

There was a short, tense silence.

"Then you are for compromise, Mr. Flemming?"

"Persuasion."

"I believe it to be useless. I don't blame men whose first instinct is to remember their own interests. But are these men persuadable? I think not, by any ordinary methods."

Flemming stared at a picture of the Israelites in the Wilderness that hung on the opposite wall.

"I wish for the best, Mr. Wolfe. I came here to try and discover whether the

feeling I had about things was correct. To see, too, if something could not be done."

"I am ready to meet you, sir, in the best spirit, but——"

"I should make it a condition that there should be no blackguarding, no uproar."

"I don't want questionable methods. But it would be impossible to promise that there would be no fair hitting."

"Then I can go no farther. I cannot bring myself to countenance abuse, and clamour—and—and a feeling of revenge."

"I understand."

"And I am sorry."

"Mr. Flemming, I too am sorry."

Robert Flemming seemed to have some difficulty in uprooting himself from the hearthrug. He fell into a bemused, hesitating stare, knowing that it behooved him to shake hands and go. The long silence grew oppressive.

"Well—well——" he heaved himself into action. "Think it over, Mr. Wolfe."

"I have thought it over. At present we are in opposite camps."

"I dislike this idea of enmity."

"I never suggested enmity to you, sir. Even in war one can be chivalrous."

He opened the door for Robert Flemming, and accompanied him out of the house. Flemming turned at the gate.

"Come and see me some evening."

"I will."

Wolfe watched him walk away, realising that this slow, sleepy, honest nature had been awakened. The new spirit was pricking the skin of its kindly, slothful optimism. And Wolfe felt that it was hard that a man who had come to the serene September of life should be made to suffer like a young man whose ideals clash like swords upon the iron coats of the mighty men of Mammon.

# *CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN*

IT was in November that Josiah Crabbe let Boxall, of *The Clarion*, off the leash.

"And don't snarl," said he, "that's the mistake you fellows make. Talk down at the scoundrels; improve them, but don't snarl. And keep to the facts—no personalities. I have promised John Wolfe to make a clean fight of it, and we can't do better than follow his lead. Send me the stuff before it is published."

For weeks Boxall had been clanking his chain. There was something of the look of the half-starved mongrel about him. He was hungry, and he got to work.

His baying reached even to the seats of the gods. Mrs. Ursula Brandon had not seen the *Wannington Clarion* twice in ten years. Mere momentary curiosity made her open a copy that had arrived by post and got itself included among the letters on the breakfast table. Young Aubrey had gone to a meet of the foxhounds at Cheston, and Ursula Brandon was alone.

There were crosses in blue pencil slashed on the front sheet of the paper; also the words, "See page 3." She unfolded the paper, found two columns marked with red ink, and headed, "Public Spirit and Public Health."

For Ursula Brandon the *Wannington Clarion* had always stood beyond the pale of decency. It was the mouthpiece of a class that she regarded with frank, full-faced, casual scorn. It suggested Dickens at his cheapest to those who preferred Thackeray at his best. The Micawbers and the Stigginses belonged to it. Nor was there any doubt about *The Clarion's* sneering offensiveness. It was a narrow organ advocating noble aims. It flaunted that most horrible of combinations—venom and piety.

But this particular article surprised her into anger. Woman of the world that she was, mere insolence could not disturb her poise. But this was different. The stuff had restraint, intensity, a certain grim humour. It did not run about like a rabid dog. The characteristic slaver was absent.

She pushed the paper away after reading the article right through.

"I wonder who sent this? And I wonder who wrote those paragraphs? They are perfectly scandalous."

But were they scandalous?

She refilled her tea-cup, and sat looking through the mullioned window at the November sunlight playing upon the green boughs of the cedars. These trees were perfect, utterly satisfying in their stateliness, and stateliness was part of Ursula Brandon's nature. She loathed such vulgar crudities as the *Wannington Clarion*, and her loathing was justified. But this article! Boxall could never have produced it. The thing was like Emerson put up to preach in some mean-souled chapel.

"I believe that man Wolfe wrote it."

The thought surprised her in a new attitude. She was still angry, but there was no contempt in her anger.

"I must look into this. Crump had better come up and see me."

But this affair of the *Wannington Clarion* was to be hustled momentarily out of her mind. Standing at the window later in the morning, she saw Whitehead, the groom, come cantering up the drive. The man's face had a scared look. He had been sent out in charge of Aubrey.

Ursula Brandon went out into the porch.

"What is it, Whitehead?"

The groom dismounted. His eyes were afraid of Mrs. Brandon, and his chalky face glistened with clammy distress.

"It's Mr. Aubrey, ma'am. He's had a fall, ma'am."

"Is it bad?"

"A broken leg, ma'am, I'm fearing."

She drew a quick breath, a reflux of relief after an instant of suspense.

"How did it happen?"

The man looked ready to snivel.

"'Tweren't my fault, ma'am. Mr. Aubrey would do it. It didn't signify what I said. I tried to catch his bridle and he hit me with his crop."

"What did he do, Whitehead?"

"Put Blinker at a five-barred gate. The pony couldn't do it, ma'am. 'Tweren't Blinker's fault. They are bringing him back in Mr. Sanderson's cart. I thought as I would ride on."

"Thank you, Whitehead. Ride off at once and tell Dr. Threadgold to come over immediately."

The groom touched his hat, mounted, and went off like a coward galloping out of action.

Aubrey Brandon's accident provoked a comedy that had its touches of raw pathos. People who have been spoilt are bad at bearing pain, and the boy's cries

could be heard half-way to Navestock when Whitehead and another servant carried him up the stairs to his room. He bit the groom's hand as a dog that has been run over bites the hand stretched out to succour it. Things culminated when Montague Threadgold arrived.

"Bless my soul! Poor little man! Now, my dear, we'll see what we can do, shall we?"

Ingratiatingly benignant, he fussed with sympathy. The boy was still dressed in his mannish clothes, riding-breeches and gaiters muddy, one foot flopping out.

Threadgold's pink hands fluttered near.

"Now, my little man, we must be brave."

The boy sent up a fierce yell.

"You shan't touch it. I won't have it touched."

"Come, come——"

"Aubrey, dear!"

"He shan't—I tell you—the old fool."

"Aubrey!"

Threadgold attempted to rush the situation. The boy's eyes flared like the eyes of a cat. He hit out wildly, screaming with fear and fury. Threadgold's pink face was smacked. The hard young knuckles landed on his nose. He backed, readjusting his glasses, and began to sneeze.

"Aubrey——"

"I'll bite."

The boy was terror-mad, and unmanageable.

"Ha—tisshoo! ha—tisshoo. My dear madam, I——"

Threadgold's face was half-hidden in his silk handkerchief. His ears and neck were very red.

"I think—ha-tisshoo, it would be ad—tisshoo—advisable—to wait——"

Ursula Brandon's eyes looked through and over him.

"But that is impossible. The child can't be left——"

"My dear lady, perhaps you can soothe him."

It was attempted and it failed. Probably the boy's terror thrilled the more to Threadgold's bleating ineffectualness. Pain refused to be fumbled with. He fought them off.

"The old fool shan't touch me."

Threadgold withdrew into the shell of his pomposity.

"My dear Mrs. Brandon, it seems to me that someone had better attempt moral suasion. I——"

His helplessness fired her impatience.

"No doubt. But the child can't lie there."

"It is impossible to do anything with him."

The situation came roughly up against her pride.

"Have you any objection to my sending for Mr. Wolfe? We will regard it as an emergency."

"My dear madam, if Mr. Wolfe is summoned, I cannot for one moment think of meeting him."

His pique angered her, and made her sweep him aside high-handedly.

"I am sorry. But something must be done. I shall send for Mr. Wolfe."

And Threadgold departed.

Wolfe was shown into the panelled dining-room at "Pardons" two hours after Threadgold had left in a huff. A log fire burnt in the open fireplace, throwing a warm light on the Jacobean wainscoting that had not been Victorianised with paint or canvas and wall-paper. The inlay work and the carving over the fireplace were very fine. Wolfe was standing and examining it and warming himself at the fire when Mrs. Brandon entered.

She was wearing a dress of some tawny stuff that glowed like yellow metal in the brown light of the room. Her eyes looked straight at Wolfe, a little haughtily. Her pallor and her reserve were natural to her. Strangers were kept at a distance. Moreover, she wished Wolfe to understand that her sending for him was the result of sheer necessity.

"My son has broken his leg. Dr. Threadgold could do nothing with him. I sent for you."

"I see."

"It is an emergency."

She was brought to pause by the expression on Wolfe's face. It was as though he had said: "I understand you perfectly. But do not qualify your condescension. I am not the man to suffer it."

She said curtly: "Will you come upstairs? I must tell you the boy is very nervous."

Wolfe followed her in silence, like a physician summoned from a hostile camp to minister chivalrously to an enemy who lay ill.

Once in the room he walked straight to the bed, and held out a hand. Aubrey Brandon eyed him sulkily, a wild animal ready to bite.

"This is a piece of bad luck, sir. Too much daring, eh? They ought to have had a good run, too, out at Cheston. Plenty of room for a gallop."

It was the attitude of a man towards a man, frank, and unrestrained. After a moment's hesitation, Aubrey Brandon's hand came out. Wolfe gripped it gently, and sat down beside the bed.

"Trying a stiff jump, was that it?"

"Yes——"

"You rascal! That's where you dashing fellows show your pluck. I have had a broken leg myself, under a cart wheel in London. It makes a man grit his teeth, especially when a clumsy beggar of a policeman gets hold of you. No, I shan't hurt you much. It's just what I don't want to do."

The boy's face brightened perceptibly.

"You know—it does hurt."

"Haven't I felt it myself?"

"It takes some pluck not to yell."

"You're not going to yell."

He played up to the boy's vanity and quickened it.

"We shall have to take these gaiters and boots off, and those riding-breeches. And when we have got you nicely trussed up, we'll put you to bed. You see I shall just cut off the buttons, slit the laces and the seams, and pick you out like an egg out of a shell."

Aubrey's eyelids flickered.

"Do you think I might have a little brandy?"

"Brandy? No harm at all."

"I'm going to stick it—you see!"

"Of course you will. I would always rather look after a fellow who can ride."

Mrs. Brandon glided aside and rang the bell. When she turned Wolfe had brought his bag to the bed, and sitting down on the edge, he began to bring out bandages, wool, and splints with casual ostentation. He chose a scalpel from a case and showed it to Master Brandon.

"A good edge on that! You won't feel me taking off these boots and gaiters. I'll bet you sixpence you don't shout."

Ursula Brandon slipped round and sat down by her son's head. A shallow swagger had come into the boy's eyes. Wolfe had flicked the right mood. They were men of the world who understood each other. None of your "Poor little man, did 'ums then——"

Ursula Brandon, holding one of Aubrey's hands, sat and watched Wolfe at work. He was cheery, reposeful, unflurried, chatting while he worked, and keeping a watch upon the boy's face. His deftness and his gentleness were remarkable. Once

or twice Ursula Brandon glanced at the man's profile. She had a peculiar sense of being dominated, interested against her will. The article in the *Wannington Clarion* recurred to her. This was the man whose destiny it would be to utter such truths. The word truth forced itself forward. It was uncompromising, refusing to be represented by some urbane and euphuistical interpreter.

In half an hour Wolfe had Aubrey Brandon splinted up, undressed, and put to bed. There had been a moment's whimpering and some faltering of the boy's fortitude over the setting of the bone. Wolfe had handed the youngster one of his leather gloves.

"Bite into that, old chap. I know it will hurt for a moment, but we shall soon be through."

And Aubrey had borne the pain with patience that had surprised his mother.

She felt grateful to Wolfe, and impressed by the way he had handled the boy. Wolfe was packing up his bag, and talking to Aubrey.

"You went through like a Trojan. Now I want you to keep quite still, you know. The leg may hurt you a bit, and splints feel uncomfortable, but you'll grin and bear it. It won't last long."

He crossed over and shook hands.

"I say, do you remember stopping my pony in Bridge Street?"

Wolfe smiled.

"I do."

"You'll come again to-morrow?"

"If I'm needed—of course I will."

"I won't have old Threadgold."

"There, there, Aubrey, dear; don't talk so much. You'll tire yourself."

She accompanied Wolfe downstairs, one white hand gliding along the black oak rail, her feet making hardly any sound on the massive steps. Her stateliness and her suggestion of mystery were part of the house and part of its traditions. She was a woman to whom clumsiness was grotesque and repulsive. Pride and perfection of movement went hand in hand.

She was thinking as she descended the stairs, very conscious of the man behind her. He had not spoken since they had left the boy's room. Silence—even to a silent person—may be problematical and alluring. Ursula Brandon felt a sudden desire to touch the real inwardness of this man.

"Supposing there should be much pain?"

She turned into the dining-room, looking back over one shoulder, chin raised, the line of her throat showing.

"I can send you something to keep him easy. We don't want the splints torn off. But I understand that Threadgold will resume the responsibility."

She was surprised at her own answer. It escaped like some headstrong impulse.

"No."

"Then you wish me to come again?"

"If you will."

"But with regard to Dr. Threadgold?"

"He washed his hands of the case. The boy would not obey him."

The copy of the *Wannington Clarion* lay on the broad oak window-seat, a patch of whiteness in the sunlight. Wolfe was standing by the fire, feeling like a stranger in a strange land. He was a worker, and a man who had struggled, and the atmosphere of a house such as "Pardons" was unfamiliar and curious. The stateliness of its reserve resembled grave, critical, and unfriendly eyes. People who lived in these more spacious places were moved by different motives, and thought upon different lines. He had a vague feeling of oppression, of being in the midst of prejudices that he did not understand.

"Have you seen the article in this paper?"

She crossed the room, picked up the *Wannington Clarion*, and held it out to Wolfe. She watched his face as he took it from her.

"I don't know who sent it me. Such things make one angry for the moment."

"Yes; I know all about this."

He had a feeling as though all the ancestral shades that haunted "Pardons" had glided into the room, and were standing watching him, Cavaliers, Jacobites, Tories, aristocrats, mistrustful, lipped with scorn.

"I don't know who sent you the paper. I have read the article, because I wrote it."

He met her eyes.

"I had guessed that."

She was neither angry nor contemptuous. Her face had a white, serious gravity, and there was no mistrust in her eyes.

"I was angry at first. But there was a reasonableness, an absence of vulgarity ——"

"I assure you——"

"Yes, it was that one distrusts such a paper as this. It is so contemptible that—well—I had to get rid of prejudices."

She looked at him with frank earnestness.

"I know I may ask you——"

“Anything you please.”

“These things, they are true?”

“As far as I know truth.”

“Thank you.”

She turned away towards the window and stood looking out into the garden. Her attitude puzzled Wolfe. He did not know whether he was being frozen, or whether something finer than he had imagined watched and waited behind that colourless reserve.

He began to pull on his gloves.

“Mrs. Brandon, I can assure you of my sincerity. I am one of those men who want things altered. I am not a squabbling politician.”

“No.”

She remained at the window, her head radiant against the diamond lattice.

“Shall I come to-morrow? I know how easy it is to look at things differently.”

She turned and faced him.

“It was not in my mind to hint at such a prejudice. Though I thank you for feeling it for me. I want you to take care of my son.”

Wolfe’s manhood bent to her with instant chivalry.

“Thank you. I appreciate this.”

He went out, feeling vaguely astonished.

## *CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT*

IN dealing with the state of Navestock town the *Wannington Clarion* disappointed all those readers who liked to coat their texts with mud before they slung them. The paper had been disciplined, and taught to handle facts. There was an absence of rant that surprised Navestock, and made mean, circuitous gentlemen such as Mr. Wilks feel uneasy. Some god stood behind the gods, restraining, directing, launching these cool, judicial revelations. Boxall's proof-sheets were slashed and amended by some autocratic and shrewd blue pencil. Personalities were banned. There were the facts to quarrel with, and nothing more.

Turrell sneered, but there was exasperation behind his scorn. He understood ordinary newspaper warfare, the writing of annihilating letters, the damning of enemies as political demagogues. But *The Clarion* had developed new tactics. The Radical dog was not snarling so that the Tory dog could snarl back. It had dropped the old bombastic, pyrotechnic volley-firing. Turrell had a suspicion that he was being attacked by some new sort of scientific artillery.

"They'll soon get tired of it," he said to his son; "who the devil cares what this rag has to say! We just sit tight and let them fire off their lies. Take no notice of the stuff, stand on one's dignity."

Tor—the swashbuckler—showed a savage desire to do something dramatic.

"Look here, Dad, are we going to take this thing lying down? We know who's at the bottom of it."

"That fellow Wolfe."

"Yes, and old Crabbe. One can't thrash a dotard, but as for the sawbones——"

"Let him alone, Tor, let him drown in his own stink-pot. We don't want all the fools in the town to think that he has rooted up anything that we are afraid of."

Then those who ruled *The Clarion* did a subtle thing. In the same week's issue there appeared, side by side, a description of Lord Blackwater's admirably-managed estate and a survey of a portion of Navestock town. No conclusions were drawn, no morals pointed. Just the stark contrasts were set down in plain language. Those who read the two accounts could set facts beside facts, and draw their own

conclusions. On the one hand stretched the estate of a magnanimous and enlightened man, bred in the best traditions, and inspired by the consciousness of aristocratic responsibility. On the other hand men saw the slovenly and selfish cynicism of the mere bourgeois landlord. Someone had been very exact in his investigations. The description of the Blackwater estate was a masterpiece, fair, crisp, vivid, complete as to detail. The description of the lanes and river alleys in Navestock was no less exact and vivid. The sheer, contrasting power of the facts was deadly. The spirit of a grim sincerity pointed a damning finger, but uttered no names.

Navestock itself supplied the names.

Men said: "What will old Turrell make of that?"

"If I had those cottages of Wilks's, I'd pull 'em down."

Yet Navestock—proletarian Navestock—was not in the least grateful. It had been born and bred in dependence and servility. It mistrusted these over-strenuous people who seemed inclined to turn everything upside down.

"What's the good of baiting old Turrell? The man ain't perfect, but he spends his money here. And supposing, for the sake o' argument, they made him pull down all these there lanes, they couldn't make him put 'em up again, could they? You can't force a man to build! And supposing he shut up the brewery, and turned all the chaps out? What's to become of us as gets a living in the town? Yah—I don't hold with busybodies. We don't want so much o' this darned sympathy. There ain't enough cottages in the town as it is. We want to be let alone."

All the world loves to see things happen dramatically, and Hector Turrell had a sense of the dramatic. He was applauded and egged on by the young bucks and toadies who forgathered in the billiard-room of the White Hart Hotel. Young Turrell was the George IV of Navestock, the first gentleman in the town, and its foremost dandy.

These knowing bucks, these gorgeous men of the world rallied to him enthusiastically.

"Ba Jove! that's the game! Give the fellah a thrashin'!"

"Supposin' we duck the bounder in the river?"

"Or put him down one of his own wells! He seems fond of wells!"

Hector Turrell twiddled a stout cane, leaning against the billiard-table, his hat on the back of his head.

"I'm going to hunt the chap out. You fellows can come along and watch. But keep out of the way. I don't want any interference."

They beamed about the beloved one.

"Interference! Listen to him!"

"As if he'd want it!"

"Swop me bob, somebody else will be callin' for the police."

This young god, ambrosial-breathed, Homeric, strode forth through Navestock town. He had a copy of the *Wannington Clarion* in his pocket, and a stout cane in his big right fist. His satellites followed, keeping him in sight—ornate, fleshy young men, plaid-bellied, triumphant as to trousers, diffusing through Navestock "beauty and genius and joy."

Hector Turrell arrived at Mrs. Loosely's gate. He prodded it open with one end of his cane set against Wolfe's brass plate. Mrs. Loosely's maid was polishing the brass knocker on the green front door.

The maid was ugly. One could have discovered that without looking at her by noticing the expression in Hector Turrell's eyes. He looked at an ugly woman as he looked at a crock of a horse.

"Mr. Wolfe in?"

"No, sir."

"Know where I can find him?"

"I do believe he went across to Mr. Crabbe's, sir."

"Right."

He made off in the direction of Josiah Crabbe's, waving his cane to the Brotherhood of the Billiard Room that had waited at a discreet distance.

Chance so arranged it that Wolfe was coming out of Josiah Crabbe's gate when Hector Turrell appeared at the end of the lane leading to Eve's Corner. It was a quiet part of the town, and the only other person to be seen was the Navestock knife-grinder and mender of umbrellas at work at his hand-cart under one of the Lombardy poplars farther along the road. Hector Turrell, galloping for the dramatic moment, would have preferred more publicity. Yet the Fraternity of the "White Hart" would be there to witness the episode, and Timothy Bumby the knife-grinder was as ubiquitous a gossip as could be desired.

Turrell walked on to meet Wolfe who had turned in his direction. The footpath running at the bottom of Josiah Crabbe's stone wall was a narrow one, and there was not room enough for two people to pass each other without one of them either stepping into the gutter, or standing back against the wall. Wolfe was walking with his eyes on the ground.

"Good morning."

Wolfe was brought up sharply within five feet of young Turrell. The shallow glare in the eyes, the grin about the mouth, were unmistakable. Wolfe, who had fought navvies in his time, knew the look. It was the gloating face of a bully, insolent and

triumphant.

"Good morning."

He tugged at something in his pocket, and brought out a copy of the *Wannington Clarion*.

"One word, please."

"What do you want?"

"You know this rag, I suppose?"

"I suppose I do."

Wolfe's voice was curiously quiet. His face seemed to harden and grow more rugged. He heard Josiah Crabbe's gate open. Adam Grinch had come out and was standing there, watching. Moreover, along the railings on the opposite side of the road half a score "gay dogs" had hung themselves in attitudes of lounging expectancy.

"Look here, did you write this stuff?"

"What has that to do with you?"

"A good deal, when it comes to blackguarding my father."

"It says nothing against your father."

"None of your beastly quibbles. Did you write it?"

"I did."

There was the sudden whirl of an arm as Turrell dashed the paper in Wolfe's face. He raised his cane, and made a grab at the collar of Wolfe's coat. The clutch was parried by the jerk of an elbow.

"Wait. If you want——"

"You damned cur——"

"I warn you——"

"I'm going to give you the best thrashing——"

Adam Grinch was clumping along the path, but fate had struck before he reached the pair. Hector Turrell had been sent sprawling by a drive on the jaw.

The knife-grinder had ceased treddling his grindstone, and was standing in the middle of the road. He spat to emphasise the state of his feelings. The Brotherhood of the Billiard Room had lost some of its jauntiness. Adam Grinch had come up behind Wolfe.

"He's a powerful young beast, Mr. Wolfe, sir."

"All right, Grinch."

"Darn it," said the knife-grinder, "he is all right—surely."

Turrell, a little dazed and astonished, was up and at Wolfe like the mere brutal slogger that he was. His savage self-confidence, and the lust to smash his man were

all against his chances. He was up against an expert fighter who had the reach and height of him, and the deadly *sang-froid* of a perfect temper. Wolfe, in his student days, had fought and beaten better men than Hector Turrell.

The Brotherhood of the Billiard Room wilted along the opposite railings. The knife-grinder chuckled, and heaved himself. Wolfe, with head well back, seemed to brush Turrell's arms aside as though they were mere sticks. His crisp, sinewy punches landed serenely. He looked unmarked, unbothered. Turrell had been down twice before his boon companions stormed across and smothered him.

"Let me go, Ally, damn you——"

"The chap hit you a cad's blow. You weren't yourself."

"Hold on, Tony."

"Let go, you fools."

"Shut up, we don't want a fuss. Someone go across and square old Bumby."

They smothered their idol, picked up his hat and cane, and crowded him away. A man who knows himself beaten is persuadable at times, despite his oaths and valiancies. But Bumby, the knife-grinder, was not persuadable.

"Go along with ye, Mr. Tofts—not me. I ain't one as takes money to see a good fight. What! Half the town will be mad to stand me drinks over the telling o' this—and you knows it."

"You old scoundrel!"

The knife-grinder chuckled.

Adam Grinch was standing at Wolfe's elbow, brown-armed and solemn, a strong man and a Puritan proud of a strong man's strength.

"That was a judgment o' God, sir. Will you come back into Mr. Crabbe's and wash your hands? There's Philistine blood on 'em."

Wolfe's eyes still had the battle shine in them.

"There is not much the matter with me, Adam. I'll go on to Eve's Corner."

Grinch went in, and found Josiah Crabbe standing outside one of the french windows. He was ready to start on his daily walk round the garden, and his black cloth gaiters made his legs look like the legs of a turkey. A frail figure, indeed, yet frail with a terrible fragility, thin-edged as flame.

"What was that fuss, Adam?"

"You heard it, sir?"

"I did."

"That son of Belial, young Turrell, trying to thrash a better man than himself."

Crabbe's eyes sparkled fiercely.

"The son of a bully, Adam! What happened?"

“He was struck by the fury o’ God, sir. Mr. Wolfe’s a fighter, a mighty man with his fists. He’s been learning young Jabez to box; seems he’s a master of it. He near knocked young Turrell’s head off.”

The gold snuff-box came out.

“Have a pinch, Adam.”

“I don’t mind if I do, sir.”

“Hey! what a grand day for the Turrells! They’ll jump for joy, won’t they! That’s good—that’s good. Spread it about the town, Adam. Spread it about.”

“That’ll be done, sir. Timothy Bumby the tinker was looking on. You know what they call Bumby, sir? ‘Frothing Tim.’”

“Let him froth.”

He felt in his waistcoat pocket and brought out a crown piece.

“Go and give that to Bumby, Adam. Spin it under his nose. Tell him to froth all over the town. You should have called me to see it, Adam. A Turrell thrashed in Navestock! We’re getting on, we’re getting on.”

## *CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE*

"PITY! There's a great deal of pity wasted on the poor. Bless my soul, they don't feel things as you think they feel them. If you let yourself be persuaded by all this sentimental nonsense, it may cost you thousands of pounds."

Thus old Crump warming his coat-tails before a roaring fire at "Pardons," radiating a fatherly slyness, and talking to cheat John Wolfe of the compassion he had stirred in the heart of Ursula Brandon. Young Aubrey, his leg in plaster-of-Paris, was able to hobble about with two sticks. He had developed a curious liking for Wolfe. Crump, the cynic, suspected that the mother had followed the example of the son.

"I can't confess to much love for the poor."

"You are quite right, madam; they are not lovable. Leave them alone. Whatever you do, they'll grumble."

"But one has responsibilities."

"And we fulfil them. Suppose you tell me that it is Mr. Wolfe's opinion that Navestock should be turned upside down, I answer you, 'My dear madam, it is Mr. Wolfe's business to have such opinions. Every man's profession, including the profession of religion, is his business. Never take a so-called expert too seriously.'"

She looked past the lawyer into the heart of the fire.

"Do you suggest that the man is not sincere?"

"I suggest nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he is a thing that I abominate—a fanatic. This sort of man rides his hobby to death. And he is ready to fight for it—as young Turrell discovered."

Ursula Brandon glanced at him with those enigmatic eyes of hers, eyes that had always puzzled Crump. He had never felt sure of the woman. She was one of those who said "Yes"—"No"—and thought her own thoughts. People who will not argue cannot be cornered and pinned to the wall.

"Was there anything in that piece of gossip?"

"Hector Turrell went out to thrash and got thrashed. That much is certain. I for

one did not grieve."

He pretended to look straight ahead, but the corner of one porcine eye was watching her. He saw a curious glint of emotion flit across her face. It might have been nothing but a flickering of the firelight. She did not commit herself by a single word.

Crump fluffed himself up.

"Arrogant young cad—that! Well, my dear madam, you think this over. Don't let a sort of false pity run away with your cheque-book. These affairs ought never to be dealt with till the mind has had time to settle. You are off in a fortnight, eh? Italy first? Just think of it, here's an old duffer who has never been out of England!"

It was Crump who did more than any other man to consolidate the opposition in Navestock against Wolfe's reforms. He had a reassuring and cynical shrewdness that smiled all extravagant opinions out of court. To an uneasy, conscience-stricken client the smile said, "Fudge! Don't fight the other man's case for him, my dear sir!" He was a safe man, was Crump. When he had once taken up a position, it was not easy to turn his flanks. He knew the ground too thoroughly, and what was possible and what was not. He advised Fabian tactics, going about Navestock with a waggish air, and ready to be ironical.

"I am a lawyer," he said to Wilks, "and I stand by the law. If there is any movement or any idea that does not come within the horizon of the law, then, sir, for me it does not exist. What has not been legislated upon does not matter. You know who you have got against you. Old Crabbe is at the bottom of most of it. They can't do anything so long as you gentlemen don't wobble."

Crump even purged Robert Flemming, temporarily, of the doubts that had afflicted him.

"An enthusiast always overstates his case, sir. Let things lie quiet for a year, let the mud settle. Then we may see the bottom of the pond. I abominate flurry. It is preposterous to think of our being hustled into some wild scheme by old Crabbe and a pair of fanatics like Wolfe and Boxall. No. Let us take any useful hints, but let us make our reforms at our own time and in our own way. It doesn't do to let passion into these things."

"But supposing an epidemic should arise?"

"That is one of their platform words, Mr. Flemming. It's a ghost made of a sheet and a broomstick. I know that kind of ghost."

Consciously, or unconsciously, Navestock adopted Crump's attitude of stolid, sensible cynicism. The Tory paper, extraordinarily wise for once in its career, ignored the whole business. Boxall, of *The Clarion*, kept up an absurd trumpeting, but the

walls of Jericho did not totter. Hardly a head appeared above the battlements to see what was happening in the plain below. The watcher on the walls saw nothing but palm trees, and a ridiculously lean and leaping dervish blowing at a trumpet and waving a red flag.

Then winter came, and with it phenomenal December floods that washed all theoretical squabblings into temporary oblivion. The Wraith overflowed its banks and swamped the river meadows and the low-lying parts of the town. For days Navestock was smothered in fog, with flood-water swirling through half-choked bridge arches, and turning the lanes and alleys into miniature backwaters. Punts plied in some of the streets. Across the meadows one saw the shock heads of the pollard willows rising out of the water. The fields were squares of tarnished silver edged with the dark lines of half-submerged hedges.

The flood had Biblical leanings, in that it lasted seven days. It left Navestock sodden and depressed. The raw, stagnant air was smitten through and through with frost. The floors and foundations of many of the cottages were so much pulp. Wolfe, with Turpin splashing through the black flood-water, had prophesied a bad winter for Navestock in the way of sickness. He was right.

By the middle of December Wolfe found himself up to the throat in work. It was forced upon him, despite his unpopularity, by the fact that he had become necessary to the town. Threadgold's new assistant was an amiable and bleating fool. Wolfe ran up against him now and then, a thin youth with puzzled spectacles, a huge forehead, and a weak, conciliatory smile. The man was a muff, and the people would have none of him. He could not even gossip to the old women. The children called him "Old Ba-lamb" to his face. Threadgold was run off his little pattering legs.

Squabbles about theories gave way before the importunities of facts. *The Clarion* turned aside to attack the riparian owners who were responsible for the waters of the Wraith. "Pardons" was empty, its mistress flown southwards where grey olive trees and a blue sea made the white walls of the South gleam more whitely. Robert Flemming was spending hours beside sick-beds. A new wing was being built at Turrell's brewery, and the Turrells were taken up with bricks and mortar. Josiah Crabbe had gone to bed with his first attack of bronchitis. Navestock was too busy for the moment to spend itself in quarrels. The combatants went into winter quarters, and waited for warmer and more litigious weather in the spring.

Old Crabbe, tucked up in bed, with a severe woman of sixty to wait on him, looked for Wolfe's visit as the event of the day. Most men are chastened by illness; Josiah Crabbe was not. His splutterings and wheezings were bellicose and emphatic. He sneered at the bronchitis-kettle that steamed on the fire, sneered at his own

water-logged chest, snapped at the severe woman, and so awed her that she spilt things. With Wolfe he showed a chuckling cynical amusement, as though he had somehow got the best of a bargain.

"What about your sinecure, eh? After all, the old man is getting something for his money!"

"Am I to say I am glad you are ill?"

"You are glad to work off on me some of your abominable pride!"

"Perhaps I am."

"Keep me alive, John Wolfe, or you will lose your very best patient."

"You haven't a chance of dying, sir."

"Oh, haven't I! You don't take my case seriously, don't you!"

"Your heart is in too good a condition."

"Bless my soul, fancy anybody talking to me about my heart! They swear down in the town that I haven't such a thing as a heart inside me. Perhaps it's a brass pump. We are not getting along very fast just at present, are we?"

"You mean with regard to our reforms?"

"Of course."

"Most of us seem to have other things to do just at present. Mrs. Brandon is in Italy; I hoped we might find a brave woman up at 'Pardons.' I am seeing my seventy patients a day."

"Doesn't that make them think, John Wolfe?"

"It might, if most of my patients weren't cottagers."

"Yes, they have sat down stolidly and don't mean to budge. I hear a good deal. I know the line that Crump has taken. Shrewd beggar—Crump. Wait till I'm well, though, and we'll explode another little powder-mine under them, scorch the breeches of their respectability. You have got to have me well by Christmas Day. See?"

"I think we shall do that."

"I have dined at my own table on Christmas Day for thirty years, and I don't like breaking habits. And you are going to dine with me."

Wolfe had been feeling Josiah Crabbe's pulse. He met the old man's eyes as he looked up.

"I am sorry, sir, but I have already made a promise for Christmas Day."

"Cancel it."

"I can't do that."

Crabbe's black eyes gleamed aggressively in his yellow face.

"John Wolfe, it would be better for you if you dined with me."

"As things stand, sir, I must refuse."

It never did to be apologetic with Josiah Crabbe. Let a man show a desire to conciliate or to please, and Josiah Crabbe despised him.

"So you are going up to Moor Farm?"

"Yes."

"Women! A household of women! What do you want to make a fool of yourself for, John Wolfe?"

"I don't look at it in that light."

"Why can't a man get along without all that bosh? I did, and I have never regretted it. Confound it, a man who means to do big things can't waste time on women. Life's too short. Sitting about on sofas and walking out by moonlight! Bah!"

Wolfe laughed.

"That's not my idea of it. I want a working mate. Women help us—sometimes."

"They'll spend your money, make you enemies, insist on your being dull and decent."

"There is always the exception."

Josiah Crabbe's eyes twinkled.

"They are all exceptions, sir, till you have lived with 'em. If you must play with the thing, get it over, get it done with. That's the best medicine for a man when he is mad. Three years of married life, and a squalling baby or two make him deucedly sane. He gets a new grip of himself and goes back to work. Work's the best wife I ever had."

"But a married man has something to work for."

"That's what everyone pretends—just to make the best of it. We are always trying to cover up our necessities with shams. Sentiment! Good Lord! It's just the gilding of the handcuffs."

Wolfe got up to go.

"Why shouldn't I come and have breakfast with you on Christmas morning?"

"Very well, come, confound you. Brimstone and treacle before dinner, eh? A cup of bitters to start the day on! I'm disappointed in you, John Wolfe. Petticoats! Good Lord!"

It turned out that on Christmas morning Wolfe had to walk to Josiah Crabbe's through three inches of snow. People had been grumbling at the wet winters, and at the sodden flatness of the average Christmas Day. God had not arranged things properly of late, and had not troubled to scatter frost and snow about with decent liberality. But, on Christmas Eve, snow clouds came out of a purple north, and Navestock town became one great white silence. By morning, roofs and chimneys

were capped with snow. The Lombardy poplars by Josiah Crabbe's were huge, white-bearded Druids. The clouds had broken, and a blue sky covered the world.

Quite early, before the church bells had begun ringing and muffled folk went plodding through the snow, Wolfe had to collar a boy and offer him a shilling to take a letter up to Moor Farm. "I can't get through with my work by noon," he wrote. "More messages and too much snow. You must dine alone. I will try to be with you by tea time."

The boy had his shilling, and a couple of mince-pies at the farm.

Jess was grieved.

"Why couldn't they let him have just this one day?"

Her mother acted while Jess deplored.

"Sally, keep the beef out of the oven. Dr. Wolfe can't get here by noon. We'll dine at six instead."

The sparkle was soon back in Jess's eyes.

"Shall I do it, Mother?"

"If you like, child. You had better let me."

"No, I want to try for myself. I wonder whether he will be surprised."

The window of Jess's bedroom overlooked the moor, and as she sat there before her glass she could see the vast white wilderness of the hills. The two cypresses were ribbed and flaked with snow, the late afternoon sunlight making their green tops still more splendid. The holly hedges had smoothly moulded copings. The stone path down the garden had been swept, and across the paddock went little black pit-marks left by men's feet.

Jess could get a glimpse of the sunset as she struggled with the black masses of her hair. Clouds were looming up in the west, and the sun, huge and red and round, went dropping into this mass of vapour. The west became a red furnace, the clouds pouring upwards like smoke, purple above, golden and blood-red below. The snow caught a faint, rosy flush. The trees were all spun over with golden cobwebs.

Jess, peering into her little swing-glass, saw red flakes floating in it against a blue-green sky. A wood fire roared in the grate. The room was warm and fragrant with the fragrance that lingers about old dower-chests and old houses. The glow of the sunset seemed reflected from the glass to Jess's face, making it luminous and alluring. The eyes were big, intent, mysterious, the red mouth sending out invisible vapour that made one little pool of silver on the glass. The purple of the piled-up clouds seemed caught in the masses of her hair, and the hands that struggled with it looked the colour of milk.

"Oh, bother!"

It was a complex business—this first piling up of rebellious hair, with stray tendrils escaping, and the whole mass threatening to tumble down like a cataract. Jess had her own conception as to how her hair should be done. She was prejudiced against nets, remembering how Miss Edith Wilks's hair looked like a sandy-coloured ferret stuffed into a rabbit-net. Ribbons, pins, and combs were scattered over Jess's dressing-table. She had borrowed her mother's hand-glass, and between it and her own little Georgian mirror, swinging in its mahogany frame, decision faltered hypercritically.

The back view of her white neck, and the hair piled above it, roused a storm of indignation.

"What a fright! Just like a mop on a new stick!"

Down came the hair again in exultant masses. Jess was losing patience, and a flamboyant impetuosity triumphed where nice care had failed. She gathered the black mass into two loose streams, wound them round and in and out with angry abandonment. Red ribbons were worked in above the ears, touches of impulsive colour.

"I don't care. So long as I don't look like Miss Plimley."

She studied herself again in the glass. The daylight was going, and the western sky turning to a coppery red. Jess lit two candles, and their flames were reflected in her pupils. The glass suggested to her in a vague and tantalising way that this passionate and undisciplined dressing of her hair suited her better than nets or side curls.

"It is not quite so bad now."

It was perfect, a dark, irregular setting to her clear yet irregular face. Meek, oiled smoothness, saintly symmetry were not for her. She needed a dash of abandonment, a something that was reminiscent of Lola Montez, to carry off her warmth, her fire and colour.

A long black skirt lay on the bed. Jess put it on, and, holding her head a little on one side, looked at herself in a long pier-glass. What a transfiguration! She went nearer and gazed at herself almost ruefully as though she were taking leave of an old friend. A solemn mood seized her. She drew a chair before the fire, sat down, and stared at the flames. Something was happening! She had changed suddenly. Life, too, had changed. For a moment she felt a passionate desire to throw herself back into the arms of the past.

"Jess, Jess, are you coming, child?"

She jumped up, buttoned on the simple black bodice, and fastened a white lace collar about her throat. She did not look at herself again in the glass, as though the

eyes of the free, romping past would gaze at her reproachfully. Blowing out one of the candles, she took the other, and went slowly down the stairs, finding the long skirt something of a problem.

"Mother!"

She was on the last step but one before she saw John Wolfe. He had been hanging his ulster on one of the pegs under the stairs. Jess paused with one hand on the rail, for Wolfe was standing and looking up at her with an expression that she did not understand.

"I didn't know you had come, John."

The candle trembled a little. She was on the fine edge between unreasoning laughter and unreasoning tears. The warm blood had rushed to her face.

"I did not expect this!"

"Isn't it horrid!"

"You call it horrid?"

To Wolfe the transfiguration was far above the level of mere playfulness. He felt his manhood hold its breath. The child Jess had vanished, and the woman Jess had walked down this steep, oak stairway out of the old-world into the new. Even the virginal slenderness of her figure suggested the woman, those smooth, sweet contours a little breathless with new emotion. Wolfe was conscious of awe, compassion, and an almost savage tenderness that set itself beside the slight figure like a grim and loyal dog.

"Why don't you say something, John?"

She laughed, yet with a flutter of timidity.

"Because I wanted to look."

"Oh, don't."

He reached up and took the hand that rested on the oak rail.

"Jess, a merry Christmas."

He lifted the hand and kissed it. Jess looked at him with a start of wonder, and saw in his eyes a new and amazing image of herself. The little Georgian mirror had not shown her that.

"A merry Christmas to you, John."

She looked at him with frank shyness, her throat still warm with colour, her eyes full of a glimmering self-consciousness.

"Come and see how we have decorated the room."

Mrs. Mascall found them there, Jess standing by the table and staring at a little gold watch lying in a leather case lined with green silk, Wolfe watching Jess's face with the eyes of a man who loved.

"John, you shouldn't have bought it!"

She met his eyes, and flushed with generous delight.

"Just look, Mother!"

"Bless my soul, you are growing up with a vengeance. And you have conquered that mop of hair."

Mary Mascall smiled at Wolfe, and was smiled at in return.

"John, I've got you nothing but a woolly waistcoat for cold weather."

"Just what I wanted."

"You were a dear to think of giving me this."

"Was I? Well, I think it is worth it."

"Worth what?"

"That is being inquisitive."

Christmas night was always a great night at Moor Farm. It was a night of lanterns over the snow, and of heavy boots being scraped and kicked against the kitchen doorstep. The farm hands came in coyly to their Christmas supper, watching their own womenfolk in clean aprons bustling to and fro. Wolfe and the Mascalls, eating their dinner in the keeping-room, heard the clomp of heavy feet and the growling of gruff voices.

"They seem solemn over there!"

"Wait awhile, John. They are queer chaps. They come in year after year, looking as shy and boobyish as a lot of calves. No one has a word to say till the beef has been done with, and a pot of beer emptied down. We shall have to go in presently for ten minutes. Old Joe Munday always makes a speech."

"Yes, standing on one leg, and scratching his head the whole time."

"Jess!"

It was a great evening—a broad, coarse, red-faced festival, with an abundance of beer and beef and pies. The men rose with a scraping of chairs when Mary Mascall and Jess went in to wish them all "good cheer."

Old Joe Munday was prodded up to make his yearly speech.

"Good ma'am—God bless'ee." That was his state opening which could never be altered, year in, year out.

The men drank healths all round, and rattled their hobnails on the brick floor. Presently they filed out, and round the house, and standing in the porch sang carols and Christmas hymns, Barnaby Goodge, the ploughman, making a melancholy buzzing on his bassoon.

It was ten o'clock when Wolfe rose to go. Jess helped him on with his ulster, and flitted across and opened the hall door.

"What a night!"

She went out into the garden, and looked up at the stars and the snow-splashed cypresses.

"Don't you catch cold."

"Come and look. It's wonderful."

Mary Mascall renounced any desire she may have had to go star-gazing. Wolfe joined Jess on the stone path that had been cleared of snow.

"Isn't it wonderful!"

Her white face was turned to a white moon, and all about her lay a white world, brilliant, mysterious, infinitely still. Tarling Moor seemed to touch the stars. Hedges and trees were all jet and foam. The shadows were as sharp-edged as the shadows thrown by eastern temples upon sand. The moonlight mapped out the stones of the path into clear and irregular outlines. Not a breath of wind, not a sound.

"One doesn't want to say anything."

She still gazed moonwards, and the firm white freshness of her face gave Wolfe a sense of infinite cleanness and of health. Mouth and eyes were soft and wonder-laden. The black hair was a splendid wreath.

They drifted to the gate.

"What a long walk you will have, John. I hope there won't be anyone waiting for you."

"I feel warm and happy. Nothing like happiness for an overcoat."

Her eyes caught the moonlight, clear, shy, glimmering eyes. Wolfe opened the gate.

"I wish I were coming part of the way, John. It would be splendid over the snow to-night."

"No; you must go in or you will be catching cold."

They stood with their hands resting on the gate, Jess within, Wolfe without.

"I like you with your hair up."

"Do you? I thought——"

"Don't do it too neatly. It wants to be blown a little by the wind."

She laughed softly.

"Now you must go, John."

"Good night."

The look in his eyes made her stretch out her hands and rest them on his shoulders. It was as though she understood of a sudden that the man was going away hungry.

"John!"

He bent and kissed her, reverently, with a kind of hesitating tenderness.
“Good night, Jess, dear heart.”
She met his eyes with solemn frankness.
“I am so proud of you, John.”

## *CHAPTER THIRTY*

THE "Jacobins" of Navestock foregathered at "The Crooked Billet" Inn, where Mr. Ragg kept the long back room wholly at their service. It was supposed to be a "smoking club," and there was a white spittoon beside each chair, but the blue-grey haze that trailed about the room at night was more suggestive of the smoke blown from the mouths of cannon. It was a grim brotherhood. With the candles burning along the bare deal table, the faces that shone up against the darker background of the wainscoted walls were rugged, austere, Cromwellian.

Adam Grinch was the warden. There were not more than twenty members, all of them mature men of the plain, shrewd, Puritanical type. Such humour as ventured about the room seemed to rattle a broadsword, and to stamp in horseman's boots. There was no vivacious chattering, but a hard biting of pipe-stems, and a kind of dogged, cautious reticence. A member threw a statement on the table, so to speak. His brethren would eye it solemnly before criticising it. No one said much. A laconic word here and there, a nod of the head, a cock of the pipe, a sagacious smile.

Everything that happened in Navestock appeared to be known by the Jacobins of "The Crooked Billet." They debated and sat in judgment on all the affairs of the town. And it was from this bare, bald room, with its Windsor chairs, its deal table, and its air of austere simplicity, that Josiah Crabbe drew all his intimate knowledge of the inner life of Navestock town. He was an invisible member, seeing and hearing with the eyes and ears of Adam Grinch.

A species of grim, toil-stained idealism drew these men together. Some of them had been Chartists, and looked at life with that terrible sincerity that is born of suffering and disillusionment. But the fighting, upward element prevailed. They were hard-headed men thinking hard-headed thoughts. The gist of their philosophy was that bad things can be made much better, and that intelligent grumbling makes for reform.

The remarks that passed across the table were ejaculatory, terse, and often vicious.

"'Tain't a free country when a man can't own the roof over his own head, and

the land he stands on."

"You can be free, Mr. Pillion, if you've got the money for it."

"Theory. Don't give me theory! The facts don't tally. Is it a free country when the landlords let their cottages go to ruin, just to get rid of the labourers and save themselves in poor rates? Is it a free country when a man who has thousands of acres won't sell you a square foot when you offer him good money?"

"It's a conspiracy," said old Clarke, the watchmaker, from his seat in a corner. He would sit in silence for half an hour, blinking and rubbing his right forefinger against the side of his nose, and then hoot in with his shrill, nagging voice.

"It's a conspiracy."

"What's a conspiracy?"

"What they call society. You can't blink it. They arrange things, don't they? Put up palings round everything. The lawyers are always ready to nail up new notice boards."

"Just take this town f'r instance."

The pipes bobbed in sympathy.

"We've a poor lot here. Wallowers. Don't mind rooting in sties. They don't want anything better."

"It's edication they want."

"Yes, and when will they get it?"

"When we get manhood suffrage, and the ballot."

"They won't thank you, neither, for wanting to edicate 'em."

"Not they. Now, up in the north, it's different. It makes me tired talking to these Navestock chaps. They've no sense o' smell. Can't see things any more than a mudfish. 'Let us alone,' that's their cry; 'we don't want t' lose the tuppence for our beer.'"

"It wants the fear o' God and the angel o' death in this rank old town." This from Grinch, black-bearded, bronzed, dangerous.

"The doctor—he knows. He's a straight 'un."

"I should like to see half the plagues of Egypt——"

"You may see them, friend, yet, before all the little Pharaohs are scared into being men."

Perhaps the March winds roused Navestock out of its wet, winter lethargy; perhaps the stagnant blood of the town moved with the spring. There were events, too, that gave the bankrupt beer-houses something to gossip about. Robert Flemming, that red tower of health, had gone down with pneumonia, double, of course, no decent Christian ever suffering in only one lung. Flemming had been dead

three times, had asked for John Wolfe to be called in, and had ordered Dr. Threadgold out of the house. These were Navestock facts! Then one of the Lombardy poplars had been blown down close to Josiah Crabbe's house, and his enemies pointed superstitious fingers. A two-headed calf had been born in the town. Sams, the baker, had been bitten by a rat, and was likely to lose his hand. There was some vague talk, too, of a mysterious "petition" that was being presented to the mysterious great people in London, requesting them to shake the sloth out of the Navestock Board of Guardians.

There was no doubt about the petition. It had been passed round at the "Crooked Billet," and the Jacobins had drawn their chairs up to the table, pushed a pen and inkstand from member to member, and set their sprawling signatures to the document, more than one man having to make his cross.

Josiah Crabbe kept this petition for three days before sending it on its way. It was as though the thing fascinated him as the keen blade of a stiletto fascinates the man who has waited years to use it.

A month passed before things began to happen. The Lords of the Council were serene, distant, contemplative gods, and Navestock was an obscure town. The eyes of the gods did not hasten to regard it.

It was on the twenty-third day of April that a closed fly from Wannington left a tall, bony man outside Josiah Crabbe's iron gates. He disappeared within, and the carriage drove off to put up at the "White Hart." The big, bony man remained for an hour or more in Josiah Crabbe's house. When he reappeared it was with John Wolfe. They were talking with that steady intensity that characterises men who take life in earnest.

Some figures are arrestive, and Wolfe's companion was a man who caught the eye. Tall, lean, with projecting shoulders and a hollow chest, his face was like the face of a marvellously wise and sardonic ape. He was seen at various points and by various people—a gaunt Dante led by Virgil through a succession of insanitary hells. An ugly man, with his grey eyes that judged everything, his long, sharp-lipped mouth, a nose that broadened out at the nostrils, a great rock of a chin, bushy eyebrows, and lank, grey hair.

Wolfe and the stranger appeared to be in perfect sympathy. They explored, and stood in judgment. The elder man betrayed occasional flashes of grim amusement. He rubbed his granite chin, strode in and out of back yards and alleys, utterly ignoring any curiosity that he aroused. Children loitered about; women stared from doorways. This imperturbable critic went about his business as though Navestock were an interesting ruin, and he was making an archæological survey.

"Yes, pretty bad. I don't think I have ever seen a worse collection of pigsties. A fairly cynical lot—your city fathers!"

"I suppose it is natural."

"Of course it is. I have known the very best of men absolutely blinded by class prejudice and tradition. Anything is good enough for a labourer. Though there are plenty of exceptions. Those samples of well-water you sent me were sufficient to damn any town. Now where does this dear old duffer of a family practitioner live?"

"I'll show you the way."

"A matter of etiquette. We must let him know what is going on."

"I agree with you. I am sorry for the old chap."

"Sorry! It is immoral to feel sorry for duffers."

Wolfe left the expert outside the doorway of Prospect House. Mulberry Green looked sleek and pleasant with its red-faced houses, fresh grass, and white painted posts. Its respectable aloofness was so characteristic, so biblical.

When the bony man emerged from Prospect House his face looked narrower, harder, keener. It was as though it had been cleaving into some soft, pulpy substance. Yet in its way the interview had been amusing.

"Swelling himself out like the frog in the fable!"

He started walking with long ferocious strides.

"Delicious old Pharisee!"

He had left a little man pulped behind him in the pleasant, contemplative Georgian house.

A fortnight later it became known in the town that some phenomenal thing had happened. A special meeting of the Board of Guardians had been called. Newspaper reporters came from Wannington and even from Pluckstead and Wisborough thirty miles away.

To put the matter briefly, the Navestock Board of Guardians had been warned by the Lords of the Council that they had been petitioned to investigate the sanitary condition of the town, that they had sent down an expert, and that he had reported that the state of the town was a scandal. The Lords of the Council desired to place these facts under the noses of the Navestock Guardians, and trusted that they would proceed to remedy all abuses!

The meeting became historical, so far as Navestock was concerned. Robert Flemming, the one man who might have striven to lift the discussion out of the slough of selfishness, was away at a sea-coast town, recovering his health. Jasper Turrell took the chair, but the whole drama revolved round Crump the clerk, pink-cheeked, confident, cynically amused.

These men of property had been running to him like children.

"Look here, Crump, what the dickens are we to do about this? We shall be landed in a pretty mess!"

"Good heavens, Crump, if they force this on us we shall be half-ruined. What! A sewage system, water-works, replacing some of the cottages! Preposterous! Where's the money to come from?"

Crump had patted each on the head and comforted him.

"Sit tight and refuse to be dictated to by these people in London. I am not a believer in the over-centralisation of authority. Local government is the thing. They have no power at present to compel you to act. Besides the whole affair is a huge piece of jobbery."

Thus each member came to the meeting convinced upon three points: Firstly, that this business might cost him personally a great deal of money; secondly, that it was nothing but a piece of savage political spite; thirdly, that the Board was supreme in Navestock and could not be coerced. The result of their deliberations was easily deducible from these three known quantities.

Wolfe had the whole account of what took place from Boxall of *The Clarion*. This red-headed firebrand had been present, and had come away with flames of scorn and wrath issuing from his throat. Wolfe met him in King Street as he was walking from the workhouse in the direction of Peachy Hill.

"It is all over, sir, all over. Their blood be upon their own heads."

He tried to talk calmly, without any prejudice, or any gnashing of teeth. But the fire within would not be smothered. His rabid mouth began to snarl and to declaim.

"Yes; they were all there, sir, with Turrell in the chair. He had his sneer at me directly I went in. 'That's right, Mr. Boxall, we want all the representatives of the Press here. Sit down and put it all on paper. We don't want any hole-and-corner business. Impartiality—you stick to that!' Impartiality! I could see most of them turn and look at me, and their sulky, sneering faces. My God, sir, the humbug of it! They had old Threadgold there, and they made him get up and pump out his opinions. His opinions! The man looked yellow, and all gone flat. He stuttered, and lost himself. You could see Turrell biting at his beard; he was savage. You could feel the greed in the room like a raw fog. It stuck in their throats. Pharisees!"

Boxall walked on his toes, his whole body moving jerkily as though it were some mechanism worked by steel springs. His gestures were grotesque, almost hysterical. His words flew out as though they were afraid of being bitten.

"Do anything? Not they! They said openly—Turrell himself said it—that the thing was a political job. They refused to be talked down at by the bigwigs in London.

Crump's face! Running over with smug, shrewd smiles. He'd prompted them."

Wolfe felt a grave disgust for Boxall. The man was too venomous, too wet about the mouth. His red head might have been rolled out of a furnace.

"Then they refused to do anything?"

"They have sold themselves to the devil."

Wolfe's silence was more impressive than the journalist's spitting scorn.

They reached Peachy Hill and the stone house by the Lombardy poplars. Josiah Crabbe was sitting in his garden, his red handkerchief across his knees, a frail black little figure that watched and waited.

They told him the news.

"What else did you expect!" he said with a flash of the eyes at Boxall.

"God's not in this town, sir."

"You have got God on your side, have you, Boxall? They have damned themselves to-day, though it may take years to prove their damnation. John Wolfe, if I prayed, sir, I should pray for just one thing."

"And that?"

"Cholera."

They looked at him in silence, this grim old man who was ready to let Death loose in order to prove the virtues of clean living.

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE*

IN order to judge the little world of his everyday life, a man must escape from it for the moment, climb some high place, and look down on it from above. It should be like leaving the narrow ways of a town, ascending a Gothic tower, and leaning over the parapet. Astonishment! Shocked incredulity! Below a little jumble of roofs and chimneys and deep black grooves, grooves into which life thrusts itself and burrows a monotonous way. Narrowness, confinement, habit. The eyes look farther afield and behold marvellous things hidden from the people in the streets; perhaps, the infinite green spaces of spring; perhaps, wet woods in autumn—mist-wrapped—splashed here and there with sunlight; perhaps, great glooming headlands and a purple sea. Those little black grooves in the town below; that life like the life of a mouse running round and round in a cage.

Hyères, Mentone, the Italian lakes, white towns dipping into a sea of amethyst, cypresses, green, sudden and solemn, oranges and lemons in yellow clusters, peach trees pink among the vines. The mistral blowing now and again, snow on the mountains, more wet colour in the pines. To pass northwards out of this, to touch the northern seas, to watch dreary chalk cliffs rising out of a raw, fog-laden north-east wind!

A home-coming is not always an emotional orgy. On the contrary, it is often an excursion into criticism, cold, merciless, and depressing. Nor could anything have been more depressing than the drive from Wannington to Navestock that day in May. A dripping, steel-grey sky, a bleak north wind, a shivering landscape trying to huddle itself into its half-spun robe of green.

Ursula Brandon sat and stared out of the carriage window, white-faced and proud. Aubrey, tired out, was asleep in his corner, mouth open, head lolling to one side. It was difficult to believe that this was a land in the thick of the month of May. A leaden-eyed country, sulky and songless.

They passed through Navestock, Ursula Brandon lying back against the cushions. How small, poky, and obscure the town seemed. There were the usual loafers in the market-place with their sodden faces, hanging lower lips, and angry,

insolent eyes. Their silly, coarse gossip and their beery laughter broke out as soon as the carriage had passed. Ursula Brandon's tired pride flashed out with sensitive scorn. What barbarians these English were, absurd beasts who brayed at anything that seemed strange and new. They had not even learned the art of being picturesquely dirty. They wallowed. The country had the soul of a giggling, elbow-nudging slut.

"Pardons" was a relief. The cedars and the green lawns were perfect, beyond criticism. The house, too, had a presence, a mellow sureness. Her own servants were clean and quick, and had absorbed a surface culture. She noticed how different their eyes were from the eyes in the animal faces she had seen in the town.

In three days the weather changed. The sky became the colour of the wild hyacinths in the woods; the yellow broom blazed on Tarling Moor; the meadows along the Wraith were dusted over with gold. A few such sense-impressions may be miraculously productive. Ursula Brandon spent two days in her garden before something more than curiosity persuaded her to walk through Navestock town.

Her pride consented to go on foot, to make a pilgrimage, nor could she remember having taken six steps in Navestock except to cross the footway from a shop door to her carriage. She had never played the sentimentalist nor the aristocratic busybody running about to have her lecturings accepted for the sake of coals and blankets. A protesting sincerity made her choose parts of the town that she had never seen, never imagined. She, who had taken an æsthetic delight in exploring the quaint foulness of old Italian cities, walked through this English townlet and found it horrible. There had always seemed some symbolical colour scheme behind the high-shadowed and mysterious uncleanness of the South. But this English town could be grossly, even insolently dirty. Moreover, many of these sour and rickety alleys belonged to her. Money came from them to her, and she spent it. The thought shocked her as though she were taking the offerings of drunkards and low women.

People stared at Ursula Brandon, bobbed curtsies, joggled their hats. She went through the lanes and alleys, haughty-faced, holding her spirit aloof. Her nice pride recoiled. Pity did not touch her, though she felt her responsibility in the thick of her scorn. The essential cleanliness of the woman could not stoop to dabble its hands in cheapness and pollution.

The next day she sent for Crump, and held him to his cynicisms, under one of the cedar trees. The borders below the house were brilliant with tulips. The man and the woman sat in their chairs and talked.

"My dear Mrs. Brandon, I have already explained that all this was thrashed out and settled while you were away."

"I suppose that even a Brandon is allowed to have a conscience! You settle mine for me—in my absence."

"My dear lady——"

"I am not being sentimental, Mr. Crump. I have seen dirty towns in the South, but somehow, it seems different from English dirt. Perhaps it is the greyness and slime of a wet climate. I have come to feel suddenly that the money we take from that property is polluted."

He stared at her, nodding a whimsical head.

"If once we begin this they may say that a Brandon has been frightened."

"No."

She looked over and beyond the sly quibble.

"Imagine them paying their rents to me personally in greasy pennies. Faugh! I do not like the poor. I want to have nothing to do with them. But then—you see?"

Crump was the stolid lawyer, the shrewd defender of property.

"Then why vex yourself?"

"If my stables were as dirty as much of that Navestock property, do you think I should keep my coachman? A horse is a clean beast, and deserves to be better treated than most men. But those cottages! One's pride is piqued. It is intolerable that these inferior people should have a just grievance against their betters. No. We must do something."

Crump reflected, and then glimmered his little eyes at her.

"Of course, my dear madam, you will have to persuade your trustees."

"I shall persuade them, if necessary."

"No doubt, no doubt. But until they have considered the matter——"

She betrayed a sudden kindling anger that astonished Crump. He had always said that she was more like a beautiful corpse than a woman.

"I have not asked you here for you to collect all the objections you can think of. I expect a lawyer to legalise my wishes, not to contradict them."

He bowed in his chair, recognising the dominant voice of the aristocrat.

"We lawyers do not always make things too easy for our clients. And sometimes they live to thank us."

"No doubt. When you have talked them out of the folly of being honest."

Crump had had many bitter things said to him in his day, but he never remembered coming away from an interview with his teeth more acidly on edge. The woman had astonished him. She had always seemed too bored with life to trouble about matters of business.

The very next morning John Wolfe received a note from Mrs. Ursula Brandon

asking him to call at "Pardons" that afternoon. He was man enough to be pleased at the capture of such a house as "Pardons," the more so because its mistress was a woman of the world and not a mere provincial.

There was no one ill at "Pardons" but Ursula Brandon desired some moments of self-expression. A tea-table and a couple of basket-chairs had been set under one of the cedars. Wolfe left Turpin in the hands of a groom, and crossed the grass towards the trees. Ursula Brandon rose to meet him. She had the look of a great lady granting an audience, standing there in the cedar shadow with her wax-white skin and her burning hair. Mystery! The mystery of Arthurian women, of black Iseult and of golden Guinevere! This woman possessed it. She lured with silence and her aloofness. Men might wonder what was passing behind those sensuously-tired eyes.

"I wanted to talk to you. That is why I sent you that note."

Wolfe discovered a new animation in her. The white dress floated between the green of the grass and the dense, nobler green of the cedar.

"Take one of those chairs."

She had that complete calmness that dominates people of coarser breeding. Ursula Brandon was the one woman who made John Wolfe feel self-conscious, not quite sure of himself. The type was rare and unfamiliar. He had a suspicion, too, that he was a mere boy beside her in the matter of a wider, finer culture.

"You came back last week?"

"Yes. We had a few days in Paris."

"You enjoyed it?"

"Oh, no doubt."

She hurried these commonplaces aside with just a flicker of impatience.

"It clears one's eyes—to go abroad. I cannot explain it, but this time, when I came back, I saw Navestock as I had never seen it before."

"I can understand that. Contrasts?"

"It shocked me. An obscure and sordid little town full of obscure and sordid people."

A footman appeared on the terrace steps, carrying a large silver tray. The fellow was well made, and moved with a certain stiff dignity.

"Look at that man. He is one of the best servants I have ever had. I must have debonair people round me. I suppose you would call him servile?"

"No. I am not a French sentimentalist."

Her eyes gave a quick gleam as though flashing to a suddenly discovered point of sympathy.

"I am glad of that. I have a great deal to say to you. Thanks, Jones. Master

Aubrey is not back yet?"

"No, ma'am."

The man arranged the tea-things on the table with quiet deftness. He had the detached air of the well-trained servant. Wolfe watched him when he walked away across the grass.

"Discipline. It is a fine thing to learn to serve."

"To serve—without servility. I hate that as much as insolence. I wanted to tell you that I explored Navestock a day or two ago. Much of the place was as new to me as the Trastavere Quarter in Rome. It is abominably ugly."

Wolfe watched her white hands. They moved with a slow serenity, very beautiful with their flowing lines.

"More than ugly."

"To me that describes it. Everything that is unclean is ugly. Everything that is cheap and ignorant and vulgar is ugly. I am not posing. I tell you quite frankly that ugliness is my measure of immorality."

"There is a great deal in it. But, of course——"

"You are going to drag in the usual excuses. These English are barbarians. And you love them!"

"Yes, and no. Plenty of them would be better dead. Yet I have seen patience that is amazing."

"A virtue valuable in slaves! I detest the poor. It is instinctive. I cannot pretend to anything else."

"I wonder whether you deceive yourself?"

"You see, that is what always happens! People refuse to believe us when we tell the truth about ourselves. Do you know what has persuaded me to try and change some of the conditions in Navestock?"

"Pride?"

"The way my stables are kept, nothing more nor less. I would sacrifice a man any day to save a horse. But it is a question of pride, of something that I might call a selfish fastidiousness."

"Things are bad enough down there."

"And why? We humans are strange creatures; we are always trying to improve on nature, and creating unutterable ugliness. It astonishes me. Go into a wood in winter when everything is wet with decay, and you find beauty, nothing to disgust you. Wild country is always clean. Man, or rather the mob, is the great polluter."

"There are too many of us, perhaps."

"And yet you try to save the weaklings! Those old plagues and massacres had

their uses."

"We shall improve; we shall organise."

"Well, I want you to draw up a report on the state of my property in Navestock, and to make any suggestions that you please."

Wolfe looked at her searchingly. She seemed to have made up her mind upon an impulse.

"It will be a big business to make the town what it should be. Moreover, we shall need the co-operation of such men as Turrell."

"Perhaps nothing less than the plagues of Egypt will persuade some of the people. At all events, you will do this for me?"

"Nothing could please me better."

"And remember, I am not a philanthropist. I desire to have nothing to do with the lower orders. I only want them and their houses made less ugly."

Wolfe rode Turpin home at a walking pace, trying to decide in his own mind whether this woman had worn a mask or not. He still looked slightly askance at her, like a big barbarian brought before the love-weary yet imperious eyes of some Roman lady. She was a pagan, a lover of that strange beauty that had sealed the temple of her own body. So far as John Wolfe was concerned, there was something mysteriously alluring and mysteriously repellent about her.

He was inclined to believe that she was sincere enough in her scornful distaste for everything that was ugly. Inferior people disgusted her. Their crude emotionalism and their impertinent ignorance were not to be justified by their lack of opportunity. A woman apart, and a fastidious spirit, she preferred clean and well-tamed slaves to ignorant and unshaven independence.

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO*

THE previous summer had been hot and dry, but it was surpassed by the second summer that John Wolfe spent in Navestock. No rain fell between the first week in June and the middle of July, and the haymakers revelled. Day after day there was the same glaring blue sky, the same dry and dusty heat. Navestock smelt like a cheap and greasy cook-shop. The surface wells threatened to fail, and the Wraith itself had not been so low for years.

So far as "progressive amelioration" went, the town stood still. The trustees of the Brandon estate had refused to sympathise with Ursula Brandon in her hatred of ugliness. "My dear child," said the elder of the two, and it needed a very pompous and purblind old fogy to call Ursula Brandon "child," "I am a reasonable man, but what is the use of building glorified pigsties until you have reformed your pigs?" And there the project had stuck in the mire.

A succession of circumstances brought Wolfe into more intimate touch with Ursula Brandon. There was a directness about the man that disarmed even the distrust of a woman who had been disillusioned. She put much of her reserve aside, and gave him glimpses of her pride, her loneliness, and her detestation of all gimcrack morality. The woman had mysterious depths. She continued to perplex Wolfe, and therefore—to interest him. Her casual and serene frankness seemed to confide and to conceal.

Jess Mascall had her eyes upon "Pardons," unjealous and curious eyes that were a little proud of Wolfe's conquest.

"Don't you think she is very beautiful, John? She always makes me think of a queen left alone to rule a country, and too proud to say she is lonely. What does she talk to you about? She looks as though she listened and listened, and said nothing."

Wolfe and Jess were in their June days. Life was green and fragrant and splendid. They took things joyously, content to let their eyes meet in flashes of untroubled tenderness. It was just summer lightning. They did not bother their heads about the future. Being perfectly happy, it did not occur to them that they should pull their happiness to pieces and examine it.

"What does she talk to you about, John?"

"Sometimes things that I know nothing about. She is beyond me. Besides, Miss Mascall, I don't talk about my patients!"

"Now, John, don't be pompous! Of course I am not being inquisitive! Beyond you, indeed!"

Jess had shown him her sanctuary on Tarling Moor, and they lay in the shade of the furze and amid the thick of the fern fronds.

"A woman of the world is too subtle for an apothecary. She has travelled, and read, and seen other lives."

"I don't like clever people, John."

"Mrs. Brandon is more than clever—she is mature."

"What a raw thing I must be!"

They laughed.

"No, apple blossom. As for me, I'm direct; I just hammer at things. The wise people who look on and meditate puzzle me."

"You are the fighter, John. I wonder——"

"What do you wonder?"

She sat up, distant-eyed, yet intent.

"No, it's nothing."

"Out with it."

"I shan't tell you. Men can't be allowed to know everything, or to go everywhere."

"I never claimed such ubiquity!"

"Ubiquity! Someone is teaching you long words!"

"And you teach me the short, vital ones! My education will be complete."

It was in the thick of the summer days that Fate came and stood upon the heights of Tarling Moor and looked down on Navestock with her all-seeing and imperturbable eyes. She saw the little red town strung on the silver thread of the river, with its rows of poplars and its slender, soaring spire. Fate had chosen her emissary. She sent him into Navestock, and passed upon her way.

It was pathetic that such a vulgar little tub of beery good-nature should have been chosen as the vessel of wrath. He arrived from Wannington in the "White Hart" coach, with three beery and battered leather cases, the baggage of a commercial traveller. There was a ruddy robustness about him, a flashiness, a coarse self-confidence that helped to impress shopkeepers. He had a round, red, pudgy face, clumsy, sloping shoulders, and a queer shapeless figure, with elephantine arms and legs hung on anyhow. Fatness prevailed both in mind and body. His hands were fat,

his neck full of red creases, his manner towards women oleaginously gallant. His convivial and swelling waistcoat floated in wherever drink and gossip and gibes were to be had. He punned monstrously, and seemed packed to the brim with coarse stories and anecdotes.

The Commercial Room at the "White Hart" had known him for years. Gladwin, the landlord, and he were old and leering friends.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Gawtrey, sir."

"You're a glad wind all over! Always glad to win at ten to one; always glad to welcome a buffer! I say, I've got a ge-or-geous thirst. I've been dreaming of one of your rump-steaks and a jug of that porter. Put me on a pailful, old chap."

This Gawtrey was great in the private bar and in the billiard-room, being famous, too, for a fat tenor voice and sentimental songs. "She wore a wreath of roses," and "Meet me by moonlight—alone," oozed from him with fine feeling. In ten minutes he would be whispering some gross anecdote to a group of friends in a corner.

He was an immense admirer of Dickens, and was always quoting Sam Weller. The enthusiasm suited him and his business. He dragged Dickens about with him, and made him a sort of genial gossip to help in the procuring of "orders." Children thought him a kind of god. Sensitive people kept at a little distance, and avoided his breath.

This good creature fell ill in Navestock, and was laid up in one of the front bedrooms of the "White Hart." Threadgold and Mr. Tweedy attended him. Mr. Gladwin came and sat beside his bed. They called it a case of gastric fever, and wondered whether he would pay his bill.

"Gladdy, old man, just a little drop of that prime port of yours. Never say die, eh! Mark Tapley's the man for me."

Mr. Gladwin would shuffle upstairs with the port, and take half a glass himself to keep the sick man company.

"Never say die."

But he was scared and emotional. Threadgold would find him weeping, thinking of his sins and that coarse, soaking, orgiastic, good-humoured life he had lived for the last twenty years.

"What do you think of me, doctor?"

Threadgold cooed over him.

"Rest, my dear sir, perfect rest for a week or two, is what you want."

And he rested for all eternity. He became delirious, then comatose. At the end of three weeks Robert Flemming buried him in Navestock churchyard. A tall, meagre woman had arrived, and followed the coffin. She stood beside the grave in her new,

cheap black dress, fluffed out with yards of crape. There were no tears in her eyes, and her poor, plain face looked dazed and pitiful. She stood and stared into the grave. The man had been genial and jocose to all the world. She had known him as the husband and the grumbler.

Wolfe heard a vague report of the case, and his professional curiosity was piqued. It was only after the man's death that certain significant details came to his knowledge through the mouth of one of the *habitués* of "The Crooked Billet." Wolfe had a feeling that they had not heard the end of the matter, and that the man Gawtrey had not had the decency to die of a disease that Threadgold and young Tweedy had diagnosed.

It was Josiah Crabbe who surprised Wolfe by putting his own thoughts into words.

"Queer case, that of the fellow at the 'White Hart.' Heard about it?"

"Yes."

"That's generally the way things have come to a town like this. I've known pedlars and roving harvesters bring smallpox. They have bundled the chap underground; but supposing he has left something behind him?"

"That's just what had crossed my mind."

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE*

A FORTNIGHT later Wolfe was called into one of the red brick cottages in Mill Lane, and found a youngster of seven sitting beside a bed and fanning her mother with the top of a cardboard box.

"It's my head that's bin so bad, doctor—ache, ache, ache fit to split. And I be that feverish! And me with all the 'White Hart' washing to be done by Saturday!"

"How long have you been ill?"

"I've bin dragging about for days, doctor, maybe a week."

"Do you do all your washing here?"

"Yes, I've got a washhouse."

"Is there anyone else ill in the lane?"

"Not as I've heard of, doctor."

Within a week Wolfe had five more fever patients in Mill Lane. The little washhouse with its tubs emptied into the backyard, the public well not twenty yards from the washhouse, the man who had died at the "White Hart," these were so many puzzle-pieces that made a pattern when they were fitted together. An ironical chance seemed to have pitched upon Mill Lane. It was a clean, rambling street ending in the white pother of the mill-pool, and always full of the noise of tumbling water. The great wagons creaked over its cobbles. The cottagers had their little strips of front garden, and it was pre-eminently the lane of birds. No fewer than three thrushes, a goldfinch, a blackbird, two bullfinches, and a couple of doves hung in cages on the cottage walls. One was met by the singing of birds, the plashing of water, and the rumbling of the mill.

Wolfe was very cautious about those cases in Mill Lane, as cautious as it behoved a man to be when he was storing evidence for the damning of his enemies. He had a London expert down to Navestock, paid the fee out of his own pocket, and was upheld in his opinion.

"Cases spreading, are they?" said the great man; "you are in for a warm time here."

They were.

Wolfe never forgot the evening when he went to break the news to Josiah Crabbe. The Lombardy poplars were black against a July sunset as he walked down from Eve's Corner. The summer twilight suggested a stage effect, with Navestock posed for the beginnings of a tragedy. It seemed tranquil and unsuspicious, with its crowded chimneys and its cobbled streets. Two of the Mill Lane cases had ended fatally that morning, and the disease had shown itself in some of the neighbouring lanes and alleys. Wolfe knew what he knew. The thing would run through Navestock like wildfire. The hopeless condition of the town, the hot, dry summer, the obstinate ignorance of the people—these spelled death.

Josiah Crabbe had finished supper, and had had his chair carried out to the gravel path in front of the house. The square-cut outlines of the yew hedges showed like black battlements against a primrose sky. Youngsters were still playing in some neighbouring lane, their voices sounding loud and near. Bats flitted about the square stone house. The smell of dew rose from the grass, and dim restfulness lay like sleep over the great garden.

"Bring out a chair, John Wolfe. And open the flap of the bureau. You'll find a box of cigars inside."

"Will you have one, sir?"

"You have brought me news, haven't you?"

"There is typhoid in the town."

Josiah Crabbe's eyes glimmered in the twilight. He half turned in his chair, looked fixedly at Wolfe, and then stretched out a thin, white hand.

"I haven't smoked a cigar for five years, but I'll smoke one to-night."

He snipped off the end of the cigar, lit it from a fusee-box he carried in his waistcoat pocket, and sat back in his chair. Silence descended on him, the silence of the absorbed thinker. The dusk made a mystery of the black-coated figure, with its dim face, the red end of the cigar glowing above the line of its bony chin. He sat there in the half darkness, meditating and smiling, a little old god cynically amused by the vapourings of men.

"Many cases, John Wolfe?"

"Thirteen."

"Any deaths?"

"Two."

"Sure of the thing?"

"Absolutely."

"That's good—that's good."

He dreamed again, smiling till he seemed on the edge of a chuckle.

“Where did it start?”

“In Mill Lane. That fellow at the ‘White Hart’ must have brought it.”

“And Threadgold missed with both barrels! By George, that’s good! Is it going to spread, eh?”

“I am afraid so.”

“Afraid so! Don’t talk bosh, John Wolfe. We want to see death get a grip of this town. Pity! I’ve no pity for fools.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Not mean it! I tell you I do. What is the use of a lot of slushy sentiment? These fools have got to be branded, to have the ignorance lashed out of them with whips. Their god is a clean god, let them crawl to him and be judged.”

There was no doubt about his sincerity. Wolfe did not quarrel with it. He sat for a while in silence, watching the smoke of his cigar.

Presently he said:

“And Peachy Hill?”

He saw a white hand come out, and point.

“Not one death on Peachy Hill, John Wolfe, not one death; see to it. We are clean here, and we’ll teach those pigs down yonder a lesson. Drink nothing but the water from our wells, and get our milk straight away from the country. Cut ourselves off! I know. I’ll see to it. I’ll go to every house myself.”

“It may not turn out to be so bad as that.”

“Don’t be soft-hearted. Can you have a war without deaths? And this is a sort of war against fools, rogues, and humbugs. They’ve got to learn. I tell you, they’ve got to learn.”

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR*

SEVERAL people witnessed that classic meeting in Navestock market-place between John Wolfe and Montague Threadgold. It was the case of a man riding the high horse, and that horse a black one, and of a little god in a car arrested in his progress over the cobbles.

"Don't stop, Sims, drive on."

Sims was an old soldier. The man on the black horse had loomed up like a cavalry officer, and held up a hand. The coachman ignored the small voice behind him, pulled up his horses, and touched his hat.

"Can I have a few words with you?"

He came close to the side of the carriage.

"Mr. Wolfe, I am particularly busy."

"I won't keep you a moment."

Threadgold looked at Wolfe and yet did not look at him. His eyes seemed to be dodging behind the rims of his glasses. He had not spoken to Wolfe since that last evening in Prospect House, and here was the man holding him up like a highwayman, and pointing the pistol of his sincerity at his head.

"What is it, sir—please be quick."

"There are several cases of typhoid in the town."

"Well, sir, what if there are, what if there are!"

He fumed, fidgeting his busy fat legs, and pulling at his watch chain.

"I don't like the look of things. We are in for an epidemic."

"Nonsense; I don't believe it. This hot weather is responsible for these gastric cases. I've seen them for years, Mr. Wolfe, before you were born."

Wolfe looked down at him from his higher level. It was the grave, steady stare that is so disconcerting to flabby, facile people. Threadgold saw John Wolfe still more vividly in the part of the highwayman threatening him from the back of his big black horse.

"I can't discuss these questions with you. I am particularly busy. Drive on, Sims."

Sims, square as a watchman's box, had been staring straight ahead of him, and listening with both ears.

"Yes, s'r, 'igh Helms, sir?"

"At once."

The carriage rolled on, leaving Wolfe facing the tall windows, and the white front of the "White Hart" Hotel.

He broke out of the town by Bridge Street, and turned Turpin in the direction of "Pardons," telling himself that Josiah Crabbe was right, and that nothing but a catastrophe would shake the obstinacy of these men of property and position. Well, the catastrophe seemed imminent, if the filling up of the Navestock burial-ground could be regarded as catastrophe. Wolfe was too big-natured a man to stand by and let the thing take its course. He was not an egoist who ostentatiously washed his hands of the matter, saying: "Yes, I predicted this, but you would not listen to me. Let this be a judgment on you." He had the blood of the old Teutonic heroes in him, heroes who had fought whenever a giant or a dragon had come out to give them battle.

His head was full of schemes and of plans of campaign—how to limit the outbreak, how to keep the children from suffering. He frowned over the gross inertia that would make the struggle so difficult. Ignorance and prejudice are damnable enemies. They revel in "street-fighting," throw up innumerable barricades, hurl stones and refuse from upper windows.

That last day in July blazed whole-heartedly, and the hedges were white with dust. The fields were brown under the blue of the sky, and the early ripening of the corn offered great stretches of rippling gold. The glimmer of the fish-onds at "Pardons" made Wolfe long to plunge and swim. The cedars looked huge and somnolent with heavy black shadows under their shelving boughs.

A white dress under one of these cedar trees was the mark of his desire. The coolness of the place enveloped him, the fresh shimmer of the grass, for the lawns were sprayed with water from the fish-onds. "Pardons" was like a green gem lying in the folds of a brown cloth.

He was welcomed with a certain indolent frankness by the woman in white. Books and magazines and a couple of croquet-mallets and balls were lying on the grass. A cedar bough drooped beneficently within two feet of her glowing head.

"Draw that chair more into the shade. There are some people to whom one cannot talk in hot weather. They make one feel overclothed."

"You are cool enough here."

"Yes, I like to hear the drowsy humming of the cedars, and the way they lift up

their heads and sing together in a wind."

She noticed his grave face, and, knowing men as she did, saw that he was not for sloth and summer dreaming.

"How is Navestock?"

"Oh, we are in for it at last. That is what I have come up about."

"You mean—that what you have long expected has happened?"

"Yes, that's it. Typhoid."

"That is nothing more than a bad name to me."

"It will be a bad name to Navestock, or I am a false prophet."

Her white figure looked so cool and serene under the dome of the great tree that a man might have wondered whether any of the harsh, fretful things of life could ever trouble her. There was no outward blemish here. To talk of dirt and disease and death seemed like throwing carrion into the white porch of a Greek temple. Yet Wolfe knew that she could help him. She was one of the great ones in that little world whose voice counted.

"Well, we are in for it. I have more than a dozen cases, and there have been two deaths already. So far as I can trace the beginnings of the thing, a commercial traveller brought us the blessing. I spoke to Threadgold less than an hour ago, the first time for nine months, but he is not taking the matter seriously."

"People who take their own positions too seriously are not persuadable. But are you sure?"

"Sure!"

She met his eyes and saw conviction, and more than conviction, the grave forethought of the soldier who scans the enemy's lines on the morning of battle.

This interested her, interested her intensely, challenging some inward, secret sympathy that had found but little expression in life as she had known it. Ursula Brandon had been a looker-on, an indifferent spectator, perhaps because the man of her own choice had proved so poor a jouster in the lists. Yet deep down under that mellow and perfect poise of hers lurked the enthusiasms of the girl. She had smothered them, laughed them down, written a sad and cynical epitaph on the door of their prison house. Yet a woman cannot wholly smother the multitudinous soul that her ancestors have given her. Tradition counts, simply because it stands for brain tissue, blood, and breeding. Many a frivolous "garrison woman" showed greatness at Cawnpore.

"Then you are going to fight?"

"What else should a man do?"

"They have not treated you so very well in Navestock."

“Well, I came as a kind of Jonah. I am not thinking of that. One must rush into the thick of it.”

Studying the man she saw this destiny of his upon him, the inevitableness of the upward struggle, the generous strength that must spend itself. Something thrilled in her. After all, there were fine moments in life, touches of splendour, moods of triumphant compassion.

“What are you going to do?”

“If the worst comes to the worst, and the town is swept, I shall try to save the children. The grown-ups will be too obstinate, most of them.”

“Any plans?”

“I am thinking them out. I can’t look for much co-operation. I have seen something of the kind before. The people get scared, and then stupid and sullen. Just to show you how ignorant and obstinate they are—I have tried to stop them using the well which is contaminated and which I believe is spreading the mischief. Not a bit of it. They use the water just the same.”

“Can I help?”

“The well is in Mill Lane.”

“Ah! our property. I’ll send down and have the pump taken away and the thing bricked over. Perhaps it’s too late?”

He looked at her frankly.

“I believe so. Still, one source of infection wiped out——”

“I’ll have it done at once. The people must get their water elsewhere for the time being.”

“That’s good. I came up here because I believed that you would help me.”

A scarcely perceptible flush swept over her pale face.

“Well, you can count on me.”

“I’m grateful. I feel like a soldier starting on a campaign with no stores and hardly any troops.”

“I think I can do something to help you. Though I detest these Navestock people, we have our traditions. We cannot stand aside.”

“That’s what I suspected. I know these middle-class people pretty well; they will talk a great deal of sentimental nonsense, but think of nothing but saving their own skins. But I counted on you.”

She laughed, her eyes shining a little.

“Did you, indeed! There are some people who persuade us to do the things which we have not the least desire to do.”

“Just necessity. It’s a bad thing in life when we have nothing to drive us.”

Wolfe had an hour to spare, and after leaving "Pardons" he cantered Turpin up to Moor Farm. Very few of us are wholly free from fear. It attacks the strongest in the strangest ways, and a man who would charge a line of guns may wilt before the aggrieved face of some tart little slip of a woman. The vulnerable point, the heel of Achilles, is always discoverable. It may be a fear of cancer or of death, a dread of debt, or some queer physical terror. Even the shadows of remote possibilities may worry a man, when those possibilities spell pain for people who are very near his heart.

Wolfe's single and solitary dread sent him cantering up to Moor Farm. It was a panic thought, a sheer piece of hypersensitive tenderness, growing dim and unreal when stared at steadily, but flashing out again when he turned his eyes away. At a fire, each person rushes to safeguard the thing which is most precious, a cash-box, a child, a bundle of letters, so Wolfe rode up to Moor Farm, intent on thrusting Jess out of all possible danger.

He found Mary Mascall sitting under the shade of a yew tree in a corner of the garden. The grass was brown, and the flowers stalky and withered in the borders. The purple of the moor tended towards rustiness under the eternal blue of the sky. There had been heath fires on Tarling Moor, and one of them had swept across Jess's sanctuary, and turned it into a charred black hollow.

News with John Wolfe was not long in the telling.

"We must keep Jess out of Navestock. Don't do any of your shopping in the town. Drive to Wannington."

"Good gracious, John, the place might be full of savages!"

"It is full of fools, which is about as bad. I don't want either of you to take any risks. I believe we are in for a devil of a time down yonder. The disease seems to spread itself chiefly by water and milk. Don't touch anything that comes out of the town."

"You had better tell the child yourself, John."

"I thought I'd trust to your authority."

"My authority, indeed! You take the responsibility, John. You know what I mean."

Jess had been to Heron's Gap, and Wolfe started out that way on the chance of meeting her. They happened on each other in the fir wood about half a mile from Moor Farm. The path ran straight through the wood between tall straight trunks that rose like mighty palisades. Great roots wriggled across the path like snakes. It was a still day, but ever and again a deep, sad, whispering murmur filled the wood.

Jess was dreaming along, her eyes turned towards the ruddy throats of the firs.

A girl may develop miraculously in eight months; and Jess looked fuller in the face and figure, and displayed a quaint, virginal stateliness that lifted its white chin above the more mischievous past. Her eyes could laugh as wickedly as ever, but there was more in them now than laughter. She was one of those tall, slim, wild-faced creatures who can be adorably and passionately serious at seventeen. She had taken herself and the world in hand, and discovered that she was abominably ignorant and irresponsible.

When Wolfe first caught sight of her she was a diminutive and distant figure between the trunks of the firs. It was he who covered most of the ground between them. Jess did not hurry. She began to smile at him when he had come within twenty yards of her, but the smile had vanished by the time they met.

"Have you heard the news, John? Isn't it hateful! A heath fire has burned out my dell on the moor."

"No!"

"I feel that it has burned out part of my life. I used to have such good times there, and now it's nothing but a black hole."

Wolfe had put himself at her side. He was not a man who manœuvred for an opening. He just pushed other subjects aside, and cleared the ground for his own action.

"It was hard luck about the old quarry."

"I shall have to find another retreat. This wood might do. I should like a nest high up in one of those trees. Think of being rocked to and fro by the wind."

"Jess, I want you to promise me something."

She glanced up at him with her dark, moorland eyes.

"What a serious face, John!"

"I want you to promise me something."

"You ought to tell me, first, what it is."

"I want you to promise not to go and see any of your friends in Navestock."

"Why not?"

"Because Navestock is going to be eaten up with fever."

"You mean that something really dangerous has broken out there."

"Yes."

"As you said it would!"

"As I feared it would."

"John, how splendid!"

Her face flushed and her eyes lit up. Wolfe's demand for her to promise him something was forgotten and swept aside. It might have reminded him of that day

when she had galloped Turpin round the paddock, recklessly triumphant, hardly conscious of such a thing as fear.

"Now, they will know that you were right. No, I'm not sorry for them, they ought to have known better. But, of course, we shall all of us have to help. Is it cholera, John?"

"No, not so bad as that."

"You will have to have a hospital and nurses, and all that?"

"If we can get them."

"Of course, I shall come and help as a nurse."

Wolfe stopped dead in the path.

"Jess, you must do nothing of the kind. I want you to promise me."

She swung round and stood facing him under the towering firs.

"Do you think, John, that I am afraid?"

"No, but I am."

"What of?"

"Of you."

Her eyes glimmered up to his, but her throat and chin showed pride.

"John, of course I shall want to help. Do you think I shall stay tied up at home? Why, don't you understand?"

He looked graver than she had ever seen him look.

"No. You must keep out of Navestock."

"Well, I shan't, so there."

"Jess, if I ask you——"

"But you won't. You will be working yourself to death down there. I might just as well ask you to run away; but I shouldn't do that. I shall be too proud for you, John. Don't you see? I'm not a child any longer. I shall want to be where you are, helping."

"No, I don't see it," he said grimly.

"But you will."

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE*

NAVERSTOCK was black tinder to the first red spark of pestilence. The sinuous, glowing fever-pattern spread itself out in wavering and sinister lines.

August scorched the town. No rain fell, and there was but little dew at night. The shade temperature hovered in the nineties, and even after dark the air that drifted into the open and panting windows was hot and enervating. Lassitude prevailed. For many days the town did not appear to realise what was happening in its midst.

Everywhere Wolfe had been baffled by the incredible apathy of those whom he had tried to forewarn and help. They would not close up polluted wells, or take emergency measures to limit the disease. The tradesmen on the Board of Guardians sniggered over his proposal that they should arrange for a temporary supply of water to be brought into the town.

"Where'd he get it, eh? With half the country wells running dry."

"Never came across such a young fusser."

"It's the heat, of course—summer diarrhœa. That's what Threadgold thinks. He knows the town."

No doubt the heat made them indolent and quick tempered.

Then came the deluge.

On August 4th there were nine new cases; on August 5th, thirteen; on August 6th, seven; on August 7th, thirty-three. Some of the early cases were running towards their critical periods. Deaths began to mount up. August 10th gave three, August 16th, eight. Fresh centres of infection cropped up like fungi in every hole and corner.

Navestock realised quite suddenly that it was in the grip of some terrible and unseen fate, something that came gliding like a great snake in the dark. A slow, querulous clamour arose. Stolid people began to look into each other's faces and to ask each other questions. Mean and selfish fears whimpered in the drawing-rooms. Old Threadgold was run nearly off his legs and off his head. People began to look aggrieved, scared, and resentful. He had to try and pacify mothers of families, women who had become voluble and inquisitive. The truth had gripped his heart,

and would not let him go. Outwardly he fluffed up his feathers, and piped pompous and religious sentiment.

On August 18th there were thirteen deaths. The disease had been wallowing in the river alleys, but about the middle of the month it came out of the slough and climbed the higher ground. Sporadic cases cropped up even at High Elms and Mulberry Green. The middle-class houses began to be attacked. The moral intelligent selfishness of the town was touched. Then the panic came.

Wolfe, hurrying out of the little white house at Eve's Corner at seven o'clock in the morning, nearly ran into a big man who was coming up the path. It was Robert Flemming, heavy-eyed and anxious, a man who had been sleeping badly.

"I have just caught you."

"I'm sorry, sir, but——"

"Oh, I'll not waste your time. I'll walk the way you're going."

They went out by the green gate, Wolfe's figure, the figure of an athlete, strung for the uttermost endurance, Robert Flemming ponderous and sad.

"What are we to do?"

"Are your men willing to do anything?"

"Some of them."

"It is too late, as far as the present attack is concerned. We can only make rescues here and there."

"The town's getting in a panic. Something must be done."

"Everything or nothing."

"I went to see Threadgold last night. He's knocking up; he can't be relied on. Will you join us as our adviser?"

Wolfe did not slacken his stride. He just looked round into Robert Flemming's eyes.

"No; not unless these gentlemen of yours bind themselves to carry out reforms, to arrange for the laying down of a proper sewage system, for waterworks, and for the compulsory closing over of most of the surface wells."

Robert Flemming gave a pathetic shrug of the shoulders.

"Can't you be conciliatory, even at a crisis? I know these men are obstinate and prejudiced."

"I can't compromise."

"Not for the moment?"

"No. I know what would happen. When we had fought this thing through and the scare had subsided, your good friends would whittle away their good intentions. A little judicious patching would be done. 'The devil was sick'—that is my view."

Flemming caught Wolfe by the arm.

"Man, you've no heart."

"I am being hard to you for the sake of the future. And I'll ask you who is the hardest man in Navestock? Josiah Crabbe?"

"Perhaps."

"And we have not had one case yet on Peachy Hill. We have had all our water and our milk brought in daily from the country. Josiah Crabbe has kept his hands and his property clean. His people are not suffering. That is what I call religion."

Flemming reddened.

"Then you won't help us?"

"Well, I have been working from five in the morning till twelve at night. And I am not alone."

"No?"

"Mrs. Brandon is showing the real woman. We are going to do what we can to save the youngsters. Josiah Crabbe has put down a hundred pounds."

He paused in his stride.

"Why don't you join us, Mr. Flemming? It is the same thing, and yet it is different. I can't compromise with those gentry of yours, but why shouldn't you and I work together?"

Flemming was silent a moment. The fine humility of the man came to the surface.

"Why not? Tell me what I can do. I have been thinking of holding special services."

"Preach to them on cleanliness. Give them orders; tell them what to do and what not to do. And if you could, get the cowards out of the town."

"Whom do you mean?"

"The people who can pack up their boxes and run away to the seaside. The old women."

"But that's mean."

"Selfishness is cowardice, and it's only common sense to get cowards out of the fighting line. I'm riding over this morning to 'Pardons.' Mrs. Brandon is getting marquees and tents together, and we are going to improvise a hospital in one of the Wraith meadows. The youngsters will have a better chance there, and we are getting volunteers as nurses. We can do something for the children. The grown-ups are too obstinate. In nine cases out of ten they'd refuse to be moved."

Robert Flemming straightened out his shoulders.

"Look here, Wolfe, I'm with you. There's the cricket club tent."

"We've got it."

"And Turrell has a marquee."

"I might leave that to you."

They smiled grimly at each other.

"All right. We ought to have a committee."

"For God's sake don't start the committee idea. All talk and nothing done. We want a tyranny of two in a crisis."

"I believe you are right. I'll go off and see Turrell about that tent."

Wolfe saw five cases before breakfast, all of them in the lower town. Two of them were hopeless, but it was the last case of all that held out blind hands and caught at his compassion. A girl of eighteen, who had been married less than three months, lay comatose, with cracked lips and dusky face. Her husband, a thick-set, red-necked lad, sat by the bed, watching her, stolid and stupid with blank dread. They were new-comers to Navestock. The man had taken a place as gardener, and had brought his young wife with him.

He drew aside, watching Wolfe with heavy, questioning eyes.

"She be bad, doctor?"

Bad! The girl was dying! And this great lumbering youth had been nursing her with rough devotion! Wolfe had to tell the man the truth. He stood stolidly a moment, staring at the bed, and rubbing one hand up and down his coat. Quite suddenly he burst out blubbering, threw himself down, and buried his head in the coverlet.

The heaving of the youngster's shoulders was too much for Wolfe. He went out with a fierce and twitching face, stalked down the lane into Broad Street, swung round the corner, and trod on the toes of Johnson, the butcher. An anti-climax, and a vulgar one at that!

"Treading on other people's toes, as usual, Mr. Wolfe."

The man's round, red, beefy face was insolently healthy. Yet there was one good point about him, he was not afraid of staring an enemy straight in the eyes.

"Suppose you think we're getting scared, sir, eh? You are making as much wind as you can over this upset."

Wolfe felt a mighty desire to drive his fist into Johnson's red face.

"Beast!"

He could not help the word coming out, and went striding on, thinking of the youngster's quaking shoulders.

The dying girl had made him think of Jess—Jess, who had quarrelled with his desire to keep her out of danger. They had called a truce in the pine wood, but it came to a pitched battle between them, a battle in which two strong and generous natures had fought chivalrously, and refused to surrender.

“I won’t let you make me a coward, John.”

These were the last words she had flashed at him. He had been utterly unable to move her. Moreover, Mary Mascall had taken Jess’s part.

“I don’t believe in being over-anxious. You oughtn’t to preach it when you don’t practise it yourself. We have to take the chances God sends us. I’ve no patience with people who poke their noses round the corner before they’ll go into the next street.”

But the thought of that dying girl haunted Wolfe. Some vague premonitory fear floated about him. He was the last man to be credulous, but he knew that he would seize an hour that morning, and ride up to Moor Farm.

On his way back to Eve’s Corner he turned in at Josiah Crabbe’s, and found the old man at breakfast.

“Well, John Wolfe, well?”

“Six more deaths yesterday.”

“Six more deaths, eh! Capital! They are feeling the lash, they are feeling the lash!”

Wolfe remembered the quaking shoulders of the youngster down yonder, and a shudder of repulsion went through him. The thought of Jess was tangled up in it, and here was this inexorable little man totting up the deaths and gloating. These fragments of anguish seemed to be mere figures to Josiah Crabbe, red weals left on the obstinate back of Navestock town.

“Don’t talk of death like that, sir. I’m seeing too much of it.”

Josiah Crabbe nodded his head and smiled.

“Sit down, John Wolfe, and have some breakfast. You’re tired, man, you’re tired.”

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX*

"DIDN'T you meet her, John? She has not been gone more than half an hour."

"Along the Navestock road?"

"Yes, to see Mrs. Brandon at 'Pardons.'"

"And you let her go!"

"Yes, I let her go, John."

Wolfe had drawn Turpin close to the garden gate, and Mary Mascall had come down the path to speak to him. The ground was cracked and dry under the cypresses, the grass all brown, and hardly a flower showed in the garden. Leaves were turning brown and yellow before their time, and in the orchard the fruit was falling. At Wolfe's back Tarling Moor crackled and shimmered in the intense heat. There was not a cloud to break the glare. All the softness, the dewiness and mystery had been burnt out of the landscape.

These two people looked at each other over the white-slatted gate. The man's eyes were reproachful. The woman's face expressed magnanimous tranquillity. She was accepting the same risks, but showing more courage, and a more unselfish understanding.

"You can't go against such a spirit, John; it wouldn't be human."

"It's inhuman."

"I should never have thought you would have taken it like this."

"It is because I care so much. I have seen thirty deaths in a fortnight, and Threadgold has seen more. Do you think I would sacrifice Jess for such a place as Navestock!"

Mary Mascall looked at him with her frank, brave eyes.

"You are showing yourself a weakling in this, John!"

"That may be. We all have our weak places. This has found mine out. Only this morning I saw a girl of Jess's age dying, and I tell you it made me most horribly afraid."

Her mother-spirit went out to him.

"Why, bless my soul! lad, anyone might think the child was doomed. She's a

strong and healthy girl; and she's not afraid—that's something."

"Yes, that's something. But she's reckless."

"You'll hurt her pride, John, unless you think less of her safety and more of her courage. I haven't held her back. And I should have something to lose!"

Wolfe fondled Turpin's ears.

"I'm a great, timid fool, Mother. We are queer things—we humans. I am going on to 'Pardons.' I shall see Jess there."

"Take hands, John, you two, and go to work together."

Wolfe rode back towards Navestock, and turned aside by the clump of larches where the road branched off to "Pardons." Men were setting up a marquee in one of the meadows, and a loaded van was bumping towards it over the baked turf. Ursula Brandon had thrown aside her lethargy. She had come down from the high places of her scorn, and little people were running to and fro, urged on by a capable and debonair imperiousness that never condescended to explain.

Half a mile from "Pardons" where the road ran between pollard willows, Wolfe caught sight of a slim figure moving towards the distant cedars. A quick, bright light came into his eyes. His knees pressed hard against Turpin's flanks. This slim figure, moving in a faint haze of sunlit dust, drew him irresistibly.

Jess glanced up at him with some wistfulness. Her eyes half pleaded with and half defied him.

"Are you coming to 'Pardons'?"

Wolfe felt ashamed. He dismounted and walked at her side, looking at her very dearly.

"Jess, I surrender."

"John, you mean it?"

She flushed, and her eyes kindled.

"Of course I mean it."

"You don't know how I want to help."

"I can guess at that."

"John, you are a dear."

One of his big hands gripped her arm above the elbow.

"No, I was a coward. You know, little woman, Navestock's just a dirty little town in a valley, and you—well, you are you."

She smiled up at him, the smile of a girl who is loved.

"I love your selfishness, dear. But you are not selfish, really. It would have been my fault."

"I think we are getting rather subtle," he said.

“Pardons” was overrun by barbarians. A furniture van from Wannington lumbered down the drive as Jess and Wolfe turned in at the lodge gate. The van put in for instructions, and had been sent voyaging again towards the marquee in the meadows. Half a dozen carts were drawn up before the house. As for those stretches of grass and those sable-shadowed cedars—dreamed of for *fêtes galantes*, and frail, frivolous people in rich brocades—they had been surrendered to a number of utilitarian girls and women who were spreading out rolls of calico, and cutting out and improvising sheets. It was as cool and stately a workshop as Nature could have given, but the workers looked bunchy, hot, and commonplace. They crawled round the rolls of calico on their hands and knees, or sat on the grass sewing.

Ursula Brandon was watching two girls unpacking cheap crockery from a crate. They were an archdeacon’s daughters, two great, bony, tow-haired young gentlewomen who were always arguing with each other and getting over-heated. They were sorting the crockery on the grass below the borders of perennial flowers. The sunflowers watched them with staring haughtiness. Never, even in autumn, had the brown scud of wind-blown leaves made such a litter on the “Pardons” lawns. Straw, wisps of paper, tufts of hay! The figure of a gardener looming under one of the more distant cedars suggested profound and professional disgust.

John Wolfe’s coming was the coming of the general in command. Hospital and commissariat staffs stared more than seemed absolutely necessary. Jess was under fire, and was unconscious of the fact, her eyes looking towards Ursula Brandon, who was waiting for them by the terrace steps.

They were great contrasts, these two—the woman and the girl—the one so cool and serene, so sure of herself; the other, flushed, fervent, and a little shy. Ursula Brandon’s level eyes gave Jess’s figure an inquiring look. There was the faintest glimmer of calm surprise. The self in her blurted a question, and had its rebuke. Then Wolfe was speaking, and she was holding out her hand to Jess.

“We are only too glad to have helpers. We shall soon find Miss Mascall plenty to do.”

Jess’s eyes were searching Ursula Brandon’s face. She was experiencing that consciousness of inferiority that a woman of Ursula Brandon’s personality imposes upon simpler and cruder natures. Antagonism and dislike follow quickly upon this feeling unless an unquestionable and gracious superiority bows them out of court. This tall, bloodless, level-eyed woman, with her flowing voice and her splendid hair, was a new phenomenon to Jess.

“I could not keep away, Mrs. Brandon; I heard you wanted helpers.”

Ursula smiled at Jess, studying her as she smiled. It was the attitude of the woman towards the girl.

"That is the spirit we want. Will you go over and help the others to cut out sheets?"

"I'll do anything you ask me to."

"That's splendid."

Jess found herself kneeling under one of the cedars, and snipping away at a bale of calico with a pair of bright new scissors. But her eyes wandered away towards John Wolfe. He was standing talking to Ursula Brandon where the steps led up from the lawns to the terrace. The massed colours of the well-watered flowers in the borders raised a broad background of rose and of gold. Beyond stood the warm, red-walled house, mellow, stately, suggesting aloofness and some awe to Jess's eyes.

They were talking like intimate friends—those two. Ursula Brandon showed animation, fire, reflecting the glow of the man's virility. Jess had a sudden, queer, lost feeling at the heart. She sat back on her heels, watching, forgetting her scissors and the roll of white stuff before her. She discovered the desire that John Wolfe should leave Mrs. Ursula Brandon and come and talk to her, even if only for a moment.

Presently he came. Jess knelt there at his feet, not looking up, her dark lashes making shadows on her cheeks, her scissors busy.

"When are we to go to the hospital, John?"

"The hospital isn't in being yet."

"Has she done all this?"

"Mrs. Brandon? Yes. I never came across anyone with a better head for organisation. She has thought of everything down to feeding-cups and safety pins. I must say I was astonished. To look at her you would not think such a woman would trouble."

Jess's head remained bowed.

"Isn't she handsome!"

"Is she?"

"Of course she is, John! She makes me feel a little raw thing in a pinafore."

"Nonsense!"

"She does."

Jess glanced up, and caught Wolfe's eyes looking down at her with grave and indescribable tenderness. Instantly her eyes glimmered to his. It was the glance of a moment, but the whole world was caught up in it, and turned to light.

Ursula Brandon, approaching them without them noticing it, saw that look of

theirs, and understood. The radiant, kindling face of the girl; the deep, protecting eyes of the man. She paused, for one step, her pale face taken in an ambush. For a moment she hated the girl and despised the man.

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN*

A CYNIC could have amused himself by walking about Navestock and watching the remarkable unanimity with which the people of the upper middle-class decided that they needed a change of air. The "White Hart" coach and all the flies in the town were kept busy, carrying the fugitives to Wannington station. The Wilks family was one of the first to leave, the young ladies pressing scented handkerchiefs to their noses, and old Wilks, the squirrel, nibbling at the daily paper. Miss Perfrement was borne off, scattering "heart attacks" like handbills along the road. The Turrells went to Scotland. Johnson, the wine merchant, departed for Yarmouth, taking his daughters and his parrot with him, the bird perched in its cage on the top of the cab, and shouting "Monte, Monte" outside Dr. Threadgold's windows. Many of the wealthier tradespeople discovered that it was the psychological moment for a holiday. Business languished, and was left to take care of itself.

Threadgold's assistant deserted him early in August, Mr. Talbot Tweedy being a hireling with "nerves." He smiled for a while on people with his yellow teeth, stumbled over doormats, readjusted his pince-nez that were always slipping, and then vanished out of Navestock. Threadgold had begun to be bewildered. His bewilderment increased as the work thickened, but he continued to go bowling about in his carriage and popping in and out of doors. A man's intellect may fail him, but his manner may survive. Threadgold's manner was the product of years of affable pomposity. It took command of him in the crisis, carried him about, spoke for him, kept him moving. Threadgold was dazed, but his manner went on working, and persisted in uttering the same pompous platitudes.

Wolfe would have been justified in exulting, had he been the man to gloat over Navestock's misfortunes. But it was the poor who were made to suffer, the patient, stubborn cottagers. With one or two exceptions the better-class people scuttled away and escaped. As for exultation—Josiah Crabbe saw to that.

Each morning he walked out into the garden and found the place where Grinch was working.

"Well, Adam, what news?"

"Seven more deaths, sir."

"Seven more deaths, eh! They're catching it, they are having it rubbed in!"

"The Turrells went off this morning."

"Running away, are they! And how do the obstinate swine down yonder like their pigsties now, Adam?"

"It's a stiff-necked generation, sir."

No doubt it was.

The people in the river alleys were brutally ignorant and ignorantly stubborn. The stultifying stupidity of the town threatened Wolfe's hospital scheme from the very first. The marquees and tents were pitched, the little improvised beds ready, the volunteers at their posts. The difficulty lay in getting the sick children. Stupid affection, sheer obstinacy, ignorant prejudice made many of the cottagers refuse to let the youngsters be taken away.

"You be wanting to cut 'em about. I know ye."

That was what one poor slattern threw in John Wolfe's face.

Compassion made him patient. He and Robert Flemming went from house to house, arguing, pleading, scolding. Wolfe began to grow fierce with some of the fools. Many of them would not let the children go, and would not feed them properly when they kept them. With the co-operation of some of the farmers, Wolfe had arranged to have fresh country milk distributed for the use of the sick. It was imperative that those who were ill should have no solid food. And again and again Wolfe caught them feeding the youngsters on such stuff as bacon and stewed cabbage.

When he was wroth, some of the old women presumed to argue.

"I don't hold with these new-fangled notions. Starve the little dears, indeed! Feed 'em up, that's what I say. Let 'em have good victuals."

And many children and many adults were fed into their coffins.

Still, some of the people were persuadable, and the two ambulances that Wolfe had rigged up, went to and fro between the town and the camp in the meadows. Wolfe was making a great fight, and those who understood it, fought for him with courage and devotion. The crass stupidity ceased in the neighbourhood of Peachy Hill. Josiah Crabbe's shrewd common sense and foresight were justified by the results. Only two cases cropped up on Peachy Hill, and neither of them proved fatal.

When half the beds at the canvas hospital were still untenanted, Ursula Brandon asked Wolfe what he thought of the poor.

"Poor ignorant beggars," he said, "but one has to remember it."

"And yet some of you people are always painting the poor in heroic colours.

Can't you see what they really are, base metal, barbarians?"

He looked at her with a shrewd smile.

"And yet you are doing this! I suppose we shall begin to educate them some day."

"And make them still more horrible with little cheap odds-and-ends of information, and insolent discontent."

"One has to begin somewhere."

"Why begin at all? You see, I am an autocrat by nature; I don't want to see the world cheapened for a multitude of cheap people. There is that boy crying again! Jess Mascall is the only one who can manage him. I frighten him. I suppose it is class instinct!"

A small boy with a mop of flaxen hair was whimpering in one corner of the marquee. Jess came in from somewhere, in white apron and black dress. She went straight to the boy and began to comfort him, making use of a breezy, sisterly tenderness, and not the absurd jargon attributed to mothers.

"I want ter goo 'ome."

"No, you don't. Just you be quiet, Billy, and lie still, and I'll tell you a story."

"All about sabiges?"

"And pirates and desert islands, and horrible big sabiges as black as your boots."

She straightened out the coverlet, patted the boy's hand, and sat down close to the bed.

The fibres of Wolfe's courage quivered. He was still constrained to be afraid for Jess's sake.

Ursula Brandon was watching the girl. Turning suddenly to Wolfe she caught that jealously anxious expression upon his face. She was half-amused and half touched.

"I think she is about the best nurse I have."

"Plenty of pluck. I suppose she eats and sleeps properly?"

"Yes, I see to that; I am very imperious."

"We should never have been able to manage this without you."

She smiled with a glimmer of cynicism in her eyes. Wolfe, the enthusiast, with his intense directness, suspected no byplay, and remained quite blind to the subtler workings of Ursula Brandon's mind. In many ways he was nothing but a big-hearted boy to her, and perhaps that made it more easy for her to forgive.

"I try to maintain discipline!"

"Otherwise they would have been talking and giving orders and getting hold of the same sheet all at the same time. It wants someone who is a head and shoulders

taller."

"Thank you."

He did not notice the slight flush, or the admiring anger in her eyes. This man had no personal vanity. He was like one of those great men of the Mutiny, simple, strenuous, heroically strong, a man who would never realise why some women worked for him or gave him of their best.

Wolfe saw Jess alone for a few minutes before he left. He drew her out to the meadow, where the scorched grass was the colour of the brown earth thrown up by the moles. Navestock shimmered at them through a haze of heat. The leaves on the willows along the road were turning yellow.

He looked at her searchingly.

"All right, Jess?"

"Yes, quite."

"Absolutely sure?"

"Shall I put my tongue out, John?"

He flipped her cheek.

"Be careful."

"Oh, I am very careful. It is just splendid here, and I get on so well with the children. Aren't those people in Navestock wretches?"

"Who?"

"The ignorant wretches who won't let their sick children be brought out here. I should like to go through Navestock with a whip."

A lad was holding Turpin by the gate leading into the road. Jess went and fondled the horse.

"Dear old Turpin."

Her eyes met Wolfe's.

"Don't worry about me, John; I never felt better in my life."

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT*

PERHAPS nothing shocked Navestock more than the deaths of old Hubbard, and Johnson, the butcher. For years these men had been part of the intimate life of the town; old Hubbard, with his round, lard-coloured, mildly owl-wise face; Johnson, the beef-red bully, smacking his great hands together and bellowing with laughter. Their deaths were like the taking down of famous tavern signs. Hubbard died in his sleep; Johnson in the full wakefulness of blasphemous terror. Robert Flemming had looked grey and tired when he had come away from Johnson's bedside.

"That chap Wolfe will be pleased, damn him. I don't care. I've led a straight life, and I ain't been stingy. What have I got to die for, what have I got to die for? God, I don't want to go!"

Then whimperings, curses against Threadgold—"old mutton head"—"blasted, bodgering fool!"

His wife wept scared tears.

"Don't, John, don't take on so. Try to bear it. Don't use such words."

"You, you, what are you snivelling for? You don't care! Damn it, what have I got to die for? Send for that blasted chap, Wolfe. I'll see him. He called me a beast! I don't care. Send for him, I say."

They sent for Wolfe, and the butcher cringed to him.

"Let bygones be bygones, sir. I don't want to slip off just yet."

He died of hæmorrhage that same night.

In those days, too, Navestock found its preacher and its prophet. Adam Grinch, black-bearded, with a face the colour of brown leather, came down of an evening from Peachy Hill. Like a Puritan—Bible and sword in hand—he went through Navestock, preaching. The grim spirit of the man flared out in wrath and scorn and pity. Crowds gathered to listen in the market-place, by the bridge at the end of Bridge Street, on the steps of the Corn Exchange, under the trees on Mulberry Green. Grinch awed the people, sent shudders of shame through them. One hand wielded a scourge, and out of his mouth came words of fire.

"This is a judgment on ye," was his cry, "turn to God, you fools, and repent."

He scourged their ignorance, their sodden, swilling ways, their stubborn stupidity.

"And the Lord showed me a herd of swine rooting in unclean places."

Death and the fear of death had begun to cow the people, and this strong, fierce man awed them into silence. They gathered and listened, to be covered with scorn and threatening compassion. Grinch was not an emotionalist, or Wolfe might have interfered. He was a driving, roaring wind, a fire that purged. There were no hysterical ecstasies. This man's fervour drove the people like sheep, taught them to obey the sheep-dog and the shepherd.

"Do what the one man who can save ye tells ye to do. Ye were stiff-necked, stubborn, and unclean. Death had his chance at ye. Fools. Turn to God, I say, and cleanse your pots and platters. Do what the doctor tells ye."

Adam Grinch's fire of denunciation swept on into other quarters. He spoke of those who had suffered the town to remain in such a state of pollution. He threw truths broadcast as a sower throws the corn. Where were the Turrells, the Wilkses, the Bardsleys, the Jermisons, and the rest of them? Gone—like hirelings. And these were the men who had taken their rent money year in, year out, and had patched and botched and let Navestock rot. The danger had been pointed out to them, and deliberately they had refused to face the truth. Let them look at Peachy Hill. Not a death there, not one death! Let them not call it luck or a miracle.

"I tell you," he said, smiting with a great fist, "God is not mocked."

The Puritan's fierce and scornful preaching gave birth to a new spirit in Navestock town. Death and the fear of death helped to stir in the people a slow anger against the men who had deserted the town in the midst of this epidemic that they themselves had challenged. Where were the Turrells, the Wilkses and the rest of them? Mrs. Brandon had shown them how a true aristocrat should act. But these half-breeds, these men whose fathers had made money!

Then, too, these slow-thinking and patient people began to realise that this pest might not have struck Navestock so fiercely, had the landlords chosen to do what the doctors had advised. Money, yes! It would have cost a deal of money! The talk in the ale-houses and at the doorways became cynical and bitter.

"Go along with ye! What—waterworks? Don't you believe 'em. Turrell couldn't afford it. He'd be having to shut up one of his glass-houses, and dock young Tor of his weskits. 'Tain't no sense to expect Turrell to do anything."

"There be those as will make him."

"Not when the money be agenst 'em. Why, don't a man know when ye've got a hole in your roof, you've got to worry three year to get new tiles put on?"

"That's true. But Adam Grinch, he says, says he: 'There be laws comin' that will make the likes o' Turrell do what's right by their tenants. The Guardians could do it now if they were willing.'"

"Dang it, the Guardians! And who be they? Why, Turrell and his sort. They ain't a'going to vote money against theirselves."

"Adam Grinch thinks as they'll be put to it. The rector's come round, they say. There's old Crabbe and Wolfe and the Methodics, and a lot more. And they do say Mrs. Brandon be for doing her share."

"Sure, why there she be, and a'walking, too!"

Ursula Brandon it was, a white figure passing through the old red streets. Three elderly men were with her; Crump, the lawyer; a tall, lean man with an eagle's beak, a heavy white moustache, and blue eyes that glared; the third, a spruce and dapper elderly dandy with long whiskers and a white hat. They were the two trustees of the Brandon estate, already somewhat shaken in their attitude of cynical and parental carefulness.

"I want you to go with me through these alleys, Uncle Charles!"

She spoke and looked towards the taller man, the white eagle, the man of Sebastopol and Delhi. The dandy chirruped along with Crump. He was the lighter vessel and would be taken in tow.

"I did not know that things were like this, Ursula."

"Nor did I till a few months ago."

The white-headed veteran and the tall woman with the bloodless face and the lambent hair walked on side by side. Ursula Brandon's level eyes shirked nothing, and the keen eyes beside her were every whit as honest. The picturesque and hectic rottenness of the lanes and alleys glowed in the streaming sunlight of a summer evening. Weather-worn tiles, lichen in grey and gold, rotten black beams, broken brick paths that were full of puddles in wet weather, horrible back yards, narrow winding ways, where no sunlight fell and where foul black mire lay all the winter. Senile, nodding gables, ragged thatch riddled with holes under the eaves where sparrows built, windows half-boarded up or stuffed with rags, chickens scratching, pigs in sties under kitchen windows. These courts and alleys had their flashes of colour, Virginian creeper turned yellow by the heat and drought, flaming patches of nasturtiums creeping over the black soil, dahlias neatly staked in some tiny garden. But it was fungoid colour, damp, unwholesome, decadent. Even the well-covers were green and rotten and slimy, and covered on the underside with slugs and wood-lice.

"Do you know that already we have had over eighty deaths in the town?"

"Incredible!"

"Unless we do something to the property now, it may fall heavily on Aubrey later on."

The soldier bit the end of a white moustache.

"I was not thinking of the boy. Of course something must be done. The estate cannot go on taking rents without putting something back into the property. It's immoral."

"I thought you would agree with me when you had seen the town. I never realised what its condition was till some months ago. I could not persuade you then."

"Yes, we listened too much to our friend behind there. Good lawyer and bad citizen; it's generally the case. It was that doctor of yours who brought it all to light?"

"Yes. He is a sort of Bayard with sincerity for a sword."

"I know the kind of man. We must have something done here. Look at that hovel with that thatch slipping over its windows like some old imbecile's hair growing over his eyes. I'll have a talk with Ponsonby."

Ursula smiled. This meant that Ponsonby would pull his long whiskers and say, "Deah fellah—delighted. I take your word for it. I'm a demmed poor hand at bwisness."

"I don't think it will do any good, Uncle Charles, our trying to improve our property unless everybody joins in some general scheme."

"No; but what are the authorities doing?"

"A good many of them have run away! Two are dead. You see, they are owners also. The matter was forced on them some months ago, but they refused to be coerced."

"And the law is with them, I suppose?"

"At present."

He looked fierce.

"By George—what a grand thing it would be for the country if we could have military law proclaimed one year in every ten. I think we should persuade these money-getting blackguards to be a little more honest. Something must be done here."

"I have an idea that it will be done. I shall let it be known that the Brandons stand for sincerity."

His blue eyes smiled at her.

"You will make a fine rallying point, my dear."

They turned back and met Crump and the dandy, the soldier towering above Crump, looking down at him a little haughtily.

“I shall be glad if you will call on us at ‘Pardons.’ Something must be done in this town.”

Crump accepted the inevitable. This man would ride him down and trample on him if he presumed to argue the point.

## *CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE*

SEPTEMBER brought rain. The thin, glaring blue of the summer sky was at last devoured by a chaos of clouds that came storming out of the west. Once more the sky seemed peopled; it was no longer a blue desert. There were piled-up heights of greyish vapour, blue-black masses with a grey underscud racing beneath. Jagged rents showed patches of vivid blue. Wayward splashes of sunlight fell here and there like light out of heaven. The most distant hills became visible as faint, violet outlines. The whole landscape was more distant, more mysterious, more beautiful with the stormy beauty of rain-drenched, wind-blown skies.

In three days the meadows began to show a powdering of green. The parched root crops drank in the rain; the scorched stubbles rejoiced. So did the farmers with their grassless fields, mud-caked ponds, and empty wells, and water-butts. Youngsters ran out into the rain, for sheer joy in the cool, wet kisses of the driving drops. The earth heaved a happy, thirsty sigh.

Wolfe, riding back over Tarling Moor with a storm racing up behind him, saw the whole blue landscape miraculously sweet and clean. Sunlight following the grey fringe of a departing rain-cloud fell upon Navestock in its valley. The little town glimmered like a dream city. Its windows sparkled. The poplars with their yellow leaves glittered in the wet sunshine. The red roofs were wonderfully red. The church-spire looked plated with plates of hammered gold.

Nearer, in the meadows that were turning green, Wolfe saw Ursula Brandon's hospital white as newly-washed linen spread out on a bank to dry. The sunlight shone on it, but even as Wolfe watched, the edge of a storm cloud covered the sun. A great hand might have flung a dark net over Navestock. The glamour went. A wind came over the moor. Rain began to fall.

The drops were rattling on the flapping canvas of the marquees and tents before Wolfe reached the hospital. Most of the children were asleep. In the big marquee two nurses were talking together in whispers.

They jumped up when Turpin's black head appeared close to the open flap. Wolfe had dismounted. He fastened the bridle to one of the guy ropes.

“How are things getting on?”

“Very well in here, doctor. Miss Mascall is with Jennie Sanders in No. 3 tent.”

The two nurses looked at each other, questioningly.

“I don’t think she is quite herself, doctor.”

“Oh!”

“Of course she pretends. But three days ago——”

Wolfe went striding round the tent pegs with a word of thanks to the nurses. In No. 3 Jess was bending over a bed and settling an ice-bag against the shaven head of a child of seven. There was a listlessness about her movements, an apathy that could not be concealed. The canvas walls of the tent were quaking in the gusty wind that swept down from Tarling Moor.

Wolfe came to the doorway in time to see Jess step back from the bed with a little tragic gesture.

“Oh, bother my head.”

Then she turned and saw him.

A kind of guilty flush went over her face, for there was something in John Wolfe’s eyes that frightened her.

“Why, John! Do come and look; I think Jennie is going to pull through.”

He came into the tent, studying her with the searching glance of a man who was afraid to see that for which he looked.

“You’re not well, Jess.”

The sparkle had gone out of her.

“It is only a headache. I don’t mind so long as the child pulls through. Come and look at her, John.”

Wolfe ignored the child on the bed. He went to Jess, and stood over her, intent almost to fierceness.

“Give me your hand. You have felt like this for some days?”

“Yes, John.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to bother. Besides——”

“Jess, that wasn’t fair, dear. Your hand is hot; you’re feverish.”

“Perhaps I may be just a little. It’s the headache.”

He was feeling her pulse. The brown eyes came up to his with a sparkle of their real spirit.

“So serious, John!”

“Don’t talk for a moment.”

She watched his face, and the straight, stern, waiting mouth.

"Jess, answer my questions. Think of me as a doctor, anyone but myself."

"I'll try to."

The inquisitorial mood lasted less than five minutes. A sudden softness came into Wolfe's voice. His eyes lost their keener, searching look, and became the eyes of the lover.

"Jess, I am going to take you home."

"But, John, I——"

He put his hands upon her shoulders.

"Dear, I'm afraid that you are going to be ill. I gave in over your coming here; now, you must give in to me."

His voice awed her with a quiet and strong tenderness that would not be denied.

"I'll do what you think best, John."

"No place like home, and no nurse like a mother. I shall ride into Navestock and come back with a carriage. Stay quietly here. I will tell some of the others to put your things together for you."

He went away through the wind and rain, and met Ursula Brandon's carriage at the cross-roads of the river. The wheels were mud-splashed, the horses drenched. Wolfe signalled to the coachman to stop. A window clattered down, and a pale face looked up at him.

He spoke, bending forward in the saddle.

"Were you coming to the meadow?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"I wonder whether you will lend me your carriage for an hour?"

"Of course. Is anyone ill?"

"Jess Mascall. I am going to take the child home."

Ursula Brandon's eyelids flickered.

"Tell Reynolds to drive on."

She closed the window, lay back in her corner, and watched the wet and wind-blown pollard willows gliding by. Her face remained haughtily meditative. Presently a smile broke out, a smile in which cynicism and compassion were merged together.

Wolfe rode on ahead, taking the wind-driven rain straight in his face. He was wet through by the time he reached the meadow. The shadowy opening in the grey tent was like a distant rent in the world of his desires. The "Pardons" horses came squelching over the grass while Wolfe was tethering Turpin to a tent peg. He turned in time to open the carriage door, Ursula Brandon stepping past him in profile. She entered the tent, and Wolfe heard her speaking to Jess, her voice slightly above the level of its casual dignity.

“You ought to have told me, child, that you were feeling ill. My carriage is going to take you home.”

“It’s kind of you. I wouldn’t go, only——”

“Yes, he is quite right. Good-bye. You have been such a great help here.”

Jess came out with a red shawl over her head, and found Wolfe waiting in the rain. His black coat gleamed wet.

“John, you are soaked!”

“Not a bit of it.”

He helped her into the carriage.

“Go home and change your clothes.”

“Nonsense. I am coming up to the farm, first.”

He slammed the door upon her protest, mounted Turpin, and rode on ahead.

Moor Farm and its trees struggled with a squall of wind and grey, smoking rain. Wolfe fastened the paddock gate back, and reached the house a quarter of a mile ahead of the “Pardons” carriage. He left Turpin at the gate and walked straight into the house.

“Well, John?”

“Mother, Jess is a little feverish. I have brought her back here. It may be nothing. There is nothing for you to worry about at present.”

She looked at him very kindly with her frank blue eyes. The man was trying to reassure her, when it was only too plain that he was the one mortal who thirsted to be reassured.

# *CHAPTER FORTY*

YELLOW leaves whirled from the poplars, and autumn reigned in the garden that was attached to the Navestock workhouse. Three old men were tying chrysanthemums to their stalks; two more were forking up carrots out of the old black soil; another stood by the low wall, smoking the stump of a clay pipe. A couple of carriages were waiting outside the gate-house, and a boy was holding a black horse. Age, the fall of the leaf, the scent of weed fires, the last pink roses in the wet autumn sunshine, a world of bronze and a sky of blue! These ancients in the garden were not the tragic old men of a dying day. They chuckled and crowed, and were scandalously cheerful.

"So you slep with your ole woman when she was dead, Thomas! Didn't ut frighten ye to lie beside a corpse?"

"No-a. I weren't terrified."

"You kep the door open?"

"I did that. And as I said to Muster Flemming, 'She never done me no harm when she was alive, and I didn't see for why she should be harming of me when she were dead.'"

"That's true! But it's unked. A corpse be so powerful cold."

By looking over the wall they could see anything that passed outside the gate. Something was happening over there in the Board Room, and the old men were interested.

"Jasper Turr'll be'unt there!"

"He ain't give in, surely!"

"Did yer see the doctor?"

The last words were spoken by the one-legged man with the clay pipe. Blue-nosed and white-headed, he had the look of the old soldier, an ancient Odysseus to whom these antique, pastoral worthies listened with sober awe. The one-legged man was a sage and a savant. Fifty years ago he had fought at Waterloo, red-coated, "Brown Bess" in his brown, ploughboy's hands. He had been ordered about the world, and had fought in India, Canada, and at the Cape.

"Did yer see the doctor? He ought to have bin a sodger."

"What makes ye think that?"

"Ridin' up on that there black horse o' his, jus' like the ol' Duke, with his leathery sharp face, and his nose a'smellin' the enemy. Kind of proud and quiet and fierce. He's a fighter; he's a bayonet boy!"

An ancient came and kicked the toes of his boots against the wall to shake off the soil.

"They're bin in yonder an hour, I guess."

"An' Turr'll be'unt there."

"Nor Wilks, nor bully Johnson, nor po'r ol' Muster Hubbard!"

"They do say as the new fellows be with Muster Flemming and the doctor. Threadgold ain't there."

"Pap Threadgold's busted—th' old wind-sucker."

"Hi, they be comin' out."

The old men lined the wall and watched the Guardians appear. Robert Flemming came first, bare-headed, stately, carrying on his shoulders the dignity of some good thing done. He turned to shake hands with Crump, Crump whose little pig's eyes twinkled with cynical amusement. It had been hot and argumentative, and voluble in there!

"Well, sir—it's to be reform! We couldn't stand out when the Brandon influence came your way. Jasper Turrell? Oh, well, there would have been a majority anyway."

The old soldier's eyes were watching for John Wolfe.

"That be he! He's whacked 'em, he's drove 'em with the bayonet. That's a fine feller. He ought to have bin in the army."

Wolfe came out with a little man on either side of him. The little men were talking with animation, triumph. Some moral battle had been fought and won, and they were jubilant, flushed, conscious of plump altruism. There were sulky faces here and there, puzzled faces, faces that totted up figures and calculated the cost. A minority had fought and vanquished a majority, yoked them in, and made them serve.

"He's a fine feller. He ought to have bin a soldjer."

Wolfe mounted Turpin and rode away in the thick of a scurry of yellow leaves. The black horse was in proud fettle. There was a smell of victory in the air; a throwing open of gates, a surrendering of keys. Men might have seen Wolfe riding into Navestock, a great soldier entering a captured town. There was something dramatic about it. Common men touched their hats.

Old Crabbe was parading in his garden when Wolfe brought him the news. A

great iron roller went to and fro at Adam Grinch's heels flattening out worm-casts as his religion would have flattened out sin. The tall poplars shivered against a clear, cold sky. Somewhere a weed fire was burning, and the pungent scent filled the air.

"We have captured their outworks, sir!"

"What, a majority? Don't tell me those fellows have decided on reform!"

"They have, after a good deal of squabbling. The honour lies with Robert Flemming. He hit out, and the wobblers went down."

"Incredible!"

His black eyes glittered with facetious exultation.

"What are they going to do?"

"Appeal to head-quarters, and ask to have an expert sent down to advise them."

The gold snuff-box came out.

"By George, John Wolfe, that's a surrender. And Jasper Turrell up in Scotland! We shall have him rushing back like a mad bull."

"I think he will break his horns if he tries charging."

"John Wolfe, it's a triumph! Damn me, if I don't do something for the town. I'll build almshouses or a temperance hotel, and call it 'The Brewer's Friend'!"

They talked on, pacing the gravel path, till Wolfe showed the vague restlessness of a man whose thoughts were hurrying elsewhere.

"Jabez is holding my horse at the gate. You will have to excuse me, sir; I wanted to be the first to bring you the news."

Old Crabbe laid a white hand on Wolfe's sleeve. His eyes were shrewd and affectionate, if a little cynical. In his own way he had developed a great pride in Wolfe.

"Don't waste any more time on an old man, sir. How is the girl?"

"Out of danger, I hope."

"You're a rum fellow. Built of oak, and yet with one soft place that a slip of a thing can put her fist through."

Wolfe laughed quietly, happily.

"You never had that soft place, sir?"

"If I did, John Wolfe, I had an iron plate fitted. It wasn't for me to have soft places. I've known an enemy whom you have got by the throat try to cheat you by setting his wife to snivel. No, no. Society gets at you through the women. I've known many a fighting spirit spoilt because something in a petticoat got a pair of soft arms round a man's neck."

"Perhaps it depends on the arms, Mr. Crabbe. They don't always drag a man down!"

"Oh, they don't, eh! No one would say I was an authority on women, but I've heard it said that there is a sort of cowardice that comes with marriage. Not the same adventurous, lusty devilry. Fear of taking risks! Life insurance! Get along then. Go and be flattered."

Wolfe snatched an hour each day to ride up to Moor Farm and visit Jess. It was typhoid that she had, but the fourth week of the disease had come, and Jess seemed drawing out of danger. Had the patient been anyone else Wolfe would not have worried, for there was nothing tangible to worry about. Josiah Crabbe had some knowledge of human nature. Love creates fear, and cowardice as well as heroism.

To-day there was news to be told, and Wolfe's heart felt big in him. He carried spoils and trophies to the bedside of the "Maid of Honour." There was a blue sky, a bracing wind, and a world all amber and bronze. The grass was crisped with blown leaves, the brown and the gold mingled. Great white clouds breasted Tarling Moor. Sunlight lay in the valleys. Never had the berries seemed redder on the hollies.

"Hallo, Mother. I have news for Jess. How is she?"

"Thinking of turkey and plum-pudding, John, and crying out for a slice of bread and butter."

"That's good."

"So there is to be no news for me! What a difference twenty years make to a woman!"

Wolfe put his hands on her shoulders and kissed one of the pink, round cheeks.

"You! Why you will always be young. Navestock has given in. They have voted for reform."

"That's why you look so jaunty, is it?"

"We have had to fight. A man can't help shouting when his side wins."

Jess lay abed in one of the front rooms whose windows overlooked the moor. The two great cypresses, rising like green towers, showed through the casements. It was a long room with two huge cupboards opening out of it; and the oak floor betrayed a tendency to undulate. Soft, rose-coloured paper covered the walls. The curtains were of white chintz powdered with roses.

Jess lay low in the bed, with a single pillow under her head. Her black hair was waved back from the forehead and plaited into two tails that reached to the white coverlet.

As Wolfe opened the door, something was hidden away under the bed-clothes.

"What, secrets! This won't do at all."

She turned her face to him with its clear skin and strong white teeth.

"You should have knocked, John."

“Nonsense. I don’t come up the stairs like a ghost! What are you hiding?”

“I shan’t tell you.”

“Then I shall smother a piece of news that I have brought.”

He bent over the bed, resting his two hands on the edge.

“It’s mean to bargain, John.”

“Shall I guess? A mirror.”

She laughed.

“Yes, but it isn’t fair——”

“What do you want with mirrors? You look remarkably well.”

“John, I could eat, oh, lots of things. I just lie here and feel greedy. Mince-pies and chicken and apple-custard and bread and butter. Bread and butter!”

“Tired of milk! One more week. Do you want to hear my piece of news?”

“Yes, quick.”

“The Guardians have given in. Navestock has surrendered.”

For one moment she lay staring at him, and then sprang up in bed, exultant.

“John!”

Her flushed face, and the intensity of her excitement frightened him.

“Lie down, dear. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“But it’s victory.”

“Yes, yes. Lie down again, Jess. You are breathing as though you had been running up Flemyng’s Cross hill.”

She lay back rather suddenly, her face paling.

“John, kiss me.”

He bent and kissed her forehead.

“I’m so glad, so glad.”

## *CHAPTER FORTY-ONE*

WOLFE woke to the sound of breaking glass. He was conscious of a thin, small voice shouting and shouting in the dim distance of a dream. Someone was shining a light upon the bedroom window, for he could see the frame outlined in shadow upon the ceiling. A strong wind was blowing gustily about the house.

Wolfe sprang out of bed, and made his way to the window, just as a second stone came crashing through the glass. A carriage lamp showed its yellow eye in the little garden below.

Wolfe threw up the window.

"All right, all right, hold on there. Who is it?"

A voice came from behind the carriage lamp.

"I guessed it were your window, sir. It be me, John Munday. The young missus has been took bad. I've brought ye a letter."

"All right; I'll be down in five minutes."

Wolfe lit a candle and dressed like a man whose house is on fire. He still was conscious of a thin, small voice calling and calling in the distance of dreams, and of the restless blustering of the west wind over Navestock town. A gust blew the candle out as he opened the front door.

"Damn the wind! Come inside, John."

"I reckoned as you wouldn't mind me using stones, seeing how the young missus be that bad——"

Wolfe had shut the door and relit the candle.

"No, you might have fired a gun in and I'd have thanked you. The letter? Hold the candle."

He untwisted the crumpled note and spread it against the wall with one sweep of the hand. A doctor receives many such messages, tragic, anguished scrawls penned anywhere, like a dispatch on a battlefield. Mary Mascall had written in pencil, but the writing was steady and showed nerve. She was a woman who could keep a clear head and remember facts that might be vital.

Wolfe crumpled the letter and thrust it into his pocket.

"Have you got a good horse, John?"

"The brown cob in the market cart, sir. He be tied to the railings."

"Can he move—go the pace?"

"I guess I'll make him."

"Here, bring the candle along. There are some things I must get together. It will save time if you hold the light."

Wolfe was in fierce haste, but it was the disciplined haste of a man who has himself in hand. There was no angry rummaging, no turning of drawers upside down, no passionate impatience. He knew where to find everything, and he seemed instantly to have made a mental list of all that he needed.

"That's all."

The cob was nibbling Mrs. Loosely's hedge, his nose over the railings.

"Climb in, John. I'll unfasten him. Take the bag—softly. The stuff is precious."

Wolfe unfastened the horse, and climbed in while the cart was on the move. John Munday whipped the cob up, and they went bumping and swaying over the cobbles with the lamps flashing on empty streets, drawn blinds, and darkened windows. Down by Josiah Crabbe's Wolfe saw the great poplars swaying and moaning uneasily. A dog barked. By the Lower Pike a white cat bolted across the road, shooting in and out of the lamp-light like a shuttle.

In five minutes they were over the Wraith and out of the town.

"Give him the whip, John. Never mind the hill."

Munday made the cob canter.

They swept under the huge, autumnal trees on Beech Hill, dark now and colourless. There was a rustling of dead leaves, and the noise of the wind in the tree tops. The lamps showed the muddy road tunnelling away into moist gloom. They drove in silence, John Munday keeping his eyes on the black road and the dim hedges; Wolfe grim with suspense. It was a bitter and self-accusing mood that held him during that night drive. His own fault—this catastrophe! Why had he been fool enough to tell Jess the news? He could see her now, starting up in bed, flushed and exultant, and the sudden, tired whiteness that had swept her face. "John, kiss me." What news, too, to set against a risk! The knocking of common sense into the heads of a few old men!

At Moor Farm the west wind snored in the cypresses and shook the holly hedges. Rain began to fall, driving out of the murk on the moor. John Munday's hands had almost ceased to feel the reins by the time that the light from the lamps flashed on the white gate of the paddock. Even in summer a drive at two in the morning can make a man's teeth chatter, and this was raw November at its worst.

The black top of the holly hedge was outlined by a light from an upper window. The porch door stood open, and Mary Mascall was waiting there, a shawl over her shoulders. Yellow rays from a lantern streamed down the paved path, showing the crevices between the stones, the tufts of grass, and the little cushions of moss. A few dead leaves fluttered to and fro. The cypresses swayed and complained.

"Thank God you've come, John."

His grave and troubled face drew out of the darkness into the light.

"How is she? Let us go up at once."

"Just as white as a bit of marble. It came so suddenly. Lad, it's one's helplessness! What could I do?"

They were climbing the stairs.

"It was my fault, Mother. I have been cursing myself all the way here. I ought never to have told that news."

"There, John, you couldn't prophesy!"

"Is the bleeding still going on?"

"No, lad, I think it has stopped. I didn't dare touch her."

"God bless your common sense. Is she very restless?"

"No—so quiet."

"Mother, I think I shall shoot myself if this ends badly."

Her heart was big enough to spare him comfort even in the stress of her own suspense.

"Don't say that, John. It's not you to talk like that."

Her compassion reproved him.

"You women have courage. We must not let her think that we are over-anxious."

Mary Mascall had shaded the lamp in Jess's room, but even in the dim light Wolfe could see the extreme pallor of her face. She was like a figure of wax, with bloodless lips and pinched features. Her hands were moving restlessly, the white fingers plucking at the quilt.

"Is it you, John?"

Her voice was a mere whisper, and when she turned her face to him her eyes looked great black circles.

Wolfe bent over her.

"Don't talk, Jess, and don't move a finger. Keep absolutely still."

"I feel so funny and restless, John; and I can hear all sorts of noises."

"Yes, yes; we'll stop all that."

He moved to the light, unpacked his bag on the chest of drawers, and began to mix a draught from the bottles he had brought with him. The neck of a bottle clinked

faintly against the measuring glass.

"Just raise her head slightly, Mother, while I hold the glass. Don't make any effort, Jess; don't try to lift your head. Now, drink."

She drank the stuff, making a slight grimace.

"That's good. Now you must try and sleep."

"Yes, John, I'll try."

"We shall be here. I am not going to leave you."

Presently she fell asleep, her shallow breathing almost imperceptible, her face white and still as the face of one dead. Her left arm lay outside the clothes, and Wolfe's fingers rested lightly on the wrist. He was listening, counting, wondering.

An hour passed. Mary Mascall lay back in the old walnut-wood arm-chair in the corner, her eyes closed. She had not realised how weary she was till Wolfe had come and taken some of the sharpness from her suspense. The farm-house was very still. Fragments of sleep became like gaps in the puzzle of life. All those who suffer ask bitter questions, nor is it good to be too humble towards God.

Mary Mascall's eyes opened, and she found Wolfe watching her. He beckoned her to come to him. She slipped her shoes off, and moved noiselessly across the room.

Wolfe drew her very close, and spoke in a whisper.

"This is a good sleep. Her pulse has picked up just a little. Go to bed, Mother, and get some rest."

"But you? They have been working you to death. And there's to-morrow."

"I am going to sit here all night. I am not going back to Navestock till I know."

"Not even to-morrow, John?"

"Not for a month, if necessary. Navestock can go to the devil. Is there plenty of oil in that lamp?"

"Yes."

"Then go and get some rest."

She kissed him, and slipped silently out of the room.

Wolfe remained there through the night, sitting beside Jess's bed, his fingers resting lightly on her wrist. The faint beating of her heart measured out the night for him, the flutter of blood under the white skin. Grey-eyed dawn found him there, gaunt and stiff like a sentinel, outstaring Death, who stood at the foot of the bed and watched.

## *CHAPTER FORTY-TWO*

NAVERSTOCK found itself suddenly in the position of a beleaguered town whose governor had disappeared in the night and left the place to confusion. A crisis creates the man who is indispensable. Navestock realised this fact directly the indispensable strong man disappeared.

Till noon of the next day no one knew what had become of John Wolfe. He had been called out in the night, and had not returned. Even this was surmise, and the bell and knocker of the little white house at Eve's Corner were restless and importunate.

"Is Dr. Wolfe in?"

"We haven't seen him this morning."

"Surely he has not forgotten to call at Mrs. Ballard's?"

"Oh, please will you tell the doctor to come to Mr. Rotherwood's at once? There's been a change for the worse."

"I've called for Mrs. Mostyn's medicine."

"Can you tell me what time Dr. Wolfe will be home?"

The little maid grew cross and flurried. Mrs. Loosely herself took charge of the front door, growing more stiff and innocent each time the knocker banged or the bell jangled.

"Dr. Wolfe must have been called out in the night. I don't know where he has gone. I have not seen him since I went to bed."

This ingenuous statement provoked no innuendoes, for no one doubted Mrs. Loosely's morality!

One of the "Pardons" grooms rode up, left his horse nibbling the hedge, and banged the brass knocker.

"Morning, ma'am, a letter for Dr. Wolfe from Mrs. Brandon."

Mrs. Loosely repeated the formula.

"Dr. Wolfe must have been called out in the night. I don't know where he has gone. I have not seen him since I went to bed."

The groom stared.

"I've got to find him. It's urgent. Mrs. Brandon said I was not to go back

without finding him."

"Well, find him, my man. Your horse is eating my hedge. I'll trouble you——"

The groom tucked the letter into his belt.

"I'll try Mr. Crabbe's."

And he banged the gate after him.

Josiah Crabbe was ready with a suggestion.

"What's that, what's that? Can't find Mr. Wolfe anywhere? Tell them to try Moor Farm."

It was at Moor Farm that they found him.

But Navestock called and beckoned to a man who was both blind and deaf. All Wolfe's consciousness had withdrawn itself into that long, low upper room with its oak beams, old rose-coloured walls, and its snow maiden in the white-quilted bed. Jess had awakened two hours after dawn, to find John Wolfe sitting beside her. Her shadowy eyes had smiled up at him with a look of dreamy contentment.

"Stay with me, John."

She had fallen asleep again almost instantly. No power on earth would have moved John Wolfe from Moor Farm.

Messages, letters were brought him, one full of frank entreaty from Ursula Brandon.

"Come down to the town, even if it is only for an hour. Perhaps you do not realise that Navestock is without a doctor. Threadgold went away yesterday for his health. The locum tenens who was to have taken his place has not arrived. What are the wretches to do?"

Wolfe wrote his reply on a black oak pedestal table. He was sitting by the window of Jess's room, with the brown leaves blowing about the grass in the garden below.

"Pardon me, but it is life or death here, and I remain till it is decided. Navestock is drawing out of the valley of shadows; things were at their darkest a month ago. Let them send for Bruce or Halliday, or some of the Wannington men. I have given a good deal to Navestock. They must not grudge me these few days. They are mine, and I shall take them."

He remained immovable, and Navestock, still half hysterical, was utterly astonished. The meaner spirits felt starved and neglected, and cried out in peevish anger. The thing was unheard of! A doctor deserting his patients because a chit of a girl he was fond of happened to be dangerously ill!

"Absolutely scandalous! He never enters my house again."

Yet there were a number of people who understood, and who were

magnanimous enough to defend him.

"Yes, abuse the man! You have let him slave for weeks, and then scream at him when he's in trouble. If he were ill in bed you couldn't drag him out, could you? I tell you I admire the man's spirit."

Out yonder on the edge of the purple moor, John Wolfe watched and waited, forgetting Navestock and its grumblers. He had swept them aside with one great gesture of passion. He had spent himself in their service. Now, they could wait upon his will.

It was more as nurse than as doctor that Wolfe fought death up at Moor Farm. The faintest tremor of excitement, the slightest movement might bring on a recurrence of the hæmorrhage. It was the trembling of a leaf on the grassy bank of a stream; a breath of wind might send it fluttering into the water. For three nights Wolfe did not sleep. His great strength helped in the crisis of nursing, when the utmost gentleness was needed, and a touch that was so delicate that it could scarcely be felt. The snow maiden with the black hair and eyes of shadow lay upon the arms of Wolfe's great love.

About the fourth day of Wolfe's withdrawal, a special meeting of the Board of Guardians was called to consider a communication that the Board had received from the Lords of the Council. The letter had come in reply to their appeal for expert advice in the matter of the town's sanitation. Lawyer Crump was the recipient of this letter and as clerk he had to lay it before the Board.

Crump had a very notable sense of humour. He delighted in a cantankerous and cynical sort of jest, taking much trouble to fasten it to his neighbour's tail, and watching with sardonic composure for the explosion. Crump had objectivity, detachment. The letter from the Lords of the Council made him grin like a dog. He sat in his cane-backed chair, and, looking down on Navestock, wondered how the town would take this smack in the face. No one could have concocted a more shrewd and suggestive snub.

Crump got up at that meeting with a stark, dry gravity, looked round the Board Room, glanced at Robert Flemming, and smothered an inward chuckle. He had one eye on the meeting as he read that letter. Some of the faces looked flat and puzzled.

The Lords of the Council desired to inform the Navestock Board of Guardians that they—the Lords—had consulted Dr. Percival, the expert whom they had sent some months ago to report on the state of the town. Dr. Percival had stated that the Navestock Guardians had the very man they needed living in their midst. They ventured to suggest to the Navestock Guardians that they should elect Dr. John Wolfe as their medical officer and be guided by the expert knowledge that he

possessed.

There were flat faces round the table. The sulky minority had a vague suspicion that it was being treated to irony. Did these gentlemen in London mean to pour humiliation upon owners of property?

"That's nonsense," said a voice from somewhere; "we have got a medical officer already."

Crump's eyes twinkled.

"Excuse me, sir, but I have another letter to read to the Board. I regret to say that bad health has compelled Dr. Threadgold to resign."

Crump glanced across at Robert Flemming, and saw that the rector was sitting heavily and austerely upon an unchairmanly desire to laugh. Some of the gentlemen were so palpably winded. They were still wondering whether there had been malice in the blow.

Crump read Dr. Threadgold's letter. The resignation was accepted.

Then came the critical pause. Robert Flemming caught the prompting gleam in Crump's eyes.

"Well, gentlemen, it seems to me that our only logical and sensible step is to elect Mr. Wolfe as our medical officer. Speaking personally, I don't think we could make a better choice."

Robert Flemming's big head, and slow, deep voice dominated the meeting. He put his weight to the rope just when the two parties were wavering, one against the other. The malcontents came sliding over. John Wolfe was elected.

Half an hour later Flemming stood in the courtyard chatting to Crump.

"It's a rum world, sir, a topsy-turvy world. You gave your tug just at the right moment."

"I shall ride up to Moor Farm at once."

The lawyer nodded.

"That's a very determined young man. He must come down and show himself. There is a good deal of feeling in the town."

"Yes, people are apt to sing out when the gout's got 'em and the doctor doesn't come."

"I don't blame them. If he is ambitious he'll come."

## *CHAPTER FORTY-THREE*

ROBERT FLEMMING saw the sun setting over Tarling Moor as he crossed the paddock to Moor Farm. Two big brown cart-horses were cropping the grass, and a file of white geese trailed up from the pond the one-eyed gander at their head. November was in a blue and misty mood, but beyond the moor the sky flamed red, a scarlet cowl to the grey cassock of the departing day. Blown leaves lay in brown knots against the grass tufts. The holly hedges of the house had a sombre, glittering majesty. The bare branches of the orchard trees scrawled grotesque signs against the sky.

Robert Flemming was a sentimentalist. He paused momentarily at the garden gate, his eyes glancing at the white-mullioned upper windows that showed between the two cypresses. A candle glimmered and passed across a window like the reflection of a falling star seen in a dark pool. The house had a hushed tristfulness. A shadowy presence waited with finger on lip.

Robert Flemming walked up the path and hesitated in the porch with his hand on the iron bell-pull. Some sensitive impression made him draw it down very gently so that the rusty wire creaked but no bell jangled. He heard a door opening; footsteps crossed the hall. A girl's face looked at him inquiringly out of the dusk.

"Is Dr. Wolfe here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want to see him. Say it is Mr. Flemming."

"I'll fetch Mrs. Mascall, sir. Will you please step inside?"

She left him standing in the half-darkened hall, with the door open, and a band of red light just showing beyond the black bulk of the cypresses. The cautious, shuffling footsteps of the girl upon the stairs made the house seem yet more silent. She seemed to melt away into the hushed shadows. Some minutes passed before the sound of footsteps returned.

Robert Flemming found himself holding out a hand to Mary Mascall. Her face looked pale, and set with the stiffness of pained endurance.

"My girl is not so well again."

"I am sorry."

"You want to see Mr. Wolfe?"

"Yes."

Robert Flemming had all the aristocrat's graciousness towards women. Instinctively he had lowered his voice.

"It is very necessary that I should see Dr. Wolfe, if he can be called without disturbing your daughter."

"She is asleep just now. But I doubt if John will leave her."

"Mrs. Mascall, you are a woman of sense. Navestock has discovered that John Wolfe is a necessity, and Navestock is beginning to grumble."

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Flemming. I never did think much of the Navestock folk. John Wolfe gave them months—but they won't give him three days."

"Isn't it very natural? Wouldn't you yourself be impatient if your child were ill, and your doctor persisted in giving all his time to someone else? John Wolfe is on the edge of sacrificing the first big step of his career."

"I see. They are ready to be soft-spoken to him now if he goes and takes his hat off."

"No; it is not wholly that. There has been a great change in public opinion, for which John Wolfe was largely responsible. He ought not to shirk this new responsibility. Try and persuade him to see me for five minutes."

"I will, Mr. Flemming. Will you step into the parlour?"

"Thank you, I shall be all right here. I have left my trap at the paddock gate."

Mary Mascall vanished up the darkening stairs. She had to grope her way along the landing. A faint chink of light showed her the door of Jess's room. She opened it softly, and spoke in a whisper.

"John."

"Yes, Mother?"

"Mr. Flemming wants to see you."

"What about?"

"Navestock. Go down and speak to him. I ask you to do it, John. It's only fair to him and to yourself."

The two men met in the dusk of the hall. Wolfe's face looked gaunt and grey—a hungry face, yet fervent, and fanatical about the eyes. He gripped Robert Flemming's hand hard.

"She is asleep now. I can give you ten minutes. It is just touch and go, the weight of a feather in the scales."

His intensity gave Flemming a sense of pathetic discouragement. He lost some of

the grip on his convictions.

"Shall we go outside? We can talk there without disturbing her."

They passed out and along the front of the house, and turned into the orchard. A flushed greyness now filled the western sky. The grass looked a deep blue, the trees black as jet. The air was keen, and the sky clear. There would be hoar-frost by the morning.

These two tall men went striding to and fro along one of the orchard ways.

"I am going to speak out frankly, Wolfe."

"The franker the better."

"To-day we elected you our Medical Officer. Threadgold has resigned. You have won your way. Don't sacrifice a fine opportunity."

He saw Wolfe's profile as they turned, gaunt and clear against a hard sky.

"You think I am acting selfishly?"

"I think that no man should put his private interests before the interests of his—his—you know what I mean. There is a good deal of feeling in the town. I came as a friend."

They turned again, and in turning met each other's eyes. Wolfe's mouth was a straight line.

"You have been a good friend. You tell me that the people down there are grumbling because I have taken these few days."

"You know, we are all human."

"I know that human nature is confoundedly selfish. Did they expect me to go round and make apologies when she—the child—was dying?"

Flemming gripped Wolfe's arm.

"I am not blaming you. But can't you work for both sides? These people have made a sort of surrender."

"Which gives them a greater right to grumble?"

"They are not all grumblers."

Wolfe's eyes looked into the grey distance. His face was very stern.

"For three months I have given Navestock the very blood of my body. They begrudge me three days. I shall not leave Moor Farm until we have either lost or won."

"I think you are wrong."

"You are one of the few men, Mr. Flemming, to whom I would surrender, if it were possible."

"Would this girl wish you to do this, if she were capable of judging?"

Wolfe faced round almost fiercely.

“She has more courage and generosity than twenty Navestocks. It was she who kept me here. I should have kicked the dust off my boots last year if she had not backed me up. ‘Stay and fight,’ she said. I stayed. If Navestock owes me anything, it owes it to her. All this here is a matter of nursing. I would trust no one but myself. They want me to give her a worse chance. They can go to perdition.”

They walked on, turned, retraced their steps. Flemming’s hands were clasped behind his back, his face clouded.

“You go too far. That’s it, you’re too thorough. Surely, a few hours here each day——”

“They have had hundreds of my hours. It is not as though I were the only doctor within twenty miles. You have had other men in. It is sheer, petty, querulous selfishness. Mr. Flemming, that’s all I can say.”

They shook hands at the gate.

“What shall I tell them in Navestock?”

“Tell them the truth. They can’t think any the worse of me.”

## *CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR*

IT was dark still when Wolfe left Jess sleeping, slipped out of the room and made his way downstairs. In the recess under the stairs he found his overcoat and boots. He unfastened the porch door and smelt the keen fresh smell of a winter morning.

The night had been critical, and the day would be in sympathy with the night. Wolfe felt tired and heavy-headed, with a hot ache in the eyes and dull blood in the brain. Strength of will alone had kept him awake, with his whole body thirsting for sleep as a dry land thirsts for rain.

Yet beyond the weariness of it all shone a breaking-through of hope. The prophetic power in the art of healing is often a matter of intuition. There may be facts to go upon, but the born healer has a spiritual sense that supplements the cruder cleverness of the eyes and hands. Wolfe possessed this spiritual sense. Something assured him that if the hazards of the coming day were passed, Jess would be out of the shadow and on the edge of the sunlight.

Wolfe went out into the garden. It was quite dark, and the cypresses towered up till their tops became merged into the blackness. The moor might have been a silent sea, for there was no wind stirring.

Wolfe turned aside into the orchard, and, pacing up and down there, felt the grass crisp with hoar-frost under his feet. Presently, a handful of grey light was thrown up into the eastern sky. The bare branches overhead became more distinct. A robin twittered, its cry like the first cry of awakening life in a dead, black world.

For Wolfe the bird's twittering had a thin and instant pathos. It stirred him indescribably, like the first notes of some well-remembered song. His eyes grew hot with understanding and compassion. The first faint twitter of joy in a sad and shadowy world! He leaned his arms against the trunk of a tree, buried his face in them, and prayed.

When he uncovered his eyes again, the earth had changed. A fantastic half-light had spread, and the scene was all silver; the grass a silver carpet; the boughs of the trees and the hedges crusted over with hoar-frost. The valleys were abysses filled with silver mist. Tarling Moor had its head in a grey cowl.

Then, very swiftly, came a further change. The sun heaved to the horizon. Clouds flamed orange against a background of purple. The rime on the grass and on the trees and hedges caught a sudden sparkle. The zenith changed from grey to blue. Colour lived again. The mole-heaps, the fallen leaves were rich browns and golds. The lichen on the tree-trunks became yellow and green. The greyness of the moor took on a tinge of blue.

Wolfe saw the red dome rise in the south-east. It was fiery, joyous, splendid. A sparkling, yellow day was dawning. Hope seemed to pour like light over the edge of the world. The beauty, the mystery, the joyousness were symbolical. Wolfe stood awhile with bowed head, very near to the Great Spirit whom men call God.

The house was awake when he returned revivified and stimulated by the winter dawn. A murmur of voices came from the kitchen, with the brisk crackling of a wood fire. Wolfe hung his coat up under the stairs and passed down the passage to the black-beamed kitchen that was full of the glow of the fire.

The girl had gone to fetch a basket of sticks from the wood-lodge, and Mary Mascall, a red shawl over her shoulders, was breaking eggs into a pan. A big black kettle had begun to sing. The brass candlesticks on the mantelshelf winked at each other, and the rows of blue and white plates on the dresser smiled with their broad faces at the fire.

"Why, John, where have you been?"

"Getting a little exercise in the orchard."

"Cold and hungry? We'll soon have something warm for you. I slipped into the room ten minutes ago. She's sleeping still."

Wolfe stood at the window, watching the sunlight flashing on the frost-whitened roofs of the barns and outhouses. A cloud of sparrows rose from the rickyard. There was the lowing of beasts, and the chug-chug of a chaff-cutter at work.

"If we get through to-day, Mother, I think we shall win."

"John, lad, be careful how you put any hope into me. I daren't so much as think. I keep saying to myself, 'Mary Mascall, you are going to lose the child.'"

Wolfe's upper lip quivered.

"I don't know why I feel so much surer to-day, Mother, but it's a fact that I do."

"Perhaps it's the sunshine."

"Perhaps it's God."

There came a clattering of hob-nailed boots on the bricks of the back yard. John Munday's frost-reddened face with its fringe of sandy hair appeared in the doorway.

"Mornin', ma'am. How be the young missy to-day?"

"A little better, John, so Dr. Wolfe says."

"Say that agen each mornin', sir, and I'll be powerful glad."

He stumped away, to be followed in three minutes by Bob, his son. The lad stood awkwardly just inside the threshold, crushing an old hat against his stomach.

"Please, ma'am, how be Miss Jess?"

"A little better, Bob."

"I've got a tame bullfinch as whistles. Maybe she'd be liking him in her winder, some day, afore long."

"That's kind of you, Bob, very kind."

The lad gulped, crushed his hat a little harder, and departed.

"They're good souls. Sit you down, John. You won't quarrel with the kitchen table. Bless my soul, how long is it going to last!"

Her brave, round face, warmed by the firelight, had the glimmer of unshed tears in its blue eyes.

"I think you can dare to hope, Mother."

"Oh, lad, lad, be careful. I've schooled myself. Here's a good breakfast for you, anyway. You'll be breaking down yourself unless we mother you a little."

Jess had been given a sleeping-draught the previous night and at noon she was still asleep. Mary Mascall took the morning watch beside the bed, and ordered Wolfe out into the sunlight.

"John, just you light your pipe and go for a walk. Supposing you take the lane and the path through the woods to Sloe Farm? You won't meet any folk that way, and I should know where to find you."

Wolfe went.

The promise of the dawn had not deceived him. Muddy enough under foot it might be, but the day was a golden gem strung between grey pebbles on the string of the year. Towards Sloe Farm the leaves had clung longer to the trees. The coppices boasted a thousand tongues of fire; the rich red-brown of the beech, the softer brown of the hornbeam, the yellow of the ash, the brown and gold of the chestnut. A wood of young larches, its poles crowded together into blue gloom, massed its criss-cross boughs into a queer amber-coloured fog. Silver birches traced delicate patterns against the blue. In the ditches and against the banks brown leaves were heaped like spoil from a battle-field.

Wolfe wandered along the woodland rides, and a great calm descended upon him. He leaned his arms on the wet black bars of gates, smoked his pipe, and studied fragments of the landscape that were visible between dripping trees.

The sense of security increased in him. Striding with his boots sucking at the wet, spongy turf, he made his way back to Moor Farm without a panic fear in his heart.

It was dusk again, and he was sitting beside Jess's bed, listening to the sound of her breathing. Nearly twenty-four hours of continuous sleep! He thanked God for it —and waited.

A robin twittered in one of the cypresses. Perhaps it was the robin of the dawn that had symbolised for him the reawakening of life and hope. Even now it was the cheerful twittering of a bird snuggling in among the dense foliage, and looking out through the crevices at the wavering silver of the stars.

Wolfe noticed a sudden change in Jess's breathing, a short slackening, and then a quickening of the rhythm. She stirred, and turned her head upon the pillow. Wolfe bent forward, his outstretched hands resting on the bed.

"John, is it you?"

One of her hands crept out and lay upon the coverlet. Wolfe covered it with one of his.

"John, I feel so hungry."

"Do you, Jess?"

"What time is it, just daybreak?"

"No, evening. You have nearly slept the clock round twice."

"Have I? What is your hand trembling for?"

"Oh, I don't know. Is it? You must not talk much, dear."

"What an old tyrant you are, John. Do you think I could have just one little bit of bread and butter?"

The muscles of his throat thickened and quivered.

"No, not yet, dear."

The shadowy eyes looked up at him out of the white face on the pillow.

"Stroke my hair, John. It's so soothing."

His hand caressed the black hair.

"I feel that I am going to get well."

## *CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE*

MARY MASCALL put her work aside, and went quickly to the parlour window. The heads of two black horses had passed across the gap in the holly hedge where the garden gate opened. Mary Mascall could see the shining hat and the red face of the coachman, and the slim figure of a young footman standing stiff and erect, and pressing the gate open.

"Bless me, Mrs. Brandon!"

She came up the stone path and under the cypresses, this tall woman with the level eyes and the calm and colourless face. She was wearing heavy furs, for the frost had held, and a keen wind blew over the moor. The serene face set in its mass of effulgent hair seemed to float unconcernedly upon the dark opulence of her furs.

Mary Mascall hurried to the porch door. She opened it as Ursula Brandon was stretching out a hand to the bell-pull.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Mrs. Mascall. I have come to ask after our lost nurse."

"She is much better, thank you."

"I am so glad to hear it."

There was no apparent reason why these two women should feel uneasy under each other's eyes, yet some vague feminine antipathy woke at the very meeting of their voices. The one was casual, calm, cold on the surface; the other, ruddy, warm-voiced, mellowly vivacious. The blue eyes of the farmer's wife took on a queer surface-gleam of watchfulness.

"You are sure that she is out of danger? In a way, I have felt myself responsible."

"Dr. Wolfe is very much more hopeful."

"That is a good sign—to have one's doctor convinced. Is Mr. Wolfe here, by any chance?"

"Yes."

A sudden and half-surprised intentness in Ursula Brandon's eyes showed that she had come abruptly against the critical and watchful reserve of this other woman.

"I wanted to speak to Mr. Wolfe about one or two of his patients. As he

happens to be here I will seize the chance. Will you ask him to come and speak to me for a moment? No, thank you very much, I will not come in. I do not want to keep my horses waiting."

She maintained her level, casual calm under the full stare of Mary Mascall's shrewd blue eyes.

"I will send Dr. Wolfe to you."

"Thank you so much."

Mary Mascall left Ursula Brandon standing in the porch. She had a conviction that this apparent afterthought carried the real purpose of Mrs. Brandon's visit.

When Wolfe came out to her she met him with the easy friendliness of a woman of the world. Mary Mascall had remained with Jess, and there was no questioning and mistrustful feminine spirit to be dealt with, merely a blundering thing called man whose methods were like trampled elephant tracks through the jungle.

"I am so glad to hear that she is out of danger."

"There is still some danger."

"Of course there must be. I wanted to see you, so I asked Mrs. Mascall to send you down to me. When are you going to remember that there is such a place as Navestock?"

"I am giving myself two more days."

She smiled at him, and the smile puzzled Wolfe. It suggested so many subtle mental attitudes. Her whole presence hinted at clearer, broader skies. She was so much more mature, so much more complex, so much more casual.

"Don't you think that you could deny yourself these two days? I suggest it as a friend. I think the patience of the people in the valley is very nearly exhausted."

He leaned one shoulder against the edge of the door, and looked gravely into her clever eyes.

"You mean that they are in a mood to throw me over?"

"They are rather like wasps in a bad temper. You know, Mr. Wolfe, we all have to smile on the mob at times, however much we despise them. Why not ride down and show yourself in the town?"

"I am not going to truckle to their petulances. I have learned a good deal in the last ten days. It has tended to make me dogged."

She gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"Oh, you proud and sincere spirits! Don't you know that one learns to humour fools and to triumph over them by smiling over their folly? Drive down with me now. My carriage can bring you back again."

He stared beyond her for the moment, but his face remained obstinate.

"No, I stand by my promise to myself. They expect me to go running round with my hat in my hand. I shall take my own time."

"Does it strike you that this may be what some people call selfishness? I only state a view. Having cultivated an intelligent selfishness all my life I merely put the middle-class view before you."

Wolfe's eyes had a gleam of humour.

"Selfishness! So it is—and I hold to it. As for gross selfishness, I have seen it at its worst in middle-class Navestock."

Her eyes gave him a flash of proud approval. The spirit pleased her, even if it contradicted her powers of persuasion.

"Inwardly I agree with you. As a friend, and a worldly woman, I wished to give you a worldly warning."

"Thank you, I'm grateful."

He accompanied her down the stone path to the gate, and saw her into her carriage.

"Give my love to Jess."

"I will."

"Try and relent towards the grumblers at the end of your two days. Good-bye."

Wolfe's spirit of inexorable independence was to bear the brunt of a second and more strenuous attack in the course of the same day. The two carriages must have passed each other on the way, that of Mrs. Ursula Brandon going towards "Pardons," Josiah Crabbe's hired fly climbing up from Navestock. For this yellow-faced little man in his archaic silk hat and black coat buttoned to his chin, this was a phenomenal journey. During Wolfe's absence from the town an increasing restlessness had possessed him, a restlessness that had culminated in this angry pilgrimage to Moor Farm.

For Josiah Crabbe had foreseen what was now actually happening in Navestock. Wolfe, the victorious free-lance, had withdrawn himself from the town that had surrendered to him, and left the small world to grumble and sneer behind his back. It had been the height of rashness, this piece of sincere and passionate egoism. Jasper Turrell and Wilks had been back in the town a week. The shrewd, cunning spirits had soon foregathered, viewed their opportunity, and pounced upon it without delay. Navestock was reconsidering its repentance. It needed but little persuasion to tempt it to accept half-measures in lieu of a fanatical thoroughness. Josiah Crabbe had all his news from Adam Grinch, and even the old cynic had been alarmed at the outcry Wolfe's absence had aroused. The town had turned like an uncertain-tempered dog. Infamous neglect of duty, an audacious hardihood that went out of its

way to flaunt the public opinion that had consented to be taken by the nose! The gossip of the river alleys said that Jess Mascall had never been in danger. John Wolfe had just taken himself off to show his masterful independence, and his contempt for public opinion.

"You damned fool, John Wolfe, you damned fool."

Mary Mascall had left them alone together in the parlour.

"You damned fool, to have let a pair of soft arms get round your neck. Man, you are spoiling everything. We had them beaten, we had them cornered, and now you play the womanish fool."

His bright, dark eyes flashed at Wolfe out of the yellow thinness of his angry face. The energy of his impatience burned at white heat in his shrunken body. Affection and scorn were curiously mingled.

"Turrell has been back in the town a week. What, you hadn't heard? They are working against you. They have got old Baggelay's nephew down from London, a smart young whipper-snapper, with a bagful of diplomas. Partnership with Threadgold; pushed through on the sly. Turrell has been fathering young Baggelay, trotting him round, mixing up soft-soap. There has been a dinner-party at Beech Hill. It's as plain as the palm of my hand, and damnably clever."

Wolfe stood by the window while Josiah Crabbe went to and fro like an old black panther in a cage.

"The Guardians have selected me their medical officer."

"Yes, you had your foot on Navestock's neck, and you must go and play this fool's game, hanging on to a chit's eyelashes, and setting the whole town against you. Good Lord, you ought to know what human nature is! Slapping the people in the face! Do you wonder they turn nasty? Yes, the Guardians elected you; but what is there to prevent them turning you out again? It's in their power. Jasper Turrell knows that. He's working for it. They'll get young Baggelay in, and he and old Threadgold will be the cocks on the dung-hill."

Wolfe's figure seemed to stiffen, and his broad, bony shoulders were outlined against the window. He held his head as though looking into the far distance.

"They cannot turn on me like that."

"Do you think Turrell will hesitate if he can get the wobblers back on his side of the ditch? They are saying that you have put them in a contemptible position. Robert Flemming is the only man to be relied on. The others will throw you over unless you go down and get them in your grip."

Silence held for some seconds. Josiah Crabbe stood holding his hands out to the fire. One-half of his face was shadowy, the other yellow in the firelight as he watched

the figure by the window.

"Then they have forgotten what I have done for Navestock during the last few months?"

"Forgotten! Do you count on gratitude? It was part of your day's work, wasn't it; part of your fighting spirit?"

"It was something solid. I gave them the best I had. If that does not count with them, I am not going to tout for favours."

"Damnation, man, you are playing the mule at the wrong moment. You are coming back with me to Navestock this very afternoon."

"I cannot do that."

"You fool, John Wolfe. I believed in you, I backed you, and now you are fiddling the game away."

Wolfe turned to him, and his face had a solemn dignity.

"Mr. Crabbe, I owe you nearly everything here, and I have not forgotten it. But I hold aloof here, for my pride and my sincerity. What I did for Navestock still stands. These people are in a dudgeon, because I chose to save a life that was dearer to me than anything else on earth. I will not hurry back to conciliate them. Robert Flemming has my promise that I shall return to Navestock the day after to-morrow. But I will not dock myself of a single day."

Josiah Crabbe felt for his snuff-box.

"Very well, John Wolfe. The board meets two days hence. You want them to judge you on your merits, eh?"

"That is what I wish. I refuse to influence them either way."

Josiah Crabbe took snuff with an excitable twirl of the fingers. His bright black eyes glanced angrily at Wolfe. He was fond of this man, proud of him, but this quixotry exasperated his sagacity.

"Well, you may regret it, John Wolfe. We helped you to win a battle, and then you act so as to make fools of us all. This damned womanishness! Who would have thought you would have been broken for a slip of a girl! Good God, man, if only you had been married three years!"

He shut the snuff-box with a snap, and turned to the chair where he had put his hat and coat.

"Women—they are necessities, but I did think I could calculate on one man keeping his eyes off a petticoat."

Wolfe went to help him with his coat.

"They have not turned me out, yet," he said.

Josiah Crabbe flashed round on him while Wolfe still had his hand on the old

man's collar.

"You have helped me on with my coat, John Wolfe. I helped you off with yours, and held it, and now you play the fool. Man, don't flatter yourself they are making a hero of you in Navestock. There is plenty of mud down yonder. Now, I'll be going. You'll be wiser in five years."

"I hope so."

"Pah—go and get married. Get it over, get it over."

## *CHAPTER FORTY-SIX*

MISTY tranquillity possessed the landscape when John Wolfe passed out of the Moor Farm gate and took the road to Navestock. It was about eleven in the morning, and he knew that the Navestock Guardians were to meet at the same hour. Passing Beech Hill House he glanced back and saw the white wainscoted paunch of the place shining between the misty trees. He could imagine Turrell's dinner-party of a few nights ago, with the local quidnuncs and men of substance growing flushed and sly over their wine.

Wolfe felt in a peculiarly calm and sanguine mood. The last two days had seen Jess out of danger, and Josiah Crabbe's prophecies had appealed to him only as the excited cynicisms of a partisan who desired to give the Turrells and their party no chance of rallying. Wolfe had been more moved by Ursula Brandon's warnings. She was not a woman who indulged in superlatives, and hunted a piece of gossip to death.

Deep down in his own heart John Wolfe was convinced that Navestock was grateful to him and loyal to his work. It might grumble and complain, but he could not bring himself to think that these people who had been chastened by suffering would throw him aside in a moment of pique. He had worked for them, fought for them, sat by the bedsides of their dying, taken their children from the hands of death. The epidemic had spent itself and was dwindling into insignificance, but the work that he had done remained. It could not be questioned or quarrelled with. He believed that it could not be forgotten.

The old town sent up its poplars and its church-spire into the grey, hazy light of a winter noon. Wolfe felt a sharp thrill go through him as he gazed at the town. He had come by a kind of affection for Navestock, having spent so much of himself there and fought through his first campaign. He saw himself working in the town, living there with Jess, perhaps in one of those big, warm Georgian houses on Mulberry Green. The rich valley with its river seemed pleasant and acceptable to him that day. Like some tall Norseman who had conquered it—he gazed on the place and thought of it as "home."

Wolfe entered Navestock by the bridge at the bottom of Bridge Street. The familiar cobbled roadway sloped up very gradually between the little red-brick houses. The street struck him as being rather dull and empty. The first humans whom he met were two small boys who stared, and turned to stare after he had passed. A group in a doorway came within his ken, three women standing as though they had been struck motionless in the thick of a gossip. It was a silent, watchful, instantly hostile group. Wolfe, glancing at their sullen faces, realised that one of them was the mother of a child who had been ill.

He turned and spoke to her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Jenson. How's the boy?"

The woman braced her folded arms under her loose breasts, threw up her head, and looked Wolfe in the face.

"I'm obliged to ye for being so kind as to remember."

"Well, how is he?"

A thin little woman with red hair and wiry forearms fell ferociously on Wolfe's flank. Her fierce and combative face was thrust forward at the end of a long red neck and a pair of stooping shoulders.

"I wonder ye have the face to ask her that, doctor. She buried the child last week."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry indeed! Desertin' of us all——"

The mouth of the scold opened on him fiercely, a red, quivering slit with a darting tongue behind it. Wolfe hesitated, and walked on. Like a man who stumbled badly in a muddy place, he felt half angry and half ashamed. It came upon him suddenly that these people would hold him responsible for any untoward thing that might have happened. They would stand about and do nothing while he was away, and fling abuse at him when he returned. Three country doctors had been coming into Navestock daily to do any work that was absolutely necessary. Yet Wolfe saw of a sudden that this would not acquit him in the eyes of these common people. Ignorant, undisciplined, absurdly emotional, they were as ready to make a brawl with him as they were to quarrel with each other.

Wolfe had not been ten minutes in Navestock before he realised that people were in no hurry to hold out their hands. The expectant and alert hostility of the three women in the doorway seemed typical of the town's attitude towards him. Once or twice he stopped to speak to men and women who had been ill. They showed him a succession of glum, uneasy, reticent faces. Once or twice he struck gratitude and sympathy, but the vulgar world was set on giving him a piece of that very vulgar thing

—its mind. He walked up against that comic, pinched-nosed, hoity-toity haughtiness that characterises the common person who is offended. Moreover, the town seemed to have some joke against him, maugre its provincial dignity. He caught loafers nudging each other, and grinning. A boy shouted something after him, but Wolfe did not catch the words.

He was crossing the market-place when a gig drawn by a high-stepping grey horse came rattling out of King Street. The whirling yellow wheels were the wheels of Jasper Turrell's gig, and it was Jasper Turrell who drove it. He had beside him a sallow young man with a neat profile—Mr. Harold Baggelay, Threadgold's new partner.

Turrell's face was the face of a "Winged Victory," if sandy whiskers could play the pan of wings. Seated on the high box above the whirling yellow wheels, the reins running taut from his two fists, the whip at an angle, he looked down on the world and smiled with his ugly mouth. Yet the bullying spirit of the man showed through his sandy, red-eyed good humour. The loafers by the pump touched their hats to him. He looked at them with contempt—the look of a man who knew that he had the power to make these people suffer.

Turrell caught sight of Wolfe, and prodded young Baggelay with his whipstock. The two men in the gig stared at the man on foot. Wolfe guessed what had happened from the look in Turrell's eyes. The yellow-wheeled gig was a car of triumph. Turrell was carrying his candidate victoriously through the town.

Wolfe stiffened up and went on. He carried his head a trifle higher, and ceased to look into the faces of the people whom he passed. A hundred yards down King Street he caught sight of the big black figure of Robert Flemming coming along the red-brick footway. Flemming was alone, and walked with his great chest expanded, his fine head held haughtily.

The two men met and gripped hands.

"I have just come from the board meeting."

"It's all right, sir, you need not tell me the news. I have seen Turrell. That was sufficient."

His voice had a dry and grim restraint.

"You know, Wolfe, I warned you that this might happen."

"Yes; but I was simple enough to believe that good work counted. Was it the town's dignity that took offence?"

Flemming's frank eyes had a glint of generous anger.

"It served as an excuse to men who were easily persuaded to recant when a clever friend showed them a cheaper method of reform. Your behaviour has been

‘impertinent,’ and absolutely lacking in a proper sense of responsibility. They have cancelled your appointment and elected young Baggelay.”

They stood face to face—these two strong men—avoiding each other’s eyes, since each man felt that the other’s pride was sore. Wolfe’s straight mouth began to smile. It was one of the first gleams of cynicism that had ever showed upon his face.

“Well, that’s the end of it.”

“I hope not. By the way, I’m not in the habit of being ill, but I should like you to look after me in the future—when I need it.”

The smile on Wolfe’s mouth changed its expression.

“I appreciate that. I take that very kindly.”

“I mean it.”

“If I am here I shall be only too glad.”

Their eyes met.

“You may leave us?”

“I shall think it over.”

“Don’t act in a hurry.”

Wolfe walked on alone in the direction of Peachy Hill. Now that the truth had come to him he was amazed, both at his own confidence of an hour ago and at the fickleness the town had shown. Big men are not so quick with their scorn as are little men, but when the thing is roused in them it is far fiercer and more passionate. Wolfe realised that Navestock had not offered him a shred of sympathy. These provincials demanded everything from him, and were willing to allow him nothing in return. Directly he had ceased to spend himself in their service, they had turned, torn up their treaty with him, and thrown the pieces in his face.

The first thing that he saw when he reached the white house at Eve’s Corner was his brass plate plastered over with tar. The amazing littleness of the taunt so struck him that he stared at the gate and laughed. On passing into the garden he noticed that three panes of glass were broken in one of the lower windows, and that the green door was smeared with something that looked like the slime of rotten eggs. The brass knocker had been wrenched off, and thrown into one of the flower beds.

The front door was locked, and since the bell-wire appeared to be broken, Wolfe had to hammer with his fists where the shatterings of egg-shells remained glued to the paint. Footsteps came down the passage, and a voice called to him through the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s all right, Mrs. Loosely.”

Recognising his voice, she opened the door.

Her pale eyes looked at Wolfe with frank displeasure. Her thin, lined face was resentful and offended.

"I left all the things for you to see them yourself, sir. Never did I think that the town roughs would come up here and break my windows. Look at my door, Dr. Wolfe. I left the knocker just where they threw it."

Wolfe glanced at the brass thing lying half sunk in the soil. The woman's face was denunciatory, grieved. She had been hoarding up hours of indignation, and now that the chance had come for self-expression, her thin lips excitedly squandered all that she had hoarded.

"I never dreamed that you would put me in such a position, Dr. Wolfe. It was bitterly unkind of you. For months I've put myself out to suit you—me being a quiet woman, with the knocker going about once a week. I tell you, sir, I was near driven out of my senses—people pestering and fussing and scolding. The goings-on I've had to put up with—my girl going into hysterics, and leaving me without notice. I never should have thought you could have been so unkind."

Wolfe looked at her with a kind of grave pity.

"How could I tell, Mrs. Loosely, that these people would behave in this way? The thing never entered my head. I am sorry."

"You ought to be sorry, sir, indeed, you ought to."

"Of course I'll pay for any damage that has been done. Can you give me anything in the way of dinner, or shall I go down to 'The Crooked Billet'?"

She looked flustered and alarmed.

"I can't take you back here, Dr. Wolfe, I can't, sir, really. I'd never know what might happen. I must ask you to take rooms somewhere else. They're savages, real savages in Navestock. I'm a quiet woman, sir."

"Of course; I don't want to make any more trouble for you up here. I am going down to see Mr. Crabbe, and then I'll come back and arrange to have my things packed. I suppose Mr. Ragg's man has been looking after Turpin?"

"Yes, sir. I do think it a shame, sir, the way they have been going on about you."

"All I can say is, Mrs. Loosely, I am wiser than I was yesterday."

He passed out by the green gate, glancing with whimsical grimness at the desecrated plate. The humour of the thing began to elude him, and he drifted into a mood of scorn. Yet even here his thoroughness made him strive to review the whole affair with critical impartiality. Had he over-taxed the people's patience, and presumed too greatly upon the debt that Navestock owed him? The answer was an indirect one, but none the less forceful for being so. What of those hospital days and the men who had worked beside him? Good fellows, exuberantly rough, perhaps,

generous, not over-clean in their language. But a "dirty trick" had always stirred up passionate and ribald scorn. Those raw medical students would never have acted as these elderly gentlemen had acted. There was all the difference between a strenuous young bounder, and a discreet and elderly cad.

Wolfe had his hand on Josiah Crabbe's bell-handle before it occurred to him to wonder whether Josiah Crabbe had heard the news of Mr. Harold Baggelay's election. What would the old man make of it? Pat his own cynical foresight on the shoulder, or let loose a quiet yet furious flood of words?

One leaf of the iron gate swung back, and Wolfe saw Adam Grinch standing there.

"Is Mr. Crabbe in, Adam?"

"Yes, sir; but I'm sorry, sir, you can't see him."

The man's bronzed and powerful face betrayed intense dissatisfaction.

"It's Mr. Crabbe's way, sir. I never argues with him, and he never argues with me. We've grown up like that together. If we'd argue, we'd quarrel."

"You mean that Mr. Crabbe won't see me?"

"That's so, sir."

"He has heard the news?"

"Half an hour ago. I brought it him. Mr. Crabbe gave me my orders, and a letter as I was to give you if you came."

He took a letter out of his jacket pocket, and handed it to Wolfe.

"It goes against the grain with me, sir. These sons of Belial think they have the laugh on us. 'Tain't a fighting age in this country."

"Thanks, Grinch."

He opened Josiah Crabbe's letter, and found it curt and to the point:

> "John Wolfe, we have done with each other. It's better for both of us that I should keep my gate shut in your face.
>
> "You turned soft when you should have kept hard. I can't forgive you that."

Wolfe crumpled the letter into his pocket.

"Tell Mr. Crabbe, Adam, that I'm sorry. He has been a good friend to me. I am feeling what he feels."

He held out a hand to Grinch.

"Well, we have had our fight, Adam."

"Cowards and old women, sir. It's after you've beaten 'em that they'll poison ye —if they get the chance."

"Anyway, we have done something for Navestock."

"God held them in scorn, Dr. Wolfe, and they are ready to forget it."

"They'll not forget everything. There will be some of you who won't let them forget."

Grinch smiled grimly.

"No, sir, that's so. We can always ask some of 'em why they ran away."

Wolfe heard the iron gate clang behind him as he walked away under the shade of the high stone wall.

Grinch entered the house, and found his master in the dining-room, sitting before the fire. The black eyes in the colourless face were cynical and expectant. The red handkerchief lay over one knee.

"Well, Adam?"

"It was Mr. Wolfe, sir."

"You gave him my letter?"

"He read it at the gate."

"What did he say, Adam?"

"He said, 'Tell Mr. Crabbe that I'm sorry. He has been a good friend to me. I am feeling what he feels.'"

"Ah!"

Josiah Crabbe sat forward, staring at the fire. The fingers of his right hand had groped for his snuff-box.

"He didn't whine, Adam?"

"Mr. Wolfe is not the man to whine, sir."

"He didn't fly out at me."

"Not a word."

Josiah Crabbe took snuff.

"Damn the man, he can be hard enough when it's too late. I know—he'll have a face like a bit of granite. I've done with him, though—I've done with him. Lord, if that chit of a girl had only died before they got him up to the farm that night."

"That's a bad thought, Mr. Crabbe."

"Bad! Damn you, Adam Grinch, what do you know about it? It has roused the devil in me to see a man like that turned to a sop. There, there, I've done with him. And he didn't whine?"

"Maybe he's got a pride that's as good as yours, sir."

"Be damned to him—I hope he has."

Dusk was falling when Wolfe mounted Turpin in the stable-yard behind the white house at Eve's Corner. He had spent the afternoon in packing his clothes,

instruments, and books, and in stripping the surgery shelves of bottles, ointment pots and phials. All these latter he stored away in the big hampers he had kept in the coach-house. He had unscrewed the brass-plate from the gate, cleaned it, and packed it away among his clothes. Such munitions of war might prove very useful in the future.

"I'll tell the carrier to call for my luggage, and these hampers."

Mrs. Loosely stood at the back door, a long, sad, meagre figure, a white shawl over her shoulders.

"I can't help feeling sorry you are going, sir. It was a kind of a comfort having a doctor in the house."

Lamps were being lit as Wolfe rode Turpin down Peachy Hill. The mist-wrapped tranquillity of the day had thickened to a fine drizzle, and the cobblestones and sidewalks gleamed wet under the windows. The Lombardy poplars below Josiah Crabbe's were huge dim shapes hiding their peaked caps in obscurity. The streets were very empty, though here and there Wolfe saw a knot of children staring through the steamy window of some little shop that had set out its Christmas treasures. Raw draughts blew down the lanes and passages. In the market-place the rickety coach that ran to and fro from Wannington station had just pulled up outside the porch of the "White Hart." Seen through the drizzle the lamps were blurred yellow circles. Wolfe recalled that night nearly two years ago when he had climbed down from the coach over yonder. It had been raining then, and he remembered the puddles and the hazy, wind-blown lamps.

Turning into Bridge Street he rode down towards the river. The narrow street was empty, the doors of the houses shut, the blinds drawn. Turpin's hoofs made a hollow sound on the cobbles, but not a soul saw John Wolfe ride by. He reached the bridge over the Wraith, reined in there a moment, and sat looking at the black water sliding sluggishly under the diffused light thrown by the solitary lamp that burned upon the bridge. Presently he rode on and out of Navestock, along the meadow-road towards the dark, wet beech woods on Beech Hill. The town became a mere blur of light in the valley, a kind of marsh-fire half smothered by the wet darkness.

## *CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN*

THE upland road passed through the dark cool gloom of the beech woods and lifted Wolfe towards the black edge of the moor. A light breeze met him, blowing the misty rain into his face. The air was fresher here, and less raw. Earth and sky seemed one immensity of gloom out of which the rain and the wind drifted.

The mud of the lowland roads changed to the sharper, sandier texture of the moor. Wolfe saw a light away towards his right, a mere spark in the midst of the blackness. Something white rose up beside the road. It was the white gate leading into the Moor Farm paddock.

The spark of light came from a lantern hung in the red-brick stable where John Munday was looking to his cart-horses. He came clattering out when Turpin's hoofs rang on the rough road leading into the yard.

"Be't you, Mr. Wolfe?"

"I'll leave Turpin with you, John. You'll be able to find room for him?"

"There be his old stall waiting."

Wolfe dismounted, and passed the old man the bridle, patting the horse's neck before he turned to go.

"A dirty night, John."

"It be that, sir. Reckon I'd like to see a bit o' real winter soon."

Wolfe passed round the holly hedge towards the garden gate. The rain thickened and made a faint hissing sound as it fell upon the holly leaves. Level rays of light from the windows streamed out into the darkness. The great cypresses sighed as Wolfe passed under them.

He found himself holding Mary Mascall's hands in the hall where the brass lantern, hanging from a beam, spread out the light between its bars. Mary Mascall's eyes searched his. He spoke little more than six words to her, and saw that she understood. His face, wet with the rain, was gaunt, proud, but weary.

"Come in to the fire, John. Something made me keep our tea waiting. There's a plate of buttered toast on the table. Give me your coat, lad; I'll have it dried in the kitchen."

She saw the gratitude in his eyes.

"Don't let Jess know yet, Mother."

"Of course not, lad. Just you sit down and get warm."

They talked for an hour, the unhurried, intimate talk of two people who trusted and understood each other. Wolfe's tense pride relaxed before the farm-house fire. Much of the bitterness went out of him. Here was a woman who could give the touch that she would give to a child, with the words that should be spoken to a man.

"I am not altogether surprised, John. You see, I have known Navestock all my life. If you want to find some of the meanest people on earth, you have only to live in a country town."

She watched the firelight playing upon his face.

"I must make a fresh start, Mother. I am not quite the beggar I was two years ago. I have saved about a hundred and fifty pounds down there."

Mary Mascall's hands lay restfully on her knees.

"I'm a woman of some capital, John."

He glanced at her sharply.

"No, Mother, I'd not take it, even as a loan."

She smiled tolerantly.

"There, how you fly out! You'll have it some day, unless Jess and I quarrel."

"Let it stay at that. We are young, both of us. A man must carve out his own corner. I don't want mine bought for me—by friends."

Mary Mascall put more wood on the fire. A cloud of sparks flew up, and vanished into the black throat of the chimney.

"About Jess?"

"Let the news wait a week. I can go out and pretend I am busy in Navestock. If you'll let me stay on for a fortnight——"

"Of course, John, that's a great favour to ask, surely!"

"Say, till Christmas is over. I'll tell Jess when she is a little stronger. Mother, I have got to do something. I have got to wipe this out of her heart."

Mary Mascall got up, and kissed him.

"God bless me, John," she said, with her hands on his shoulders; "Navestock's a mere bit of a puddle. You can't swim there. You're much too big."

*Letter from Ursula Brandon to John Wolfe.*

FLORENCE, December 23, 18—

DEAR MR. WOLFE:

I have had a full account sent me of all that the little people have been

doing in Navestock. Even your beloved poor did not prove themselves marvels of sentimental loyalty and gratitude. I think I dislike the English poor a little more than I did six months ago—if that were possible.

I am writing to remind you that you are our doctor at "Pardons," that is to say, if you decide to stay in the neighbourhood. My impression is that you will shake off the dust and be gone.

Now—for our dear bourgeoisie—and the mob! Let me talk freely. Why should a man of great ability—and with some ambition—waste himself upon inferior people? It is a sort of fashion at times to stand in awed admiration before the "patient poor," and to sneer and hurl accusations of immorality and selfishness at the aristocrats. Believe me—there was never greater nonsense. I know something of horses and of men. Breed is everything. We better-bred animals know how to restrain ourselves. We learn to sneer a little, but we become too clear-eyed to be hypocrites. The English—in the mass—are barbarians. Heaven defend me from the comfortable, consequential dullness of the respectable middle classes.

Being a woman I can stand aside and look on with some amusement. With a man it is different. He has to shoulder the world. Therefore beware of inferior people. Inferiority means a mean way of looking at life, a mean way of judging motives. Little people are spiteful, pretentious, ever ready to fall into absurd little rages about nothing.

You ought to be busied with big things, big men, big ideas. You are too strong to fight with the little people in a provincial town. You hurt them, without meaning it, and then they go about, furtively, to hurt you in return. I do not believe all that the religionists say about love and self-sacrifice. They may be good for slaves—but a big man cannot live and work among little men, when he has pride and a staunch soul. It must lead to the inevitable disgust, cynicism, and scorn. Big men walk often with bare feet; so the little men spread thorns.

If I seem to write as a prig and a worldly one—I write as a friend.

I am glad that Jess is out of danger. She is not little. She should help you in the future.

Believe me ever truly yours,

URSULA BRANDON.

## *CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT*

THE pine wood rose like a high-walled and black-spired city out of the white world of the untrodden snow. Above the pine tops two grotesque dragon-clouds raced to devour the red winter sun. These two dragon-clouds had rushed out of the purple cover of the dim north-east, and they were flying against a sky of stormy gold. A wind whistled through the pine wood. The trees threw up their heads and cried, "Enough—enough!"

A narrow path came out of the wood, a ribbon of footsteps that had blurred each other in the snow. It looked a lonely place for such a path, with the great white moor waiting for the moon.

Two figures emerged from the shadows behind the straight tree-trunks, walked some fifty paces, and then turned to look at the sunset. The man's figure stood out gaunt, black, and tall. The girl beside him was wrapped in a scarlet cloak, and her white face looked out from the oval of the upturned hood. They were beyond the long shadows thrown by the pine wood on the snow, standing very close together.

"Look at the bits of yellow light between the trunks of the trees. They are like the windows of a church on a dark night."

"The sun's going, Jess. Come along; I am not going to let you stay out after dusk."

"But it's your last day here, John."

"Is that any reason why I should let you catch cold!"

He swung her round with one arm over her shoulders, and they walked with their faces turned towards the grey east.

"I am glad it was like this, John, and not rain and a wet sky."

"It makes the memory more vivid."

They walked on in silence, Jess sunk in a reverie—the white world before her. She was striving to see the future as she desired to see it, both for herself and for the man.

"John, I want to ask you a question."

"Well?"

“Are you sure you don’t regret all that happened in Navestock?”

“Quite sure.”

“I don’t think I was ever so miserable in my life as when you told me they had turned against you. Oh, it was mean! Every morning I wake up, and say to myself, ‘It was my fault. I have spoiled his career.’”

“Say something else for a change.”

“But in your heart of hearts, John——”

The arm over her shoulders drew her closer.

“Jess, you have given me the biggest uplift I have ever had in life. I suppose I am an ambitious man. I see now that in a few years I might have been like a bear in a cage if I had stayed down yonder. The bigger the thing we set ourselves to do, the better we do it.”

“You can’t help being ambitious.”

He looked down at her with a light in his eyes.

“Hardly.”

“No, I mean——”

“I want to give you a life you can be proud of, so that other people may envy you a very little.”

“John, dear lad! But envy——”

“It is one of the finest spices in life. To see your enemies look dour and savage.”

“What, you feel that? I have felt it for you. Was it wrong?”

“I don’t think so.”

The chimneys of Moor Farm sent up a film of smoke above the tangled branches of the orchard trees. The tops of the two cypresses still caught the sunlight.

“I know you will succeed, John. I have no doubts at all.”

He said very quietly and without arrogance: “Yes, I shall succeed.”

They came to the end of the holly hedge, and turned for a last time to look at the sunset. The level splendour beat upon their faces—the man’s gaunt, confident, adventurous: the girl’s, proud and full of a smiling valour.

# *AN AFTERGLEAM*

JOHN WOLFE walked out of the new red-brick station at Navestock and found an open carriage drawn by a couple of greys waiting for him in the road. A man-servant touched his hat, held out a hand for Wolfe's bag, and opened the carriage door.

"Dr. Wolfe, sir?"

"Yes."

The red-brick railway station had been built in one of the Wraith meadows, and as the two greys went at a fast trot along the road between the willows, Wolfe turned and looked back at Navestock town. The Lombardy poplars close by the house where old Josiah Crabbe had lived, still towered up into the blue. The town was the same red-roofed, deliberate old place with Peachy Hill and Turrell's brewery dominating the two main quarters like the strongholds of high-handed Roman nobles.

Wolfe smiled, and turned his eyes towards Moor Farm. There were the two cypresses in the distance, and the familiar outlines of Tarling Moor, but the old life had broken away from there and had become a mere memory.

Before him rose the cedars of "Pardons," the oaks and beeches in the park, the red chimneys, the black yew hedges. He could see the fish-ponds flashing in the sunlight, and the Alderney cows grazing in the meadows beyond.

The carriage carried him up the drive and drew up before the house. It struck him as a dream-house that had been sleeping all these years while the seasons came and went and the leaves burgeoned—changed and fell.

He found himself walking up the oak staircase and thinking of the day when he had been called in to set young Aubrey Brandon's leg. A door opened showing him a large room full of a mellow light that made the sheen of the polished furniture and the colours in the carpet and on the walls look rich and warm. A nurse was standing by a window. A grey-haired man rose from a chair, bowed to Wolfe, and then held out a hand.

Wolfe's eyes wandered towards the bed, and he saw Ursula Brandon smiling at him. Her face looked as pale and her hair as miraculous as ever, but there were lines

of pain about her mouth, and crowsfeet about her eyes.

"I am so glad you have come. This is Dr. Phipps of Wannington. You may just remember him."

"Yes, quite well."

The elder man looked pleased.

Half an hour later Ursula Brandon was lying back upon her pillows with the look of one who was experiencing a feeling of intense relief. She glanced at the nurse and smiled, and the nurse smiled back at her. Dr. Phipps and Wolfe were talking in undertones in the next room.

"You think she will be all right?"

"I am practically certain of it."

"I will write—should any other symptoms arise. I am very glad to have met you here."

The country practitioner shook hands and departed, and Wolfe returned to the other room. Ursula Brandon had said something to the nurse, for she went softly out, closing the door after her.

"Do you know, I feel at once that you are an old friend."

"I'm glad."

"Some people make one feel like that. Come and sit down here, and talk."

Wolfe drew up a chair, and the light from one of the windows fell full upon him. Womanwise she was studying him, noticing every subtle detail, whether there were any lines on his broad forehead, any reticence in his eyes. He had changed very little, save that there were some grey hairs about his temples, and his clothes were well cut.

"I felt that I must have you to see me. I was getting anxious about myself. And I have always had great faith in you, in spite of the fact that you are one of the big men."

He smiled at her.

"This is the first time I have been in Navestock since——"

"Yes—twelve years! Good heavens! And Aubrey is with his regiment in India—and I——"

"I don't think you have altered much."

"Now, that's charming of you. Nor have you—only—somehow—you look bigger."

She met his eyes and held them.

"I sent for you because I know you can tell the truth. So many of these doctors ——"

"Yes——"

"Do you think I shall get well? Tell me."

He answered without hesitation.

"In my opinion you will, most certainly."

Something seemed to relax within her, some cord of strain. Her face became younger, smoother, more peaceful. She looked towards the windows and sighed.

"Life is good. I used not to care much whether I lived or not, but now—I have found out some of the secrets. Tell me all about yourself—and Jess."

Wolfe's eyes appeared to fill with light.

"We had our struggle, and I think it made us all the happier. Jess has a little country place now down near Guildford where the youngsters make hay and ride an old pony and pester their grandmother. Harley Street? Oh, yes, I get away when I can, or rather I should say, 'we.' I don't think we care much for the social side of things; we're much too interested in real life. I have to work pretty hard, and I like to be with her and the children."

Ursula Brandon was regarding him intently.

"Yes, I can see it all. You are one of the rare men who marry the right woman, and continue to think her just the one woman in the world."

He met her eyes and smiled.

"I have had plenty of excuses. She has helped me more than I can tell you."

"Yes, but what a blessing that you had the strength to answer such a challenge."

"You mean——?"

She spoke very softly, almost to herself.

"The challenge of such a love. Most men fail us. So often that is the tragic side of life for women."

Wolfe appeared to reflect a moment.

"I don't think we were for ever pulling our happiness to pieces to see if it was the same as ever."

"Oh, you direct, happy, purposeful people!"

"Besides, life has been too full. We had to struggle, and we went up the hill together."

His eyes shone out suddenly, and she saw that life had softened him, rubbed away some of the rough and fanatical edges.

"By George, I wish you could see the youngsters. I think you would like the little beggars."

Her pale face flushed, but he was looking out of the window at the cedars, and he did not see it.

“Your wife shall bring them down here this summer. Yes, and I think you ought to come, too, if you can spare a few days. You must explore Navestock. You will find a great many changes.”

“For the better?”

“I think so. You know, you started the new tradition, and even the Turrells could not kill it. Josiah Crabbe and I became quite good friends before he died.”

“Someone kept the tradition alive.”

He looked down at her and smiled, and her eyes flashed up to his with a sudden strange pride.

“Yes, I kept it alive. What is more, it kept me alive, also.”

THE END

# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Challenge of Love* by Warwick Deeping]