

HARDY
ON THE
HILL

BY

M. E.

FRANCIS

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IN A NORTH COUNTRY VILLAGE
A DAUGHTER OF THE SOIL
AMONG THE UNTRODDEN WAYS
MISS ERIN
THE DUENNA OF A GENIUS
YEOMAN FLEETWOOD
FIANDER'S WIDOW
THE MANOR FARM
CHRISTIAN THAL
LYCHGATE HALL
DORSET DEAR
WILD WHEAT
SIMPLE ANNALS
STEPPING WESTWARD
MARGERY O' THE MILL

HARDY-ON-THE-HILL

BY

M. E. FRANCIS

(Mrs. FRANCIS BLUNDELL)

AUTHOR OF

"MARGERY O' THE MILL" "FIANDER'S WIDOW" ETC.

THE FIRST FARMER WAS THE FIRST MAN, AND ALL
HISTORIC NOBILITY RESTS ON POSSESSION AND USE
OF LAND . . . AND THE PROFESSION HAS IN ALL
EYES ITS ANCIENT CHARM, AS STANDING NEAREST
TO GOD, THE FIRST CAUSE.

EMERSON

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TO

THE HON. LADY BARRINGTON

Hardy-on-the-Hill

CHAPTER I

The big farm was situated on the hill—the dwelling-house, that is, for Hardy's land stretched up and down and round about almost as far as the eye could see. To say the truth the hill was but a little hill, a scarcely distinguishable mound in the midst of that fertile valley which lay between the downs and the river. The big farmhouse, then, with all its wealth of tile-roofed outhouse and clustering stack, crowned the hilltop, and the Little Farm—the little old grey tumble-down house so seldom used nowadays, so much in need of repair, so forlorn with its ancient smokeless chimney stack and its shuttered windows—crouched in the hollow, a mere appendage to that supplementary barton of Farmer Hardy's, with its surrounding cowsheds and pigsties, in which the overflow stock from the prosperous premises above found refuge. Yet it was looking out on the lower barton that the noble tithe barn stood, that wonderful relic of the past, with its time-worn brick walls, its mouldering oak floor, the great granary in which the monks of old had stored the offerings of the pious. In the barn proper Stephen Hardy's produce was stored now, but the granary above, being considered unsafe, harboured only rats and mice, in greater or lesser numbers according to the war waged upon them by such of Mrs. Hardy's cats as chose to forsake the sociable comfort of the upper premises for the sporting opportunities provided by the lower.

Mrs. Hardy was pouring out tea for her stepson one autumn afternoon in the comfortable parlour of Hardy's-on-the-Hill. From time immemorial the place had been known by this name to distinguish it from the abodes of those other Hardys who dwelt in the vale, and in the neighbouring small towns. In like manner the head of the family was seldom spoken of as Farmer Hardy, or even Stephen Hardy, but was invariably given his full title—Hardy-on-the-Hill.

Mrs. Hardy had been housekeeper to the last Hardy-on-the-Hill for many years before he married her, for some years, indeed, before he married Stephen's mother. She had loved and mothered the first Mrs. Hardy to the best of her ability, and had kept things going then as she had kept them going before and after the reign—if reign it could be called—of that helpless

little woman. The first Mrs. Hardy had been but “a nesh tewley poor body” as the neighbours agreed, who, except in providing that stout old yeoman, her husband, with an heir, had in every way neglected her duties as mistress of the busy household. Rebecca had ruled and taken possession of her from the first, just as she ruled and took possession of old Hardy-on-the-Hill. Stephen, too, had been her property from the moment of his birth, her more particular property since his fifteenth year, when she had stepped into his mother’s vacant place. She took possession of him, I say, but she did not rule him, for Stephen was not a man to be easily ruled. While he deferred to, and loved, the kindly, capable soul whom he continued to call Rebecca, making her feel herself in every way mistress of the house, he never for a moment forgot, or allowed her to forget, that he was master.

They presented a great contrast as they faced each other at the big round table. Rebecca, stout of form and ruddy of face with bright blue eyes and hair that was still brown though she was between fifty and sixty years of age. Stephen had dark hair and dark eyes, and the complexion of his handsome keen-featured face was suggestive of that strain of gipsy blood which was associated with his name. His figure was tall and well-knit, and he carried himself well.

Mrs. Hardy, having attended to Stephen’s wants, was about to settle down comfortably to her own tea when the sound of wheels without caused her to look up with an exclamation.

“I’d ’low there’s a visitor,” she cried. “’Tis a strange thing, Stephen—we don’t see much company, Lord knows, but if ever folks do come, ’tis sure to be of a washin’ day, or a Saturday when we’re a bit shorthanded. Jessie’s gone to the town now and Maggie’s just changing her dress.”

“I’ll answer the door,” said Stephen, rising.

“Go to the door yourself—why should you do that?” cried Rebecca. “I did ought to go if anybody goes—but I’m such a sight. There, for once I didn’t change my dress—bein’ Saturday and tea bein’ nigh upon a quarter of an hour late already. Still I don’t like you to take the trouble.”

She looked at him appealingly nevertheless, and Stephen with a good-natured smile crossed the room and went out.

A strident and particularly high-pitched voice soon heralded the approach of the visitor; at sound of it Rebecca laid down her knife and fork with an expression of dismay.

“It’s Mrs. Turnworth,” she remarked; “of all people to come such a day as to-day!”

She whisked off her apron as she spoke, and thrust it hastily under one of the cushions of the sturdy leather-covered sofa which formed part of the furniture of that homely, antiquated living-room, but a patch on the front breadth of her dress caused her countenance to assume a yet more dubious expression, and she was cogitating as to whether it might not be better after all to resume the discarded badge of honest drudgery, when the door opened, and the lady in question entered, followed by Stephen.

“Dear me,” exclaimed Mrs. Turnworth, “still at tea! Why, it’s long past six. How are you, Rebecca?”

“Quite well, thank you,” responded Mrs. Hardy, who did not deem it necessary to offer the newcomer any special demonstrations of welcome. “Yes, we are rather later than usual—we generally have tea at six o’clock. But Saturday is a busy day with us.”

“So I see,” returned Mrs. Turnworth, fixing ruthless eyes upon Rebecca’s patched gown. “Six o’clock tea—it’s your last meal of course, but still I fancy you must get hungry before you go to bed.”

“We’m early folks, you see,” responded Rebecca, in her flurry lapsing into dialect, which was not often her custom when entertaining a visitor. “At least I be. I be ready for my bed about nine. Stephen, there, sits up longer, but he seldom cares for any supper.”

“Well, go on with your tea now, anyhow,” observed Mrs. Turnworth condescendingly. “Don’t let me interrupt you. I just looked in on a matter of business.”

Stephen, who had been helping himself to a supply of cold ham, reseated himself calmly, and Rebecca, half unwillingly, poured herself out a second cup of tea.

“’Tis too late to offer you any, of course,” she remarked. “You’ll have had tea, I d’ ’low.”

“Oh yes, some time ago. I’ve been to the Rectory. It was Mrs. Moreton—by the way, how wretchedly sickly she does look, poor soul; but what can you expect with such a wearing husband? His sermons are enough to throw anybody into melancholia—it was she who advised me to come here. The fact is, I am looking for a house for some cousins of mine, and I thought the Little Farm might do.”

“Are they farmers, then?” inquired Stephen quietly.

Mrs. Turnworth flushed. Though she had dwelt in one of the best houses in the neighbourhood for more than twenty years and had put forward her claims to the respect and consideration of the entire community with unflagging energy and perseverance, it was now and then made patent to her that her position was even yet ill-assured. The country magnates occasionally invited her to their big parties, it is true, and she was careful to eschew such society as was provided by the country town, and to include on her visiting list nobody of less importance than a doctor or a clergyman; nevertheless she could not feel that she was making headway among those whom she was pleased to term her equals, while her obvious inferiors treated her with a cool lack of ceremony which at times verged on disrespect. In fact, no one knows better how to differentiate among his “gentry” than the Dorset rustic, who has as fine a taste for “quality” as the old-world Irishman.

“Farmers!” ejaculated Mrs. Turnworth, her already high-toned voice lifting itself another octave. “Farmers, Hardy! I tell you they are cousins of mine.”

“Oh,” said Stephen, in no way disconcerted, “in that case they probably wouldn’t want any land. I only asked the question on that account. I couldn’t let them have any land.”

“They wouldn’t want any,” returned the visitor, regaining her composure. “Mr. Leslie, the father, is a broken-down Oxford don—he doesn’t know the difference between a turnip and a potato, I should think—and as there are only two daughters, there couldn’t be any question of farming.”

“But the little house would never do for them, though, would it?” exclaimed Rebecca. “Nobody has lived in it for over a year now, and it ’ud want a deal o’ settin’ to rights.”

“It’s a wretched tumble-down place, I know,” returned Mrs. Turnworth with gusto. “I have often said you ought to put it in order for your own sake, Hardy; it’s a disgrace to your premises. But as far as the Leslies are concerned it really doesn’t matter. They’d have to live in some miserable hole, anyhow—they haven’t a penny-piece in the world.”

“Then perhaps they wouldn’t suit me,” said Stephen, with one of his quiet smiles.

“Of course I’m not speaking quite literally. They’d manage to pay your rent all right—you couldn’t in conscience charge very much for that ruin. They’re foolish, harmless sort of people. The old man would write and read all day and the girls could paint or garden. They’d keep the house aired, and you might as well have them living there as keep it empty.”

“Be there no mother?” inquired Rebecca.

“No; she died, poor creature, when the youngest girl was four—rather a good thing, too, for I don’t think she and John Leslie understood each other in the least, and there might have been an enormous family—there always is, you know, when there’s no money—and that would have complicated matters.”

She laughed—her own peculiar, ill-natured laugh—while Rebecca eyed her solemnly over the top of her cup. She was old-fashioned enough to consider such a speech indelicate in the presence of a young man, and, moreover, the heartlessness of it jarred upon her.

“Poor thing,” she said at length, setting down her cup, “is it she who was your cousin or is it the gentleman?”

“Mrs. Leslie was my cousin,” said Mrs. Turnworth rather stiffly. She thought it presumptuous of Rebecca to ask personal questions, though it never occurred to her that Mrs. Hardy might resent her own familiar use of her Christian name, or that the young yeoman, whom the wives of the Squire and the Rector were accustomed to “Mr.” with all ceremony, might consider it a liberty on her part to dispense with this prefix. “That has nothing to do with the question,” she continued; “the question is, Will you let them the Little Farm at a reasonable rent?”

“Meaning by reasonable a very low one,” intimated Stephen.

“Well, it comes to that,” responded she; “but as you don’t want to live there yourself and it’s empty now, you must be the gainer in any case.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Stephen.

“Oh, but you must make up your mind at once one way or the other,” cried Mrs. Turnworth, the higher octave coming immediately into requisition. “I’ve had a letter this morning from the girls—quite a desperate letter. Why they should expect me to find a house for them I can’t think, but they are the most helpless people in the world—and, of course, one can’t leave them quite stranded.”

Thereupon, forgetting in her eagerness all about the advisability of keeping people like the Hardys in their place, Mrs. Turnworth drew an envelope from her pocket and unfolded the sheet it contained. It was a small sheet much blotted, especially on the first page, and was evidently written by two different hands.

“It’s a curious document,” said Mrs. Turnworth, “but really they do seem in an extraordinary plight, poor shiftless creatures that they are. You can judge for yourselves from this.”

Thereupon, assuming her pince-nez, she read out the missive:

“‘DEAR COUSIN MARIAN,—We are dreadfully sorry to trouble you again, but we really do feel so bewildered and forlorn we don’t know what to do’ (‘Bess—this is Bess, I see—spells forlorn with an “e,” I perceive’). ‘We have to leave this house on Monday week and we haven’t the faintest notion where to go. A friend told me that living was cheap in Dorset, and so, as we are such grovelling beggars, Kitty and I think it would be a good thing to live there. Do try and find a home of some sort for us—any squalid hole will do—just any sort of house with a garden and a roof that won’t let in the rain. Of course if there was a sundial we should love it——’ ”

“A sundial!” interpolated Rebecca with a gasp.

“Yes, a sundial,” repeated Mrs. Turnworth, laughing in a way that was at once contemptuous and compassionate. “Oh, this is a most characteristic letter—characteristic of the whole family’s attitude towards life. Any sort of squalid hole will do. It would be advisable to have a roof which would keep out the rain, but on the whole they would prefer a sundial. Bess seems to have exhausted herself with this statement of her requirements, for the letter has evidently lain by for a day or two before Kitty finished it. This is what she says:

“‘I am so sorry to find that Bess never posted this letter—she imagined she had and was wondering why you did not answer, but I have just found it in her blotter. Dear Cousin Marian, do try and help us. We don’t seem to have another friend in the world, and certainly no relations. I don’t know who to turn to. We have to leave this on Monday week and I don’t think we ought to stay at Oxford. It would be so hard to live in a small way here. Father would go on ordering books and things and we should not be able to pay for them. He doesn’t seem to know how much money we have left, but I am sure it is very little. If you would help us to find a house I should be so grateful. It would be nice to be near you, as we should not feel quite so forlorn.’ (‘Kitty has begun by spelling forlorn with an “e” too,’ remarked the

reader; ‘but at least she has had the good sense to cross it out.’) ‘We can only pay very little rent, not more than fifteen or twenty pounds, I should think, but I suppose we could get a cottage for that. Bess and I saw a pretty one the other day—only a labourer’s cottage, but it had honeysuckle all over the porch, and a sundial in the garden.’ There’s the sundial again, you see.”

“I’m afraid we haven’t got such a thing,” said Mrs. Hardy regretfully. “Dear, to be sure, they do seem desolate poor young things.”

“Desolate!” exclaimed Mrs. Turnworth, settling herself back in her corner of the sofa, with the aspect of comfortable enjoyment with which she generally delivered her most censorious speeches. “What can you expect? They’ve had the most absolutely idiotic bringing up that girls could possibly have. Never denied anything—sent to the most expensive schools—allowed to grow up in absolute ignorance of all it was essential for people in their position to know—and their father meanwhile living on his capital. I fancy they must be on the verge of bankruptcy now.”

Mrs. Hardy’s face fell. The word had an ugly sound, and the thing it represented was to her mind a crime worthy to be ranked with theft and arson. She looked questioningly at her stepson.

“I shouldn’t like anyone to go bankrupt in our house,” she said.

“Oh, they won’t do that,” responded Mrs. Turnworth, again repenting her of the ease with which her terribly ready tongue outran her discretion. “I was speaking—ah—in a general way. They have some money, my cousin’s money, which is strictly tied up, so that Mr. Leslie can’t touch it. You’d better let them have the house, Hardy—you’ll not regret it. Let them have it for a year, anyhow—if the rent is not forthcoming at the end of that time they can march, and you can come down on me for it.”

This postscript, though very unexpected, was thoroughly characteristic of Mrs. Turnworth; she united in her own person a very curious mixture of qualities. She would now and then do a really good-natured thing in the harshest possible way; she would make a genuine sacrifice without in any manner altering her disapproving attitude towards the recipient.

“Shall we say fifteen pounds a year?” she persisted. “You oughtn’t to ask any more, you know, and you wouldn’t get it if you did. Fifteen pounds a year for house, orchard, and garden. And you’ll mend up the place a bit and make it tolerably tidy?”

“Very well,” said Stephen.

“I don’t know how it is,” remarked Rebecca, when Stephen came back after escorting the visitor to her carriage, “Mrs. Turnworth do never come to see us without I feel as if somebody had been scratching me. I hope she won’t be popping in and out too often if she gets her cousins here. I don’t know why you gave in so quick, Stephen.”

“I don’t know either,” returned he.

He was indeed puzzled, if truth be told, and inclined to regret his complacency. He was not a man who liked interference—above all, feminine interference. He had no wish whatever to let the Little Farm, and fifteen pounds a year meant nothing to him. And yet he had given Mrs. Turnworth her own way, secured for himself tenants who were apparently most undesirable, and no doubt let himself in for a good deal of expense and possible annoyance—why? Perhaps because of the recurrence in that blotted letter of the misspelt word “forlorn.”

CHAPTER II

It required a good deal of effort on the part of the new landlord and his stepmother, with, it must be owned, some assistance from Mrs. Turnworth, to render the Little Farm habitable for the incoming tenants. But as many hands were called into requisition, added to a sufficient quantity of real goodwill, the place was set in order with a celerity scarcely short of miraculous. Windows were glazed, missing tiles replaced, a certain amount of papering and whitewashing was carried out, and big fires were lit in all the rooms, so that the house was aired to Mrs. Hardy's satisfaction. The flagged path before the door was cleared of encroaching moss and grasses, the gate mended, a portion of the garden roughly dug over.

Mrs. Turnworth superintended the unloading of the Leslies' furniture—which seemed to consist chiefly of books and carved oak—and engaged a reliable charwoman.

On the day before the expected arrival, Stephen drove into the town and returned to the Little Farm with a rather heavy package. It was an old sundial.

"Dear heart alive!" ejaculated his stepmother, coming out of the house and finding him engaged in setting it up. "Where did ye pick up that?"

"Oh, I chanced on it in Sarum Street. It only cost a few shillings, but it's a genuine old one. See the verse written here on the pedestal."

"Well, they'll make themselves happy with their sundial, I suppose," said Rebecca, "but they don't seem to give much thought to ordinary comforts, I will say. They haven't ordered a bit of coal, and they've wrote to Mrs. Turnworth to say none of the things are to be unpacked till they come."

"I suppose they like to arrange everything themselves," said Stephen, delicately poisoning the dial.

"It seems so, but they'll want beds to sleep in and chairs to sit on, I d' 'low. Mrs. Turnworth sent a man down to put up the beds, but the parlour's all littered up with cases—there's scarce standin' room; and she thinks I'd better leave the linen chest alone. The very sheets won't be aired, my dear!"

"Well, well, it can't be helped. They know their own affairs best," rejoined Stephen.

“And there’s no talk of any provisions coming in,” resumed Mrs. Hardy. “’Tis to be hoped they’ll arrive early enough to give their orders.”

But when the luggage-piled cab toiled slowly up the lane which led to the Little Farm, it was already so dark that the figures of its occupants were indistinguishable.

An hour or two later Mrs. Green, the charwoman engaged by Mrs. Turnworth, came panting up to the house upon the hill.

“Oh, if you please, m’m,” she cried breathlessly as Mrs. Hardy went out to her, “I took the liberty of comin’ up for to inquire if you’d be willin’ to oblige Miss Leslie with a few eatables to-night. The young ladies say they’ve brought a hamper with them, but they’re not sure which it is along o’, there bein’ so many boxes and cases about. I made so bold as to say I felt sure you’d have no objections to helpin’ of ’em to-night, and to-morrow we’ll be able to get things a bit straight.”

“Dear, to be sure!” exclaimed the sympathetic Mrs. Hardy, “what a state they must be in. But I felt certain they’d find everything terr’ble upset, travellin’ so late and all. What would they like, Mrs. Green? They’m welcome to anything I’ve got.”

Mrs. Green, who was a tall angular person with a lantern-jawed, saturnine countenance, sniffed as she replied—

“Well, Mrs. Hardy, it do seem a bit hard to make out what the young ladies do want. One says one thing and the other says another. The eldest told me to ax for some fresh eggs—‘There’s sure to be eggs at a farm,’ says she, ‘and I could make a omelet.’ ‘No, no,’ says the other, ‘let’s have some cold ham—they’re bound to have ham at a farm, because there are so many pigs’—I feel a bit put out myself, Mrs. Hardy. I brought my dinner with me, seein’ there was nothin’ in the house, but I did look to have a bit o’ supper found. I did agree for my meals wi’ Mrs. Turnworth.”

“To be sure, to be sure,” said hospitable Rebecca. “There, they shall have ham and eggs, too, poor dears. Wait a bit—we’ll get a basket and put in a few oddments of all sorts.”

Presently Mrs. Green went staggering down the hill laden with comforts for the newcomers. Ham, eggs, a loaf, tea and sugar, butter—even a little flour. Mrs. Green had mentioned the young ladies had said something about flour—all these were stowed away in the basket which she carried in one hand, while the other clasped the handle of a large can of milk.

Nevertheless Rebecca went to bed that night with her kindly heart still in some anxiety.

“I know they’ll never think o’ gettin’ their sheets aired,” she said, as she crept in between her own lavender-scented ones.

Early on the morrow she persuaded Stephen to accompany her on a visit to the Little Farm.

“I do feel a bit bashful-like goin’ by myself,” she urged; “but I should like to know how they be a-gettin’ on, and maybe we could help them a bit. An’ ’tis but the proper thing for you to pay your respects to them seein’ you’re their landlord.”

The little house was looking its best this golden October morning, the sunlight bringing out wonderful tints on the grey walls and the moss-grown tiles. The row of pollard lime trees, which stood like sentinels behind the undulating roof of the tithe barn, carried their sparse foliage bravely; every leaf was aglow, every twig glittered, the shifting lights on the trunks danced and vanished and reappeared with dazzling rapidity, for there was a fresh breeze that morning and the branches were perpetually astir. The house door stood open, but there was no sign of life within. In the absence of a bell, Mrs. Hardy knocked several times upon the door panel, and on receiving no answer ventured to walk in.

“Bless me,” she exclaimed under her breath, “did a body ever see such a mess!”

From the narrow passage they had a glimpse of a small room, which the Miss Leslies presumably intended to use as a sitting-room. A great pile of packing-cases occupied the centre of the floor, on the top of which a dish containing the remnants of Mrs. Hardy’s cold ham, some cups, and plates were insecurely balanced. One window was partially draped with a length of art muslin, which, having been unfolded, had apparently caught in somebody’s dress, and had wound itself round the legs of a table. A good deal of earth was scattered over the recently scrubbed floor, and a mass of it heaped up in the grate, in the midst of which a large bush of Michaelmas daisies was embedded. The flowers and foliage were already beginning to droop, and the probability seemed slight of their continuing to be the ornament they were evidently intended for.

Stephen did not, however, share his stepmother’s horror; he laughed, indeed, and was looking about him with amusement, mingled with curiosity,

when the door on the opposite side of the passage opened and Mrs. Turnworth came out.

She had left this door ajar, and through the aperture was visible the figure of a tall man standing irresolutely in the middle of the floor. His moustache and hair were white, but his face was unwrinkled and looked young, so young as almost to startle Mrs. Hardy, who, from Mrs. Turnworth's frequent allusions to "old John," had imagined Mr. Leslie to be quite an elderly person.

"Oh," cried his relative, turning sharply as she beheld the other two, "here are the Hardys, John. I'd better introduce them—he is your landlord, you know. This is Mr. Leslie, Hardy."

Stephen and his stepmother followed her into the apartment which was in future to be known as Mr. Leslie's study. The whole place was littered with packing-cases and books, but a small fire burnt in the grate, and, as the Miss Leslies had not endeavoured to carry out any special scheme of decoration in their father's sanctum, its disorder was of a less appalling nature.

After a nervous glance at the newcomers, Mr. Leslie, who had been standing with both hands in his pockets, took one of them out, gazed at it with gratified surprise, as though he had not been aware of possessing so valuable an appendage, and then, apparently finding himself unable to entrust it even for a moment to the keeping of another, restored it to his pocket again.

"They'll expect to shake hands," said Mrs. Turnworth, in a warning whisper.

With a pained and protesting look the scholar once more produced the precious member, extended it limply and reluctantly to each of the visitors, and once more stowed it away in safety.

After a moment's pause he glanced hurriedly round him.

"Won't you—won't you sit down?"

"There aren't any chairs," interpolated Mrs. Turnworth with a laugh.

"That's true," responded Mr. Leslie, looking about him again, but this time with an expression of relief; "there aren't any chairs, so, of course, you can't sit down."

"I hope," said Mrs. Hardy timidly, "that you and the young ladies will soon settle down, sir, and begin to feel comfortable."

“Comfortable!” ejaculated Mrs. Turnworth in her highest treble. “It looks like it—doesn’t it?”

Her cousin glanced at her reproachfully.

“I’m unpacking my books,” he said. “I have no doubt that before long I shall be quite comfortable here. It’s quiet, and I am not likely to be disturbed. That’s all I ask.”

“You must not let us take up any more of your time,” said Stephen. “I only called to ask if there was anything we could do for you.”

Mrs. Turnworth laughed again with her usual zest.

“It certainly looks as if a good many things might want doing,” she remarked.

Mr. Leslie, who had inclined his head in answer to Stephen’s speech, turned towards his cousin with a helpless, inquiring look, fidgeted from one foot to the other, and then suffered his eyes to stray to a heap of books nearest to him.

“You are longing to get rid of us, I see,” cried Mrs. Turnworth. “Come—shall we look for the girls?” (This to Mrs. Hardy.) “They must be somewhere about the place, though, so far, I have not discovered them.”

Mr. Leslie made a faint-hearted attempt to produce that valuable hand again, but failed in the endeavour, and contented himself with once more inclining his head. He found himself, however, quite able to step briskly towards the door and to close it with alacrity after the departure of his guests.

“I don’t think the gentleman was so very well pleased to see us,” remarked Rebecca in a low voice, and with a somewhat injured air, to Stephen.

Mrs. Turnworth caught the words.

“That’s only John Leslie’s way,” she cried. “He’s the most extraordinary creature. I’ve seen him dodge round a lamp-post to avoid his best friend, and he would walk a mile to get out of taking off his hat to a lady. He wasn’t a bit pleased to see me either.”

By this time they had arrived at the kitchen, where, however, nobody was to be found but Mrs. Green, who was kneeling on the tiled floor, dustpan in hand, sweeping up some flour. There was a good deal of flour scattered over the table, too, in the midst of which a hard squat little slab of

dough was lying. Mrs. Green rose from her knees with an aggrieved expression.

“I’m sure I don’t know what’s become of the young ladies,” she returned in answer to Mrs. Turnworth’s query. “I haven’t seen Miss Leslie all the morning. Miss Bess was here an hour ago—she was a-makin’ that there pastry”—glancing with a dubious air at the dough—“an’ now she be gone to look for apples. They be a-goin’ to have a apple tart for lunch, an’ nothin’ else as I can see.”

“Dear, to be sure,” exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, “haven’t they found the hamper yet, poor young things?”

“Oh ees, mum, they began unpackin’ before breakfast, but they got tired long before the job was done. Miss Leslie found a tinned tongue, and she said that ’ud be enough—I was never in such a place in my life, Mrs. Turnworth!” exclaimed Mrs. Green, suddenly exchanging the coldly detached tone with which she had begun her narrative for one of unconcealed fury. “The whole house be in such a mess as no Christian body ever see’d, an’ they don’t seem to wish for to make it no better. There’s not a bit o’ food as is worth namin’ in the house. I couldn’t sit down to a tinned tongue for my dinner not if I was starvin’, an’ there’s not so much as a tater to be had. When I axed Miss Leslie if I hadn’t better go into the town and get a few things, as the tradesmen hadn’t come for arders, she says, ‘It’ll be time enough by and by.’ I can’t stand it much longer, Mrs. Turnworth, mum.”

Before even the quick-tongued lady in question had time to reply the dismayed little assemblage in the kitchen was startled by the tempestuous arrival of the youngest Miss Leslie.

The youngest Miss Leslie looked very young indeed, being small for her seventeen years, and, moreover, being enveloped in a long blue pinafore. She had a little impudent elfish face, extremely pretty withal, with its small features and pink and white complexion. Her hair, of which she possessed an immense quantity, was of a red-gold, more red than golden, it must be owned, and her eyes were of a curious indeterminate hue, now blue, now green—occasionally almost yellow, but that was generally in the early morning on wet days when Bess omitted to darken her auburn lashes.

“Oh, Mrs. Green,” she cried, as she dashed in, “I hope I’m not late. I haven’t found any apples, but I’ve lost my heart to two of the darlinest kittens! Oh, is that you, Cousin Marian? How good of you to come so early.”

“I thought I had better come and see how you are getting on,” returned that lady, visibly unbending as Bess hugged her with a warmth which rather astonished Mrs. Hardy. “Mrs. Hardy has had the same idea,” resumed Mrs. Turnworth; “and Mr. Hardy, your landlord, has also come to see if he can make himself useful.”

Bess, who did not appear to share her father’s caution with regard to shaking hands, extended hers with a frank ease to each in turn, and thanked all three visitors very prettily for coming.

“We are getting on splendidly,” she announced. “It’s a heavenly, heavenly place, and I never saw such engaging kittens!”

“You are not going to have kittens for lunch, I presume?” said Mrs. Turnworth, regaining her customary sharpness; “and, according to Mrs. Green, there is nothing else.”

“Why, there’s the tinned tongue, Mrs. Green,” said Bess, “and I’ve had such an idea. I couldn’t find any apples, but I came upon a whole lot of potatoes, all hidden away under earth and straw. Two great lines of them, yards long. So we’ll have a potato pie instead of an apple tart. That will be much better and more nourishing.”

Mrs. Hardy cast a questioning glance towards Stephen. They were his potatoes, but the young lady had evidently helped herself to them without any thought that she was committing petty larceny. Stephen, however, only smiled in reply.

But Mrs. Turnworth was not so reticent.

“My dear child!” she cried, with a delighted cackle. “You can’t help yourself to potatoes promiscuously, even if you *do* come to the country. Those are Hardy’s potatoes, of course, and”—turning towards the hearth, on which a fire built entirely of brushwood was blazing and crackling—“I should think those are Hardy’s faggots, too.”

“Are they, Mrs. Green?” inquired Bess, turning towards her innocently.

“I’m sure I don’t know, miss. Miss Leslie told me there was plenty of wood in the yard when I asked her what I was to make the fire of.”

“They are your faggots, Hardy, aren’t they?” persisted Mrs. Turnworth.

As a matter of fact they were rather choice faggots, which Stephen had set on one side to serve as pea-sticks, but seeing the growing distress on Bess’ face he came gallantly to the rescue.

“There is always a lot of wood lying about a place like this,” he said. “I’ll have some proper logs sent in, though. I get the men to saw them up on wet days.”

“I’m sure my cousins don’t expect you to find them in fuel as well as in house-room for fifteen pounds a year,” Mrs. Turnworth was beginning, when, with a soft flutter of draperies, another flying figure advanced into their midst.

Kitty Leslie, Kitty, bareheaded and clothed in a pinafore like her sister, but taller, gentler, more sedate for all her rapidity of movement. Kitty was two years older and infinitely wiser than Bess—at least, so she imagined. Her face was paler, her eyes more blue, and her hair dark. It had in certain lights some ruddy tints, but in general it was of a rich brown, very light and cloudy in texture.

“I saw your umbrella in the hall, Cousin Marian,” she cried breathlessly. “I recognised the squirrel on top. You are kind to come and see us so soon.”

“It’s about time somebody looked after you,” responded Mrs. Turnworth with an acid smile. “You seem pretty well at sixes and sevens—and besides that you are plundering Mr. Hardy in the most barefaced way. This is Stephen Hardy, your landlord, by the way, and that’s his stepmother, Mrs. Hardy.”

In response to this gracious introduction Kitty turned from one to the other with a pretty deprecating smile.

“I’m so sorry if we’ve been plundering you,” she said. “I didn’t know.”

“I’m sure you’re heartily welcome, my dear,” cried Mrs. Hardy cordially. “There, it bain’t worth while to make a fuss about a few oddments same as taters and faggots. As Stephen do say, there’s a lot of wood about a place like this, an’ ’tis better for the men to be cuttin’ of it up on a wet day nor to be wastin’ their time.”

“I didn’t understand,” explained Kitty, turning her limpid, appealing gaze upon the speaker. “When I saw the wood lying there—I thought—I imagined somehow——”

“Kitty and I don’t know anything about the country,” explained Bess, shaking her head. “We imagined somehow that there always was wood and that sort of thing lying about.”

“So it seems,” chimed in Mrs. Turnworth. “The potatoes are stored away so that you may help yourselves, and eggs are to be had for the picking up.

Perhaps you'll find mutton chops hanging on trees and chickens dangling from the hedge if you look for them."

"I did take some potatoes you know, Kitty," said Bess, turning with a guilty look to her sister. "I found them outside our yard, and I thought they were ours. We have got a garden, you know," wheeling towards Mrs. Turnworth again with an explanatory air.

"Oh yes!" cried Kitty—"such a garden too! It's lovely even now, though there are only Michaelmas daisies and anemones in it. But it lies so prettily. You ought to go and see it, Bess; it slopes up, up to the most delicious old brick wall, with little mosses and ferns growing all over it, and oh, Bess—there *is* a sundial!"

"A sundial!" exclaimed Bess. And then the two ridiculous babyish creatures caught hold of each other's hands and fairly danced for joy.

"Really!" ejaculated their cousin, "one would imagine you were still in the nursery. But how comes there to be a sundial in the garden, Hardy? I thought you told me you didn't possess such a thing."

"Oh, I—I found one," said Stephen, looking so conscious that the girls turned towards him simultaneously.

"I believe you got it on purpose for us," cried Bess.

And Kitty said, less impetuously perhaps, but with real gratitude—

"We are very, very much obliged."

"Oh, it's nothing," responded Stephen, somewhat awkwardly, "I picked it up for a few shillings."

A pause ensued, broken at length by Mrs. Green.

"If you please, miss, we haven't settled yet what's to be for luncheon. Be I to use these potatoes?"

"Oh no," cried Kitty with a start. "At least"—turning to Mrs. Hardy, "unless you would let us—let us——"

Pay for them, she was about to add, but her courage failed her, and she tried to indicate her meaning by a deprecating and suggestive smile.

"Lard, no, my dear," returned Mrs. Hardy, laughing, "we don't want no payment for that handful—do us, Stephen? But it mid be better another time if ye just mentioned when you was wantin' 'em."

“Oh, of *course*,” cried the sisters together; “we are not going to rob you any more.”

“It was quite a mistake this time,” added Bess.

Rebecca, laughing again, caught a hand of each. “ ’Tis no such thing as robbery, my dears—I was only thinking the frosties mid get at the rest of the taters if you got ’em for yourselves, but I’m sure you’m kindly welcome.”

Mrs. Green now mutely suggested the evacuation of her premises, by setting to work with many sniffs and somewhat aggressive clearings of the throat to peel the potatoes.

Kitty, turning to her guests with a little hospitable air, suggested an adjournment to the sitting-room.

“Sitting-room!” echoed Mrs. Turnworth, “the word is hardly appropriate, for I don’t know where you expect anyone to sit.”

When they reached the door Kitty cast a dismayed glance round.

“I am so sorry,” she said penitently, “we meant to make it quite tidy before anyone came. I just ran out to get some more flowers, and then I so fell in love with the garden I’ve been rambling about it and forgetting everything else. Isn’t it dreadful of me?—Oh, Bess, what a mess you’ve made here!”

“Yes,” said Bess, “I know. But don’t you think our decorations lovely, Cousin Marian? At least they will be when they’re done.”

“No doubt,” returned the lady addressed, with a sardonic laugh, “but allow me to suggest that any practical person with sense would have begun by putting down the carpet and unpacking the furniture.”

“You’ve started at the wrong end, my dear,” said Mrs. Hardy, tapping Bess on the shoulder.

Both sisters laughed.

“I’m afraid we’re always doing that,” said Kitty.

“Ah, but don’t you think it saves one from being commonplace?” said Bess, turning her little red head pensively on one side, and peeping out of the corner of her eye at Stephen, who stood by in amused silence, looking much too big and too massive for the untidy little room with its feminine flipperies. “I’m sure you disapprove of us dreadfully, Mr. Hardy,” she cried suddenly.

Stephen merely smiled; he did not disapprove. This was a new experience for him, and he appreciated it. The girls were so pretty; their babble was childish, it was true, but quaint for all that, and delivered in the softest little voices, interrupted now and then by trills of laughter, very sweet and low, unlike any laughter he had ever heard. It certainly was most unlike the laughter with which Mrs. Turnworth greeted Bess' last sally.

“Saves you from being commonplace, does it? Well, it saves you from having any common sense, if that's what you mean. Now listen, girls, we must introduce order into this chaos. I'm going to drive round to the different tradespeople and tell them to come up at once for orders, and you must give up dreaming about Michaelmas daisies and mossy walls and think about bread, meat, and groceries. I'll send two men down to unpack your furniture, and when I come to-morrow I expect to find everything tolerably straight, and then you and I, Kitty, will look into financial matters and see how you ought to portion out your income. Your father is a perfect baby, and neither of you are much better. Somebody must look into things. How did you manage at Oxford?”

“We didn't manage at all,” said Bess naively.

“Of course, we were at school most of the time,” explained Kitty; “we had a housekeeper.”

“Well, it's time you began to learn how to keep house for yourselves,” said Mrs. Turnworth. “I'll help you.”

“And if I can be of any use,” put in Rebecca, “I'm sure I'll be only too glad. There, you could just pop across to me, my dears, whenever you find yourselves a bit short of anything or in any kind of difficulty, and I'll do my best to help ye.”

The girls received both offers of assistance with much gratitude, accepting Mrs. Turnworth's, it must be owned, with a somewhat chastened air, but surreptitiously squeezing Rebecca's hands.

CHAPTER III

“Kitty, do listen!”

Kitty sat up in bed. The room which she shared with Bess was still absolutely dark, yet, as she strained her eyes towards the spot where she knew the window to be, a faint light flickered for a moment across the blind and then was gone; it was followed, however, after a brief interval by another and yet another. At the same time a tramping as of heavy-footed beasts accompanied these phenomena, and was dominated now and then by the shouting of a gruff man’s voice.

“Who-ope—who-ope!” cried the voice, and then would come a shrill whistle, and then a very pandemonium of sounds—shouts, rude laughter, the lowing of cattle, the cracking of whips.

“They’re driving up the cows,” went on Bess. “Isn’t it exciting? Now one can feel one really is in the country. Driving up cows in the middle of the night. Do come and look.”

The thud of her bare feet sounded on the floor, and she pattered across towards the window, knocking against sundry articles of furniture as she advanced, and groaning in consequence.

Kitty struck a match and looked at her watch.

“It’s not five o’clock yet,” she said. “Do put on your dressing-gown, Bess—you’ll catch cold.”

“Come!” cried Bess from behind the blind. “You never saw such a lot of cows. They look so picturesque by torchlight—I mean by lantern-light.”

Kitty joined her at the window, and the two watched the procession together. More cows, and still more; a man swinging a lantern, the light of which fell with weird effect on his own smock-frock and across the red flanks of his charges. Now came horses, great shaggy beasts, pacing leisurely by in twos and threes.

“Did you ever imagine they really began work so early?” cried Bess. “Look, they are driving them to the stables up there. Isn’t it nice to see the lights twinkling all over the place? Kitty, I’m wide awake—I couldn’t possibly go to bed again—I shall dress and run up the hill. It will be fun to watch the milking.”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” said Kitty, catching her firmly by the sleeve. “The Hardys would think it so extraordinary. Besides, there will be so many rough men about. You can watch the milking in the afternoon.”

“That wouldn’t be at all the same thing,” rejoined Bess, pouting. “Besides, the rough men will be there just the same, Miss Prim; the only difference would be that they’d be picturesque by lantern-light and they won’t be by daylight.”

“It is different,” said Kitty. “Oh, Bess, don’t be silly. I don’t want the Hardys and everybody to think us more mad than they do already.”

“My dear, we can’t help their thinking us mad, because we are utterly mad,” returned Bess, sitting down on the side of her sister’s bed and speaking so emphatically that her tangled red curls nodded again. “Father’s as mad as he can be, poor dear, and neither you nor I are in the least sane. Everyone says so, and it’s much easier to live up to one’s received character than to pretend to be what one’s not. I’m getting rather mixed, I believe.”

“Do go back to bed,” pleaded Kitty. “There’s a long hard day before us—we shall want all our strength for it.”

Bess took a flying leap into her own couch, but instead of penetrating beneath the blankets, crouched in a frog-like attitude outside, rocking herself backwards and forwards.

“Item one, interviewing butchers and bakers and trying to make believe we know what we want. Item number two, being helped by Cousin Marian to apportion our income—as neither of us has the least idea of what our income is, that will be a tough job, Kitty. Item number three, helping father to unpack his books——”

“Well, I’m only too glad to do that!” announced Kitty, with sleepy indignation, from under her blanket.

“Of course; so am I, it’s a privilege,” cried Bess, with a wicked little giggle. “If the poor dear darling would only make up his mind to begin with where he would like them, and which are the indispensable ones that he must have ready to his hand, it might be easier—also if there were not quite so much dust. I shall wash my hair afterwards. A woman’s glory is her hair, as St. Paul says.”

“Bess, for shame!”

“Well, I can’t help it, he did say it or somebody else said it; it’s quite a nice virtuous quotation. I want my hair to be in full glory, because we are

going to tea with the Hardys——”

“Bess, if you’d *only* go to sleep now.”

“I hope they’ll give it to us in the kitchen,” responded Bess, as she at length wriggled beneath the bed coverings. “I’m looking forward to item number four.”

The first task was negotiated, on the whole, successfully with the assistance of Mrs. Green, though Mrs. Turnworth subsequently took exception to the fact that a saddle of mutton had been ordered, which, when the number of the household was considered, appeared to be somewhat improvident.

Item number two seemed to present more difficulties. Not only were the girls in complete ignorance of the extent of their resources, but they appeared to have no idea whatever either of the value of money in itself or of the scale on which they intended to conduct their household expenses. At length Mrs. Turnworth, with a mixture of impatience and contemptuous good-nature, took the matter completely into her own hands.

“I can tell you exactly how much you’ve got to live on,” she cried. “Your father has spent every penny of his own—we must take that for granted, else you wouldn’t be here. Well, then, all you’ve got to count on is your mother’s fortune, which I happen to know was eight thousand pounds. Very well, it brings in, I suppose, about three hundred a year. All you’ve got to do is to lay out that to the best possible advantage.”

“How clever you are, Cousin Marian!” cried Bess, rolling her changeful eyes towards her with an expression of admiration that was half real and half feigned. “Isn’t it clever, Kitty? Three hundred a year. We might do a lot with three hundred a year.”

“Get me a sheet of paper and I will show you exactly how much you can do with it,” replied Mrs. Turnworth, sniffing.

The next quarter of an hour was certainly an unpleasant one for the two girls, and their spirits sank lower and lower as their cousin ticked off the various calls upon their income. After portioning this out in the most minute and practical manner she demonstrated to them that they could only count on eighty-four pounds a year for dress and other personal expenses.

Bess was the first to find voice.

“Forty-two pounds each,” she said tentatively; “we must make it go as far as we can.”

“Quite so,” interposed Mrs. Turnworth, with her most piercing note of triumph, “and what about your father? Clothes, postal expenses, books—I fancy his requirements will swallow up a good deal of the spare cash.”

The girls looked at each other dolorously.

“Well,” said Kitty, after a pause, “father has the best right to the spare cash if there is any; I for one don’t grudge it to him.”

“Neither do I,” chimed in Bess. “We can’t afford to be ill, that’s quite certain, though how we are to manage to keep well, if we are not to have any clothes, I don’t quite see.”

“Bess, you are a pert monkey!” cried Mrs. Turnworth with spirit. “I’ve a great mind to wash my hands of you both. If you are so perfectly delighted with the way your father manages everything, Kitty, why should I bother myself about your concerns? As for you, Bess——”

“I’m sure I’m not pert,” broke out Bess, evincing symptoms of becoming tearful. “I was only quite innocently wondering what we ought to do.”

“You must have an allowance, of course. Twenty pounds a year each is all that can be afforded. Everything else must come out of the remaining forty-four pounds. You understand, your father must make you a quarterly allowance—five pounds each, and he must give you, Kitty, a cheque every month for the housekeeping—that will be twelve pounds fifteen. I’m going to interview him now and make it all clear to him.”

Bess, still with an injured look, rubbed her head up and down her sister’s shoulder, much as a kitten might have done. She would have been extremely like a kitten if she had not been also extremely like a bird. All at once she sprang up, her face clearing again and her eyes dancing.

“I know what we’ll do,” she cried. “We’ll let father give us those cheques all right, but we’ll save on the housekeeping. Oatmeal, Kitty—oatmeal’s cheap and goes a long way, and we’ll grow our own vegetables and have very little meat. It’ll be awfully good for our complexions, you know, as well as economical.”

She was skipping about the room, clapping her hands, in spite of certain protests from Kitty, when Mrs. Turnworth came back.

“I must say your father is a most peculiar man,” she remarked in a tone which suggested her wish to use a stronger adjective, “the rudest man,” she remarked. “Oh, it’s all right; I made him look at my balance-sheet, and he’s

agreed to everything—that is to say, he has agreed to make you the allowances I suggested for housekeeping and dress. But when I pointed out to him that he would have to regulate his own expenditure within the strictest limits, he practically told me to mind my own business.”

“I’m sure he couldn’t have done that,” cried Kitty.

“Well, he wrapped up his meaning in his own pedantic phraseology, but it comes to the same thing,” responded Mrs. Turnworth tartly. “I told him I had a good mind never to come near the house again, and he just bowed in that irritating way of his and opened the door for me, so of course I had to come out. Now I think I’ll go home. I hope you’ll bear in mind that I subjected myself to this on your account, girls, and that you’ll prove your gratitude by acting up to my advice.”

They both promised, Kitty meekly and dutifully, Bess with an exuberance of protestation that was slightly suspicious. They re-entered their little sitting-room soberly enough after watching her departure.

“Item number two disposed of,” said Bess, ticking it off on her fingers. “I think, on the whole, we’ll dispose with number three—I don’t think I’ll offer to help father with his books just now.”

“I will, then,” cried Kitty, a little dubiously though.

“I shouldn’t if I were you,” returned Bess. “The poor dear man has had a very trying morning. He has had to look into figures, which he never does if he can help it; to talk to a woman, which he hates, and to listen to Cousin Marian’s advice, which he won’t follow, but which is nevertheless highly irritating and upsetting to the thoughtful mind. Let me see—let me see——”

Here Bess began to stride up and down the room in imitation of her father, her head bent forward, her hands apparently thrust into imaginary pockets.

“‘The necessarily circumscribed attitude of the mediæval thinker—h’m—h’m—certain aspects of modern research—Forty-four pounds a year! How the deuce’—no, I don’t think father would say ‘How the deuce,’ he’d say ‘How the Lucifer does the woman expect——’”

“Bess, I will not have you mimicking father! You are like a little fiend yourself. Have you no respect for anything or anybody?”

“I’ve a fearful, awful, utter respect for Farmer Hardy,” cried Bess, becoming quite serious all at once, and nodding portentously.

“Good gracious! Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Because he’s so big, I think—and so brown. He’s very brown, isn’t he? Well, while you are being a good daughter I’m going to wash my head.”

“But if you are not going to help with the books your hair won’t want washing,” cried Kitty; “you only washed it last week.”

“The condition of my hair is a serious matter with me,” returned Bess, pausing. “I find people always form their estimate of my character from their first impression of it. If they think it’s golden they are disposed to like me, and if they say it’s carrotty it’s all up with me—if I was an archangel I should produce no effect.”

“Well, I don’t think it much matters to-day, anyhow,” said Kitty as she made her way to her father’s study.

She found that gentleman as Bess predicted, thoroughly out of humour. He was striding irritably up and down the room, and paused with a portentous frown as she entered.

“I do think,” he began, almost before she was within the room, “I do think you might contrive in some way or other to spare me such annoyances as that to which I have been subjected this morning.”

“Dear Father, I am so sorry,” murmured Kitty; “I only thought—Cousin Marian thought that it might really save you trouble in future if we carried out this plan of living upon a certain sum and making regular monthly payments.”

“Oh, I don’t object to the idea in the abstract,” said Mr. Leslie, with a slight jerk of the head, meant, no doubt, to replace the wave of the hand with which a differently constituted man would have emphasised the statement. “I merely wish to state that, in my opinion, matters of this description should be settled without intrusion upon my time and thoughts. The woman burst in upon me with a balance-sheet—a balance-sheet! She sat for nearly a quarter of an hour making explanations, as she was pleased to say, in her most penetrating voice about butchers and bakers” (the manner in which Mr. Leslie delivered his “b’s” was positively explosive) “and coals, and matters of that kind—paltry matters to which I have never been accustomed to attach much importance. They are the scaffolding of life—one’s existence can very well be supported by them without reference to the fact being dinned into one’s ears as it was dinned into mine to-day.”

Never before had Kitty seen her father so seriously annoyed. For the moment she had no rejoinder ready and merely gazed at him remorsefully,

clasping and unclasping her slender hands. But Mr. Leslie was not mollified.

“I do not so much complain of the fact that this good lady, your cousin, with extreme indelicacy and presumptuousness, took on herself to interfere in matters which are entirely private and personal to myself.”

This remark was made, however, with an accession of bitterness which proved that he did very seriously object.

“But I do complain, and I consider justly, that you and your sister—two grown-up girls—should be unable to manage such very trivial affairs without outside intervention. Your cousin, Mrs. Turnworth” (in his present mood Mr. Leslie could not bring himself to acknowledge any personal or intimate connection with the lady), “has depicted for me a state of affairs which is almost inconceivable. Two grown-up girls, I say, to whom I have given the very best education, who have had, moreover, every opportunity of studying household—ah—ah—economies under the supervision of a most excellent manager—I’ve reason to believe that Mrs. Spring was an excellent manager—that my two grown-up daughters should be so ignorant, so incapable, as Mrs. Turnworth alleges, seems to me positively deplorable.”

Kitty remained silent. It did not even occur to her to rejoin that an education in foreign schools was not perhaps the best and most practical preparation for a thrifty homelife, and that, moreover, owing to the years of enforced absence consequent therefrom, she and Bess had not had as many opportunities of studying domestic economies under that excellent manager, their late housekeeper, as her father supposed.

“No one seems to realise,” he went on impatiently, “the importance, the necessity to me of being undisturbed during the progress of work like mine. The process of thought,” went on Mr. Leslie again jerking his head, “is in itself a delicate and extremely gradual one. A rude interruption, arriving unexpectedly at the moment when out of a certain combination of ideas a long-sought-for conclusion is about to take shape, is positively destructive. Irremediable mischief is done—incalculable loss ensues——”

Kitty suddenly burst into tears, and running to her father clasped his arm with both hands.

“Oh, I know, I know I have been foolish and useless,” she sobbed, “but I am really and truly resolved to do better. Do forgive me, dear Father—I’m going to try so hard.”

Mr. Leslie’s arm remained stiff and unyielding, but his face softened.

“I’m going to learn,” said Kitty with a little gasp; “after all, there’s no teacher like love, and you know I love you.”

Mr. Leslie actually removed one of his hands from his pocket and patted his daughter’s bent head; then he kissed her, rather an unfinished peck of a kiss, but still bestowed in good faith and with real affection.

“We’ll converse no more on the detestable subject,” said Mr. Leslie magnanimously. “My books are still, as you see, in need of arrangement; perhaps——”

“That’s just what I came for,” cried Kitty, joyfully wiping her eyes. “Now, if you’ll just tell me those you want to keep close at hand and those that may go on the upper shelves, I’ll go to work at once.”

She toiled hard all the morning, proving herself in this at least thoroughly deft and efficient. Her father was pleased to commend her at the conclusion of her task.

“I begin to have hopes of you, Kitty,” he said. “If you can succeed in more important matters, there should surely be no difficulty in ruling our paltry household affairs with judgment and discretion. At least we may in future dispense with any assistance from Marian Turnworth. Did I tell you she was kind enough to fix an allowance for me? Positively she did!”

Kitty blushed guiltily.

“She was about, in fact, to allot the exact sum which I was in future to spend on books and other materials necessary to my work when I stopped her. You must realise, Kitty, that a man in my position could not positively tie himself down in such a manner. To prosecute my researches I must have a variety of books—books of a rare and expensive type, unfortunately, but I could not possibly dispense with them. It would be like trying to make bricks without straw.”

He took a turn about the room, once more indignant and perturbed. However, presently he again relaxed.

“I am determined not to allow myself to be disturbed. I shall use my own judgment in such matters, but you children shall have your allowances. Remind me on the first Monday of each month and I will sign you a cheque, Kitty—and you can also have your quarterly allowance for dress. That will give satisfaction, I hope.”

She looked at him a little wistfully. Bess and she were provided for, no doubt, and this terrible question of a household budget disposed of;

nevertheless, if Mr. Leslie did not intend to allow his judgment to be hampered or his fancy impeded in the matter of his own personal expenditure, complications would possibly arise. However, seeing him once more calm and benign and apparently quite untroubled by any doubts on this subject, she had not the courage to give voice to her own.

CHAPTER IV

It was yet early in the afternoon when Kitty and Bess made their way up the hill to Hardy's. Rebecca had invited them to come early so that she might conduct them over the premises before tea, according to a desire expressed by Bess on the previous day.

Hardy's was an old house,—though not so old as the Little Farm, still its brick walls had attained that mellow tint which can only be conferred by time; the tiled roof, if it had not that delicious irregularity of outline which characterised its smaller neighbour, was, nevertheless, clothed by a variety of lichens; the windows were mullioned and the panes leaded. The doorway was arched almost like that of a church, and the door itself of oak and studded with nails.

Mrs. Hardy herself received them in the hall, which was narrow and passage-like, and conducted them into the living-room—a big comfortable chamber, with panelled walls painted a cheerful buff, and great beams supporting the ceiling, and whitewashed like it. Mrs. Hardy wore her best black silk, and a black cap which rather altered the expression of her face, being spiky in texture and helmet-like in shape, and almost covering her smooth hair. Her ruddy face was shining metaphorically with hospitable good-humour, and literally from a recent and plentiful application of soap. In greeting the girls she had looked past them expectantly.

“The gentleman didn't come,” she remarked. “I d' 'low I did ought to have axed him myself—or Stephen—Stephen should ha' wrote him a bit of a note.”

“Father's so busy, you see,” returned Kitty, “he never goes out to tea.”

“And he never takes any either,” put in Bess hastily. “We carry in a cup to him sometimes, but he almost always never drinks it.”

If Bess' grammar was slightly defective, there was no mistaking her anxiety to avoid giving offence.

Mrs. Hardy's brow cleared, and she extended a hand to each of her young visitors with a broad smile.

“Well, I be pure glad as you were able to come, anyhow. Well, now, would you like to throw a look round before we sit down to our tea? Stephen won't be in till four—we put tea at that hour because we'm fayshionable to-

day,” said Mrs. Hardy, wagging her head with a jolly laugh. “We mostly has our tea at six, you know, but to-day we’ m fayshionable. Well, this ’ere’s the parlour what we do always use. There’s another one in there, but we do never sit in it. It bain’t not to say properly furnished either. When Stephen gets married I do tell en he can furnish the best parlour.”

She threw open the door as she spoke, disclosing a long, light room with a round table of monstrous dimensions in the centre, and containing hardly anything else in the way of furniture. Nevertheless Bess walked to one of the windows with an air of satisfaction.

“It might be made a perfectly delightful room,” she said. “It’s so nice to be able to look out on the orchard—only the orchard would be prettier if there were no pigs in it.”

“Now that’s where you make a mistake, missy,” returned Mrs. Hardy. “Pigs is a pleasant sight, because, as a general rule, where there’s pigs there’s money. ’Tis pigs what makes a dairy valuable, and there’s a deal o’ knowledge required to make a pig pay, as it did ought to pay.”

Bess turned away from the window and once more surveyed the room.

“If these walls were painted white,” she said, “with just a little frieze of roses and pale blue curtains—short curtains—it would be simply lovely.”

“Oh no, Bess,” cried Kitty with animation, “not blue curtains. This room ought to be all white and green, with those green boughs waving just outside the window—apple-green curtains, Bess, and just a little note of green in the frieze.”

“What’s a note of green?” inquired Stephen, suddenly appearing at the door.

Kitty hesitated for a moment, not being quite certain as to the manner in which she should greet their farmer landlord; but Bess at once stepped forward, graciously extending her small hand.

“Don’t you think it very kind of us to plan the decoration of your room?” she inquired, with a saucy smile and her head at its most engaging angle. “You can’t think how pretty it would be if you would follow our advice.”

“The advice wouldn’t be very easy to follow,” he returned. “You don’t seem quite agreed on some points.”

“Take my advice then!” cried Bess. “Now look here, Mr. Hardy, you mustn’t have a carpet all over roses as big as cabbages—a cabbage rose is one thing and a rose cabbage another—it must be all one plain colour——”

“A note of colour?” Stephen queried, with his eyes twinkling.

“I shall have to begin your artistic education at the very beginning, I see,” said Bess; “you don’t even understand the terms. I’ll explain what I mean while we go on,” she added, as Mrs. Hardy led the way out of the room.

Kitty followed, a little puzzled and, it must be owned, slightly uncomfortable. She herself had every wish to treat Farmer Hardy with due civility and even deference as master of the house and landlord to themselves, but she was not prepared to find herself on intimate and even familiar terms with him. Bess seemed absolutely to forget that there was a disparity of station which should not be quite overlooked; indeed her mode of greeting the young yeoman, and the tone of the conversation, in which she was now taking an animated part, seemed to sweep away all barriers.

Stephen himself responded to her sallies with placid good-humour, laughing sometimes quietly to himself; it was evident that Bess amused him.

Meanwhile Mrs. Hardy conducted the little party upstairs and down. They saw the bedrooms, immaculately neat but a trifle gloomy, a huge four-poster in each absorbing much of the available space; they visited the dairy—a very picture of a dairy—with its white walls and its stone shelves and rows of shining “leads.” Bess positively gloated over the pans of cream, and all at once drew her little finger round the edge of one and licked it. It would have been a highly reprehensible action in one less childish and less pretty, but as it was Stephen and his stepmother laughed.

“If you like cream, you shall have a-plenty,” cried Mrs. Hardy, taking up a skimmer.

“You must hold it quite, quite steady,” cried Bess, “because the skimmer is so big and my mouth so little—at least, rather little.”

She sipped very cautiously, her green eyes roving the while from one to the other of her hosts; when she had finished her cream she licked her lips like a little cat.

“Will you have some, missy?” inquired Mrs. Hardy, turning to Kitty.

As the latter refused, very civilly but with a certain haste, Rebecca remarked, laughing, “You’re the proud one, I see.”

“Oh, indeed, indeed, I’m not,” cried Kitty, growing pink with distress. “I—I don’t care for cream, really.”

“Well, please yourself and you’ll please me,” replied Rebecca. “I don’t mean nothing to hurt ye, my dear. I do only call ye the proud one because you seem to take less interest like than your sister.”

“Oh, I take a great deal of interest in everything,” returned Kitty quickly. “I know I seem dreadfully dull and stupid, but I—you lead such useful lives and I do so little—I feel somehow disheartened.”

She scarcely knew how she worded her apology in her anxiety to refute Rebecca’s accusation—if accusation it could be called, that was so good-humouredly made. She spoke indeed out of the fulness of her heart, for ever since her interview with her father she had been conscious of a humiliating dissatisfaction with herself and her capabilities, and a doubt of her power of carrying out the resolutions which she had so valiantly made. Added to this was her discomfort at Bess’ unexpected attitude, and her fear of the complications which might possibly ensue. To this last point she could not of course allude, but she spoke the truth when she owned to being disheartened.

“No need to be cast down, love,” cried Rebecca, quite mollified. “There, I be sure you be young enough to learn. Lard, when I were your age I didn’t know much more, I d’ ’low, though of course I was brought up different. I’ll be real glad to put ye in the way o’ things, whenever you do want tellin’.”

The tour of inspection was concluded by a visit to a big, cheerful room aglow with firelight, and decorated with a wonderful array of cooking utensils, some of which, dating as they did from a hundred years back, were more for show than use.

Stephen next proposed to conduct the visitors out of doors, that he might introduce them to the live stock and garden. Rebecca did not, however, fall in cordially with the suggestion.

“I’ve got my dress on, d’ye see, and my house shoes,” she said hesitatingly. “Maybe you’ll excuse me, my dears. Stephen will be glad to show you all what’s to be seen.”

“I think we had better stay with you,” returned Kitty. “It was you whom we came to see, after all. Let’s stay and chat with Mrs. Hardy, Bess.”

Bess turned her head sentimentally on one side, with a gentle and inarticulate murmur, by which she intended to convey her willingness to abide with Rebecca had not the paramount duty of inspecting the live stock in Stephen’s company called her elsewhere.

“Please yourself, my dear,” said Rebecca. “You can go out wi’ Stephen while your sister and me bides indoor. Come along, love.”

She smiled broadly on Kitty, having been entirely won by her proposal and sweet gentle ways; while Kitty hesitated, Bess, with great alacrity, announced that she should like to see the cows first.

She and Stephen were absent some time, so long, indeed, that the lamp was lighted and the curtains drawn when they returned. Bess came running in with her cheeks glowing and her eyes bright.

“It has been delightful,” she announced. “You can’t think how delightful it was, Kitty. You should be ashamed of yourself to prefer sitting curled up here, like an old cat before the fire.”

“Miss Leslie wouldn’t have a chair,” said Rebecca, smiling down at the girl with an expression which betokened that their intimacy had made strides during Bess’ absence.

Bess dropped down beside her sister on the rug, tossing off her hat and laughing. The firelight made a very nimbus of her hair, and brought little ruddy sparkles into her eyes.

“We’ve had such a lovely walk,” said Bess. “We saw the garden and the orchard—and oh, Kitty, we saw the Lovers’ Walk. Up there in the wood, you know, the little copse on the top of the hill—the Lovers’ Walk goes straight through it; and there is a stile for the lovers to lean on, and a dear old battered bench where they can sit and rest.”

Kitty got up from the rug.

“Did you see the cows?” she inquired in a sternly matter-of-fact tone.

“The cows,” echoed Bess vaguely as she too scrambled to her feet.

She stood for a moment or two blinking, as if she had some difficulty in bringing her thoughts back to concrete matters, then suddenly seemed to wake up.

“Of course we saw the cows—it was just milking-time. I wouldn’t stay, though, because I am going to see them in the early, early morning by lantern-light, and I didn’t want to spoil the effect of my first impression. Mr. Hardy thinks it quite natural I should want to see them in the early morning,” she added somewhat defiantly; “he wasn’t in the least shocked. He says his men are not at all rough, and, besides, he will be there himself.”

She threw a sidelong glance at her sister as she made this last announcement.

“What do you think, Mrs. Hardy?” said Kitty, turning doubtfully to her hostess. “Bess wants to get up before daylight to see your cows being milked. Do you think it would do?”

“Well, it will be very early for her to get up,” said Mrs. Hardy.

No other aspect of the affair seemed to strike her.

“I thought it might be—inconvenient,” faltered Kitty. “I thought we might be—in the way.”

“Not in the least, my dear,” responded Mrs. Hardy genially. “If your sister has a fancy for seein’ the milkin’ by lamplight for once, I’m sure she’s welcome to do it, but I d’ ’low she’ll not feel so ready for it to-morrow mornin’. I don’t get up much before six myself—except on churning days—and Stephen don’t, as a rule.”

“Mr. Hardy says he’ll be up to-morrow,” repeated Bess; “and that’ll be nice, because he can show us everything. But you needn’t get up if you don’t like, Kitty. I shall, because he mightn’t be there another morning, so it’s a chance.”

She threw back her head with a little jerk of the chin that was meant for Kitty, and she smiled innocently at Stephen as she passed him.

“I’ll be there,” said Stephen, but he looked not at her, but at Kitty.

The table was spread with a substantial meal. The girls were more or less prepared for the cold ham and the poached eggs, but they were rather surprised to find a brace of partridges smoking on the board, flanked by the inevitable bread sauce.

Bess threw an admiring glance at them as she sat down.

“How nice,” she said. “I’ve never had partridge for tea before, but then, of course, we are not well off.”

Stephen, who was handing Kitty’s cup, was surprised to see her blush, and to detect a look of warning directed at her sister. Following her gaze he observed that though Bess’ face was wreathed with a most engaging and guileless smile, the sparkle in her eyes, which he had thought to be the effect of firelight, was more noticeable than ever; it was the very demon of mischief.

“Well, ye see,” remarked the unconscious Mrs. Hardy, “us don’t often have young ladies like you to tea, and so we are anxious to do our best for them.”

“Our best is rough enough,” put in Stephen’s voice. “You must take us as you find us, Miss Leslie, and put up with us when we make mistakes.”

The observation appeared to be addressed to Bess, but again he looked at Kitty. Oddly enough he did not resent the younger sister’s babyish impertinence so much as the elder’s aloofness. This was the proud one, as the stepmother had said.

She glanced at him in return, unconsciously drawing herself up a little, for his manner had been abrupt and his voice had a harsh ring. There was surprise, indignation, and withal a kind of pleading in her eyes, but Stephen was not prone to analyse niceties of expression, and, indeed, before he had had time to do more than note their mere beauty, the full lids veiled them again and the dark lashes seemed to sweep the girl’s cheek.

Stephen laughed to himself as he set about carving the birds.

“What’s amusin’ ye, my dear?” inquired Rebecca, laughing too for sympathy, as was invariably her way, long before she was acquainted with any joke.

“Well, I’m just laughing out,” said Stephen, “because I know these two young ladies are laughing in their hearts.”

“Oh, how wicked you are!” cried Bess, with twinkling eyes and a solemn button of a mouth.

“I never felt less like laughing in my life,” said Kitty.

CHAPTER V

It was, after all, Kitty who woke up first on the following morning, and shook the shoulder of a very sleepy little Bess.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” cried Bess, blinking at the candle.

“Don’t you want to get up?” asked Kitty. “They are driving the cows up to Hardy’s now.”

Bess turned over and groaned into her pillow.

“I thought you were so anxious to see the milking by lantern-light,” remarked Kitty severely.

“I think, on the whole,” murmured Bess, now with her eyes tightly closed, “milking is an overrated form of entertainment. I peeped into the shed yesterday—they were an ugly lot.”

Kitty gave the plump little shoulder another shake.

“I didn’t know you professed to be a judge of cows,” she said. “You’ll be asleep again in a minute.”

“I didn’t mean the cows,” said Bess, slowly hoisting herself up and yawning portentously. “What a nuisance you are, Kitty—how do you come to be so wide awake at this time of morning? I mean I thought there’d be a lot of nice, pretty dairymaids, and there’s nobody there but a few stupid, common-looking men.”

“Do you expect ‘dairy-chaps’ to be aristocratic?” inquired Kitty, who was proceeding with her dressing. “You’d better make haste if you are coming—they’ve all gone by now.”

Bess, with a valiant effort, jumped out of bed, uttering a little shriek of anguish as her feet touched the bare boards.

“You are disgustingly energetic this morning,” she remarked; “you’re the most inconsequent person I ever knew. Yesterday when I wanted to get up you wouldn’t let me; to-day when I’m pining to remain tucked up in my little beddy-by you drag me out by the hair.”

She shook the hair in question protestingly and shivered.

“It’s quite a new idea, this craze of yours for learning agriculture,” she added in an injured tone.

Kitty paused to laugh, but replied seriously enough.

“A promise is a promise. You arranged to look on at the milking this morning, and those good people up there will be disappointed and put out if you don’t come.”

“Do you mean Mr. Hardy?” inquired Bess. “It’s very good for him to get up, and I’m not a bit sorry for him. As for the old lady, perhaps it’s churning morning. For two pins, Kitty, I’d go back to bed.”

“Well, this time,” said her sister, with a sudden flash in her eyes, “I won’t give in to you. You shall keep your word, Bess. If you don’t, I’ll be really angry.”

Kitty was so seldom really angry, and particularly with her cherished little sister, that the prospect had the terrors of the unknown. Bess rubbed her eyes for the last time, sighed, and then began quite meekly to dress herself in silence and with dispatch.

It was still quite dark when they made their way up to the barton on the hill, but they were guided by the lights which flickered forth here and there from the long lines of sheds. They picked their way gingerly along the muddy track, and paused irresolutely on arriving at the yard.

“I don’t see Mr. Hardy,” said Bess; “I must say I think he ought to have been on the lookout for us. I’m sure he doesn’t often entertain visitors at this time of morning. Perhaps he didn’t expect us, after all,” she continued irrelevantly; “so you needn’t have worked yourself up into such fits over his possible disappointment.”

Kitty coloured in the darkness, feeling, it must be owned, somewhat foolish. She could scarcely have explained her determination to make Bess keep her promise. She had been ashamed and unhappy at the impression which she divined they had conveyed to Stephen on the preceding day, and was now almost feverishly anxious to make it clear to him that they had no intention of giving themselves airs.

“Oh, my little pillow!” sighed Bess. “Oh, for my nice warm blankets! Let’s come in here, Kitty—it’s better than an open shed.”

They turned into the outhouse in question, a long, low building partitioned off into stalls, in each of which an animal was standing. The sweet hay-scented air and the rhythmical sound of milk spurting into the pails announced that these animals were cows, though it was so dark that at first the sisters could do no more than make out the indeterminate outline of man and beast. One or two horned heads were turned as they slowly made

their way down the long row, keeping themselves as close as possible to the wall; and now and then from a dusky corner a gruff voice would be raised in greeting: "Good-day to ye, miss," or, "You'm early this morning, ladies," but there was no pause in the steady spurt, spurt of the milk, and nobody seemed much surprised, or even particularly flattered, at the visitors' early arrival. Just as Bess was about to remark with a pout that there was nothing to be seen and that it had hardly been worth while to come, a tall, white-clad figure rose at the farther end of the shed and made its way towards them. It was Farmer Hardy, looking perfectly gigantic in his dairyman's "pinner." He shifted a foaming pail of milk from his right arm to his left, and shook hands unconcernedly.

"So you have come, after all," he said. "I thought you had changed your minds. We are nearly done in here."

"We very nearly didn't come," returned Bess. "If Kitty hadn't scolded me and worried me till I couldn't go to sleep again, I should have stayed where I was. Well, now that I have come, I want to see everything. It's very dark in here, Mr. Hardy."

Stephen, who had glanced quickly at Kitty during her sister's incautious speech, now turned to Bess again.

"What did you expect?" he said. "It's long before daybreak."

"Oh, I don't know; I thought the lights and shades would have been stronger and more effective. I thought there would be a great flare of light, and murky pools of shadow, and a man's face suddenly flashing at you out of the darkness—the sort of thing one sees in a Rembrandt picture. But your lights are too dim to be the least romantic."

Stephen, who had begun by staring at her, ended by laughing good-humouredly.

"We have just enough light here for the men to see their way about," he answered prosaically. "Will you come to the next shed? They won't have finished in there yet."

This shed was an open one, and the girls shivered as they stood watching operations. Bess, however, laughed and chatted all the time, insisted on watching Stephen as he milked another cow, and finally announced her intention of taking a lesson.

"This nice white cow looks most kind," she observed. "What lovely long white eyelashes she has! Do put the lantern on the ground, Mr. Hardy, so that the light may be thrown up. Oh, that's beautiful! Isn't it picturesque,

Kitty? There's a heavenly shadow here—I'm going right into the middle of it. Mayn't I have a pinafore? Do give me a pinafore, Mr. Hardy—let me put yours on."

"Bess!" cried Kitty, unable to restrain herself; adding somewhat lamely as an afterthought, "Mr. Hardy, of course, wants his."

But Stephen had already begun with great simplicity to untie the strings which fastened it round his waist.

"It is quite clean," he said; "I've only worn it for half an hour."

"What a delightful garment!" exclaimed Bess. "Do you put on a clean one every morning?"

"Not every morning; very seldom, in fact—I leave the milking to the men, but to-day I thought I might as well lend a hand while I was waiting."

"Then you got up so early on our account," murmured Bess; "how glad I am we came now. It would have been too dreadful if we hadn't, wouldn't it? Kitty, I want the light to fall on my face—just move the lantern a little way. Does it catch my face? I want a long ray to go slanting up the cow's side and then on my head. Is it there, Kitty?"

"No," said Kitty, moving the lantern about, "if the light falls on the cow it misses you—if it touches you it's nowhere near the cow."

"That's a pity," said Bess. "Never mind, it will do just as well if the cow just looms through the murky darkness. Just a dim outline. Throw the light on me, Kitty dear. Now! Am I not just like a Rembrandt picture, Mr. Hardy?"

Stephen had possibly heard of Rembrandt, for he was a man who accomplished a certain amount of reading in his spare time, but the name presented no definite associations, and, though he laughed, he laughed vaguely.

He had been somewhat bewildered at Bess' previous remarks and at the amazing ease with which she rolled off her high-flown little sentences. Kitty was too well-accustomed to Bess' particular mode of romancing to be more than faintly amused at the preliminaries, but she was genuinely tickled at the final comparison. Anything, indeed, less typical of the school in question could scarcely be imagined than the picture presented by Bess, swathed in the voluminous white "pinner," her little pink and white face and red head thrust so eagerly towards the light, being distinctly, almost aggressively,

English. After she had turned about the said little head for a moment or two, she bethought her of her business and stretched forth two small cold hands.

“Like this, I suppose? Give me the pail, Mr. Hardy. Now—why doesn’t the milk come?”

“You are not managing quite right,” said Stephen. “This is the way, see—a little jerk and a squeeze.”

“Oh, but I don’t want to hurt the poor thing—oh, Mr. Hardy, why doesn’t the milk come? I don’t believe the cow likes me. Kitty, do come and pat her.”

Kitty stood still, laughing in spite of herself, though Stephen’s attitude was somewhat startling to her. Now he was bending over Bess—now absolutely holding her hand; he was laughing, too, as she had never seen him laugh before. Kitty grew serious all at once.

“I think my sister had better take a lesson in milking some other time,” she said rather stiffly. “In the afternoon, perhaps. It is bitterly cold now.”

Stephen immediately straightened himself and came towards her.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, “I should have remembered you were likely to feel cold. By all means let us put off the lesson till the afternoon—and then my mother can teach the young lady,” he added.

As he caught up the lantern Kitty saw the anger in his strong, dark face, and felt ashamed at her readiness to take alarm.

Stephen, however, was already marching across the yard, and Bess, instead of responding to her sister’s meek proposal to return homewards, suddenly started after him, catching her feet in the folds of her “pinner” as she ran.

“Mr. Hardy, Mr. Hardy, come back—I want to know—I want to ask you _____”

The house door opened, revealing a glow of warmth and light, and Mrs. Hardy’s figure appeared on the threshold.

“Come in, my dears, come in. I’ve got a nice hot cup of tea for you.”

The little stumbling figure vanished through the doorway, the sound of her clear laughter reaching Kitty where she stood. The latter had no choice but to follow, and made her way shamefacedly enough to the parlour, where the rest of the party were assembled. A jolly laugh from Rebecca greeted her as she entered. Bess, mounted on a chair, was contemplating herself in the

old-fashioned glass that surmounted the mantel-shelf; waving her short arms, on which Stephen Hardy's sleeves hung in festoons, and turning herself about in the endeavour to obtain a back view of her voluminous draperies.

"Look at my new dairymaid, missy!" cried Mrs. Hardy to Kitty. "She was too cold to finish her lesson wi' Stephen, but she be comin' again this artemnoon and I be goin' to larn her. I d' 'low I'll make her a better hand at it than he do do," nodding across to her stepson; "they haven't got much patience, menfolk haven't."

"I know I must have been very trying," said Bess, descending from her chair. "But it wasn't the will that was wanting."

"Well, sit down and have a cup of tea, do 'ee now, there's a good young lady," urged Mrs. Hardy hospitably. "Sister looks fair perished," turning to Kitty. "Draw nigh to the fire, my dear."

"Thank you," said Kitty, lifting her eyes gratefully to the kind, ruddy face. "How thoughtful you are. I never knew anyone so thoughtful."

Stephen stalked across the room and out of the door without a word of apology, either to Rebecca or her guests. Kitty instinctively felt that her cordiality to his stepmother had in a manner accentuated what he chose to consider her disdainful attitude towards himself. She was again filled with a sense of discomfiture and shame; why could she not take life with the same simplicity as that shown by these good folks, who, after all, were only anxious to be friendly and kind? No doubt the wish to take advantage of their enforced equality was as far from Stephen's thoughts as the possibility of really forgetting herself was from her sister's, irresponsible child though she was.

Bess' first words on returning home, however, startled Kitty out of her newly gained equanimity, if her remorseful condition of mind may be fitly described by such a term.

"I wonder," said Bess, sticking a large hat-pin thoughtfully through the little knitted cap which she had just removed, "I wonder which of us two Farmer Hardy means to fall in love with?"

"Bess!" cried Kitty, dropping her own tam o' shanter and pinioning her sister by the shoulders; "what do you mean? How dare you even think of such a thing!"

Bess wriggled in her grip, but giggled mischievously nevertheless.

“My dear, he may be a farmer, but, after all, he is a man. He is an educated sort of man too. His ‘h’s’ are all right and his grammar is all right, and he only talks Dorset now and then, when he’s excited——”

“Bess, I can’t bear to hear you speak like that—as if it wouldn’t be the most shocking—the most humiliating—thing if he was to allow himself even for a moment——”

Bess wrenched herself free and laughed.

“A cat may look at a king, and, even if a man is a farmer, he can’t be constantly with two pretty girls—the fact of our being ladies doesn’t prevent our being pretty girls, Kitty—without——”

“Bess, you’re a little monster!” Kitty was stopping her ears, but Bess jerked her hands away and shouted the remainder of her sentence.

“Without losing his heart to one of them. It’s a foregone conclusion. The only question is, which is it to be? Sometimes I think it’s you.”

Kitty’s face was flaming now, and she flashed upon Bess a glance of such fiery wrath that the latter was for a moment abashed. Only for a moment, however; she resumed the argument presently in the same high and determined key.

“He kept watching you all the time at tea yesterday—I saw him. But all the same he enjoyed showing me the Lovers’ Walk. And no doubt this morning he did think I looked pretty in his pinafore. I watched his face in the glass, and it was quite admiring. I don’t think he has made up his mind yet.”

“Now listen to me,” said Kitty, swiftly crossing the room and kneeling down beside her sister so that her eyes were level with those of Bess, who sat on a low chair. “You’re a child and you don’t understand, but such talk as this is positively degrading. It—it makes me writhe to hear you! The mere thought that you, my own little sister, could for a moment let your mind dwell on such an idea is revolting! Never, never let me hear a word of this again—don’t allow yourself to think of it.”

Bess made no answer, but she twisted up her face into a wicked little smile.

CHAPTER VI

Kitty was walking slowly and somewhat disconsolately up the narrow lane which led past the farm on the hill and wound upwards over the great pasture-field and by the copse through various tracts of arable land—all of which belonged to Farmer Hardy—to the downs. It was a glorious autumn afternoon, one of those golden days when the year seems to pause before consenting to decay. The leaves were still yellow and crimson, the berries on the spindle bushes still clove to their twigs, though each little rosy pod had burst, displaying an orange seed. The light, sinking low at this hour, transformed every insignificant bramble-vine to a trailing glory, burnished the thorny interlaced branches that took up so large a share of the hedgerow till they formed what seemed a fiery fretwork amid the sparse leafage, and turned the more heavily clad saplings of hazel and birch to golden sheaves. The place was very solitary. As Kitty plodded onwards no sound fell upon her ear except such as were caused by her own light footfalls and the occasional twitter of a bird or a rustle of its light wings. Now and then a hedge-sparrow or a linnet darted from its place of concealment and fluttered for a little way ahead of her, its wings becoming momentarily translucent, and, as seen thus against the glowing sky, appearing to assume the texture and transparency of those of a moth. Overhead a flock of peewits was sailing in evident enjoyment, wheeling hither and thither, now stretching itself out, a long string of scarcely distinguishable dots across the sky, anon gathering into a compact mass.

At length Kitty reached a point of the hill where the path ran along a level tract of land before again dipping into a hollow. On her left was the copse pointed out by Bess some few days before through which lay the Lovers' Walk; on her right a clump of larger trees shadowed an immense wheat-field.

Half idly Kitty climbed the stile and turned into the Lovers' Walk.

Even at this time of year there was fascination and mystery in this wood. A stream tinkled somewhere out of sight; the ground was thickly covered with moss, and the trees through which the path wound were for the most part oaks, beeches, and birches, their straight young stems all steel and bronze in shadow, gold and silver where the ruddy light struck them;—the lichens and mosses, which, even at this early stage of growth, had crept

along many of their slender limbs, seeming to Kitty's fancy like gleaming emerald serpents twisting themselves amid the branches.

Though the white-stemmed trees were most prevalent, there were firs somewhere in the background which betrayed themselves by their aromatic scent; the ground, moist with early dew, gave forth its own indescribable fragrance; the ivy, the lately fallen leaves, the myriad small green growing things crowded together in that sheltered space—each and all added its own burden of spice to the sweet air.

Kitty paced ever more and more slowly. The Lovers' Walk! Doubtless many simple happy souls had wandered here. Some, perhaps, had waited long, first hopefully, then anxiously, then with sickening doubt for the coming of the loved one; and all at once he or she had been seen hastening round the bend yonder with outstretched arms, with eager excuses. This was indeed a place to dream in, to make plans for a visionary future; a place of happy meetings and often postponed partings, a place to which the thoughts of many might well turn in anticipation or in loving memory.

Kitty sighed involuntarily. It must be nice to be able to look forward, she thought, to feel there was something coming—somebody—the wonderful somebody who would be the centre of one's life, the master of one's fate. Most girls could confidently count upon such experience, but what could the future hold in store for Bess and herself? They had now left childhood behind, yet, in all probability, life held no prizes for them.

Sighing again, Kitty began to picture to herself the imaginary Prince Charming who might, under happier circumstances, have ruled her destiny. She did not want anybody very rich or very grand in the world's estimation, but she would have liked him to be very refined and extremely clever. An artist, probably—yes, she would have liked him to be an artist, with keen eyes accustomed to look out for and register effects, and long slender mobile hands. A man quick to divine and understand her own feelings and aspirations, who would help and encourage her to make the most of such talent as she possessed—for Kitty had ambitions of her own, and delighted in dabbling with colour. Best of all, he would have the quickness of intuition, the delicate sympathies which accompany the artistic temperament. How delightful to converse with such a man, to rejoice together on the beauty of Nature, to meet, each with a full heart, amid such surroundings as these.

Supposing yonder in the distance where the trees parted she were to see the outline of a tall figure—he must certainly be tall—he would throw his

head a little back, watching and waiting for her, for, of course, he would be first at the rendezvous, and then, when he caught sight of her, or when she had announced herself by the rustling of her dress over the leaves, how he would come striding to meet her!

Kitty closed her eyes and imagined to herself what it would be like to feel one's heart leap at the sound of the rapidly approaching footsteps, and then to see the tall figure come hastening onwards through the trees, and then to meet—to clasp hands!

All at once she opened her eyes with a start. Was she still dreaming, or were these really advancing footsteps which now broke the stillness? Firm and rapid footsteps, unaccompanied by any rustle of skirts. Now, was that indeed a man's form which came towards her threading its way from tree to tree? A tall figure showing dark, almost gigantic, against the glowing background. Kitty again stood still, uncertain whether to advance or retreat, and another moment revealed the newcomer to be no other than Stephen Hardy. She began to walk onwards, thinking it would appear foolish to fly from his approach, and passed him with a murmured "Good-day." He had slackened his pace a moment as though about to speak, but, finding she had no such intention, removed his hat and went on. As they crossed each other, however, he bent a glance upon her, a keen questioning glance—not even Kitty's imaginary Prince Charming could have had a more piercing gaze than that directed towards her by this young farmer.

Kitty vexed herself as she hurried on in her endeavours to account for it. She did not know how much of the ecstasy of her foolish dream still lingered in her flushed face, how much of the light in her dilated eyes which caused Stephen to marvel as he approached was due to her inward vision. She walked sedately to the farther end of the wood, her thoughts still unwillingly taken up with Stephen Hardy. Why had he looked at her thus? What had he been about to say when she hastened by? What was he doing there in the Lovers' Walk? Was he perchance keeping tryst with someone, and did he in consequence feel her presence an intrusion?

When she arrived at the extremity of the wood she paused a moment, wondering if she could make her way home without again traversing the Lovers' Walk. But she found that a deep ditch half full of water surrounded this portion of the copse, totally barring her advance. On the farther side was the large pasture before mentioned, and still farther to the right, a turnip-field, a portion of which was hurdled off. Even as Kitty stood there a multitude of sounds broke suddenly upon her ear, the bleating of sheep, the tinkling of innumerable bells, dogs barking, men shouting, and presently she

saw a white stream pour down the turnip-field from an adjacent slope, the sheep advancing at full speed either because they were driven or because of their eagerness for food. In the space of a moment the hurdled off patch, till now a sober medley of brown and yellow and green, became a heaving, struggling, white mass, broken here and there by a dark figure of man or dog. Yonder was Stephen crossing the field on his way to the pens. He walked well for a rustic. Yes, at this distance he was a goodly figure of a man, one likely enough to captivate some fine young woman in his own sphere of life.

Kitty turned away with a little smile on her lips and suddenly started on perceiving that she was not alone; a tall girl standing a few paces away from her in the shadow of the wood was watching her furtively. As Kitty, surprised, returned her gaze, she advanced into the light without relaxing for a moment her close scrutiny; a handsome creature, with the flawless skin of the Dorset peasant, tanned to gipsy brownness without losing its fineness of texture, a rich colour in cheek and lip, flashing dark eyes, hair raven black by nature yet now ruddy in the sunset glow—a splendid type of rustic womanhood.

On looking more closely Kitty saw that the girl was poorly clad in a thin cotton dress that clung about a form, goddesslike in proportions. On one arm was slung a gathered sunbonnet such as only the older village women wore, no jacket or cloak protected her from the tart breeze.

“Good-evening,” said Kitty diffidently.

The girl nodded without speaking, and then, stepping past her, swiftly descended the bank, and, supporting herself by the overhanging branch of a willow that grew on the other side of the ditch, swung herself across and continued her way without turning her head.

Kitty stood still and watched her, puzzled and curiously excited by this encounter. How oddly the girl had looked at her—as oddly as Stephen himself, but differently. Kitty indeed could not fathom the meaning of that gaze. She had seemed to read in it distrust, defiance—even a kind of reproach. Whence had she come, whither was she going? Though she walked straight across the pasture she kept to the upper edge of it as though anxious to avoid detection, stepping along quickly, with a perfect ease and grace of carriage—the grace of the wild creature, the freedom of limb possessed by the colt as yet unbroken to the yoke, by the deer which roams the woods, a stranger to man and his ways.

Now she was crossing a hedge and making her way along the turnip-field. Could she be seeking for Stephen? No, she made no effort to approach him, and as his back was turned towards her he did not even perceive her advance. When she arrived at the farther end of the field in question, however, and when she had climbed the bank which separated it from the next, Kitty noticed that she paused and looked back in the direction where the farmer stood. A moment she remained thus poised on the summit of the bank, her thin draperies fluttering in the breeze, the sunlight slanting across her face, then turning she jumped down on the farther side and disappeared.

“Perhaps they have already met,” thought Kitty, as she too turned to make her way homewards. The remembrance flashed across her of the foolish words which Bess had jestingly spoken on their return from Mrs. Hardy’s tea-party. “I wonder which of us two Farmer Hardy means to fall in love with.”

She had been sufficiently shocked by the suggestion then, but now, now that she had seen for herself the kind of girl who took Stephen’s fancy, she felt even more humiliated. It seemed to her, for some inexplicable reason, that Stephen’s thus voluntarily lowering himself was a kind of personal affront.

Perhaps it was to meet this girl that he had come striding down the Lovers’ Walk, and it was, as she had already surmised, surprised displeasure at her own unlooked-for appearance which caused him to gaze so sharply at her.

The girl, too, might possibly have divined that it was on her, Kitty’s, account that the tryst had been postponed; this no doubt would account for the resentment in her face.

What could she be? Not a gipsy. She looked too tidy and clean for that, besides her clothes were not ragged enough. Yet surely this was no mate for Stephen Hardy. Even Rebecca must disapprove of such an attachment; perhaps, thought Kitty, it was on that account that the lovers kept their meetings concealed.

Oddly enough she mentioned it to no one. The secret was not hers, and though she could not but feel astonished at Farmer Hardy’s choice she would not on any consideration have betrayed him.

Yet, in spite of her vexation at having unwittingly intruded on this romance, the Lovers’ Walk held a curious fascination for her and she felt in a manner drawn to revisit it.

Bess was very busy just then; there were wonderful feats of dressmaking in progress, or rather the altering of dresses to suit the family's changed circumstances; it was difficult to coax her out of doors. Kitty, who loved these golden autumn hours, was constrained to wander forth alone, and it was not long after her first visit to the copse that she again found herself halting by the stile which gave access to it. Pausing on the topmost step she looked around her first. The world was all astir to-day; a robin was singing just over her head, the rooks were very busy in an adjacent corn-field. Down among the sheep pens the ewes were making a great din. The shepherd's hut had taken up its position in the midst of them, and Giles, the shepherd, was walking critically from pen to pen, his white smock catching the light as he moved. That was Farmer Hardy who came riding up now on the bay mare which Bess and Kitty admired so much. He rode round and round, the mare deftly threading her way between the hurdles. Well, since he was on horseback, thought Kitty, there could be no danger of meeting him in the Lovers' Walk; she might safely venture there. Though the place belonged to Farmer Hardy and was the scene of his own tender meetings, it was not in any special way forbidden to the public—indeed, by common consent, a certain section of the public was invited to walk there.

Kitty, therefore, jumped down on the farther side of the stile, and paced quietly along the track, endeavouring, but without success, to recall her former daydream. All at once she caught sight of a fluttering pink cotton gown a little ahead of her, and on insensibly quickening her pace, saw that the same girl she had met before was walking rapidly in front of her. Kitty stopped short just as the woman, who had not seen her, turned abruptly from the path, and, pushing her way through the undergrowth which fringed the road, paused at a place where the bushes grew sufficiently far apart to enable her to look down upon the sheep-field.

She stood and looked, shading her eyes with her hand. As before, her head was uncovered, and as Kitty paused, hesitating, she could not fail to observe the intentness of her expression.

At length, attracted no doubt by her gaze, the girl wheeled and saw her, and to her discomfiture came quickly towards her.

Kitty, deciding that it was better to advance, and endeavouring to look as if she had noticed nothing in particular, began to walk on, intending to brush past the other as quickly as possible, but when they met she found her path barred.

“I see’d ye lookin’ at me just now,” said the girl; she had a low, rather musical voice, and it trembled as she spoke.

“Yes,” returned Kitty, with a nervous little laugh. “I was wondering what you were doing.”

“I were a-lookin’ down at the sheep-field,” retorted the girl. “Anybody mid do that. I see’d ye doin’ it ye’self the other day.”

“Yes, so I did,” said Kitty, colouring faintly.

She tried to pass on, but again the other intercepted her.

“I see’d ye lookin’ at the sheep and at Farmer Hardy too. Ees, you was a-lookin’ at Farmer Hardy—and a-smilin’ to yourself—in a regular stud, you was.”

“Really,” cried Kitty, uncertain whether to laugh or be angry, “you must have watched me very closely.”

“Ees, I did watch ye close,” cried the other, raising her voice; “an’ so did you watch me close. I see’d ye a-watchin’ of I when I was a-standin’ on the bank up-along. I see’d ye in your blue dress a-standin’ an’ a-watchin’.”

“Well, perhaps I did,” returned Kitty, who did not know what to make of the girl’s fierce manner and accusing gaze. “I like looking at country people and country things.”

“Ye needn’t go for to twite I wi’ that!” exclaimed the girl, and her eyes positively flamed. “I do know very well I be common and country-bred, but ye needn’t think to make a mock o’ me for that!”

Kitty put out her little hand and touched her gently on the arm. She had not the faintest idea of the girl’s meaning, but the sudden dimness of the dark eyes, the quiver of the full red lips sufficiently betrayed wounded feeling.

“You are making some mistake,” she said. “I don’t understand why you are so vexed, but I can assure you I mean no harm. I’ll promise not to come here any more, if it is that which annoys you so much. I can just as well walk somewhere else.”

The other looked at her sharply and suspiciously, but presently, disarmed by Kitty’s gentle, almost pleading expression, suffered her own face to relax.

“I don’t know whatever you must think of me,” she murmured. “I don’t know however I came to say sich things, I’ve a-forgot myself jist about. But oh—nobody knows—nobody knows!”

She turned away abruptly, but not before Kitty had seen the tears upon her face. After a moment's hesitation, Kitty too retraced her steps, and, emerging from the wood, went slowly down the lane towards home.

The whole affair was a mystery to her, but, as before, she kept it to herself. She was conscious, nevertheless, of a certain resentment towards Stephen. Had he quarrelled with his sweetheart, neglected her? What could be the meaning of that sudden cry which seemed to come from her very heart—"Nobody knows—nobody knows"?

It never once occurred to her to suspect that the couple might not be lawful lovers; even had she not been so innocent, so ignorant of evil, it would not have been possible to her to impute a dishonourable course of action to a man like Stephen Hardy. He might be cold, he might be hard, it was quite likely he could be vindictive, but no one could look on Stephen Hardy's face and believe him to be vicious.

Kitty continued to think of the affair with wondering disapproval, now marvelling that a man in Stephen's position should thus abase himself, anon conscious of a feeling akin to indignation as she thought of the girl's distress. She went no more to the Lovers' Walk, however, and gradually, amid the pressure of more personal difficulties and vexations, the incident faded from her mind.

CHAPTER VII

Late one afternoon, about a fortnight after the Leslies had taken up their abode at the Little Farm, the two girls made their way homewards from an entertainment given in their honour by Mrs. Turnworth. It was now late November and the dusk had already set in, a clinging damp fog made progress difficult, and their advance was further impeded by the extremely muddy condition of the roads. Kitty carried a small lantern, the feeble light of which was only sufficient to enable them to see a few yards ahead, and they walked slowly and with great caution.

“I wish I hadn’t put on my high-heeled shoes,” sighed Bess. “My dear little French shoes! They’re full of mud now—and they’re the last of their line. We shall have to get great country clod-hopping things after this.”

“Well, they’ll be more suitable, I daresay,” said Kitty in a dispirited voice.

“Yes, all our little elegances were quite thrown away on Cousin Marian and her friends,” agreed Bess. “That was an entertainment, wasn’t it?”

“She did her best,” returned Kitty charitably, but dolefully.

“The cats’ tea-party!” ruminated Bess. “Do you remember that book we were so fond of as children? It was a regular cats’ tea-party to-day—and Cousin Marian was the cattiest of all!”

Kitty laughed feebly and Bess continued in a more sprightly tone, for the fancy cheered her up a little.

“Yes, there were clerical toms, and ordinary cats—and that nice Mrs. Molesworth was a dear kind old pussy. She purred all the time, and she was so proud of her white frill. And Mrs. Moreton was a Chinchilla, I think, with her greenish eyes and grey whiskers—did you notice her whiskers? Every time she opened her mouth she seemed to give a sort of plaintive ‘miaow!’ ”

Bess came paddling up alongside of Kitty, in her eagerness scarcely heeding where she stepped and splashing up the mud.

“Yes, we had five cats and one calf—one pink-faced calf,” she repeated meditatively. “That Chilby man looked like nothing but a calf. I saw him wagging his ears while you were talking to his mother, and when he handed

me those horrid little sticky cakes he looked just as if he was going to ‘moo.’ ”

“Calves don’t moo,” said Kitty.

“Yes, they do. You know how they throw up their heads and say ‘M-m-m-m’? Mr. Chilby went just like that. ‘M-m-m’ he’d say, holding out a plate of something or other. Oh, Kitty, isn’t it horrid?”

She stood stock-still in the middle of a pool, dropping her skirts the better to gesticulate with both despairing little hands. Her mouth drooped, and as Kitty, startled, held up the lantern, she saw two great tears upon her sister’s cheeks.

“My darling, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, it’s so horrid,” sobbed Bess again; “there’s no use pretending to each other and making believe that we like it, when it’s so *hateful*——”

“Being poor, you mean?”

“Being poor and living in a farm, and tramping along muddy roads, and going to a cats’ tea-party. Oh, Kitty!”

“Of course it has been horrid to-day,” said Kitty soothingly, though her own heart sank.

“It’s horrid every day,” protested Bess. “I don’t mind the place so much—it’s the people. And to think we shall see nobody a bit better all our days. That we shall vegetate and grow old and ugly on our maiden stalks unless the pink-faced calf takes a fancy to us. That’s all we have to look forward to now!”

She picked up her skirts again and plodded on, Kitty following her in sore distress.

“We may as well make up our minds to it,” resumed Bess. “We have absolutely no prospects. No lovers to walk in the Lovers’ Walk—nobody to dance with even if there was such a thing as a ball. The only excitement that breaks the monotony of our days—a party at Cousin Marian’s with a married clergyman on each side of you and a thing like Chilby to hand the bread and butter!”

Kitty herself was too painfully convinced of the truth of these remarks to venture to contradict them. Cousin Marian’s entertainment had moreover been of a chastening nature, and she was so thoroughly out of spirits herself that she was incapable of persuading her sister to take a more cheerful view.

They paddled on again, and for some time the silence was only broken by the squelching of the mud beneath their feet and the drip of moisture from the neighbouring hedge. All at once, however, a faint sound of wheels was heard and the rapid hoof-beats of a fast-trotting horse.

As the vehicle approached, Bess dropped behind her sister; the road was narrow just at that part.

“Keep close to the hedge, Kitty,” she cried, “or we shall be run over by some bloated aristocrat or other. What a pace he is going! Ugh, I’m a regular Radical now—a Socialist—no, a Nihilist, I mean. I’d like to throw a bomb under that horse’s feet. What business has that creature to spin past us and splash us while we, who are fifty times better than he or she can be, are plodding along in the mud?”

On came the rapid wheels; Kitty held up her lantern and the sisters squeezed themselves almost flat against the hedge. To their surprise, however, the unseen driver drew up and a well-known voice inquired—

“Is that you, Miss Leslie? Will you have a lift?”

“Why, it’s Farmer Hardy,” cried Bess joyfully.

Snatching the lantern from Kitty’s hand she held it aloft, peering meanwhile into the mist. The half-defined outlines of a tall black horse and an equally tall dogcart were now dimly visible. Also those of a man’s stalwart figure bending towards them from his high perch.

“Oh,” exclaimed Bess, with a gleeful little cry, “I am so glad it’s you, Mr. Hardy. Yes, please, we’d like a lift, shouldn’t we, Kitty? We are so damp and so cold that we are feeling quite wicked—at least I am.”

“Can you see the step?” inquired Stephen. “I’ll hold the light. Now, Miss Leslie. I’ll let down the back seat in a minute for you, Miss Bess.”

“Oh, but your horse won’t stand,” said Bess. “Don’t turn round, Mr. Hardy, don’t turn round. Let me get up in front. I saw you driving three like that the other day.”

“If you like,” returned Stephen. “Of course ’tis only a little way, but I thought you would prefer——”

But Bess had already scrambled into the cart and popped herself down between him and Kitty.

“I’m used to doing bodkin,” she said. “Oh, what a nice warm rug! This is delightful! You farmers have really the best of it; and, only fancy, I

thought you were a bloated aristocrat when you were coming along—that’s why I felt so wicked. I said to Kitty that I should like to throw a bomb under your wheels.”

Stephen, having finished tucking them up with the rug, gathered up the reins leisurely and allowed the horse to proceed; then he glanced down at Bess and laughed, a little puzzled as to what rejoinder to make. Bess was, however, in no way disconcerted by this fact.

“Kitty and I have been to tea at Cousin Marian’s,” she volunteered. “Cousin Marian seems to be in a funny sort of set here, Mr. Hardy—in the social way, I mean.”

“Perhaps I’m hardly in a position to judge,” returned Stephen.

“No,” rejoined she, “that’s just what’s so refreshing. You and your mother need not go into society. You can just live in that heavenly old house of yours and look after your work, and you can hunt and she can superintend the dairy, and so you’re quite happy. Now Cousin Marian—Cousin Marian—you needn’t pinch me, Kitty—Mr. Hardy knows just as well as I do that Cousin Marian only knows fusty, musty people—and, if we are to be in her set, we shall only know fusty, musty people too.”

Stephen laughed again and drew the lash of his whip lightly across the horse’s neck; the animal sprang forward and the light cart swung as they rounded a corner.

“Now farmers,” resumed Bess, “needn’t ape gentility, they can just go in for comfort, which is far more satisfactory.”

“What a pretty horse,” put in Kitty’s soft voice.

She thought it was time to change the conversation.

“Yes,” rejoined Hardy, and his tone was well pleased. “He is about the best I have; I bred him myself and broke him.”

“And isn’t the cart comfy?” exclaimed the irrepressible Bess. “It’s so springy and so light, and this is a nice warm rug, too. Ah, give me comfort!”

“Well, ’tis better than going afoot on such an evening as this,” rejoined the young farmer somewhat awkwardly. “I could have called for you at Mrs. Turnworth’s if I had only known. It is really not a fit night for you to be walking.”

“Beggars mustn’t be choosers,” responded Bess. “I don’t like being a beggar at all,” she added dolefully.

By this time they had turned up the little lane leading to the two farms, and Stephen presently drew up before the gate of the smaller one. Kitty, murmuring her thanks, sprang to the ground, but Bess did not accomplish the descent without a variety of little manoeuvres. First she had to extend her hand to Stephen, then to exclaim at the height of the vehicle from the ground and the shortness of her own legs, to give voice to certain misgivings as to the difficulty of preserving her skirts from the wheel, and, finally, as the horse became restive and Stephen bewildered, to fling herself bodily on top of Kitty, who stood by holding the lantern.

“I hope I haven’t damaged you!” she exclaimed. “Oh, Kitty, I’ve torn my glove—my nice white glove! Why didn’t you keep the lantern out of the way? I’m sure my finger’s bleeding too. Good-night, Mr. Hardy. Oh, Kitty, hasn’t it been odious? The only part of the whole time that I enjoyed was the drive home.”

The two little figures vanished round the angle of the house and Stephen pursued his way, now smiling to himself as he thought of the prattle of one sister, now frowning as he remembered the silence of the other.

There was no light in the passage, but in answer to a shrill summons from Bess, the servant who had replaced Mrs. Green came clattering down the stairs.

“Bring a light, please,” said Kitty.

“Oh, Louisa,” groaned Bess, “come and take off my shoes—they’re so muddy I can’t touch them!”

Louisa, who had begun to clump upstairs for the candle, now clumped down in response to the appeal of her younger mistress, then, apparently bethinking herself when about half-way that she could not remove the shoes without a light to see them by, mounted the stairs again at a gallop and came clattering down again at such speed that her light was extinguished before she reached the hall.

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Bess in exasperation, as the noisy steps began to retreat; “where are you off to now?”

“To get the matches, miss,” responded Louisa cheerfully. “I do always leave ’em in the same place—on the attic window-sill—and then I do always know where to find ’em.”

She spoke with modest pride, evidently expecting to be commended for her forethought.

“Give me the candlestick,” said Kitty, “else perhaps you’ll forget that by the time you’ve remembered the matches.”

“So I mid,” rejoined Louisa, with unimpaired good-humour.

“Considering that she never by any chance goes near the attic except at bedtime, I don’t quite see the point of keeping the matches there,” said Bess.

Both girls were tired and cross. Kitty slowly removed her pretty white fur tippet and shook it, inwardly wondering whether it would ever recover from the effects of that clinging fog; while Bess tapped discontentedly on the floor with the tip of her ill-used little shoe.

A clatter on the stairs, a heavy bump on the landing, and renewed clatter on the lower flight heralded the return of Louisa; the hurried and, for some time, ineffectual scraping of a match was at length rewarded by the appearance of a flame which revealed first her large red hand and presently her large red good-humoured face wreathed in smiles.

“ ’Twas lucky you did think o’ keepin’ the candlestick, miss, else I’d ha’ smashed en all to flinders when I did fall upon the stairs. I can never mind the landin’ there, an’ I do always fall,” she added pleasantly.

“Well, don’t fall over me, anyhow,” remarked Bess acidly; “take off my shoes and put them carefully on one side until they dry. They’re not to be put near the fire, mind—and not to be blacked.”

“Would ye have the brown polish on ’em, then?” inquired Louisa, as she drew off one of the objects in question.

“Brown, no!” returned Bess with a little scream. “They’re my very best shoes, they must be done with kid reviver—I’ll do them myself if it comes to that.”

“Well, it mid be safer,” replied Louisa, turning to Bess’ left foot. “Wold Cox, there! he be a terr’ble wold chap for makin’ mistakes. Yesterday ’twas, he was as near as anything puttin’ blackin’ on Miss Leslie’s brown shoes. He be sich a one for thinkin’ about his soul, ye know.”

“What?” cried Kitty, turning round with a laugh.

“His soul, miss!” repeated Louisa. “There, he do go into a reg’lar stud thinkin’ about it an’ goin’ over texts an’ things in his mind. I do often say to en when he be a-cleanin’ the knives an’ a-stud-studdin’ all the time, ‘Maister Cox,’ I do say, ‘you’ll have one o’ your fingers off so sure as anything.’ An’ he do tell I not to take so much care for the things o’ this world.”

Bess laughed too, but somewhat unwillingly, for she was still contemplating the sad condition of the muddy shoes. "Bring me my trees, Louisa," she said—"you know. Oh, I don't mean oaks or ashes or anything of that kind," as Louisa squatted back on her heels with a mystified expression. "I mean the little wooden things that go inside my shoes. You know where they are, don't you?"

"Oh ees, miss," responded Louisa delightedly. "I did find 'em in your room to-day an' I did put your other little shoes on 'em 'cause they was a bit damp arter you was out this mornin'. They didn't seem to fit so very well, but I did stretch an' stretch 'em, an' the elastic at the back keeps 'em in place nice."

"You don't mean my goloshes!" ejaculated Bess, bursting into helpless laughter, in which she was joined by Kitty.

It was, however, with a sort of groan that Bess at length caught up the candlestick and led the way to her sister's room, her little shoeless feet making a soft pad, pad on the uncarpeted stairs. She groaned all the time she was changing her dress and arranging her ruffled locks at the glass. Suddenly she rushed across the room and threw her arms round Kitty's neck, burrowing her head dejectedly on her sister's shoulder.

"Kitty, you'd always love me whatever happened, wouldn't you?"

"Darling, can you ask such a question?"

"Even if I was cast off and despised and—and—down-trodden by everybody else? I'd still be your own Bess, shouldn't I?"

"Of course you would, but why do you say such things?"

"Oh, because—because I'm getting desperate. I hate my life, and I can't bear it! Think of that horrible function to-day!"

"No, don't let's think of it," urged Kitty, pressing soft kisses on the flushed face.

"Remember how we live here with old Cox thinking of his soul when he should be cleaning knives, and Louisa tumbling up and downstairs and putting goloshes on my best shoe lasts. Here we are with nasty, smelly, indiarubber hot-water bottles in our beds because we can't afford a fire, and going to have porridge for supper because it's cheap. We don't live like ladies—I think there's no use in pretending to be ladies."

"My pet," said Kitty, kissing her again.

“You said you’d love me, didn’t you, Kitty, whatever I did?”

“Bess—really——”

“I’d rather be a good red herring than neither fish, flesh, nor fowl.”

“I wonder what you mean,” said Kitty, trying to obtain a glimpse of the face which was still rolling on her shoulder.

“Now, if we lived in a farm,” murmured Bess, “a nice big comfy farm, like the Hardys’, and one just had one’s work to think of, and to wear clean print frocks and pretty gathered sunbonnets. The dairy’s lovely—I could be quite happy skimming cream and making butter, and if the parlour was done up all blue and white. You are sure you never, never, never could care for Stephen Hardy, Kitty?”

“Bess, I told you before, and I tell you again, I think that idea positively insulting!”

“I am sorry to hear you say that,” returned Bess; “because, you know, Kitty, I’m thinking—seriously thinking—if you are sure you wouldn’t like him for yourself—of setting my own cap at Farmer Hardy.”

CHAPTER VIII

On the following morning Stephen Hardy, on his way to the meet, was slowly jogging down the lane which led from his premises to the high road, when he was hailed by name.

“Good-morning, Mr. Hardy,” said a girl’s voice.

Stephen reined up his horse and looked round. On his right was the paling which skirted his own fields; on the left the high wall which shut in the garden of the Little Farm; no one was apparently in sight, yet the voice most certainly belonged to one of the Miss Leslies.

“You’re going to hunt, I suppose,” it pursued. “Why don’t you wear pink, Mr. Hardy?”

A certain elfishness in the tone and in the trill of laughter which accompanied the query identified the speaker with the younger of the sisters. Stephen turned in his saddle and looked behind him. Old Cox was leaning on his hoe on the path in front of the Little Farm, apparently lost in meditation; but no other human figure was in sight.

“You’ve looked in front, and you’ve looked behind, and you’ve looked all round—why don’t you look up?” inquired Bess.

Stephen did as he was bid. There was a high mound on the farther side of the wall, as he knew, which had at one time been crowned by a sort of shrubbery; a large clump of pampas grass still remained surmounting the little eminence, and in the midst of this Bess stood, possibly a good deal to the detriment of the plant in question. Her small figure was almost lost amid the thick growth of stalk and withered leaf, and her uncovered head peered out from the midst of the waving plumes with fantastic effect. Catching Stephen’s eye she immediately turned this head to its most engaging angle, and waved the tall stems to which she was clinging, so that white feathery flakes detached themselves and filled the air about her.

“What are you doing up there?” asked Stephen, with a smile that was half astonished, half admiring.

“I’m pretending to be a fairy,” responded Bess, shaking the pampas stalk again. “I’ve been pretending for a long time, and it’s quite nice.”

After all she was only a child. Stephen smiled up at her quite paternally. She did, indeed, look rather like a fairy—a pantomime fairy—as she stood poised thus on her insecure pedestal, with the wintry sunshine playing on her brightly tinted head and face, and turning the surrounding plumes into silver and gold.

“When I am up here, do you see,” she resumed, “I feel I’m in a beautiful world. I can forget everything that is sordid and squalid. I think of all the kind and generous things I could do for my friends if I had the power as well as the will.”

Here the blue pinafore fluttered with a little sigh.

“And I think—I think, too, of what I might do for Kitty and for myself.”

Another fluttering sigh—a pensive rolling upwards of the golden eyes.

“We lead rather miserable lives for such young girls, you know, Mr. Hardy.”

“I suppose so,” said Stephen, considering her gravely.

His horse, which remembered it was a hunting morning if he did not, gave an impatient little spring and recalled his mind to the business in hand.

“Well, I must get on, I suppose,” he remarked. “I’m rather late already, and the meet is a good way off.”

“Lucky you,” said Bess. “What a glorious thing it must be to have a good gallop on such a day as this. Kitty and I used to ride once—but that belongs to the past, like every other nice thing.”

Stephen raised his hat rather awkwardly and jogged on down the lane.

He was riding slowly homewards, through the gathering dusk, after a capital day’s sport, when, on passing a turnip-field, belonging to a neighbouring farmer, of which a small portion was being hurdled off for sheep, he was startled by the sound of a woman’s voice crying out in terror or in anger. Raising himself in his stirrups he looked over the hedge, and saw a little group of figures gathered together in a corner of this field; in the midst was a woman struggling with a tall man, whose loud guffaw of laughter was echoed by his companions. The group was standing by an open gate near which was a cart half full of hurdles.

“Now then, now then, what’s all this?” shouted Stephen, as, putting his horse to a trot, he hastened towards the spot.

The party in the field were too much occupied with the jest in hand to pay any attention to him; but in another moment he was in the midst of them, and, springing from his horse, pushed his way towards the still struggling woman.

“Now then,” he cried again, seizing her tormentor by the shoulder, “what’s this?”

It was too dark for him to distinguish the woman’s face, but there was something familiar to him in the outlines of her figure. She freed herself now from the relaxed grasp of the startled ruffian, and, turning away, dashed her hand across her eyes.

“He—he insulted I,” she said with a sob.

“What! Sheba!” exclaimed Stephen; then tightening his grip of the prisoner, he shook him until he cried out for mercy.

The other men crowded round. “Nay, sir, ’twas but a bit of a jest. Sheba Baverstock be so stand-off like, she do fair tempt the bwoys to carry on wi’ nonsense!”

“I’ll not let nobody touch me,” said the woman, or rather the girl, for the voice, broken though it was, sounded clear and young.

“’Twas but a bit o’ horseplay,” urged one of the defenders; “no harm meant. The bwoy was but for snatchin’ a kiss.”

“Ees,” she cried, flashing round upon him, “jist because I’ve got nobody to stand up for me you think you can take liberties—a lot o’ cowards that ye be!”

Stephen’s left hand still grasped the bridle of his horse, and he now turned to the last speaker.

“Lead my horse on to the road,” he said, “and hold him for me. I’ll take this business in hand. I’ll show you, you folks here, that it isn’t safe to insult a woman, however lonely she may be.”

The girl, without a word, caught hold of the bridle and led away the horse. When she had passed through the gate Hardy turned to her aggressor.

“Now then,” he said, “you may either stand up to me like a man, or you may make up your mind to take a proper good thrashing.”

It is to be presumed that the youth was either somewhat dazed by the suddenness of the onslaught, or was not prepared to show fight to so

powerful a magnate as Stephen Hardy. In either case he took his drubbing meekly enough, his companions standing round, sheepish and impressed.

Having released his victim at length and upbraided the group generally in a few scathing words, Stephen rejoined the girl, who was walking up and down the road with her head bent, and her bosom still heaving with sobs.

“Sheba,” he said, coming alongside and taking possession of the bridle, “Sheba, why will you lay yourself open to such treatment? How often must I ask you that?”

“You do know as well as I do,” returned she; “I’ve got to work to keep myself, and father too.”

“Then why not do proper woman’s work? I told you we could find you plenty to do any day in the dairy at our place. You could go home as often as you liked to see your father.”

“Nay, I’ll never do that,” she returned vehemently, “never! You and me was equals once—I’ll not be your servant now, nor your mother’s neither.”

“What were you doing in the field yonder?” asked Stephen after a troubled pause.

“Oh, I did bring up a load of hurdles there; they be fetchin’ back my cart now, look-see.”

One of the men was indeed approaching them with a horse and cart. He delivered the reins to Sheba with an obsequious air, and stood back, staring at her and the farmer.

“That’ll do,” said the latter sharply.

As the man turned away, Sheba climbed into the cart and gathered up the reins, but Stephen barred her progress for yet another moment.

“I wish you’d let me help you,” he said earnestly. “For the sake of old times you might do it, though you are so proud.”

“ ’Tis along o’ wold times that I won’t,” she returned. “Nay, Stephen, I can get along right enough if folks ’ull leave me alone, an’ I reckon they’ll do that now you’ve given that chap a lesson.”

“This old horse of yours,” persisted Stephen, as though he had not heard her, “he’ll scarce keep on his legs much longer. Now if you’ll accept the one I offered ye—a good beast with many a day’s work left in him yet, though his wind’s damaged—you might start a proper tranting business. I’d be glad,

too, to find a home for poor Duke. He's no good to me, and I don't like to destroy him; so the kindness would be as much on your side as mine."

"No," she returned, "I won't take nothin' from ye, Stephen,—nothin'. Not your horse, nor yet your money. I took help of another kind from ye today, and I thank ye for it, but your charity I don't want, and I won't have!"

Stephen stepped back, and, answering to a jerk of the reins, Sheba's horse, which seemed indeed to be very old and feeble, shambled slowly away. When the cart disappeared from sight Stephen mounted his horse and rode homewards. He sighed to himself as he proceeded on his way, and his thoughts for some few moments busied themselves with the recent encounter. Presently, however, they wandered away to another point, and he recalled once more certain words which had been dropped down to him over the high wall that morning.

"We lead rather miserable lives. . . . Lucky you. . . . Kitty and I used to ride once, but that belongs to the past, like all other nice things."

Well, this at least was a state of affairs that could be remedied.

He found on reaching home that his stepmother was not in the parlour, and, being ready for his tea, he made his way to the big kitchen, where he found her in company with his tenants of the Little Farm. Bess, wearing a business-like white apron and a sunbonnet poised with bewitching effect upon her curls, with sleeves rolled up on two plump arms, always white, and now whiter than ever with flour, seemed busily at work. In a corner by the fire sat Kitty, pensively gazing into the glowing coals.

"I've got company, ye see, Stephen," cried Rebecca joyfully.

"Not company," said Bess, raising eyes demurely from the dough she was diligently kneading; "help."

"To be sure, to be sure," laughed Rebecca. "I'm havin' help, Stephen, my dear. Miss Bess, here, she be come to give I a hand wi' the bread, and to-morrow I be a-goin' to learn her to skim cream."

"I'm tired of leading an empty life," explained Bess; "I've made up my mind to be useful."

Stephen stood for a moment flicking at his splashed boot with his hunting-crop; there was a smile upon his face, which, however, presently vanished as he glanced at Kitty. The latter had not spoken, nor, after the first nod of greeting moved.

"You have no taste for such work, I see, Miss Leslie," he said.

The harshness so often noticeable in his tone when he spoke to her was very perceptible now. This dainty lady was evidently too proud even to emulate her sister's playful pretence. Kitty looked up with that mixture of appeal and resentment with which she had once before responded to a similar indictment, but made no reply.

Mrs. Hardy hastened to take up the cudgels on her behalf.

"I d' 'low ye bain't so very well to-day, be you, missy? There, you've scarce spoke a word since ye did come in, though Miss Bess, here, can make her little tongue wag a bit."

"Ah," said Bess, glancing up innocently from beneath her sunbonnet, "that's the worst of me. I'm such a chatterbox—I know I am. You see, when I get with kind people like you I can't help feeling light-hearted again. It's such a contrast to our dreadful silent house down there. Everything's so cheerful in this place, I can't help feeling cheerful too."

"Well, my dear, an' I'm sure 'tis right you should feel cheerful at your age. 'Twould be downright onnat'ral if you wasn't. There, it do do my heart good to hear ye. I could wish to see sister a bit more lively-like too. I'm sorry to hear as you do feel it so lonesome at the Little Farm. It must be a sad change to what you're used to, of course—sure it must be."

Stephen's face softened and he came a step or two forward into the room.

"You were saying this morning that you'd like to ride again," he said to Bess. "That pony of mine which goes with one of the milkcarts would carry you nicely. He's a pretty-shaped, clean-legged little beast if you come to look at him; and the mare I ride about the place would suit Miss Leslie very well, I think, if she was willing to try her."

Kitty half rose from her chair; her cheeks were flaming, her lips parted, but, before the words which she had begun to stammer could convey their meaning, Bess struck in with shrill and decided tones—

"Thank you so much, Mr. Hardy—thank you a thousand times! It will be lovely—too delightful for words! We accept with rapture!"

"Bess," interposed Kitty, raising her voice in turn, "I don't see how we can. We have not ridden since we were children, and our habits——"

"I tell you I will go, Kitty," cried Bess, stamping her foot. "A fig for habits! I'll go if I have to wear Louisa's Sunday gown. We'll certainly go, Mr. Hardy."

“Of course, if Miss Leslie objects——” said Stephen.

“Let her object as much as she likes,” exclaimed Bess rebelliously. “I’m going to ride, Mr. Hardy.”

“If Bess rides I will ride too,” said Kitty. “Where you go I go, Bess,” she added, turning upon her sister with a sternness which she had never hitherto shown before the Hardys.

“Well, well, the more the merrier,” said Rebecca, gazing from one to the other with a mystified air. “I’m sure ye needn’t trouble much about habits, miss; there’ll be no one to see you but the crows. I wouldn’t go out on the road for a bit till ye get more used to ridin’; any old skirt ’ull do then.”

“There’s a saddle here which belonged to my mother,” said Stephen; “I will hunt it up, and I can borrow another.”

“Thank you very much,” said Kitty constrainedly; “it is very good of you to take so much trouble.”

“And you’ll come with us, won’t you, Mr. Hardy?” said Bess. “You’ll come just to see we don’t fall off or anything.”

“It might be safer at first,” responded the farmer. “I’ll try and get everything ready for three o’clock to-morrow—I shan’t be busy then.”

But he was destined to see the sisters before the stated hour. Quite early, before daylight, in fact, he observed the pair crossing the yard towards the milk-house, Bess skipping along in front and Kitty following more slowly.

“What do the young ladies want at this time of the morning?” he inquired, rising from the table where he had just finished breakfast.

“Dear, to be sure,” responded Rebecca, “I’d clean forgotten I’d promised to teach the little one how to make up the butter. I did tell the maids to keep a bit back on purpose for her. I did think ’twould be a pity to drag her out of her bed any earlier.”

“Is Miss Leslie going to learn to make butter, too?” inquired Stephen.

“I fancy not. She do seem to ha’ got summat on her mind, poor dear. There, she do scarce open her lips, but she do follow sister about same as a dog mid do. Well, it mid seem a funny thing to you, Stephen, but for all she be so stand-off by times, I do seem to have more of a likin’ for she nor what I do feel for the little ’un.”

Stephen made no answer, and his stepmother glanced round at him.

“She be too stuck-up for your taste, I d’ ’low.”

“She is nothing to me one way or another,” returned Stephen, and he went out, banging the door behind him.

Mrs. Hardy uttered an ejaculation of surprise, for Stephen seldom showed temper, and the occasion did not seem to her to call for it. But presently, like the philosophical woman she was, she joined the sisters in the dairy without further troubling herself about the matter.

CHAPTER IX

At three o'clock a clattering in the yard of Little Farm announced the arrival of the girls' steeds. Kitty, whose figure had not much altered during the three years which had elapsed since she had last ridden, had managed to don her habit, which, though somewhat worn and of unfashionable cut, nevertheless became her well enough. Bess, however, had grown a little taller and a good deal plumper since the days when, as a lassie of fourteen, she had taken lessons at a riding-school. She could, indeed, wear the skirt, but the coat was an impossibility. She was constrained therefore to content herself with the little blue serge jacket of everyday wear, and was disposed to pout in consequence. Her face cleared, however, as she caught sight of her pony, which had been well groomed and looked quite smart.

"Oh," cried Bess, with a spring of rapture, "how lovely it all is! My pony is a darling—prettier than your gee, Kitty, though that's a noble animal too. Aren't you going to ride, Mr. Hardy?"

"Not for the first time, I think," rejoined Stephen. "All my horses except this are young ones and not quite to be depended on. They might start kicking or jumping and upset the mare here. She's a good plucked one too, though she's not so young as she was."

"But you'll keep quite near, won't you, in case we tumble off?" pleaded Bess. "Are you going to put us up, Mr. Hardy?"

"Yes, I'll put you up. Bring the mare here, John."

The man who was holding the animals obeyed, and Stephen turned to Kitty—

"Now, Miss Leslie."

In another moment Kitty found herself in the saddle, and Stephen, with a business-like air, was arranging her girths. Except for the brief words of invitation, which were, indeed, almost a command, he did not speak to her, and now, though he took infinite pains to secure her comfort, he neither glanced at her nor smiled. Kitty's heart smote her. Despite her ever-increasing anxiety to make Farmer Hardy keep his distance, she was conscious of how ungracious her attitude must appear to him. Truly, he might well ask himself why she should accept favours if she meant to repay them with slights and ingratitude. He could not know, of course, the

haunting dread which forced her to accept his kindness and, on the other hand, constrained her to point out as definitely as she could the impassable barrier between her sister and himself. Nevertheless, a word of thanks was permissible now.

“You are very good to take so much trouble,” she said in a small voice.

Stephen made fast a buckle and strap, and inquired, in reply, if the saddle felt quite comfortable. He did not raise his eyes as he spoke.

“Yes, thank you,” answered she hesitatingly. “I’m afraid we are taking up a great deal of your time, Mr. Hardy.”

“I’m not at all busy this afternoon,” said he.

“Mr. Hardy, Mr. Hardy, Jock won’t stand—is his name Jock? He’s fidgeting so. Do come and put me up! I’m sure Kitty is all right.”

Thus Bess, who having been alternately feeding her pony with sugar and endeavouring to kiss his nose, was now anxious to begin the business of the day.

Stephen went towards her without another look at Kitty, and, after much hopping and shrieking on the part of Bess and a certain amount of fidgeting on the part of the pony, she was finally deposited in her seat. The necessary adjustment of girths ensued, to an accompaniment of wriggling and laughter on Bess’ side, and at last she declared herself quite comfortable, and, gathering up her reins, clattered out of the yard at a small trot. Tamsine, the mare, startled at this uncanonical behaviour, threw up her head with a snort and a flounder and was for darting in pursuit before Kitty was fully prepared.

Stephen was at her side in a moment, restoring tranquillity by a pat or two and a soothing word.

“How well she knows you!” remarked Kitty as they paced sedately in Bess’ wake.

“All the creatures here know my hand,” said Stephen, smiling for the first time. “They know my voice too, don’t you, lady?” he added, addressing the mare.

Then he glanced at Kitty’s hands.

“You’ve forgotten how to hold your reins, haven’t you?” he asked, and smiled again. “Like this, see, and carry the whip, so.”

He illustrated the lesson with the ends of the reins, being careful not to touch Kitty's fingers. She bethought her with a kind of shame that he had detected, and now remembered, her indignation when he gave Bess that practical lesson in milking.

"Hold her in when you first get upon the grass," pursued the farmer, "and let her go up the hill—that will take it out of her a bit. The old lady's wind is not so good as it was, but I daresay you'll relish a canter."

Bess had already passed through the gate of the field in question, and was now pounding along with much play of the elbows and bumping in the saddle. Her hair had already come down and her face was scarlet with excitement.

"Gallop, gallop, Kitty," she gasped. "Oh, isn't it glorious—I wish my foot wouldn't keep slipping in the stirrup, though. Let's gallop, gallop!"

"Bess, take care!" shrieked Kitty, as the pony went hammering off, gathering speed every moment and testifying to his supreme enjoyment by an occasional little kick.

"She's all right," said Stephen. "She won't have far to fall if she does come off. Look after yourself, Miss Leslie, the mare's more ticklish, though she is a kind creature."

Tamsine indeed had shown some excitement at her little companion's antics, and required all her rider's attention. Stephen ran beside her when she started off, keeping his hand on the reins until she settled down into what seemed a comfortable and easy canter.

Though Kitty was unaccustomed to riding, she had a naturally good seat, and as she took the mare gently up the incline, all traces of anxiety left Stephen's face, and he stood looking after her with a satisfied air. He had forgotten all about Bess, when a sudden shriek recalled the fact of her existence, and turning quickly he beheld her lying prone upon the ground, while Jock made off with all speed in the wake of his stable companion.

"Catch him, catch him," cried Bess, sitting up.

She was on her feet before he could reach her, and started in pursuit of her recreant steed, screaming meanwhile with all her strength to Kitty to stop him.

"Hush, Miss Bess! Hush, for goodness' sake," called out Stephen. "You'll frighten the mare!"

The warning came too late! Jock, delighted to find himself at liberty, and excited by Bess' cries, was now rushing madly after Tamsine, the rapid sound of his advance causing Kitty to turn in her seat and the mare to start forward simultaneously. Impelled by some demon of mischief, Jock raced past mare and rider, making straight for the hedge which separated the large field in which they found themselves from a smaller one, where he had at one time been turned out. Stephen set off running, but too late to stop the ensuing catastrophe. The pony scrambled on to the bank and through the hedge with the nimbleness of a cat; Tamsine, excited, irritated at finding herself distanced, and making no more of her incompetent rider than if she did not exist, attempted to fly the obstacle, rose at it, and fell back.

"My God!" murmured Stephen, his heart stopping for a moment, but the next he breathed a deep sigh of thankfulness.

The mare was on her legs again, and Kitty lay a small, dark heap on the ground, motionless indeed, but at least free of the saddle.

Tamsine shook herself and trotted quietly towards the stable. Stephen, however, paid no attention to her, and ran with all speed to the spot where Kitty lay. Her face was deathly white, the eyes closed, the lips slightly parted; the young farmer dropped on his knees beside her, his own face blanched beneath its tan; he felt for her heart—thank God it still beat! He had removed her hat and loosened her collar by the time Bess came up, loudly wailing.

"Oh, she's dead! Kitty's dead and I've killed her!"

"No, she's not dead," said Stephen authoritatively. "Now, Miss Bess, this is no time to lose your head. You'd better unfasten a few more of those buttons and do what you can for your sister while I run for help."

"Oh, don't leave me," cried Bess, clutching at his arm; "perhaps she'll die while you're gone—or perhaps she'll get much worse and I shan't know what to do!"

"I'll stay here, then," returned Stephen impatiently, "and you run down to my place as hard as ever you can. Tell a couple of the men to bring a gate or a hurdle or something here at once, and send someone off for the doctor. Miss Leslie's light, and thank Heaven the mare didn't roll on her. I hope there isn't very much damage done. It's concussion, I think."

Bess, who had been bending over Kitty with chattering teeth, managed with difficulty to loosen the buttons aforesaid with her trembling fingers,

and ran off as directed, staggering a little, and keeping up a sort of sobbing lamentation as she went.

At last the sound of her woe died away and Stephen was left alone with his charge. He took off his coat and laid it under Kitty's head, accidentally loosening her already disordered hair. Kitty made no sign of returning life, and he gazed anxiously into her face. What a young face it was, and how beautiful with its soft curves and tender lines! She might be a child asleep but for that terrible pallor. He held his breath as he watched her, his face, his whole attitude denoting the most intense solicitude. One looking out at him from her post of ambush in a thicket watched too with breathless interest, but it was Stephen whom she watched.

After a pause, Stephen half hesitatingly touched Kitty's wrist again; yes, the pulse certainly beat; through the partially opened bodice of her habit, a little frill of lace had crept, and to his joy he saw it flutter. He moved away a few paces, averting his face, feeling as if it were an obtrusion, almost an act of desecration, to gaze at the girl as she lay there helpless in his charge.

It was very still up there, the early wintry evening was drawing near; already the homing rooks were making for the copse yonder, behind which the sun was dipping. The trees clung together, an indefinable dusky mass at this hour, the stillness of evening already in possession of the boughs and twigs that but a little while ago had been tossing and swaying in a brisk wintry wind. Betwixt the boles came long shafts of ruddy light, but on the lower part of the slope the ground itself was already in shadow.

The grass had taken on that curious intensity of green which in a few moments more would pass into grey; his own goodly ricks and stacks in the hollow seemed to diffuse a kind of reflex radiance, though the sun no longer touched them. There would be a frost to-night; already it was growing cold. Would the folks never come?

He ventured to glance at Kitty again; not so much as a flicker of the eyelids to denote returning animation; once more he laid his finger on the wrist; it seemed to him the pulse beat more feebly.

But a few moments had passed in reality since Bess' departure, but they seemed to him an eternity. Something ought to be done for Kitty—something, he did not know what. Perhaps she would die for the lack of it—die there on the cold ground while he, Stephen, looked on without raising a finger to help her. With sudden resolution he stooped and raised Kitty in his arms.

Why, he could carry her as easily as though she were a child. He should have thought of it before. He would have her home in a few moments now. Her beautiful, helpless head fell back over his arm, and, shifting his light burden a little, he pillowed it upon his shoulder, her long hair streaming over his breast. He stood quite still for one moment, and then pressed forward as rapidly as he could without danger to his charge.

The change of position and possibly the quick motion operated as restoratives; before they had gone half-way down the hill Kitty opened her eyes, and, after a moment or two's blank staring, struggled to speak.

"Mr. Hardy, put me down," she gasped faintly.

Stephen's eyes, which had been gazing full of anxious and tender concern into her own, now assumed the hard look to which she had of late been accustomed.

"I am obliged to carry you home," he said; "the folks delayed so long I couldn't wait for them. You ought to be attended to at once."

"Oh," said Kitty, "I remember now."

She shuddered a little in his arms as she recalled the accident and the horror which had accompanied it, and lay for a moment with closed eyes, feeling very weak and miserable. It would have been almost better to have been killed, she thought, than to have to be carried home by Farmer Hardy.

Stephen's swinging strides were carrying them both over the ground at a prodigious pace, yet to Kitty it seemed as though the transit would never end. She opened her eyes and glanced at him stealthily. How strong he was! Those great arms of his never shook or wavered, and in uncomfortably close proximity to her ear she could feel the measured beatings of his heart. Her eyes wandered to his face. It was still paler than usual, and looked stern, yet—or, perhaps, it was her sick fancy—there were lines of pain about the mouth.

"Mr. Hardy," said Kitty with sudden remorse, "I—I—I am most dreadfully sorry—I—am really not so ungrateful as I seem."

He looked down at her for a second with a softening face, but he did not answer a word.

The watcher in the Lovers' Walk noticed the pause, and her jealous heart leaped up within her; what were they saying to each other, those two? Then she saw Stephen go on again, and, pressing through the prickly branches,

losing for the moment all thought of hiding herself, she came out into the open and gazed after his retreating figure till it vanished through the gate.

CHAPTER X

The doctor, who arrived shortly after Kitty had been put to bed under the joint supervision of Mrs. Hardy and Louisa, declared that the girl had sustained a slight concussion of the brain, and must be kept very quiet. It was subsequently discovered that Kitty was suffering more from the shock to the system than any actual damage caused by the fall. She kept her room for two or three weeks, visited frequently by her father, who gazed at her with an air of puzzled dejection, and evidently considered her plight as unaccountable as pitiable. Louisa clumped up and down to and from the sickroom, full of delighted importance, startling the invalid every now and then by some unwelcome attention or extraordinary suggestion. Kitty, indeed, waved away the black pudding, which choice delicacy Louisa had imported from her own home, and brought up frizzling on the point of a fork, with the announcement that “ ’twas terr’ble nourishin’ ”; she found it more difficult to dispose of the suggestion that Louisa’s mother should come and sit with her, being such a talented person when there was sickness about, and she was moved to weak laughter when the girl observed one day with a portentous face that “Farmer Hardy ’ud only be doin’ right if he’d have thikky mare shot for fear she might go mad.”

“There was a dog shot at our place along o’ that,” she added sagaciously.

“But the mare didn’t bite me,” said Kitty, still laughing.

“Ah, there’s no knowin’, no knowin’ what it mid turn to,” responded Louisa. “She did do you a mischief all for nothin’, an’ if you’ll excuse me, miss, you don’t seem quite in your wits since. It’s always best to be on the safe side,” pursued Louisa sagely. “There, Mrs. Sibley, what do live next door to we, she did have a cat killed, what come an’ scratched her little boy for nothin’. When a beast do go to hurt ye for nothin’ ’tis best to have en destroyed.”

The most unwelcome of all Kitty’s visitors was Mrs. Turnworth, who, with most charitable intent, caused the hapless patient a great deal of weariness and discomfort. Not a day passed that she did not uplift her voice in perpetually renewed astonishment as to the extraordinary manner in which the accident had come about. Riding a horse of Farmer Hardy’s? How was such a thing possible? What had her father been thinking of? How could the girls themselves have so far forgotten their position! And, was it true—could the inconceivably silly tale which had reached Mrs. Turnworth’s ears

have any semblance of foundation—that Farmer Hardy had himself carried Kitty home? At this point Kitty would invariably begin to writhe upon her pillows, and if Bess was in the room she would wildly endeavour to change the conversation.

One morning Mrs. Turnworth was surprised to encounter Mr. Leslie himself in the hall.

“Good-morning, John. One does not often see you about.”

“I thought I’d keep about this morning,” rejoined Mr. Leslie, who was clasping his hands tightly behind him.

“I’m just on my way upstairs to see Kitty. How long this wretched business lasts, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” rejoined he; “there’s nothing for it but rest and quiet.”

As he remained firmly planted in front of her, barring the approach to the narrow stairs, Mrs. Turnworth gave him a little tap on the arm.

“Let me pass, will you? I can’t walk through you, you know.”

“No,” said Mr. Leslie, “you can’t walk through me. That’s why I’m here. The child didn’t sleep after your last visit, therefore I think you’d better discontinue them for the present.”

“Really!” ejaculated Mrs. Turnworth, with a sneering laugh. “It’s quite new to find you enacting the part of the fond parent, John.”

Mr. Leslie unclasped his hands, brought them round within range of vision, examined his nails critically and tucked them safely away again.

“I’ll let you know when she comes downstairs,” he remarked. “That’s all that need be said, I think.”

“Well, I suppose I may carry my jelly and the other little comforts back again,” cried Mrs. Turnworth indignantly. “If she won’t see me, I presume she won’t care to accept favours from me!”

“Very likely not,” returned her cousin. “I was not aware you had been bringing—little comforts.”

“The girl would have fared badly if I hadn’t,” retorted she. “You never see beyond the end of your nose, John Leslie. If you did you’d find out for yourself that little comforts are rarities here!”

Having implanted this stab she caught up her basket and went out of the house.

Mr. Leslie remained at his post until he heard the gate swing to behind her, and then went meditatively upstairs to his daughter's room.

Kitty was sitting up in a dressing-gown, beside a very small fire. Her face looked pinched and pale. As she occupied the only available arm-chair, Bess, sitting opposite to her, was constrained to content herself with an ordinary cane-seated, straight-backed one. The latter's expression was dolorous in the extreme. Her hair was untidy, and her little nose red with cold. The room looked miserable enough with its carpetless boards and uncurtained windows.

Mr. Leslie gazed from one daughter to the other, and then began to walk up and down without speaking, as was his custom when puzzled or annoyed. Kitty glanced towards him, smiling faintly.

"You carried the day, Father, after all. Cousin Marian is gone, isn't she?"

"She's gone," returned he, pausing and gazing at her with a perplexed air. "She took her jelly with her. Is it not possible," he went on with dignified displeasure, "for anyone to make jelly in this house? I should have thought jelly was a simple thing to make."

"Let's ask Louisa!" cried Bess, springing up and laughing. "Perhaps she knows how to make jelly, or perhaps Cox would act as chef. He could meditate as long as he liked while it was clearing."

"Well, then," said Mr. Leslie, quite seriously, as he moved towards the door, "you had better see to it, Bess, that your sister has such little comforts as are necessary for her. There's no reason why comfort should be a rarity in this house—none whatever. Kitty is, of course, unable to look after things at present, but you, Bess, are quite—able-bodied. I beg that you will hold the reins of government with a firmer hand, my dear."

Bess looked after him with a comical air, and, when the door was closed, burst into irreverent laughter.

"I'll hold the reins of government as tight as he likes," she cried; "but I doubt if my odd team will get on any faster. The colt—isn't Louisa just like a colt?—will run amok as usual, and poor old decrepit Cox will hobble on in his own way. Shall we ask him if he knows how to make jelly, Kitty?"

"Don't be silly, darling. I wish Cousin Marian wouldn't come here to worry father."

"Oh, he doesn't worry much," returned Bess, growing gloomy again. "He doesn't worry anything like I do." (When Bess' feelings were moved,

her grammar was apt to become more erratic than usual.) “You don’t seem to mind when I worry, Kitty. You don’t seem to think anything of the s-s-sacrifices I’m making for you!”

“My darling, I didn’t know you had been making sacrifices for me. Is that what has upset you?”

“Farmer Hardy,” said Bess, gulping down a sob, “Farmer Hardy met me just now, and he said—he said—I didn’t seem in my usual spirits—how can I be, with you ill, and Christmas so near, and everything so hateful?”

This was said with an air of fresh injury, but Kitty uttered no sympathetic response, continuing, however, to gaze at her sister with an air of great anxiety.

“So I said I wasn’t feeling very cheerful,” continued Bess; “and he asked if I should like another ride on the pony, and said he would stay quite close to me all the time, and would take care I didn’t fall off.”

“Well?” asked Kitty breathlessly.

“Well, I refused,” said Bess with a groan of anguish. “I told him I thought you wouldn’t like it, and I refused.”

Kitty began to roll her head about on the cushion of her chair; her cheeks were flushed, and she looked vexed.

“I think I’ll go back to bed,” she said after a pause; “my head aches.”

“Well, I must say you are rather ungrateful,” remarked Bess with a virtuous air. “Poor father took all the trouble to quarrel with Cousin Marian on your account, and I gave up a great treat entirely to oblige you, and you are not a bit pleased. But get back to bed if you want to. I am sure it’s not so very gay sitting here.”

Thereupon Bess marched out of the room in a state of tearful indignation; all the miseries of her actual plight presenting themselves to her lively imagination in the darkest colours, while the unknown future loomed ahead—gloomy, unbearable.

Mrs. Hardy came upon her presently, sobbing behind a haystack, and in response to her kind and somewhat alarmed queries, Bess poured forth her tale of woe.

“And there’s Christmas coming,” she cried; “we always used to be so jolly and merry at Christmas—we had heaps of friends at Oxford. But now father and Kitty and I will have to sit down in our poky little parlour and eat

a skinny turkey—I don't suppose we can afford a good one—all by ourselves. And Louisa is sure to make a mess of the pudding," she added.

"Dear heart alive!" ejaculated Rebecca, full of commiseration.

"I knew you'd feel for us, Mrs. Hardy," said Bess, suddenly exchanging her shrill voice of lamentation for a flutelike and caressing tone. "You and Mr. Hardy are always so jolly together, and you have that nice, big, bright room to sit in, and you'll be so cosy and comfortable, with lots of friends and relations round you, perhaps, and keeping Christmas in the hearty, old-fashioned way—no show—no hollow shams——"

Bess stopped at length, breathless with her own eloquence. Rebecca, who had been smiling and nodding and staring throughout this speech, in a highly flattered but somewhat mystified condition, continued to gaze at the girl during the ensuing pause with a reflective air.

"Of course there's your papa to be thought on," she said, after a moment. "It wouldn't do to forget he."

"Oh dear, no," said Bess, "I don't forget him—but it will be just as miserable for him as it is for us."

"Ah, sure, it will!" agreed Rebecca, still reflectively. "But a gentleman same as he 'ud be like to be very particular, wouldn't he?"

"Poor dear father! it's not much use his being particular now," rejoined Bess with a sigh. "He has to put up with what he can get!"

"And that's true," agreed Mrs. Hardy with a relieved expression. "Well, there, don't you fret no more, Miss Bess, my dear, do 'ee run indoor out o' the rain. You'll get a bad cold, certain sure, and that won't mend matters."

"She might have been a bit more sympathetic," groaned Bess to herself, as she turned reluctantly towards the house.

On the following morning Rebecca came down from the Hill with a countenance wreathed in smiles, and nevertheless a certain diffidence in speech and manner. She carried a great bunch of Christmas roses which, after some hesitation, she presented to Bess, cutting short the girl's effusive thanks by confessing that it was not she who thought of them, but Stephen.

"There, as I was comin' down along, I did meet en wi' this 'ere gert posy, an' he says, 'You'd best take it to the Little Farm since you be a-goin' there.' (He knowed I wer' a-comin' here, d'ye see, for him an' me had talked together about it last night.) 'Well,' I says, 'they be beauties'—not meanin' to praise 'em, but just to pass the remark. 'Which o' the young

ladies must I give 'em to?" I says. 'Oh, to both,' says he, an' he goes away a step or two and then he comes back an' he says, 'No, give 'em to Miss Bess,' says he. So I reckon you're the favourite," added Rebecca waggishly.

Bess clapped her hands. "How nice of him! Do tell him I think it's awfully nice of him, Mrs. Hardy! Kitty, aren't they lovely?—such innocent, pure-looking things! We shall have a bit of Christmas, after all, you see!"

"And there's another thing," resumed Rebecca, beaming with good-nature, yet speaking with that odd shyness before mentioned. "I was a-talkin' to Stephen last night and a-tellin' him how lonesome you do find yourselves, and what a dull Christmas you do seem to expect, and we thought—both on us—at least I thought and he agreed—that if you didn't think it too great a liberty—if ye could put up wi' our plain old-fayshioned ways, and was willin' for to jine us up yonder—why, ye'd be heartily welcome—heartily welcome."

Kitty, who had been silent hitherto, stretched out her hand and pulled the good woman's face down to hers, while Bess expressed her jubilation in her usual way by dancing around the room.

"If you'll not think it too great a liberty, my dear," reiterated Rebecca, after warmly kissing Kitty.

"I think there never was anyone so kind and good as you," murmured Kitty; "that's what I think!"

"Except Mr. Hardy," interpolated Bess. "It's awfully good of him, too, for I'm afraid he'll find us rather in the way."

"But what about father?" said Kitty in a low voice. "It's not that he wouldn't be just as grateful as we are," she explained hastily, as Rebecca was about to speak; "it's only that he's so shy—and so fond of shutting himself up."

"You leave father to me," cried Bess. "I can't ask him now because he's busy, but I'll choose the right moment, and let you know this afternoon. I know he'll say yes."

"Thank you, missy," said Rebecca gratefully. "Well, I'll be trottin' home along, for these be busy times wi' me. There's one thing, though," she added, turning on her way to the door, "one thing I ought to mention. My brother what do live over Sturminster way—he and his family do always dine wi' us on Christmas day. I hope you won't take it as a insult if they do come this year too."

Both sisters cried out at the idea.

“I did think for a minute,” continued Mrs. Hardy, “of puttin’ ’em off till Twelfth Day maybe, but Stephen he wouldn’t hear on’t. ‘Nay, Rebecca,’ says he, ‘we can’t disappoint your own folks, no matter what mid happen. If Mr. Leslie and the young ladies do come they’ll take us as they do find us.’”

“Quite right,” said Kitty.

“I should think so, indeed!” exclaimed Bess.

Rebecca, however, looked dubious.

“I d’ ’low my brother an’ his folks ’ull surprise ye a bit, though,” she said. “I bain’t Stephen’s equals myself, an’ I wasn’t his father’s equals. I was but housekeeper to old Hardy, ye know, missy——” addressing Kitty. “He wasn’t what you mid call up to Stephen—Stephen has had a right down good eddicashion, same as a lard mid have. There he did go to Branston Grammar School, year arter year he did—top o’ the school he were. Wold Mr. Hardy, my husband, didn’t have no eddicashion at all, so to speak, an’ I didn’t count myself his equals.”

Here Rebecca, who had rambled somewhat far from the point in her anxiety to be explicit, paused to smile half nervously, half expectantly, upon the sisters.

“Now, my brother,” she resumed, “he be quite a common man, he be so common as you could meet anywheres; an’ his missus, she’s a fine, tidy, sturdy piece, an’ needs to be, wi’ the long family they’ve got, but she bain’t no lady. You wouldn’t think it for a minute if you was to look at her,” said Mrs. Hardy earnestly.

“Please don’t talk like that,” cried Kitty; “you make me quite ashamed.”

“And you know,” exclaimed Bess, “these things are only on the outside. I’m sure your sister-in-law’s a lady at heart.”

“No, miss,” rejoined Rebecca firmly, “she bain’t a lady nowheres. Don’t you think it. Well, she be a-comin’ wi’ the children—five or six on ’em. They are nice well-behaved little children, I will say,” she added grudgingly.

Bess clapped her hands again.

“It will be a real, real Christmas,” she cried ecstatically. “One can’t have a real Christmas without children. Oh, Mrs. Hardy, I think it will be delightful—I like the idea of the children best of all.”

“And I like the kind thought best,” said Kitty, smiling gratefully in Mrs. Hardy’s face.

Bess succeeded in persuading her father to accept the invitation with greater ease than she had anticipated. Mr. Leslie was really fond of his children whenever he had time to think about them, and of late Kitty’s languid condition and Bess’ lowness of spirits had, in a manner, forced themselves upon his notice.

He was vaguely distressed at the existing state of affairs, but found himself unable to cope with it. It was certainly absolutely necessary that he should have unlimited facilities for writing; as money—one of the paltry necessities of existence—chanced to be scarce, the family must perforce dwell in a cheap and retired neighbourhood, but it was not at all desirable that his girls should mope or make themselves unhappy. He had imagined that friends would come flocking round them in their new surroundings, in the same numbers as those to which they had hitherto been accustomed. But, really, Dorset folk were dull folk. Nobody had called at the Little Farm, and here was Bess informing him with tears, positively with tears, that the only house that was open to them at this festive season of Christmas was Hardy’s-on-the-Hill.

True, the good people up yonder had ever shown themselves most civil and obliging, they were unobtrusive, moreover, and had evidently made clear to Bess that the accepting of the invitation by their tenants would be regarded by them as a very great favour. Mr. Leslie, wavering between dread of leaving his shell and his wish to gratify his little girls in this, the only way which seemed open to him, was finally entirely won over by a happy suggestion of his younger daughter.

“It will be a real, real old-fashioned Christmas,” she pleaded; “quite Washington Irving and Dickens-y. Mrs. Hardy said they always kept it in the real, plain, old-fashioned way—hearty and all that. Do say yes, Father. Just think if we were asked to dine by Mr. Wardle!”

This last phrase turned the scale.

Mr. Leslie, who had been smiling somewhat hesitatingly, now allowed his face to clear altogether; he was an enthusiastic admirer of Dickens, and it was his custom to read *Pickwick* from cover to cover once at least every year. Withdrawing his hand from his pocket he patted Bess benignly on the shoulder.

“That’s an argument that cannot be resisted,” he said. “Tell the old lady—I mean Mrs. Hardy—that we accept her invitation with pleasure.”

Bess flew off to impart the tidings to Kitty.

“We shall have father kissing Rebecca under the mistletoe,” she remarked with a delighted giggle.

There did indeed seem to be some slight foundation for the idea, for during the ensuing days Mr. Leslie was more than once discovered poring over a volume which was neither philosophical nor scientific, and the plates of which bore the familiar signature “Phiz.”

So much indeed was he under the influence of what Bess called the “Dickens-y spirit” appropriate to the season, that when Mrs. Turnworth presently wrote, overlooking her past injuries and metaphorically extending the hand of good-fellowship by inviting them to dine at seven-thirty on Christmas day, Mr. Leslie insisted on accepting.

“Your Cousin Marian is a lonely woman,” he said. “We are three. Shall we allow her to eat her Christmas meal in solitude when we, her own kindred—I mean—er—er—connections,” said Mr. Leslie, correcting himself, for the relationship with Mrs. Turnworth was ever a sore point with him, “have it in our power to add some measure of—of—conviviality to that occasion? No, no, write at once,” he cried benevolently, “and say yes, my dear Kitty. And wish her the compliments of the season from me.”

“It’s certainly Mr. Pickwick,” laughed Bess. “I shall be looking out for shorts and gaiters. Poor dear, just think how dreadful those long skinny legs of his will look!”

CHAPTER XI

Though Mr. Leslie did not consider it necessary to adopt Mr. Pickwick's garb on that memorable Christmas day, nevertheless, when he sallied up the hill with a daughter on each side of him, his face wore an expression of earnest benignity, which might not have ill-become the philosopher in question. He was determined to enjoy the festivity in a fitting spirit, and to extract the fullest possible flavour of old-world good-fellowship from it.

Kitty, who was watching him somewhat anxiously, saw his face light up when Mrs. Hardy received them at the parlour door. She was a little younger than Mrs. Wardle, to be sure, but the ruddy good-nature of her face, the solidity of her form, arrayed for the occasion in her best silk dress, the warmth of her greeting, which was, nevertheless, not without a touch of dignity, were everything that could be desired. Mr. Leslie positively beamed, and, moreover, shook hands without any preliminary hesitation. Turning to Stephen he repeated the performance with no less heartiness, and, looking past him into the room which appeared to be crowded with children of all sizes, gave vent to the dry chuckle which was his nearest approach to a laugh.

"Come in, do, Mr. Leslie, and sit down. Dinner's ready, and we was but waiting till ye come. This 'ere's my brother, Timothy Gallop. He do always sit on my right hand, look-see, and we don't like to make no changes this year—so hopin' to give no offence—if you'll be so kind as to take thikky chair, on my left, sir——"

Mr. Leslie chuckled again. This was the real genuine thing and no mistake; blood was thicker than water, evidently.

Mr. Gallop, a middle-sized, thick-set man in a check suit, grinned affably and extended a large hand, ducking his head in Mr. Leslie's direction the while. He did not consider it necessary to get up, and Mr. Leslie, immediately accepting the situation, stretched his own precious hand across the table, and permitted it to be engulfed in a grip which was somewhat painfully affectionate. He examined his member a little nervously as he withdrew it, but finding it still whole and apparently undamaged, smiled again.

"These are my girls," he said, designating Kitty and Bess, who stood a little timidly behind him.

Stephen had followed them into the room, but did not take any active part in the introduction.

“To be sure, to be sure, I was forgettin’ my manners,” said Mrs. Hardy, who had been whispering certain energetic instructions in the ear of Jessie, the maid. “These is the young ladies, Tim. And—Jane, my dear, come for’ard a bit—this ’ere’s my sister-in-law, Mrs. Gallop, sir. This is my sister-in-law what I was tellin’ you about, Miss Leslie.”

Mrs. Gallop rose and came round the table, laughing a good deal and rolling her shoulders; she restrained with difficulty an inclination to curtsy, when Mr. Leslie, who was evidently determined to do nothing by halves, abandoned his hand to her honest grasp. Mrs. Gallop had a large, round pink and white face, shining with good-humour, a figure quite as stout as Rebecca’s own, and a cheerful manner. She wore a brown stuff dress, trimmed with fringe and black braid, and had a bow of rose-coloured ribbon at her neck. All six children were there, from Willie, who pulled his forelock just like a gentleman, as his mother sometimes said, to little Rosie, who sat and sucked her spoon in delighted expectancy of the joyful time coming. They were all fresh-coloured and clean-skinned like their mother, and most of them seemed to have inherited the wide-awake expression which was one of their father’s most noticeable attributes.

Mrs. Gallop, having duly greeted the two girls, returned to the table.

“Where shall I sit?” she asked, smiling pleasantly, albeit a trifle dubiously at Stephen, and accompanying the question by a scarcely perceptible wink and jerk of her thumb.

“In your old place, Jane, of course,” returned Stephen, disregarding the hint. “We are not going to change old customs on Christmas day. The ladies will excuse us for keeping to them. Perhaps,” he added after a pause, “one of you ladies will take this seat,” drawing forward a chair on his left hand, “and the other will sit next Mr. Gallop.”

He was so busy pulling out the chair that he did not raise his eyes, and a momentary pause ensued. Then Bess made a half-step forward, and Stephen looked up.

“Will *you* sit here, Miss Bess?” said he.

Kitty went quickly round the table and took her place next Mr. Gallop, who hitched away his chair to give her a little more room, and smiled benignly on her. The children were already installed at the table, at one end

of which Jessie had deposited a monstrous turkey, while the other groaned beneath the weight of a sirloin of beef.

“Oughtn’t I to carve?” inquired Mr. Leslie, blinking with his short-sighted eyes at the turkey. Surely Mr. Pickwick carved for old Mrs. Wardle.

“If you please, sir,” rejoined Rebecca, highly flattered, but a little anxious too.

Mr. Leslie took up the carving-knife and began hacking at the huge fowl as if he were operating upon a round of beef.

“Hold hard, sir,” called out Timothy Gallop, with a dismayed expression; “no offence,—no offence, indeed, but you be a-cuttin’ of it agin the grain!”

Mr. Leslie surveyed his handiwork, and then looked helplessly at Rebecca.

“I do really think, Mr. Leslie,” cried she in a fluttered tone, “though I’m sure ’twould be a honour—still I do really think I’d a’most better do it myself, bein’ more used to it, ye know, and knowin’ where the stuffin’ lays.”

Mr. Leslie willingly surrendered the knife and fork, and leaned back in his chair; Rebecca drew the dish towards her again, and Mr. Gallop, to cover a slight awkwardness in the situation, inquired his fellow-guest’s opinion of the political outlook.

The gentleman in question was more acquainted with the politics of ancient Egypt than with those of his native country at the present time. He blinked at Timothy again, after a fashion he had when nervous, and replied that he had no very strong views.

Mr. Gallop eyed him with a kind of compassionate contempt.

“It’s a pity that, sir; a great pity, I’m sure. Now if it bain’t insultin’ of ye to say so, I’d ha’ thought it a duty for a gentleman sich as you be to take a interest in the affairs of your country.”

“Well,” said Mr. Leslie, sitting up at this, not only metaphorically, but actually, “the fact is one hasn’t very much time for that sort of thing. Of course, the weight of one’s opinion—whatever that may be worth—is cast on the right side, and one votes the right way——”

“And which way mid that be, sir?” inquired Mr. Gallop, with his head on one side and a cunning smile upon his lips.

“There, don’t ye be a-troublin’ your head about politics, Tim,” interpolated Rebecca, scarlet in the face, partly as the result of her exertions,

and partly from a certain dread of the impending argument. "Lard bless us, who wants politics on Christmas day? What do ye think o' the turkey? 'Twas me as had the crammin' of en. Don't ye think he do do I credit?"

"'Tis a beauty," agreed Mr. Gallop admiringly, but unrelentingly. "As far as politics goes I bain't o' your opinion, though. The better the day the better the deed, say I. Here we be, a-sittin' down to our good cheer in a country where there's millions an' millions o' starvin' folk, and like to be more too if Joe gets his way."

"Who's Joe?" inquired Mr. Leslie, looking up from his plate innocently.

"Lard ha' mercy me!" exclaimed Mr. Gallop, sticking his knife and fork on end, and gazing at his opposite neighbour with an air of utter amazement. "Who's Joe, d'ye say?"

"Mr. Gallop means Mr. Chamberlain, Father," prompted Kitty.

"Oh," said Mr. Leslie, "yes, to be sure, Joseph Chamberlain—J. B. Chamberlain, yes. For the moment I did not connect——"

"Well, as I say," interrupted Mr. Gallop, rapping on the table with his knife, too eager to voice his opinion to be strictly polite, "as I say, sir, there's like to be many millions more starvin' folk in this 'ere country if Joe Chamberlain gets his way."

"Ah," said Mr. Leslie, with an interested air, "you are alluding to his fiscal policy. Yes. It's a very deep subject—deep and complicated. I have not been able to find leisure to—er—go into it as thoroughly as I could wish."

"Haven't ye now?" returned Timothy, still pitying and slightly contemptuous. "Well, now, I have. I mid say there's not a man in England what has studied it more thoroughly."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Leslie with increased respect.

"Ees, I have, indeed," asseverated Timothy vehemently; "and I am sorry to say, sir, if you are a follower of Mr. Chamberlain's, that I'm afeared you bain't a-takin' the right road. I'm sorry to say I can't approve o' this 'ere fiscal policy, and I don't think the nation 'ull approve."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Mr. Leslie with entire seriousness.

"I be sorry too, an' I'll tell ye why. Because if a nation's to be great it must be prosperous, an' prosperity depends on the greatest good of the greatest number."

Mr. Gallop was quoting from his favourite weekly organ, but Mr. Leslie was not aware of this, and listened to the speaker's eloquence with astonishment mixed with admiration. These were the opinions—not of an apocryphal “man in the street,” who might indeed be drawn from any class, but of an intelligent English countryman, one of the community which has been frequently described as the mainstay of the nation. His views were, indeed, likely to be instructive.

“Now ye’ll not deny, sir,” said Mr. Gallop, pausing with a large piece of potato on the point of his knife, to eye the other severely, “ye’ll not deny that there be more workin’ folks like me nor rich folks same as you in this ’ere country. Therefore, if there has to be taxation—and no doubt,” said Timothy handsomely, “there must be taxation, else the country couldn’t keep a-goin’—why not tax the things as is only bought and paid for by them as can afford it? I see naught agin taxin’ your coach, or taxin’ your motor car——”

Mr. Leslie nodded gravely: he was quite willing that his coach and his motor car should be taxed.

“But to go for to raise the price of tea,” continued Mr. Gallop, with starting eyes, “why, everybody do drink tea. ’Tis there where the injustice do come in. Mr. Chamberlain says, I know, as them as don’t want to pay the tax can drink cocoa—but there! us don’t want to drink cocoa, an’ that’s where ’tis,” said Mr. Gallop decisively.

Mr. Leslie continued to eye him gravely, without, however, committing himself, and Timothy fell to ladling in bread sauce and stuffing at an amazing rate to make up for lost time.

During his enforced silence Stephen took up the argument. There was a twinkle in his eye, and he said but a few words; but these tended in some manner to restore Mr. Leslie's mental equilibrium. Stephen was a Unionist, and, moreover, a farmer; Mr. Chamberlain's policy had his approval. He was not perhaps so eloquent as Mr. Gallop, who presently took up the argument again, quoting at length from his oracle, and altogether surpassing himself in a flood of oratory. Mr. Leslie listened with profound attention, first to one and then to the other.

When the pudding was brought in, gay with blue flames, and a somewhat lopsided decoration of holly, Rebecca authoritatively thumped the table with her spoon.

“Here be the puddin’,” she cried. “Let’s ha’ done wi’ sich serious talk! This ’ere’s the children’s treat, an’ I d’ ’low they can’t get a word in, wi’ all

this talk about trade an' taxin'. Let's be thankful for what the Lard sends us, say I, an' that we be all here together this merry Christmas day—an' Rosie there shall have the first bit o' puddin'."

This statement was applauded by all present, and was supplemented by a shrill cheer from the little folks as platefuls of the luscious dainty, each crowned by its blue flame, were handed down the table. One of the chief glories of plum-pudding to the juvenile mind lies in the possibility of prolonging the life in the aforesaid blue flame by stirring the burning spirit which produces it. Even little Rosie uttered shrieks of joy as she ground her spoon round and round her plate; and was disposed to weep when, in spite of her vigilance, the flame went out at last. Then Stephen, with a good-natured smile, invited her to pass up her plate that he might bestow on her a supplementary portion of blue flame; and as the little maid clung tightly to the plate in question, the difficulty was solved by her mother handing her bodily up to their big kind host. There sat Rosie, proudly enthroned on Stephen's knee, her blue eyes shining, her little button of a mouth tightly compressed; tossing back her yellow curls every now and then when they came between her and the entrancing vision. Stephen, clasping one of the chubby hands, directed the movement of the spoon. Bess, leaning across from the other side, called attention to a small quantity of the spirit which had run behind the pudding and had failed to become ignited. For a moment the three faces were close together, and the vision of them, laughing, tender, delighted, photographed itself on Kitty's brain.

The blue fire went out at last, and the pudding was eaten, and then mincepies were attacked, and then a very large and very heavy cake, white and pink with sugar without, and black with plums within. And then came oranges and dried fruit and crackers. It was pleasant to see Mr. Leslie nervously holding on to two of these last-mentioned, and with difficulty repressing a start when they were pulled simultaneously by Rebecca and Kitty. Then Mr. Gallop, who was, it seemed, an adept at the art, prepared a bowl of punch, of which they all presently partook, including Mr. Leslie, who habitually touched nothing but claret, Kitty and Bess, who were water-drinkers, even the children. It was very sweet and very hot, not a particularly delectable beverage, some of the guests thought, and no doubt a most undesirable one for children; nevertheless, as Mr. Leslie reflected, valiantly endeavouring to swallow his own portion of the brew without grimacing, it was the proper thing, and quite in keeping with the festivity. As it presumably had not injured any of their forefathers, why should it injure them?

The repast being at length concluded, the party advanced to the half-empty parlour, where the huge Yule log was burning, and fell to playing old-fashioned games with great zest and vigour. Rebecca cried off "Blind-man's-buff" and "Puss-in-the-corner," suggested by Willie Gallop, but consented to play "Hunt-the-slipper"; and Mr. Leslie formed a picturesque and delightful spectacle as he sat cross-legged on the ground between her and Mrs. Gallop, a somewhat strained expression on his countenance, it is true, but as eager as anyone to enter into the spirit of the game.

Had it not been for the considerate attitude adopted by the rest of the company towards him, he would have been hunting all the time, for, despite his zeal, he was somewhat dilatory in his movements and the slipper was plainly perceptible on each occasion that he passed it beneath his long, thin legs.

Having thoroughly exhausted themselves with "Turn-the-trencher" and "Christmas day in the morning," the elders voted for "Forfeits," and then for old stories. Lastly, when the early dusk began to fall, and it was time to think of proceeding homewards, Rebecca proposed a carol, and Kitty, who possessed as pretty a voice for singing as she had for speaking, led off with "See amid the winter's snow."

The children joined in, and Rebecca and Mrs. Gallop sang softly under their breaths, and Stephen's rich bass presently strengthened the chorus. Mr. Gallop, too, did his best, not a very musical one, but luckily his voice was drowned by the others. Mr. Leslie did not sing, but he suffered his eyes to wander round the little party now gathered about the hearth, and his face wore a softened and tender look such as Kitty had rarely seen there.

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Leslie was in a very different mood on returning a few hours later from Mrs. Turnworth's Christmas party. He was chilly in his evening clothes, the Hardys' punch combined with the vintage supplied at Mrs. Turnworth's more fashionable board had given him a headache, and he was feeling altogether dyspeptic and exhausted. His physical sensations were, however, almost forgotten in his mental discomfort. The dinner of which he had recently partaken was pretentious and more or less uneatable; the half-dozen neighbours convened by their hostess had been all uninteresting, while some of their number had grated upon him by their vulgarity. The conversation had consisted entirely of trivial and occasionally ill-natured tittle-tattle. The merrymaking, if such it could be called, had been unseasoned with the Christmas spirit. The shade of Mr. Pickwick had been absent from the assemblage. The crowning shock of the evening had been the appearance of a tipsy cook in the drawing-room, who had proceeded to give her mistress a piece of her mind before the assembled guests.

As the Leslies drove homewards in the musty-smelling fly, Bess suddenly burst out laughing.

"For once in her life," she cried, "our dear Cousin Marian has been thoroughly routed. You were frightened, Kitty, weren't you? But I wasn't. That woman wasn't so very tipsy, was she?"

"The condition of the unfortunate cook was the least offensive part of our evening's entertainment," said Mr. Leslie with a shudder. "Think of the conversation at dinner—the whole tone of it—the almost inconceivable pettiness of mind revealed by it."

He paused, continuing after a moment or two: "And the terrible thing is that I suppose all these people are really very worthy in their own way." He broke off to reflect, adding emphatically, "All I can say is that they compare very badly with our neighbours, the Hardys. There was no vulgarity there, no paltry ostentation. The homely, kindly, cheerful atmosphere was as great a contrast to that from which we have just emerged, as that fine fellow Stephen Hardy to the wretched creature Chilby, or his warm-hearted mother to Mrs. Turnworth herself."

When Mr. Leslie alluded to Stephen, Bess, leaning forward, pinched Kitty under cover of the darkness; now she turned to her father innocently—

“Farmer Hardy is one of Nature’s gentlemen, isn’t he?” she asked.

“My dear,” returned he, “I begin to think the word has no meaning. These people from whom we have just parted no doubt call themselves gentlemen and gentlewomen—Mr. and Mrs. Hardy would never dream of claiming to be ranked with them; yet, to my mind, the latter are incomparably superior. One has but to compare the conversation of either house to realise this fact. On the one hand, gossip, tittle-tattle, ill-natured censure. On the other, such discourse as it was profitable to listen to. Not only is Mr. Hardy himself a sensible, well-informed man, but that friend of his—Mr. Gollop—Gollop, was it?”

“Gallop, I think,” corrected Kitty.

“Gallop, then. Mr. Gallop, I say, displayed a grasp of his subject, a natural acuteness of intellect which positively amazed me. Under other conditions that man might have been a statesman.”

He leaned back in the corner and closed his eyes.

“Let us endeavour to efface the unpleasing memories of this evening by recalling our really delightful entertainment on the Hill,” he said.

Silence ensued, broken presently by an interjection from Mr. Leslie.

“We didn’t have a wassail-bowl!” he said.

“What do you mean, Father?” cried the girls simultaneously.

“At the farm to-day,” he explained, “we did honour to almost every ancient Christmas custom——”

“Not the mistletoe,” interpolated Bess plaintively.

“Well, the mistletoe was there. Under the circumstances it is perhaps just as well that the custom of—ah—honouring it has become obsolete. We had punch, of course, and old games and ghost stories and carols—but we didn’t have a wassail-bowl. Do you know, I have a great mind to invite the Hardys to come and wassail with us now? It will finish the evening in a becoming way, and will, I hope, entirely remove the unpleasant flavour of more recent events. We’ll stop at the Hardys’ gate, and you, Bess, might run up and ask them.”

“Isn’t it too late?” asked Kitty.

Mr. Leslie struck a match and looked at his watch.

“It’s not yet ten o’clock,” he said. “We came away directly after dinner, you know.”

“I think it will be great fun,” cried Bess. “Wassail—what’s wassail made of?”

“A variety of things,” returned Mr. Leslie. “I should have liked to have had time to look up an old recipe, but, never mind, we’ll do the best we can. The spirit, at least, will not be wanting.”

The fly was duly stopped outside the Hardys’ gate, and Bess, jumping out, well-pleased, ran quickly up the hill and knocked at the farmhouse door. Stephen himself opened it.

“You, Miss Bess!” he exclaimed, starting back as the light fell on the small figure in its white-furred cloak.

“Yes, it’s me,” said Bess. “Is Mrs. Hardy in bed? My father wants you both to come down and have a cup of wassail with him.”

“A cup of what?” ejaculated Stephen. “I’m afraid Rebecca is sound asleep by this time; she went upstairs nearly an hour ago.”

“Oh, what a pity! But couldn’t you come, Mr. Hardy? It’s an old English custom, and my father says it is the only one that was wanting to-day. We have had such a horrid dinner at Mrs. Turnworth’s—a lot of awful old cross-grained frumps, and the cook was tipsy, and my father was disgusted. He thinks if you’ll come down now, and we have a wassail-bowl, it will make us all feel nice and Christmassy again.”

Stephen laughed with a puzzled look.

“Well, I’m sure I’m very much obliged,” he said, “Please to thank your father, Miss Bess. I’ll come.”

On arriving at home, they set about making preparations at once. The fire in the girls’ sitting-room was relighted, the lamp brought in; Louisa had gone to bed, so that Kitty herself was obliged to hunt up all the requisites for the forthcoming celebration. She was presently joined by Bess, and the two had scarcely managed to collect all that was necessary before Stephen himself appeared. He was very, very shy, and was obviously still much astonished. He had probably never supposed wassail to be a beverage attainable in the twentieth century.

Mr. Leslie’s greeting, however, was sufficiently hearty to set him at his ease, and when he was presently seated opposite that gentleman, he found himself able to look about him with pleased curiosity.

The little room had much altered for the better since that memorable occasion when he had first called on his new tenants. It was now quite orderly, thanks to certain virtuous resolutions, incidental to the season, and vigorously carried out by Kitty. The perfume of violets filled the air, and his own Christmas roses were still fresh, the water in which they stood having been carefully changed by Bess, who had further decorated them with a new background of green. The sisters themselves seemed to him visions of beauty as they tripped about, laughing gaily. It had never before fallen to Farmer Hardy's lot to behold a woman in evening dress, and he was positively dazzled. Was anything ever so fair as those milk-white arms of Kitty's? How graceful the turn of that slender little neck on which the head was poised so proudly. Bess, too, Bess with spangles flashing as she moved—Bess was addicted to spangles—and a silver butterfly jauntily set in her red curls, was a fairy indeed.

Mr. Leslie meanwhile, with pince-nez set astride of his handsome nose, was diligently hunting up authorities for the concoction of wassail.

“Mulled claret will do very well, girls. We shall want cloves and cinnamon and lemon-peel and sugar and mace—I think there should be a little mace—and crab-apples—there certainly should be crab-apples. You know: ‘And crabs go hissing in the bowl——’”

“I'm afraid we can't find crabs,” returned Kitty; “but there are some ordinary apples if they'll do.”

“We must make them do, I suppose,” said her father. “I fancy there should be a little brandy. No brandy to be had? Well, we'll do without it. But we must have a bowl—a large bowl. Is there such a thing as a bowl?”

“I've got a large green flower-pot,” cried Bess, who was possessed of an inventive genius.

She ran off, presently reappearing with the pot in question, which she had actually remembered to wash. By this time the liquor was bubbling in the saucepan, Kitty kneeling beside it and throwing in such spices as her father recommended, and stirring it from time to time with a kitchen spoon. Stephen watched her furtively, marking how her brown hair shone in the firelight, and how transparent that little white hand of hers looked when hovering in the glow. Her face was flushed and her lips smiling as she responded to her father's directions.

“It's ready now, I think,” she said, rising from her knees and lifting the saucepan off the fire with both hands.

Bess ran forward with her flower-pot, and soon the contents of the one were transferred to the other.

“Now, all draw up to the hearth,” commanded Mr. Leslie. “Are the glasses there? Yes; where’s the ladle? I must have a ladle.”

The ladle was produced, and four glasses filled with the steaming mixture.

“Now wassail, wassail!” cried Mr. Leslie jovially. “I drink to you, Mr. Hardy, my kind friend and neighbour, to our better acquaintance, and to a further tightening of the—ah—bonds of friendship which have been knit between us this day.”

“I drink to you, sir,” said Stephen, but before he drank he looked at Kitty. Her eyes were downcast, however, and she did not perceive it.

“I think we shall all be tipsy,” remarked Bess, thoughtfully protecting her fingers from the hot glass by a filmy little handkerchief. “You know we never, never take anything but water, Mr. Hardy.”

“On such a day as this,” said Mr. Leslie, “one should be glad to conform to old-world ways. No doubt eating and drinking have from time immemorial been associated with the idea of merrymaking, and there are certain occasions when it seems right to put one’s personal convenience—I may say preferences—on one side. Wassail, Mr. Hardy.”

He stretched out his hand for the ladle again, but Stephen, laughing and shaking his head, declared he had not yet finished his portion. Thereupon Mr. Leslie, with a countenance expressive of great content, fell to sipping his own, discoursing meanwhile of various ancient customs appertaining to family gatherings and friendly feasts, and on the moral to be drawn therefrom.

This time it was Stephen who did the listening, and his face expressed so much interest, and such questions as he asked were so intelligent, that he rose higher than ever in the favour of his host. The latter’s homily, however, lasted for so long a time that at its conclusion the remainder of the wassail was found to have grown cold, and the fire had meanwhile sunk so low that it would have been a matter of difficulty to reheat the decoction. Mr. Leslie was doubtful of the correctness of leaving a wassail-bowl unfinished, but was considerably relieved when Kitty suggested that the remainder should be kept for the delectation of Louisa and Cox.

“I am sure it will only be right for every member of our little household to have a share,” she urged, dreading lest she herself should be called upon

to dispose of a further portion.

Mr. Leslie gravely admitted the justice of her theory, and bade farewell to Stephen with great friendliness and cordiality.

The sisters went upstairs silently enough, and when Bess, as was her custom, surveyed her little face and figure at every angle in the looking-glass, it was still without speaking. At length she turned to Kitty, who was sitting on her bed looking very pensive and making no attempt to divest herself of her finery.

“Well, Kitty, what are you thinking about?”

“I am thinking,” said Kitty, “that—perhaps I was wrong, Bess dear. Perhaps I oughtn’t to have discouraged your—your making friends with Mr. Hardy. Everything is so topsy-turvy—it seems hard to know what’s right—but even father——”

“Even father’s got to see what a fine fellow Stephen is!” cried Bess eagerly. “He said he was worth fifty of Cousin Marian and her friends. Surely you yourself must see that, Kitty?”

“Yes, I see it,” said Kitty.

Bess came towards her nodding her head till the silver butterfly quivered again. “We must take the world as we find it,” she cried. “No doubt about it, we have dropped out of our own class and have got to belong to another one. Is it to be Cousin Marian’s, with its shabby gentility and humbug and its odious little petty conventions, or shall we take a good honest plunge and throw in our lot with the Hardys? Kitty, you’ve got to decide—which shall it be?”

“Oh, I’ll efface myself,” returned Kitty wearily. “I’ll stand on one side, Bess, and leave you free.”

CHAPTER XIII

It was curious, but none the less true, that, in spite of the forgathering on Christmas day, in spite of the bonds of friendship which Mr. Leslie himself acknowledged, in spite even of the wassail-bowl, Farmer Hardy appeared disposed to hold himself more aloof from his tenants than before all these demonstrations of goodwill had taken place.

This was extremely provoking to Bess, who had been looking forward to an intercourse which should, at least, brighten the dulness of her life, even if it led to no more interesting developments. It was also in a way disconcerting to Kitty, who had so virtuously resolved to be magnanimous where his pretensions were concerned. There is, perhaps, nothing in life more humiliating than to find one's good resolutions uncalled-for, the sacrifice which, at much cost to personal feeling, one had forced oneself to make apparently undesired.

The New Year opened blankly for the two sisters, and Mr. Leslie's transient flash of enthusiasm for his living fellow-creatures was once more lost in the, to him, far more absorbing interest of his researches in the past.

When Bess suffered from lowness of spirits she took care that other people should know of and, in some cases, share her unenviable fate. She moped and murmured, sobbed at night in the most heartrending way just as tired Kitty was about to close her eyes, and bewailed the hardness of her lot in season and out of season.

"We have absolutely sunk so low in the world that even Farmer Hardy cares nothing for our friendship," she said one day. "No; you can go out if you like, Kitty; go out by yourself. You don't take things to heart as I do. Besides, as you know very well, it's worse for me than for you. I shall stay at home and hide my head!"

She suited the action to the word by throwing herself upon the sofa, and there burying her face amid its two flimsy cushions. Kitty stood looking at her for a moment or two, and then, guessing that Bess' woe would probably last for a shorter time if there were no sympathetic witness, and feeling an imperative need of fresh air, went out for a solitary walk.

It had been raining almost unintermittently during the last fortnight—ever since the opening of the New Year, in fact—but to-day the sky was

cloudless and the air mild as April. The river had risen during the recent stormy weather and many of the fields were flooded.

Having crossed the road and bent her steps towards the great meads which bordered the river, Kitty stood still with an exclamation of delight. The familiar landscape was changed and, in a manner, beautified by the existing condition of things. The green spaces between the sheets of water wore that exquisite transparent tint which can only be conveyed to them by the double presence of moisture and sunshine; the water itself, in certain lights, reflected the forget-me-not sky, in others seemed to be of pure silver. Silvery radiance, too, bathed the trunks of the larger trees, elms and limes for the most part; but the pollard willows stretched forth long slender wands, gold at the base, deepening into ruby at the tip. The kind of spurious spring which sometimes breaks a Dorset winter had now taken possession of the land. There was a bloom over distant woods, partially, no doubt, due to the moistness of the atmosphere, but in a certain measure also to the condition of the leaf-buds, which were swelling and developing as they had no business to do at such a season. The hazels were actually fringed with yellow catkins, while the willows were studded here and there with downy grey cushions which would soon develop into the “goslings” beloved of children.

Kitty went on towards the river, walking blithely now, and only pausing when she had reached a favourite haunt of hers, a somewhat abrupt bend whence she could obtain a good view of its winding length. The bank sloped upwards just where she stood, jutting out into the water so as almost to form a peninsula, and crowned by a clump of willow trees, one of which, hoary and old, grew at the very edge and leaned out over the water. This little promontory was well above the river, but at a few paces higher up the bank was almost level with the water, and at one spot a tiny thread of silver crept over the field, twinkling in the light. It would not make much progress, Kitty thought, since the rain had stopped, and there seemed no probability of a further downfall.

The view was less interesting on that side, and, turning herself about, she gazed towards the left. How majestic seemed the river now that it was so full; how fast the current raced along! But here beneath her feet the water caressed the bank with a gentle lapping sound and an occasional gurgling as it eddied round the cavity beneath the willows.

On the opposite bank of the river immediately facing Kitty was a thatched cottage, the moss-grown eaves of which were mirrored in the water. The old brick walls had assumed every variety of tint from creamy white to

orange, the actual material of which they were composed only showing itself in patches of soft rose. Kitty had brought her sketch-book and a little colour-box, and presently, propping herself against a convenient willow stump, began to make a little picture of the scene.

She worked diligently, almost despairingly, however, of being able to do justice to her subject, and, indeed, the difficulty of her task was increased by the approach of sunset, which made every narrow pane of those latticed windows yonder seem to be on fire, while roof and walls were bathed in a glow to which her art was inadequate. But how beautiful was that sunset, how beautiful the world, how full of promise, even of actual delight! Who could help feeling hopeful amid surroundings full of renewed youth! Everywhere the sap was mounting, the tide of life running high: surely the future held many possibilities for her and Bess. She touched the tree's rough bark with a laugh; it was old and gnarled and hoary, yet here were little shoots tender at the end, and buds that would soon open. And all about her amid the grass that had been trodden by so many feet, and burnt by the sun, and withered by the frosts of so many years, there were tiny blades springing up afresh. For her, too, should there not be a new birth?

Her brush hung idly in her fingers, there was a smile upon her lips, a look in the eyes half happy, half wistful; she might have continued to dream until the sun had vanished if she had not been brought back to her sense of realities by a sudden sensation of cold. Her feet and the edge of her skirt were actually in water! She jumped up startled. Water was flowing all round her, close to her, rising, rising every moment!

Anyone who knew the ways of this river would have realised that she had taken up her position in a dangerous place; the cessation of the rain, which, as a matter of fact, had only occurred within the last few hours, was not by any means a guarantee of security. When "the springs broke," according to the local phrase, the river continued to rise, and sometimes with astonishing rapidity. Kitty, absorbed first by her work and afterwards by her dreams, had not noticed that the water had been increasing in strength and volume, and that the little stream, which had seemed to her so insignificant, had spread and deepened until the promontory on which she found herself was totally surrounded.

She was practically marooned on a very small insecure island, and the flood which cut off her retreat was widening every moment. She cautiously made a step forward, but quickly drew herself back; the water was already above her knee. The last little patch of green was rapidly vanishing from beside her stump, and it seemed to her that her best chance lay in climbing

to the willow's pollarded top. Once out of the reach of that cruelly cold water, she could surely make known her plight to the inhabitants of the cottage yonder. There must be somebody living there—if she screamed loud enough she must make herself heard.

Twining her hand amid the yellow willow wands and making a spring at the same time, she hoisted herself up to the gnarled summit. But the old tree quivered and groaned beneath her weight, the water rushed past in a manner that increased her fears. Even if the rotten trunk did not give way beneath her, might it not be undermined by the impetuous flood?

Uplifting her voice, she sent forth a long cry, once, twice; and an answering cry, a cry which might have been the echo of her own, came faintly back to her, though from which direction she was too bewildered to ascertain.

Raising herself on her insecure perch, she shouted again, and the slight additional impetus caused by her action hastened the catastrophe which she had been dreading: creaking and shuddering, the hollow old tree heeled over, broke from its moorings, and in another moment was drifting down the current.

“This is death,” said Kitty to herself as she felt the waters close over her head, and even while she struggled the thought came to her, why had she not kissed Bess before she left her?

Oh, the vain battling with the water, the icy cold, the horrible suffocation—how long would it last?

All at once she was seized in a strong grasp, her head was raised above the water, and now a voice was sounding in her ears above the swirling of the river, piercing the tumult of her brain: “You are safe, you are safe, now.”

For a moment longer she was drawn through the water, and at length, opening her eyes with difficulty, found herself upon dry land.

How was this? It was surely a woman's voice that had answered her appeal, yet here was Stephen Hardy bending over her—Stephen—hatless, wet to the skin, but with what gladness in his face, what eager solicitude in his eyes!

One hand still held hers, and Kitty, unconscious of everything but passionate gratitude to her preserver, tightened her grasp of it.

“You have saved my life,” she cried. “Oh, how shall I ever thank you!”

“ ’Twas an easy job enough for me,” returned he. “I’m a good swimmer.”

She loosed his hand, and he straightened himself.

As Kitty sat up shivering, the splash of oars was heard, and again a woman’s voice calling.

“Now this is a piece of luck,” cried Stephen, as he turned and looked back towards the river; “here’s Sheba Baverstock coming across in a boat. ’Tis the very best thing that could have happened, for you couldn’t have walked home like this, and you might have got your death of cold. You’d better let her take you back to her place and lend you some things, while I go home as quick as I can and change too, and bring the trap to fetch you.”

Kitty rose to her feet just as the boat came grinding in among the willows. It was growing dusk, but she could distinguish a woman’s figure rising over the bank.

“Who be it?” cried a voice—surely a voice that she recognised. “I can’t leave the boat, an’ there’s no way o’ makin’ it fast here. Be anybody hurt?”

Stephen went towards the spot, splashing through the water, for the boat had necessarily halted on the farther side of the willow-grown margin of the river proper.

“ ’Tis you, Sheba. ’Twas a good thought to bring the boat. I’ve got a young lady here all but drowned.”

He spoke half laughingly, but there was no mirth in the voice which answered him.

“Stephen! And what be *you* a-doin’ here?”

“ ’Tis lucky I am here, else there’d have been a sad misfortune. Now, can you take Miss Leslie across to your place and lend her some dry things and give her a cup of tea? I’m going to get a trap to drive her back.”

There was no answer from the woman in the boat, but he waited for none, and came plunging back to where Kitty stood, shivering with cold, yet half unwilling to accept aid from this particular quarter.

“Come,” said Stephen, holding out his hand.

Kitty grasped it and made a staggering step or two forward, stumbling once or twice, and finding it scarcely possible to drag her numbed limbs through this icy and ever-deepening sheet of water. After they had proceeded a yard or two she halted, clinging to his arm and endeavouring to

speak, but her teeth chattered so that she was unable to do so. Thereupon Stephen, without pausing to ask permission, caught her up in his arms and hurried with her towards the boat.

“Now then, lend a hand here, Sheba,” he cried authoritatively. “We must lose no time, or Miss Leslie will be dead with cold. Keep the boat steady—have you got her? Right. I’ll push off. Now take her across as fast as you can and see to her.”

Kitty found herself at the bottom of the boat, and soon the only other occupant was plying her oars as for dear life. Even in the dusk, and in spite of her own dangerous and painful plight, Kitty had been able to identify her as the girl whom she had twice encountered in the Lovers’ Walk. She would have preferred to receive succour from other hands, for she instinctively felt that it was unwillingly bestowed, but, since no other was attainable and since her own condition rendered assistance imperative, she had no choice but to accept it.

In a few minutes they reached the opposite side, and her companion, making the boat fast, assisted her to land. Kitty was now so weak and benumbed that she would have been incapable of making a step unaided, and she clung to her new protector almost as a child might have done. With unspeakable relief she at last found herself in the small sanded kitchen into which the cottage door directly opened. It was the same cottage which had been the indirect cause of her disaster, since, had she not dallied so long over her sketch of it she would not have been surprised by the flood. It was empty, and Sheba’s first act was to bolt the door.

“Now you be gettin’ your clothes off so quick as ye can, while I fetch ye some things o’ mine,” she commanded in a business-like tone. “Nobody’ll come in—ye needn’t be ’fraid.”

She stirred up the log fire as she spoke, so that a cheerful blaze lit up the room, pulled the wooden shutter across the window, and mounted the ladder-like stairs, which led presumably to her own bedroom.

She had returned before Kitty had succeeded in putting off her sodden garments, and threw down a little heap of clothes at her feet.

“They’re not such as you be used to, I d’ ’low,” she said, with a short, fierce laugh; “but since ye can’t look for nothin’ better here, ye’ll have to put up wi’ ’em.”

She took down a lamp from a shelf on the dresser and lit it; turning to look critically at Kitty, who was still fumbling with knots and buttons.

“I d’ ’low ye be no more’n a child—a little nesh thing. Ees, that’s what you do look like, a child!”

She set down the lamp, and coming over to Kitty began to help her with a sort of impatient kindness.

“It bain’t much use gettin’ into dry things wi’ your hair so soppin’ wet,” she exclaimed. “Here, I’ll tie this cloth round—’twill help to dry it.”

In a minute Kitty found herself decorated with a turban, and, in another four or five, clothed afresh in garments, coarse indeed, but clean, and, moreover, smelling of lavender.

“I’ve a-brought ye my print dress, look-see,” said Sheba. “It be fresh-washed—I thought maybe ye wouldn’t care to put it on else.”

This was undoubtedly the truth, and Kitty deemed it best to make no protest, merely observing, after a pause, in a meek voice, that she was most grateful, and that she was afraid she was giving a great deal of trouble.

“Trouble,” echoed Sheba, with a short, hard laugh, which had before unpleasantly affected her listener, “ees, I d’ ’low ye’ve gied me trouble enough.”

She whisked off the towel before mentioned, and forcing Kitty to sit down on a chair which she pushed forward, began with vigorous movements to dry her hair.

“What was ye doin’ a-walkin’ by the river wi’ Stephen Hardy?” she inquired abruptly, without pausing in her rubbing and drying.

“I wasn’t walking with him! I was by myself!”

“You were a-waitin’ for en, then?”

Kitty jerked away her head and half rose, facing the inquisitor.

“I was doing nothing of the kind. I have nothing to do with Mr. Hardy.”

“How was it then that he comed up just pat in time to save ’ee? He was a-follerin’ of ye, I suppose?”

“I’m sure he wasn’t——” Kitty began angrily, when the other interrupted her—

“There’s not a bit o’ good in tellin’ me sich tales. I say ye’d have been drowned as dead as a kitten in two minutes. I couldn’t ha’ got across to ’ee in time, though I made so much haste as I could to fetch boat, so soon as I did hear ye holler. He *must* ha’ follered ye!”

Kitty was dumb for a moment: the coincidence was certainly curious. Nevertheless, she regained with an effort her voice and her dignity.

“It was just a chance thing, I suppose. As matters turned out it was lucky Mr. Hardy was there, but I was not expecting him.”

Sheba’s scornful laugh and evident disbelief of this assertion goaded Kitty into an attempt to turn the tables.

“I cannot see that it is any business of yours, in any case,” she cried with asperity. “Pray what have you to do with Mr. Hardy?”

A sudden chill silence fell between the two girls; Sheba continued to rub Kitty’s hair for a moment or two, and then moved away to the hearth, where she stood looking down into the fire. The lamp was behind her, and Kitty could not see her face, but she noticed the strong tension of the clasped hands which the firelight revealed. Kitty, at all times a peaceable and kind-hearted little soul, felt ashamed of her recent outburst.

“I am so sorry,” she said impulsively. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“Nay, it’s no matter about me,” returned Sheba in a dull voice. “My feelin’s bain’t worth thinkin’ about—I d’ ’low nobody ’ud gie I credit for any. You are quite right, miss—I have nothin’ to do wi’ Stephen Hardy. What should I have to do wi’ such as he? Look at him—he be pretty nigh so good as gentry, and look at I—what be I? Every year he do seem to go up’ards, and every year I do sink down’ards! There, we’ll give over talkin’ stuff an rubbidge!” she exclaimed after a pause, in an altered voice; “I be to make ’ee a cup o’ tea, Stephen says.”

“Stephen?” ejaculated Kitty, unable for the life of her to resist the query. “I suppose you know him very well since you call him by his Christian name?”

“Ees, I d’ ’low I do know en long enough—ever since him an’ me was knee-high. Come nigh to the fire, miss; I’ll fetch away these clothes o’ yours, and hang ’em up to dry so soon as you be gone.”

She picked up Kitty’s soaked clothes from the hearth, fingering the material with an odd smile.

“Lace and fallals of all sorts,” she commented, “and the stuff cobweb-fine. ’Tis nice that. I did always use to think if I was a lady I’d like to have everything nice, what bain’t seen so well as what be.”

“I’m sure there are very few girls who keep their things so neat and clean as you do yours,” remarked Kitty, anxious to make herself agreeable. “And very few, I am sure, would think of putting lavender with them.”

Sheba smiled. “My mother, d’ye see, did teach I that. My mother was full o’ sich notions, poor soul! I do often wonder if she can see I now—she’d be like to fret if she do, no matter where she mid be.”

She carried away the wet clothes, and presently returned, pausing with her hand on the back of Kitty’s chair—

“There’s one thing I do want to ax ye—one promise I do want ye to make. Ye’ll not breathe a word to Stephen of all that nonsense talk I’ve been a-sayin’ to ye—about his follerin’ you an’ that?”

She tried to laugh as she spoke, but there was no mistaking the pleading of her eyes, the trembling of her voice.

“Indeed I won’t,” returned Kitty.

“An’ ye’ll never tell en about seein’ me watch en in the Lovers’ Walk? Ye’ll not tell en that, sure? I d’ ’low I’d die o’ shame if he was to know that.”

“I promise—indeed, I promise!” said Kitty.

CHAPTER XIV

A sudden fumbling at the latch, followed by a loud thump on the door, startled both girls, who had been too much absorbed in their conversation to heed the sound of approaching footsteps; their hands, which had impulsively clasped each other, fell apart, and Kitty inquired quickly if that were Mr. Hardy.

“No, he can’t be here just yet,” responded Sheba; “ ’tis but a stone’s-throw across the river, but a matter o’ three mile round. That’ll be father, I’m afeared. I’d best tell en to go away again.”

A shower of blows on the door denoted the fact that Mr. Baverstock was growing impatient.

“Oh no; why should you do that?”

“Well, ye see, father—there so like as not he mid be a little bit the worse. He mostly be at this time o’ day. If I could find a few pence now——”

She began to search first in her pocket and then behind the small ornaments on the chimney-piece. Her father meanwhile demonstrated as to the truth of her surmise by alternately battering at the door and dancing a kind of double shuffle on the step.

“Dear, to be sure, ’tis too bad! He must ha’ took what I did leave here. If I could find so much as a threepence, he’d tramp off to the True Lover’s Knot wi’out givin’ no more trouble to nobody.”

“Oh, but you shouldn’t give him more money for drink if he has had too much already,” remonstrated Kitty, much scandalised.

“There, if you do think a glass more or less would make much difference,” Sheba was beginning, when Mr. Baverstock, tired of his former ineffectual attempts to attract his daughter’s notice, applied his shoulder as a battering ram to the crazy lock and burst it open.

Kitty, with a little shriek, ran to the farthest corner of the room, but Sheba hastened to reassure her.

“No need to be afeared, miss. Father be so good-natured as anything at all times, and never more so nor when he’s a bit drinky. He’ll not hurt ye.”

Going towards her parent, who stood staring with a somewhat vacant smile at the unexpected apparition of a strange girl, and slowly unwinding

an apparently interminable length of checked comforter from his neck, she accosted him with some severity.

“Now then, Dad, what be the meanin’ o’ this? Breakin’ into your own house same as if you was a thief?”

Mr. Baverstock paused, comforter in hand, to smile in the direction of his daughter. In the direction, I say, for the smile was, as has been mentioned, an uncertain one, and the gaze which accompanied it appeared to have no fixed object in view. He was a small, thick-set, round-shouldered man with a ragged, reddish beard, and eyes at all times somewhat fish-like in expression, very unlike the tall, straight, handsome Sheba.

“Well, I bain’t so very well, ye see,” he remarked, now apologetically. “Nay, I bain’t so very well, my maid, my lags be a-troublin’ of I a bit—not so studdy as I could wish. An’ I wer’ anxious for to sit down.”

He made a tottering step in advance as he spoke, and Sheba pushed forward the chair which Kitty had just vacated.

“Thank ye, my maid,” returned her father, with great suavity. “You mid just shut the door if it bain’t givin’ of ye too much trouble. I be feelin’ a bit light in the head, Sheba. ’Tis a thing what I do often suffer from.”

“Too often, indeed,” ejaculated Sheba, and she closed the door, setting a chair against it to keep it to.

“Ees, I be suffering summat awful from my head an’ eyes to-night,” continued Baverstock confidentially. “My poor eyes be a-playin’ me sich tricks. There, I seem as if I could see two o’ ye this minute, maidie—two darter Shebas wi’ pink gowns an’ black heads—one here where you be a-standin’, an’ one over yonder where ye bain’t!”

“ ’Tain’t your eyes—’tis a young lady. Us have got company to-night.”

“O-oh,” said Mr. Baverstock, endeavouring to pull himself together, and bestowing a watery smile in Kitty’s direction. “O-oh, a young lady? Yet it do seem to I as if ’twas all as one as my Sheba.”

“ ’Tis a young lady right enough, Dad. She did fall into the river, and I did lend her some o’ my things.”

“O-oh, she did fall into the river,” repeated Mr. Baverstock, with tipsy gravity. “That were bad—that were very bad. As I do often say, an’ Sheba there do know it, water’s bad stuff to have anythin’ to do wi’—treecherous stuff. I wouldn’t ha’ nothin’ to do wi’ water,” he continued, raising his

voice, “nothin’ at all, if I could help it. Ye midden think it, but I was a miller once—and what did the water do for I? Ruined I—that’s what it done!”

He paused, shaking his head ruminatively, and presently continued his discourse, Kitty remaining trembling in her corner, while Sheba busied herself with preparations for tea.

“After that, my poor missus, what’s dead an’ gone, did say to me, ‘Baverstock,’ she says, ‘ye must be a temperance man, else ye’ll never get on in the world. You must drink water to your dinner,’ she says. Well, I did agree for to please her—I did try the water, and there—dalled if it didn’t give me influenzie!”

Here he unexpectedly indulged in a short doze, and presently, appearing to recover himself, went on very rapidly—

“So arter that us did have to leave the Little Farm, and my poor missus did try to take in washin’, an’ it carried her off—that’s what meddlin’ wi’ water done for her—an’ we’ve been a-shiftn’ here an’ there, Sheba an’ me, ever since—ees, I be never one for to desert my child—I’ve tolled her about wherever I did go—an’ here we be a-livin’ on the very edge o’ the river. What’ll be the end o’ that I’m sure I don’t know—it’ll be the death o’ me so like as not!”

Being much affected at the prospect, he shed a few tears, and presently, wiping his eyes with his cuff, smiled pathetically at Kitty.

“But I’m sure you be welcome, miss,” he observed. “However it mid fall out, you be so welcome as anythin’. Won’t ye take a chair and come nigh to the fire?”

“Do ’ee now, miss,” pleaded Sheba. “Ye needn’t take a bit o’ notice o’ my father. Come and sit by the fire and get warm afore ye’ll have to go out in the cold again. Tea is made, look-see, I’ll pour ye out a cup in a minute.”

Thus adjured, Kitty ventured to draw near to the hearth, though it must be owned she kept as far away from her host as the limited space would admit of. Sheba poured out a steaming cup of tea, and was in the act of cutting some bread and butter when her father again addressed himself to her, this time in a stage whisper.

“What did ye say the young lady’s name was, my maid?”

Sheba looked across at her guest.

“Miss Leslie, isn’t it?”

Kitty nodded, and Mr. Baverstock received the information with an air of deep interest and satisfaction.

“Ah, Miss Leslie! Think o’ that, now! An’ where mid she live, Sheba, my dear?”

“At the Little Farm, Dad. You know the Little Farm—our Little Farm.”

To Kitty’s alarm, Mr. Baverstock immediately burst into tears, and was so much overcome by emotion as to be quite inarticulate, though between his sobs he poured forth a long story of which the girl did not understand a word.

“There, Dad, ha’ done, do!” cried Sheba impatiently. “Drink your tea, it will do your head good. I’m downright ashamed o’ ye afore the young lady. Don’t ye take no count of him, miss. He be a bit upset along of our having lived at the Little Farm once.”

“The Little Farm—our house?”

“Ees, miss,” responded Sheba, not without a transitory flash of pride. “’Twas our house then, an’ we did have a good bit o’ land too. Old Mr. Hardy didn’t use to keep so much land in his own hands as what Stephen do——”

At this moment a sound of wheels was heard outside, followed by a shout in a man’s voice.

“That’ll be him,” cried Sheba, jumping up. “That’ll be Stephen. He can’t leave the horse, most like.”

She ran out, presently returning with a bundle of wraps, with which she immediately proceeded to cloak Kitty.

“’Tis to be hoped as he did bring enough,” she remarked somewhat grimly. “I d’ ’low he reckons you’d melt away if the cold air was to get at ye. Best put thikky shawl over your head, look-see, your hat be too wet. I’ll dry it and all the other things to-night, an’ bring ’em over to-morrow morning.”

Kitty vainly strove to thank her, but found herself hustled to the door before she could complete the first phrase.

“The horse won’t stand, he says,” cried Sheba, as she drew her along. “Here she be, Stephen—scarce able to climb into the trap, I shouldn’t wonder, wi’ all they cloaks. Now then, up ye go—be ye right? Good-night to ye.”

“Good-night, Sheba,” responded Stephen, busily tucking the rug round his companion.

“Good-night and thank you,” said Kitty, but Sheba had already returned into the cottage.

“I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long,” said he as they drove off. “I hope”—struck by a sudden thought—“old Baverstock wasn’t there.”

“Yes, he came in, but he was all right—at least——”

“Half-seas-over, as usual, I suppose,” suggested Stephen wrathfully.

“Well, he wasn’t quite himself. It’s very sad for that poor girl.”

With this Kitty eyed Stephen surreptitiously, but could not discern his expression in the darkness. When he spoke, however, it was in an altered tone.

“Yes, indeed! Sheba has had a hard life of it. They were quite well-to-do folks once. The mother was a nice woman—indeed, she was a sort of cousin of ours—but the father has been sinking lower and lower ever since she died, and dragging the girl down with him.”

Though he spoke compassionately of Sheba and with noticeable indignation of her father, the emotion in each case appeared to be of an impersonal kind—so might he have alluded to the most absolute strangers.

“Surely you have known them for a long time,” said Kitty, unable to keep a certain resentful intonation out of her voice. “I observe you call each other by your Christian names.”

“To be sure, I have known them since I was a child,” returned he unconcernedly. “Sheba and I were great playfellows. We had neither of us any brothers or sisters, you see, and then we were close neighbours. Why,” he added, “we used to carry on all sorts of games—we were even sweethearts at the ages of ten and twelve!”

He laughed as he spoke, and Kitty laughed too with an odd sense of relief. Ten and twelve! A very innocent affair, surely!

“Yes,” he continued, touching up the horse lightly, “we used to go a-courting regularly in the Lovers’ Walk like any grown couple.”

He laughed again.

“I mind it as if it were yesterday. We had been reading some story-book or other and thought it would be a fine thing to be sweethearts, I suppose.

Yes, I remember we kept it up till they shifted from the Little Farm.”

Kitty was silent for a moment or two, recalling the expression of Sheba’s face as she had watched Stephen from the scene of their former innocent courtship. To him it had been a childish episode—an incident to be laughed at and then forgotten. But to her—“Nobody knows—nobody knows!” The cry was still ringing in Kitty’s ears. Sheba had not forgotten.

“I wonder,” she exclaimed impulsively, “if the Baverstocks had not moved, would you and Sheba have gone on being sweethearts?”

Stephen turned towards her quickly. “What a strange question. I don’t know, I’m sure. How can one tell what *might* have happened?”

“She is a very handsome girl,” said Kitty.

“Is she? Well, yes, I suppose she is.”

He paused, then suddenly exclaimed—

“Too big! I’ve no fancy for those great tall women. Besides—oh no, I don’t think one ever falls in love in that way!” He did not elucidate further, and there was again a long silence, broken presently by Stephen, who solicitously inquired if Kitty were feeling cold.

“No, indeed. You have taken good care to prevent that, Mr. Hardy,” added Kitty shyly; “I don’t know how to thank you for all your kindness. If you hadn’t come up when you did—by the way, how was it you managed to come at that very moment?”

Stephen hesitated before replying.

“Well, as a matter of fact I came down to look for you. I saw you going in the direction of the river, and I thought you might not know how dangerous it is in flood-time. When it came to four o’clock I thought it safer to go after you.”

“And then you risked your life to save mine,” said Kitty in a low voice. “Mr. Hardy——”

“Well?” said he as she paused. His tone was uncompromising and yet she was determined to continue.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you. I know you think I’m proud——”

Stephen made no reply.

“I want to tell you—that though I may have seemed,” pursued Kitty haltingly, “to be so, I didn’t really mean it. Everything was so strange at first—I can hardly explain——”

“Oh, I quite understand,” he returned still drily. “Our ways are not your ways. Rebecca and I——”

“You are both kind and good,” interrupted Kitty eagerly. “I want you to understand this. I may have made mistakes, but I am sorry now. Indeed, I should like Bess to go out riding with you——”

“That’s a change,” remarked Stephen.

“What can I do more than own I was wrong?” said poor Kitty rather piteously. “You are the best friends we have, Mrs. Hardy and you. My father says so, and we all think it. If I have seemed to hold aloof before, I am sorry, and I—I—we are equals, and I don’t want you to think anything else.”

Stephen turned round towards her.

“Do you mean what you are saying?” he asked with restrained eagerness.

“I do, indeed,” replied Kitty. “I feel I have been in fault before, but now—in future——”

“Because,” interrupted Stephen, continuing his own train of thought, “there’s two kinds of pride, you know. A man might be just as proud about putting himself forward as a woman about holding herself back. One person might be as unwilling to take advantage as another to lower herself. Don’t you say anything you don’t mean, Miss Leslie, because I warn you I’m a plain man, and I shall act on what you say.”

The suppressed excitement of his manner and emotion in his tone frightened Kitty a little, but she braced herself. Had she not promised Bess, after all, to stand aside?

“I do mean it,” she said. “I want us all to be friends.”

Stephen drew a long breath and sat for a while looking straight before him; then he said—

“I thank you for that word, and I promise you you’ll never repent of it!”

CHAPTER XV

On the following afternoon, when the girls were at work in their little sitting-room, Louisa came in with an important air to announce that Miss Leslie was wanted. The latter rose and went to the door, followed by Bess, who was not going to be left out in the cold if there were any small excitement afoot.

Drawn up outside their gate was a battered old cart to which an extremely ancient horse was harnessed; on the plank, fixed midway in the cart, was seated Sheba Baverstock, who greeted Kitty with a curt nod.

“I’ve brought your clothes,” she said; “I’ve ironed them out and they’re so good as ever—but the hat’s terrible broke.”

She handed down a parcel to Kitty, and continued to look tentatively at her, as though she had something further to say.

Kitty shyly drew her purse from her pocket and was about to open it when Sheba threw up her hand forbiddingly.

“What’s that for?” she cried roughly. “I don’t want no pay, but I suppose you don’t want to let I do you the leastest little thing for nothing!”

“Indeed, I do,” retorted Kitty quickly. “I shall never forget your kindness yesterday. I only thought—as you had so much trouble with my clothes _____”

“Well, I don’t want payin’ for it,” interrupted Sheba. “Is that your sister?”

“Yes,” said Bess, coming forward with her most ingratiating smile. “Kitty told me all about everything, and I am *so* grateful to you.”

“Everything?” repeated Sheba with a suspicious glance.

“Yes, all about your kindness,” put in Kitty quickly, “and how you helped me to change my clothes, and the nice hot tea you gave me. We are just going to have tea now, by the way—will you come in and have some with us?”

“Oh, *do*,” said Bess, with exaggerated warmth, though she was inwardly somewhat astonished at this proceeding on Kitty’s part. Still, anything out of the way, anything, above all, that held a suggestion of Bohemianism was always a delight to her.

“Nay, I’ll not have tea,” returned Sheba; “but I *should* like to come in just for a minute, to throw a look round the wold place. Us did use to live here once,” she continued in an explanatory tone to Bess.

“Did you?” cried the latter. “Fancy!”

She spoke with such genuine astonishment that Sheba was reassured. If Kitty had not related this insignificant detail, she had doubtless been equally discreet where more important matters were concerned.

“Will your horse stand,” asked Kitty, “or shall I send our man to hold him?”

“Oh, he’ll stand right enough,” returned the other with a laugh. “There’s never no trouble about gettin’ of en to stand—it’s the goin’ along he don’t so much fancy.”

She clambered out of the cart, knotting the reins on the horse’s neck, and then followed the sisters indoors.

“I can but stay for a minute,” she said; “I’ve two or three trantin’ jobs to do afore I go home-along. Is this ’ere your parlour?”

“Yes,” said Kitty, standing back to let her look round.

“Dear, it do look different to what it used to do in our time!” exclaimed the visitor. “All they little oddments o’ things—cushions an’ all—an’ sich a-many books. And flowers everywhere. Our clock did use to stand there, and there was the chest there, and a sofa, and a few chairs what mother did use to keep polishin’ an’ polishin’; us didn’t often sit in this room.”

“This little tiny room is where we have our meals,” said Bess, throwing open another door.

“So did we,” cried Sheba delightedly. “Us did use to sit here mostly, except in winter-time, and then us did keep to the kitchen—if ’twasn’t takin’ too much liberty, there’s one o’ the rooms upstairs I’d like to see.”

Without waiting for permission, she began to ascend the stairs, and burst open the door of the girls’ bedroom.

“This was once my room,” she said, crossing over as she spoke to the open window. “Many an’ many a time did I stand here lookin’ out.”

“It looks right across to Farmer Hardy’s barton,” said Bess.

Sheba did not answer. She was gazing out intently, her brows drawn together and just a faint smile upon her lips.

At that moment Stephen happened to be crossing the yard in question, turning midway to speak to one of his men. His clear, somewhat peremptory tones reached the girls, though his words were not audible. Sheba unconsciously craned her neck and watched his retreating figure until it disappeared into one of the outhouses, then she drew in her head and glanced half defiantly from one sister to the other.

“Did you know Mr. Hardy when you lived here?” inquired Bess with polite interest.

“Dear, to be sure, yes! Him and me was children together. Well, I must be gettin’ on. I thank you kindly, miss.”

She ran down the stairs and had resumed her seat in the cart before the sisters could reach the door, and jogged out of sight without another glance either at them or towards the farm on the hill.

“What a queer girl!” ejaculated Bess. “Is she quite all there, do you think?”

“Very much all there,” responded Kitty, turning away.

“How she stared at Farmer Hardy, didn’t she? Was that mere countrified gawking, do you suppose, or was it because she felt a particular interest in him?”

“How can I tell?” replied Kitty, without turning her head. “Perhaps she does feel a certain interest in her old playfellow.”

“I don’t know that I much fancy your Sheba,” retorted Bess with some resentment in her voice.

Kitty instinctively felt that her sister was conscious of a somewhat similar annoyance to that which had affected herself on a former occasion.

At this moment there came a tap on the outer door, which, on being opened by Bess, revealed Rebecca Hardy.

“I be come on a message from Stephen, my dears. He bain’t so very busy jist now, an’ he says if you was both to fancy a ride to-morrow, he’d be glad to oblige ye. He’ll keep a better lookout on you this time, Miss Bess,” added Rebecca waggishly.

To the last-named young lady’s surprise, Kitty accepted the offer with alacrity.

Before Bess had finished expressing her personal gratification Louisa entered with the tea-tray, and the sisters persuaded Mrs. Hardy to share the

meal.

“I bain’t dressed for company,” expostulated Rebecca. “An’ I did ought to be back in the dairy by now by rights, an’ Stephen—him an’ me has tea together at six o’clock, ye know.”

“You can have another tea, then,” said Bess coaxingly. “It’s only half-past four now. Just a cup, Mrs. Hardy—one cup for friendship’s sake.”

“Well, then,” agreed Rebecca, smiling, as she dropped into a chair.

“We very nearly had another guest,” said Bess. “Do you know a girl called Sheba, Mrs. Hardy? What’s her other name, Kitty, by the way?”

“Baverstock,” said Kitty. “She brought back my clothes just now. You heard all about my tumble in the river, Mrs. Hardy?”

Rebecca had indeed heard something, but was anxious to hear more, and many questions were asked and much commiseration expressed before she could bring her mind to bear on Sheba.

“You was a-talkin’ o’ that maid o’ Baverstock’s,” she said ruminatingly. “Dear, yes, I knowed her well! Sheba, her mother did call her—she said the maid must have a Bible name, and yet she’d choose a pretty one—she was sich a ’ooman as never was for notions o’ that kind! Dear, to be sure, she used to dress that child like a pictur’. ‘If I do have to work my fingers to the bwone, Mrs. Hardy,’ she did say, ‘I’ll keep my Sheba nice.’ Poor soul, little did she ever think as the wench ’ud be a-traipsin’ up an’ down the country, workin’ i’ the fields, an’ trantin’, an’ doin’ all sorts of odd jobs as bain’t fit for a maid like her.”

“Why doesn’t she go out to service?” asked Bess.

“Well, there, she don’t like to leave her father, d’ye see—that’s one thing. She did promise her poor mother never to forsake him. He’d drink hisself to death straight off if ’twasn’t for her—he’s bad enough as it be. There, so soon as she’ve a-got a few things together an’ a bit of a roof over their heads, he’ll bust out. Poor Sheba!”

“Poor Sheba!” echoed Kitty softly.

“Ees,” resumed Rebecca, meditatively stirring her tea, “I’ve tried to lend her a helpin’ hand for the sake of wold times, but she be a bit proud, Sheba be, and she’ll not take no help.”

“I understand that,” said Kitty quickly.

“It ’ud be a deal better for her if she would, though,” went on Rebecca regretfully. “There, ’tis terr’ble what she do have to put up wi’. There’s times when the wold man be that bad she do have to go an’ fetch en home-along out o’ the public, an’ the drinky folks there ’ull be saucin’ of her, an’ carryin’ on wi’ all sarts of impidence. An’ she do go a-workin’ i’ th’ fields—turnip-hoein’ an’ that—wi’ a lot o’ rough chaps as thinks it sport to tease a lonesome maid—she must find that hard by times. Why, there was one day Stephen hisself did have to give a lad a proper good thrashin’ for insultin’ of her.”

“I suppose Farmer Hardy would have done the same for any other woman in distress,” remarked Bess with a shade of tartness in her tone.

“Well, so he would; that’s true enough. But I dare say the chap got it worse along o’ it’s chancin’ to be Sheba—Sheba what he knowed ever since she could speak, as we mid say, and who did ought to be holdin’ up her head wi’ the best of us, if she had her rights. Why there, her mother was all for havin’ her eddicated, but poor Sheba had next to no schoolin’, ye mid say. Wold Baverstock did always want to move so soon as ever she was gettin’ on, an’ she’ve a-been tranted here an’ there, and a-knocked about the world till ye’d think she was the commonest maid i’ th’ whole place. How broad she do speak, don’t she?—very near as broad as I do speak myself when I do get a-runnin’ on this way. That was a beautiful cup o’ tea, my dears, and thank ye. I must be trottin’ off now, an’ do all the work I can to get up another appetite afore six o’clock.”

She pushed back her chair with a laughing nod and hurried off, leaving Bess ecstatic over the thought of the coming ride and Kitty inclined to be silent.

Mrs. Hardy’s anecdote had given her a better understanding of the curious state of affairs between Stephen and Sheba.

Kitty felt tenderly and compassionately towards the latter, and was remorseful, moreover, on reflecting that her own present attitude would probably bring matters to a climax sooner or later between Stephen and Bess.

The ride which took place on the following day was the first of many; the girls were soon quite at home in the saddle, and, at Bess’ request, were taken farther afield, being invariably escorted by Stephen.

There was but one bitter drop in Bess’ cup at this time—the lack of a habit; she could not venture to ride anywhere she was likely to be seen in

her present hybrid costume.

She announced the intention of practising the severest economy until she had acquired the necessary funds for the purchase of this garment, and Kitty agreed to co-operate; therefore the sisters left off fires during a particularly severe spell of cold, and exchanged the beef and mutton and occasional chickens, which had formerly figured on their bill of fare, for such inexpensive viands as sausages and tinned meats.

Luckily the practice of such self-denial did not endure for long. Rebecca, finding them shivering in their fireless parlour one morning, sent over a supply of logs, which she declared were lying about the place and getting in her road so much that it would be pure charity to burn them. And Mr. Leslie, chancing on one occasion to look up from his own chop to the somewhat pallid countenances of his daughters and thence downwards to their plates, which contained nothing more inviting than sardines, was so extremely irate, that this particular system of economics could no longer be carried out.

“If it is necessary for you to have a riding-habit, why don’t you buy one?” he inquired severely.

“Because my poor little money is all gone,” returned Bess; “and my allowance isn’t due for ever so long. Kitty won’t let me buy anything on credit.”

“Kitty is quite right,” said Mr. Leslie, relaxing somewhat. “I am glad to see that she has such a practical mind. At the same time, my dear Bess, I see no reason why I should not advance your next quarter’s allowance. You can then buy your habit and pay for it.”

Bess sprang up delightedly, but Kitty intercepted her.

“But, Bess, you will have to get some summer things, you know. If you spend your money now, what will you do when the warm weather comes?”

“Well, you are a kill-joy!” remarked Bess with such energetic disgust that her father burst out laughing.

“Never mind,” he said. “A habit is not a thing you are likely to want every day—I’ll stretch a point for once. I’ll give you a cheque now, Bess. How much will it cost—five pounds? Six pounds?”

“I’m sure we could get the Branston tailor to make one for that,” cried Kitty.

“Then I’ll give you one for six pounds. Now, have some more chops cooked at once, and never stint yourselves in food, children, whatever

happens. Really,” added Mr. Leslie plaintively, “how am I to get on with my work if my mind is distracted by fears of your freaks?”

Mr. Leslie had been apparently working very hard of late; large cases of books kept arriving; he had been even obliged once or twice to undertake a journey to town in order to prosecute his studies at the British Museum. On these occasions he stayed at an hotel, sometimes for two or three days, sometimes for longer. Kitty had been feeling a little anxious, and it was with more than a slight qualm that she saw her sister pocket the cheque.

CHAPTER XVI

The lower barton, the barton of the Little Farm, was, as has been already said, as much used by Farmer Hardy as that appertaining to the house upon the hill; and on a certain February day one of the great ricks which stood in stately array to the right of the tithe barn was threshed.

Ever since the morning the engine had been humming, the leathern bands swirling; the vibration seemed to penetrate into the Little Farm itself. The booming filled the sisters' heads, till Bess not infrequently laid down her fork in order to stop her ears.

"There are some disadvantages in living on farm premises," she remarked, gazing across the table at Kitty on one of these occasions.

The sisters were breakfasting alone together, Mr. Leslie being absent in London.

Kitty made no reply; she was intent on the letters which Louisa had just brought in.

"Not much this morning," she said absently, after a moment. "One for father, another for father—an invoice—oh, Bess, I'm afraid he's sending down more books!"

"What about the forty-four pounds, I wonder?" cried Bess, mimicking Mrs. Turnworth. "That's the second lot in a month. I say, young Kitty, our parient is going it."

Kitty did not laugh. She had taken up, with some misgiving, a letter addressed to herself.

"This is from the bank!" she exclaimed. "Bess, the manager says he can't honour my cheque. He writes very stiffly. He says father has overdrawn his account already. Oh dear!"

"What?" inquired Bess breathlessly.

"He's not going to cash the cheque father gave you for Briggs, either—the tailor, you know."

"We shall be disgraced!" murmured Bess with trembling lips.

"What are we to do?" inquired Kitty, wringing her hands. "We are strangers here—they will think we are trying to cheat them."

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Bess dolefully. “No one would ever believe what a perfect baby poor dear innocent father is.”

“I told the butcher we should pay him to-day,” said Kitty. “Something ought to be done at once—and father’s away, and everything. Oh, if one only knew what to do!”

“Shall we ask Cousin Marian?” said Bess in a very small voice.

“No,” returned Kitty energetically. “I’d rather die!”

“So should I,” said Bess. “But she’s the only creature who could help us, unless——” She paused.

“You don’t want to ask the Hardys!” ejaculated Kitty.

“N-o,” said her sister doubtfully. “Not to ask them to help us, of course—not to lend us money. But they might be able to advise. Perhaps,” added Bess, “perhaps, Kitty, they could tell us of a good pawnbroker.”

She threw herself into Kitty’s arms with a sob, and Kitty hugged her, but absently.

“I don’t believe there’s anything we could pawn,” she said, “except father’s books—and we couldn’t touch them until he came home. In fact, we can’t do anything until he comes home. I must just write to the manager and explain that my father is away. Oh, Bess, do you think he’d cash the tailor’s cheque if we asked him as a particular favour, and told him father would make it all right when he came home? I daresay the butcher would wait, but, of course, Briggs knows nothing about us.”

“Perhaps if we went to the bank ourselves,” suggested Bess hesitatingly.

“I should sink into the earth with shame,” said Kitty.

“So should I, but it is better to be humiliated than to be dishonest,” said Bess. “It’s good for our souls, anyhow.”

Kitty did not stop to inquire into Bess’ curious system of ethics; in her present bewildered misery it certainly seemed less dishonourable to pay a bill with money which did not belong to her than to contemplate the possibility of her father’s cheque being returned to Mr. Briggs unhonoured. It would be very unpleasant, indeed, to make a personal explanation to the manager of the bank, but it seemed the only course open to them.

“Very well,” she cried ruefully. “I’ll just see Louisa, and leave a note for the butcher in case he comes, and then we’ll go.”

She left the room and Bess disconsolately betook herself to the window, looking out dismally at the busy scene in the barton.

The sun was shining brightly, and the stack appeared a very hillock of gold; the great revolving bands gleamed, too, as their edges, polished with use and plentiful oiling, caught the light. As the men tossed the sheaves they joked and laughed. The smoke of the engine formed a straight, dark column going right upwards into the blue.

Bess opened the window and leaned out with her elbows on the sill. Those poor men, working so hard yonder, were all merry enough; they had no aspirations, no carking cares—Bess loved a fine-sounding phrase even in her thoughts—they did not know what it was to feel degraded and wretched—undeservedly wretched. Bess was conscious of never having done anything to earn her hard lot, her present plight was entirely due to her father's folly and extravagance, and he would never, never be any better—never—never! He would go muddling on to the end of his life, and his innocent children would always have to suffer!

Two great tears leaped out on her pink cheeks.

Just as she was about to wipe them away, she observed a figure detach itself from the group at the foot of the rick and approach her window.

Bess paused, handkerchief in hand, but hastily decided she would not wipe away her tears; on the contrary, she made haste to send a few others to reinforce them.

It was the face of a very Niobe that encountered Stephen's astonished gaze as he paused beside the window.

"I beg your pardon," he said, as Bess gave a heartrending sob; "I'm afraid I've come at the wrong time. I'm afraid—— Are you in trouble, Miss Bess?"

"Well, yes—something has happened," said Bess; "but I don't think I could tell you—I don't think I could, indeed."

She buried her face in her handkerchief, cogitating the while as to whether it might not, after all, be expedient, in spite of Kitty's feeling on the point, to take Farmer Hardy into their confidence. He certainly was their best friend, and would very probably be something more in time; and, anyhow, she felt sure he would be kind and sympathetic, and he might be able to help them out of their difficulty. Still, it would have to be very carefully and delicately done.

She continued, therefore, to sob and shake her head, and to reply with broken, inarticulate phrases, until Stephen, deeming her reluctance unfeigned, resolved to press her no further, and was about to withdraw. Thereupon Bess raised a tearful face, and with pauses, and much hesitation, revealed to him the quandary in which she and Kitty found themselves.

“Is that all?” exclaimed Stephen, as she finished. “I’ll soon put that to rights for you, Miss Bess—don’t you fret any more. I know Mr. Watson at the bank very well. I’ll go and talk to him myself and explain matters to him. You don’t need to trouble yourself about it.”

He raised his hat and moved away, and Bess, drying her eyes for the last time, ran joyfully off to communicate the good news to Kitty.

Though she related her tale very artlessly, and with a nice adjustment of circumstances, in deference to Kitty’s well-known prejudices, the latter received the intelligence with doubtful satisfaction.

“I wish it had been anybody else,” she said; “or rather I wish it had been nobody. We ought to have managed the business for ourselves. Of course we can’t draw back now without hurting Mr. Hardy’s feelings.”

“There is really a great want of simplicity about you, Kitty,” remarked Bess loftily.

“Perhaps,” owned Kitty; nevertheless, she remained downcast all the morning.

They went out together in the afternoon, pausing involuntarily to see how the folks were getting on with the threshing.

There is a fascination about this operation which makes it impossible for even the most casual observer to pass by unheeding.

The bustle and movement, the cheery excitement of the men, who seem at such times as these to be full of joyous vigour, the colour and brilliancy which the insignificant details assume for the nonce, the brass fittings of the engine sending forth rays, the yellow straw, the golden cloud of chaff, and then the kind of rhythmic balance with which men and machinery alike fulfil each their allotted task, all form a combination as interesting as attractive.

As the girls surveyed the scene from a little distance, they observed a figure drop lightly from the stack on to the rough heap of threshed straw which had been gradually mounting beside it, and cross the yard in their direction. It was Stephen. He was coatless, and his shirt-sleeves were rolled up on a pair of arms as brown and muscular as those of any of his labourers.

He pulled these sleeves down as he ran towards them, and refastened his collar.

“I must beg pardon for being without my coat,” he said as he came up; “one of the men took it back into the house. I had to lend a hand myself this afternoon. I just wanted to tell you,” he added, turning to Bess, “that it will be all right about those cheques—the manager quite understood when I explained, and has promised to cash them.”

“Both?” exclaimed Bess. “The housekeeping one as well?” (She had narrated their troubles in detail to Stephen in the morning.)

“Yes, sure,” returned he, smiling; “’twas only a few pounds, after all. So now you’ll be easy in your minds, won’t you?” he added, looking from one to the other.

Bess thanked him effusively, and Kitty, touched by the friendliness of his tone, and his real anxiety to set their hearts at rest, smiled gratefully, too, as she said, “You are very good.”

It was a little difficult to induce Mr. Leslie, on his return, to bring his mind seriously to bear on the situation; but when he did at length comprehend the state of affairs, he was hardly less distressed than his daughters had been.

“The manager consented to cash those cheques pending my return, you say?” he asked, walking dejectedly up and down. “What’s the use of that, my dear girls? If there is no money of mine in the bank, then I have no money. I could only scrape up enough in London—just barely enough for my journey home. Why the man expects my return to improve matters,” he added, with growing irritation, “I really can’t think.”

“But you see, Father dear, we had to do something,” said Bess. “If we hadn’t, something dreadful might have happened—perhaps we should have had a bailiff in the house. They might even seize your books.”

“My books!” ejaculated Mr. Leslie, sitting down suddenly; he had turned quite pale.

“Hush, Bess, don’t say such things!” remonstrated Kitty. “Let us think what is to be done. I suppose there is some money coming in some time. When shall we have any more money, Father?”

Stimulated by Bess’ threat, Mr. Leslie made a strong effort of memory, and actually managed to recall that his dividends were due in March.

“Well, we are more than half-way through February,” returned Kitty encouragingly. “That’s not so bad. If you would only—only not get quite so many books, Father dear, I believe we should do very well.”

Mr. Leslie drew himself up, a wave of colour passing over his hitherto pale face.

“My dear children, you don’t understand,” he said. “Books are to me a necessity—at this stage of my work more vital than at any previous period. You might as well expect me to make bricks without straw.”

Bess cast a despairing glance towards Kitty, but the latter would not meet it; her eyes were bent on the ground.

Mr. Leslie looked from one to the other, and then rising, walked leisurely towards the door; he paused, grasping the handle, and again glanced round, his face twitching with genuine emotion.

“I ask you to trust me,” he said. “Some day—some day you will be glad that, to use a homely illustration, you did not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

As the door closed behind him Bess burst into a smothered laugh, a laugh that had in it more exasperation than mirth.

“Poor dear old darling,” she ejaculated; “I grant he’s a goose, but as for the golden eggs, never a chip of one will come our way, Kitty, my dear. He’s not even growing red about the comb,” added the irrepressible Bess vindictively.

“The question is,” said Kitty seriously, “what is to be done? If I could only induce father to write to the bank and say that his money was coming in next month, I daresay it would be all right. If they know he is back and he doesn’t do anything it will look so strange.”

She followed her father to the study, but he had already begun to read his notes, and tartly refused to be disturbed.

“You had better go and see the man, Kitty,” he said with a final air. “That is much the best way of solving the difficulty. Go and see the man, and make a personal explanation of our exact situation—of my exact situation, I should say. Yes, you had much better go yourself, and the sooner the better—then we shall have an end of the matter, it is to be hoped. Now leave me, my dear, leave me,” he continued irritably; “I have been too much harassed about this business as it is, and my work has already suffered. I asked you, if you remember, Kitty, I asked you as a personal favour, when we first took

up our abode here, to guard against my being hampered in this way. I thought you would have been more considerate.”

Kitty turned away without a word, less stung by the injustice than cut to the quick by the reproach. She idolised her father and wilfully blinded herself to his egotism and inconsequence. Perhaps if she herself had been more careful, more thrifty, she thought, these complications might not have occurred; she might have saved something out of the housekeeping allowance instead of being behindhand, as now, in settling the books. Well, well, the least she could do was to fulfil her father’s behests and make a personal explanation of the circumstances to the manager of the bank.

She set forth alone on her distasteful errand, concealing even its purport from Bess, whose comments on the subject she was too sore at heart to brook with patience. Bess did not suffer from the same obliquity of vision as herself where Mr. Leslie was concerned.

It was with a palpitating heart that she entered the manager’s private room, into which, at her special request, she was ushered, and that gentleman’s good-natured response to her first stammered words, though calculated to allay her perturbation, filled her mind with new qualms.

“You needn’t trouble about the matter at all, Miss Leslie,” said Mr. Watson cheerfully. “Mr. Hardy—Mr. Hardy of the Hill, you know—has already spoken to me, and practically made himself responsible.”

Kitty stared at him blankly. “How do you mean responsible?” she asked, her breath coming even more quickly than before.

“Oh, well, the word’s pretty plain, I think——” he paused, smiling. “You had better go home and ask Mr. Hardy,” he continued, the smile gradually expanding into a laugh. “He’ll tell you all about it, no doubt. Meanwhile you can be easy in your mind—we are quite ready to wait Mr. Leslie’s convenience.”

Kitty found it impossible to face those twinkling eyes any longer, and rose with a murmured farewell.

Mr. Watson set the door open for her and accompanied her down the passage. He continued to smile all the time, and as Kitty hastened along the street, she felt that the knowing gaze was still fixed upon her.

She burst breathlessly into the sitting-room at the Little Farm—

“Oh, Bess, Bess, how could you have told Farmer Hardy about our difficulties! How do you think he has settled them? By making himself

responsible for them!”

Bess, who had been curled up in an arm-chair with a kitten in her lap, looked up amazed at the torrent of words.

“Do you mean he has paid our debt at the bank?” she returned placidly. “How nice of him.”

“Bess, positively there are times when I think you have no delicacy of feeling. Paid our debt—I don’t think it can be so bad as that—but I suppose if we didn’t eventually find the money, he would have to do it. Anyhow, we are under an obligation to him—I can’t bear to think of that—a money obligation!”

“We are under heaps of obligations to him already,” said Bess, sitting up and growing red with vexation. “You like to pretend not to see things so that you needn’t be grateful—I think that’s worse than not having any delicacy of feeling, as you call it. You know perfectly well the Hardys are always doing things for us—remember the wood. You don’t suppose it was really in Mrs. Hardy’s way, do you? You think as long as you keep your head well up, and your nose in the air, you preserve your self-respect—but you don’t a bit more than I, who am not ashamed to accept favours from friends and be thankful for them.”

Kitty dropped into a chair in almost the same way as her father had done in the morning. Bess had a kind of uncanny sharpness, and for the moment Kitty was absolutely taken aback at the picture presented to her mental vision. She knew quite well that her motive was very different from that imputed to her, but she remained tongue-tied, and Bess continued to plume herself with evident satisfaction on her own superiority.

All the afternoon Kitty remained restless, and after tea again strolled out by herself, wandering disconsolately up the lane.

Sunset was over, but a faint glow lingered in the sky, and here and there were streaks of luminous green between heavy banks of cloud; the evening star was already twinkling, and the young moon had risen.

The sound of steps recalled Kitty’s eyes from the sky, and she observed a dark figure descending the lane with something white in its arms.

Still dazzled from the effects of gazing skyward, she took the advancing form for that of a workman carrying his bundle of tools, and was about to pass with a civil “Good-evening,” when the man stopped, and Stephen’s voice asked—

“Do you see what I’ve got here, Miss Leslie?”

Going nearer she saw that he was carrying a little lamb.

“It’s one of three,” he explained. “We have had to take it from its mother. I was wondering if you and your sister would like to have it as a pet. There’s lots of milk going at our place,” he added hastily; “and they are easily brought up.”

Kitty was silent for a moment, conscious of a fresh twinge of remorse. He was always thinking of them, always trying to give them pleasure—and Bess said that she, Kitty, did not know how to be grateful.

“I dare say Miss Bess would fancy it,” said Stephen quickly; “it’s more in her line than yours, I think.”

“I shall love it, too,” said Kitty as hastily. “I’ve been only—trying to say something else. I went to the bank to-day, Mr. Hardy——”

It was too dark to judge of the expression of his face; she could only just see its outline, and the resolute set of the sturdy shoulders against the dark background of the hedge.

“Mr. Watson told me what you had done,” she went on. “I didn’t know the other day—I should have thanked you more.”

Stephen hitched up the little white bundle in his arms and paused before replying—

“I don’t want any thanking—particularly as I fancy you think it a bit of a liberty.”

He spoke with a certain roughness, prompted by his real emotion.

“I don’t!” she cried with sudden energy. “Why will you always misjudge me?”

Stephen laughed.

“Can you say that you were pleased when you heard about the thing—such a little thing, too?” he added, dropping his voice.

Kitty hesitated.

“I own I wasn’t pleased,” she said. “I am not happy about it now, but it is because I feel that we let you do too much—that we are always taking advantage of your kindness—always depending upon you.”

There was a dead silence, during which the clicking of the pattered feet of some maid at the Upper Farm was distinctly audible, and then Stephen spoke—

“Miss Leslie, I’m a plain man, as I told you once, and I can only say things in a plain kind of way—and the time hasn’t come yet for speaking out all that’s in my mind, but you know very well that the little I do for you is not half—not a tenth part of what I’d like to do if I had my will. Some day I’ll put my meaning clearer. Shall I carry down the lamb for Miss Bess, then?”

“If you will be so good,” said Kitty meekly. “I’m sure she will be delighted.”

She smiled to herself somewhat sadly as she turned and went down the hill with him, finding it difficult to keep pace with his strides. The lamb was for Bess, like the Christmas roses. Farmer Hardy was a plain man, as he said, and when he wished to indicate a preference he did so unmistakably. Kitty had implied her willingness to accept part-ownership of the lamb in token of friendly feeling, but Stephen evidently meant the offering to be a love-gift, and as such bestowed it in the right quarter.

CHAPTER XVII

The blackthorn winter had come, all blue and white, with skies of cold azure and scudding fleecy clouds, a slate-coloured haze veiling the distant woods and wreaths of snowy blossom appearing amid the nipped leaf-buds of the hedge; cruel winds driving the dust along the roads and making poor folks' washing dance and turn somersaults on the clothes-lines. It penetrated through many interstices into the Little Farm and caused Mr. Leslie's chimney to smoke and his eyes to water. But it was a fine, brave, invigorating wind for all that, and made young blood glow and young cheeks rosy.

Kitty and Bess stood in the teeth of it one sunny day, with shining eyes and faces pink with excitement above their white furs. There was to be a meet within easy distance, and Stephen had borrowed a little pony-cart, and they were to drive themselves to the spot.

The pony was very fat and very good-humoured, and qualified to withstand all possible temptations to excitement, and, moreover, to submit patiently to Bess' guidance as charioteer.

"So long as you do start in good time, my dears," Rebecca reminded them, "he'll take you there as right as anything—so long as you do start in good time."

Stephen was there, too, looking his best, as he always did, in his hunting accoutrements, and Louisa stood in the background rubbing her elbows and giggling, while Cox, who was supposed to be holding the pony, was lost in profound abstraction.

"Vanity of vanities," murmured Cox as he relinquished the reins to Bess.

They were off at last, the vehicle narrowly escaping an upset at the corner, where Bess had accidentally driven into a post.

"Lard ha' mercy me!" ejaculated Rebecca, looking after them. "D'ye reckon they'll get there safe, Stephen? I'd ha' thought Miss Bess could drive better after all the ridin' lessons she've a-had!"

"Oh, she'll manage all right now they are on the straight road," said Stephen; "she happened to be looking over her shoulder just then. I don't think they could overturn that little cart if they tried."

He went leisurely up the hill again, for there was no necessity for him to start for another half-hour, and Rebecca followed, while Louisa, cheerfully prophesying that the turnout would be “het all to flinders before her young ladies came home-along,” made her way back to her own quarters.

After many vicissitudes, the sisters duly arrived at the park of a certain magnate where the meet was to take place, joining in the stream of carriages which was making its way up the avenue leading to the house.

“Isn’t this fun?” ejaculated Bess, waving her whip. “I do feel, for once in a way, we are taking our proper place in the world. This is really quite a smart little turnout.”

“Quite,” assented Kitty. She, too, was looking about her eagerly, delighting in the gaiety of the scene.

It was quite a large meet. Several ladies were “out” and many more had arrived, as has been said, in carriages. There were even one or two motor cars.

Bess fired off rapturous exclamations at half-minute intervals.

“Do look at the dogs. . . . I wish they all had red coats. . . . There’s quite a tiny child on a pony.”

Sandwiches were offered to them, and were accepted with great dignity by Bess, who, however, declined the accompanying cherry brandy. Presently her face fell.

“These are the sort of people we ought to know, Kitty,” she murmured; “and we don’t know one—not one. I wish Farmer Hardy would come up, even he would be better than nobody. Look at those two girls over there in the motor car; what jokes they are having with that boy—*Kitty!*”

“What?” said Kitty, recovering from her amazement at the tone in which her sister had said “even he.” Yet surely she was thinking of marrying Stephen Hardy.

“Kitty,” said Bess with renewed energy, and rising in the cart as she spoke; “that boy—don’t you see?—it’s Teddy Venables!”

She had, indeed, recognised the pink and white countenance of a youth whom they had both known very well in their Oxford days. So well, indeed, that they had been accustomed to call him by his Christian name, for he was a cousin of some intimate friends of theirs, and they had met him frequently even before he had come “up” as a “fresher” during the preceding year.

At the sound of Bess' voice and, possibly, of his own name, Mr. Venables turned round with slightly uplifted eyebrows and an immediate assumption of dignity. On catching sight of the sisters, however, he relinquished this attitude, sprang out of the motor, and ran towards their modest equipage with outstretched hands.

"Can I believe my eyes?" he exclaimed. "Bess! Kitty!"

"Yes, it's really us," responded Bess, permitting her hand to be warmly shaken.

"Well, who would have thought of meeting you here," ejaculated the lad.

"Surely you must have heard that we left Oxford," said Kitty. "Didn't the Brookes tell you that we were living here?"

Teddy shook his head with an air of conviction.

"They couldn't have," he said, "else I should have remembered. It was very remiss of them."

"I suppose most of our friends have forgotten us by this time," said Bess. "Poor us! We are stony-broke, you know, Teddy."

Mr. Venables looked as sympathetic as was compatible with a slight sense of awkwardness, and remarked, after a pause, that it certainly was a piece of luck meeting them there.

At that moment there was a general move towards the covert. Bess cast a little sidelong pathetic look at Teddy.

"Now, of course, you'll go back to your motor and your smart friends," she remarked; "and we shall jog along with the rabble."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," he returned. "Between ourselves, those are two awfully stuffy girls—I don't like 'em a bit. Can't you make room for me in there? That's a stiff little beast you are driving; he'll get me along all right. I'll just tell them I've met some old friends who are going to give me a lift."

He ran back to the motor, which was being got under way, and the occupants received his announcement with a mixture of amusement and surprise. The two girls looked round with undisguised curiosity, while the owner of the car, who was driving, watched Teddy's return to the Leslies with an affable grin.

"Now we are all right," he remarked, as he opened the door; "if you two would sit together we'd balance better. That's all right," as he drew in his

long legs with some difficulty and refastened the door. "If I'd only known you were living here I'd have come to see you ages ago. I've been down here nearly a fortnight. I'm staying with some cousins. I say, Bess, the motor will be into us in a minute if you waggle about like that."

"You'd better drive, I think," said Bess. "This pony has a mouth like a rocking-horse."

Teddy took possession of the reins, and the motor passed, the occupants of both vehicles smiling at each other.

Teddy was not sorry to show his housemates on what intimate terms he was with the two extremely pretty girls in the pony-cart. Both, indeed, were looking their best; Bess had never appeared to greater advantage. Teddy gazed at her with increasing satisfaction. He had not felt any particular admiration for her at Oxford, as was perhaps natural under the circumstances in which they met, but now he thought to himself that she had developed amazingly, and his spirits went up with a bound when he ascertained that they lived but a short distance away. He had hitherto found it a little dull at his cousin's house, and probably would not have remained there so long if he had not been supposed to be reading hard during this particular "vac."

"Didn't you know that the Heriots were cousins of mine?" he asked. "That's old George there—awful good chap. Haven't you come across them yet?"

"We haven't come across anybody!" said Bess. "Nobody has called—not a single creature except the Rector and his wife."

"No!" said Teddy.

"You see we are living at a farm," interpolated Kitty.

"We have only three hundred a year left," explained Bess, shaking her head. "That doesn't go very far among three people."

Mr. Venables, who had found three hundred a year go a very short way when applied to the expenditure of a single person, shook his head commiseratingly.

"Indeed it doesn't," he rejoined. "I say!"

"It is rather hard, isn't it," resumed Bess, "to be living like hermits just when we ought to be seeing a little life? Poor dear father, you see—it's all because poor dear father is so frightfully learned and clever that he has made such a mess of things. Instead of opening our minds and giving us

advantages, he goes on buying books and buying books—I believe we shall end in the workhouse.”

Kitty was beginning a warm protest, when Mr. Venables, who was a tactful person, adroitly changed the conversation.

“I’ll tell Dorothea to call, anyhow,” he said. “You’ll like her very much. She’s as jolly and good-natured as they make ’em.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of Lady Dorothea,” cried Bess eagerly. “You know, Kitty, we saw her go past the post-office one day—she’s a pretty woman.”

“Not bad-looking,” agreed Teddy; “a little *passée*, of course, but she must be over thirty. Hullo, now they’re off!”

The pursuit of sport having now become the main object, and the pony being of a placid disposition and in no way inclined to hurry himself, serious conversation was deferred till a more suitable opportunity. After a couple of hours, during which they had managed by dint of various short cuts and knowing turns, to keep up in a sort of way, the party in the governess-cart found itself hopelessly distanced, and began to think about returning home.

“How will you get back?” asked Kitty. “Heriot Grange is miles away, isn’t it?”

“It must be at least seven miles off,” responded Venables. “Are we far from your place?”

“I haven’t the least idea,” cried she with a laugh.

“Well, if it’s the other side of Branston, we’d better go that way,” said Teddy, pointing with his whip.

“You’ll have some lunch with us, anyhow?” suggested Bess.

Teddy, who frankly owned to feeling hungry, remarked that that would be a very good idea; and having turned the pony’s nose in the Branston direction, they proceeded at the best pace it could be induced to adopt.

They had not gone far on their homeward way when the sound of hoofs behind them made them look back; Stephen Hardy was trotting after them.

“I came to see if you were all right,” he remarked, as he overtook them and slackened his horse’s pace.

“Quite, thanks,” said Bess somewhat curtly.

“Yes, we have got on very well,” added Kitty quickly.

“I was kept at the last minute, and they had moved off by the time I got up,” explained he. “I missed you somehow, but if you are all right——”

“Quite, thanks,” said Bess again, with her chin a little tilted.

“We met a friend, as you see,” explained Kitty, observing that Stephen was looking with some curiosity at Teddy.

She was about to complete the introduction, when Stephen, lifting his hat, wheeled and rode off.

“Who’s that chap?” inquired Teddy, as the hoof-beats died away in the distance.

“Our landlord,” said Bess hastily, before Kitty could put in a word.

“Fine-looking fellow,” remarked Teddy.

“He has been wonderfully kind to us,” said Kitty with a reproachful glance at her sister.

Bess coloured and looked the other way.

“I think,” pursued Kitty, “it was very nice of him to run the risk of spoiling his day’s sport in order to look after us.”

“Well, that’s his lookout,” responded Bess tartly. “We don’t want any looking after.”

“Oh yes, you do,” said Mr. Venables, with a meaning glance; “but I’ve undertaken to do it, you see. Poor chap,” he added, after a pause, with a chuckle; “he looked a bit sick, didn’t he?”

Bess glanced back at him with an expression of artless surprise, upon which Teddy became more explicit; during the remainder of the drive a running fire of chaff was kept up between the two, while Kitty, leaning back in her corner, remained silent.

CHAPTER XVIII

On the shady side of the neglected shrubbery at the back of the Little Farm sat Bess one April afternoon. It was necessary to choose the shady side, for the spring sunshine was scorching—a not uncommon phenomenon in that sheltered southern county. Teddy sprawled at her feet, lying on his stomach, his Panama hat pushed back on his head, his legs waving in the air, his heels occasionally clicking together in moments of special enthusiasm. For this was an interval of what Bess called intellectual repose, and Teddy was reading aloud Omar Khayyám. They had previously wrangled for some twenty minutes over the term to be applied to this period of relaxation; Teddy declaring that the stimulating properties of the Persian poet rendered the word “repose” inapt, while Bess stoutly maintained that the characteristic of the verse was nothing if not soothing. Anyhow, as she triumphantly pointed out, after labouring so hard at the construction of the pheasantry, this break could not be looked upon in any light save that of restfulness.

Her dimples were so bewitching, and the languid grace of her attitude was so engaging, that Teddy ultimately succumbed to her arguments, and intoned the musical lines with such mellifluousness that his companion presently closed her eyes, and seemed indeed to hover on the edge of dreamland.

A pheasantry might appear a scarcely appropriate adjunct to the Little Farm; the prospective occupants of the somewhat lopsided construction were, however, no ordinary fowl, but a pair of silver pheasants bestowed on Bess by Teddy’s cousin. The sisters’ acquaintanceship with that lady was rapidly developing on intimate lines. Lady Dorothea Heriot delighted in novelty, and the piquancy of the contrast between the two pretty girls and their bookworm father, and of all three with their surroundings and circumstances, tickled her imagination. She had called on them several times, and had moreover often carried them off in her motor to her beautiful luxurious house, where they had spent pleasant hours, listening to her whimsical conversation, or examining the many art treasures which generations of Heriots had accumulated. The gardens too, now in full spring glory, were a never-failing source of wonder and delight.

The Little Farm looked very small indeed, very dilapidated, very unsatisfactory, when they returned from these expeditions; and if Bess had

not been so busy in rehearsing the clever speeches with which to astonish Teddy, she might have given way to open discontent. Teddy came almost every day, and as he was, at this period of his existence, much giving to theorising on abstruse subjects, and as he had on one occasion informed Bess that he considered her a brilliant conversationalist, and on another that he was astonished at the profundity of her mind, it behoved her to keep up her reputation in these respects. Transmigration of souls was the subject which occupied their spare moments at present, and, as Teddy remarked, Bess' views were of so daringly original a nature that they almost frightened him.

“‘I sent my soul through the Invisible,
Some letter of that after-life to spell,’”

he read now, and Bess opening her green eyes, and raising herself on her elbow, was awaiting the end of the verse in order to bring out the result of her meditations, when Kitty's voice suddenly broke the harmony—

“Bess, Bess! Did you forget that we were to ride with Mr. Hardy this afternoon? He is there with the horses now. I have been looking for you everywhere.”

Kitty, duly clothed in her habit, came towards them, walking hurriedly.

“I am so sorry, Teddy,” she continued, catching sight of that young gentleman. “I know it seems rude, but a promise is a promise—and I thought you said you were going back early,” she concluded somewhat pointedly.

Teddy sat up and looked at her, reddening a little; but Bess intervened before he could speak.

“Oh, bother! He must take the horses back again. I can't ride to-day; I'm too tired. Besides, really—I don't see why we should throw over an old friend to oblige Farmer Hardy.”

“You should have let him know if you didn't wish to ride,” said Kitty, coming to a standstill. “He has probably arranged his whole day in order to oblige us. I can't go and put him off just at the last minute.”

“Well, I'm not going!” exclaimed Bess doggedly. “You should have reminded me before. You must just say I forgot. Make him a nice little sugary speech.”

“Why must this bucolic animal be fed with sugar?” inquired Teddy. “Turnip would be more in his line.”

Kitty went slowly back to the house; she felt it impossible to continue the argument in the presence of their visitor, and, moreover, Bess' little face wore that obstinate look which it occasionally, though very rarely, assumed, but which meant business. There was no use in endeavouring to shake her resolution, but her sister's heart was hot with indignation.

Stephen listened, apparently unmoved, when Kitty presently faltered forth the best excuses she could concoct. Bess was very hot and tired, she had been working hard at the little pheasant-house which they were making near the wood-shed; the hot sun had given her a headache, Kitty thought. Meeting Stephen's eye she blushed and broke off.

"That little pheasant-house takes a deal of making," said he, smiling rather bitterly; "I'd have knocked it up in an hour or two. Well, it's natural enough. Like takes to like, I suppose. I serve my turn when there's nobody better at hand. Now, I'll take the horses back. Perhaps you'll let me know when you'd like another ride. There's no use wasting time for nothing."

"I—I—I'm very sorry too," cried Kitty quickly. "I was all ready to come—if Bess hadn't been tired."

Stephen glanced up.

"You're dressed, I see," he cried impulsively. "Why shouldn't you have your ride, Miss Leslie? No, no, of course you only come to please your sister—you'd never care to come without her."

"Yes, I would," exclaimed Kitty quickly, seeing his face fall again. "I ride to please myself. I shall be very glad to come if you'll let me."

She had hardly spoken the words before she regretted them; but it was too late to recall them. Stephen was already giving directions to his man to take the pony back, and in another moment with a pleased and eager face led forward the mare.

"'Tis a lovely day," he said; "'twould have been a pity to miss it."

They rode down the lane together, Teddy and Bess peering at them mischievously from over the wall.

"Did you try a turnip?" inquired the former in a stage whisper as Kitty passed him.

Stephen looked gravely up, his glance passing over the youth's smooth, flaxen head to rest on the pink and white countenance of Bess.

“I hope your headache will soon be better,” he said, and rode on, without waiting for a rejoinder. After they had been jogging along the road for some minutes he suddenly turned and looked at Kitty.

“Miss Bess seems more of a child than ever,” he said. “She and that young gentleman seem to understand each other very well.”

“Oh, we have known Mr. Venables a very long time,” rejoined Kitty apologetically; “and Bess is like that. She—she—it doesn’t mean anything.”

Stephen did not answer, and they rode on in silence till they reached the downs, where a long gallop made Kitty oblivious of all save the exhilaration of the moment.

When at length they turned to go homewards by a circuitous way which led them for the most part along grassy, unfrequented lanes, she was struck by Stephen’s silence and appearance of abstraction. The peculiar mellow light of late afternoon was bathing all the land, enhancing its delicate spring radiance. The untrimmed hedges were bursting into leaf, the hawthorn already showing pearly buds, while every now and then a patch of gorse, strayed from the downs above, flamed vividly orange among the prevailing golden green. Its characteristic fragrance seemed to follow them as they rode. A lark was singing high above their heads; an unseen stream trickled noisily among the rank grasses beneath the bank.

Kitty made little remarks now and then, calling attention to this or that, or praising the beauty of the day; but Stephen only answered in monosyllables when he answered at all; occasionally he did not appear to hear. His eyes were fixed on the distant hills—hills brooding under a deep blue haze; he seemed to be lost in thought.

All at once Kitty turned to him, speaking more earnestly.

“I’m afraid you are hurt at Bess being so changeable,” she was beginning, when she suddenly stopped short, startled at the expression of his face.

“It’s time we had an understanding,” said Stephen.

He laid his hand on the mare’s rein, and the animal obediently halted.

“I’ve been afraid to speak out,” he went on. “Sometimes I’ve thought it would be better to know the worst once for all, and again I’ve thought, ‘If patience will better my chance, I’ll wait.’ But I can’t stand it any longer, it’s—it’s—more than flesh and blood can bear.”

Kitty drew a hurried breath.

“I don’t think this would be a good time to speak, Mr. Hardy,” she stammered. “You see, the fact of Teddy Venables being here—I mean—it has brought back old times.”

“That’s the very reason I’ll have my answer one way or the other,” he broke in almost roughly. “I’m not a man as can submit to be taken up one minute and tossed away the next. I’ll try my luck once, and stand by it.”

Kitty stole a frightened glance at his face, and then, scarcely knowing what she did, endeavoured to twitch the rein from his grasp, and at the same time touched Tamsine lightly with her whip; but Stephen checked the mare as she would have sprung forward, and fixed his eyes steadily on the rider.

“It’s no use, Miss Leslie,” he said. “I’ve got to speak out now, and you’ve got to listen to me; but it’ll not take long. I have but one question to ask—will you marry me?”

“I!” exclaimed Kitty, turning as white as a sheet and gazing at him with starting eyes. “You don’t mean *me*, Mr. Hardy?” she added almost childishly.

“Who else?” said Stephen.

Kitty was thunderstruck, but tongue-tied too; the mere possibility that Farmer Hardy’s affections were centred in herself had never even occurred to her. Brought face to face with the fact, she found herself unable to believe it; yet she could not betray her sister.

“You’re taken aback, I see,” he pursued, watching her. “Perhaps, after all, I’ve spoken too soon. But I thought you’d ha’ guessed—oh, I know you’re above me in every way,” he went on quickly. “I’m not fit to tie your shoe—but you said we might be friends, and, I—I—I couldn’t be with you without loving you. I love you——” He broke off with a sort of gasp, continuing in a low, hurried tone, “Well, I can’t tell you how much; it don’t seem right to try to talk about it even, but I—all that man can do I’d do for you.”

Kitty gazed up at him with a nightmare-like sense of oppression. His brown face was flushed, his eyes eager; his voice shook with emotion. It was Farmer Hardy who was speaking to her like this—Farmer Hardy who was wooing her—*her, Kitty*—the contingency from which she had originally shrunk in connection with Bess seemed in her own case unendurable.

“I don’t expect you to love me as I love you,” went on Stephen; “but in time—your heart may turn to me. I just want the right to take care of you, and—make you happy.”

Kitty listened with an ever-increasing sense of bewildered terror and shame. She scarcely heeded what Stephen was actually saying, so busy was her mind in cogitating over those previous words of his—"You said we might be friends."

He thought she had encouraged him, then! With a sudden leap her mind caught the next phrase which fell brokenly from his lips: "Seeing you so lonesome seemed to give me a kind of hope."

Because they were friendless, down in the world, he thought they were on the same level!

Suddenly her own voice startled her; she spoke almost without knowing it.

"I couldn't—I couldn't! It's all been the most awful mistake. I never, never could."

Without a word Stephen loosed her rein, and sat back in his saddle. The horses went forward again, and he did not speak for several minutes; then, turning suddenly, he shot a keen glance at Kitty's face; it was agitated, alarmed, even indignant.

"Well," he said, "I'm a downright sort of man, and I like to know exactly where I stand. I'd like to know your reason, Miss Leslie? There's been a mistake, you say—have I spoke too soon, then—didn't you know I was courting you?"

"Courting me?" ejaculated Kitty, and indignation for the moment drowned all other feelings. "No, I didn't know—how could I know? How could I ever think——" she broke off, but he finished the sentence.

"How could you ever think I'd be so presumptuous—that's it, isn't it? Well, Miss Leslie, if you'll forgive me for saying so, you would have done better to have thought a bit—there is but a step, after all, between friendship and love. But I know my place now," he added; "I'll not transgress again. I said I'd speak out once, and I've done it. You'll never hear another word of love from me."

They jogged on, side by side, along the quiet lane; and presently, coming to a short piece of turf, he asked if she would like to canter. Kitty agreed, but all her former exhilaration was gone. She could never again ride with Farmer Hardy, never meet him on friendly terms. In his last glance at her she had thought to read not only bitterness but contempt. Even in the midst of the turmoil of outraged pride and indignation the consciousness stung her. It filled up the measure of his cup of iniquity.

The worst part of the business was that she could never justify her attitude towards him, nor explain the train of circumstances which had led to the present deadlock. Bess' curious temperament, and the views which she had at one time entertained with regard to Stephen; Mr. Leslie's no less remarkable idiosyncrasies, which had led to a kind of indirect and unconscious sanction of these views; Kitty's own real gratitude for the many acts of kindness which she had received, and her regard for the farmer's sterling good qualities;—all these had helped to cause this quandary.

“But a step from friendship to love!”— *There* she begged to differ from him. She could perfectly contemplate Farmer Hardy as a friend—even as a brother-in-law—but as a lover—a husband! She threw back her fastidious little head, blushing hotly. How dared he!

Bess was standing at the door when they rode into the yard, and laughingly inquired if they had had a nice ride.

Kitty made an inarticulate rejoinder as she slid down from her saddle, and Stephen raised his hat without speaking.

“Friend Hardy seems in the sulks,” remarked Bess, following her sister into the house. “Was he very cross and disagreeable while you were out?”

“He was—rather disagreeable.”

“I expect he was put out at my not coming,” returned Bess, with a comfortable little giggle. “Perhaps it's just as well,” she added reflectively. “You know, Kitty, since Teddy has come I feel that it wouldn't do to get too intimate with the Hardys. You and I were so moped before that positively our moral vision was warped—our whole world had got out of perspective. But talking with Teddy and seeing how he looks at things, it *does* seem to give one insight. After all, though we are poor we are ladies, and never can be anything else, either. So there it is.”

Kitty said no more. She was shaken, perturbed, angry, and, above all, ashamed. It was a dreadful thing to have happened to her, but it was not the mere sense of outraged dignity which made her roll her head feverishly on her pillow that night, and toss off the coverings; it was the uneasy consciousness of having acted unworthily. One by one the many benefits he had conferred upon her family rose before her; she thought of Rebecca's good-natured face, and the almost motherly kindness she had shown them; she thought of Stephen himself whom she had unconsciously misled, and to whom she had that day shown herself so ungracious and hard.

“I love you—I can’t tell you how much—it don’t seem right to talk about it.” His feeling for her was to him a sacred thing—but she had repelled it with scorn; she had not found one kind word to say to him, not even a grateful look—and he had offered her his all. She was haunted by the memory of his eyes, first ardent and pleading, then cold and hard as flint, giving her back scorn for scorn. She had offended him past forgiveness; there was no doubt of that.

CHAPTER XIX

A few days later Lady Dorothea's big motor backed, with much clatter and many smothered objurgations on the part of the chauffeur, up the lane which led to the Little Farm. Louisa, with a dressing-bag jammed beneath one stout red arm, and her cap at its most acute angle, hastened to throw the gate open.

Rebecca Hardy hailed her from the other side of the lane.

"Bless me, bain't it a bit dangerous for this great machine to come up here? It 'ud be terr'ble awk'ard if a body didn't hear it comin'. An' so many chicken about too. I thought your ladies always went down to the road to meet it?"

"My young ladies be goin' on a visit," announced Louisa delightedly. "An' there's luggage to go in this here car. Miss Bess be takin' her big box—Cox an' me couldn't carry it so far. 'Twas me as thought o' axin' this gentleman to bring the car so nigh the door as he could."

The mustachioed, leather-clad chauffeur eyed her in great contempt, and brought the motor to a standstill with a protesting air.

"Where's that luggage?" he inquired briefly, inwardly reflecting that his mistress was certainly a very erratic person. It was strange enough to visit at a farmhouse, but when it came to putting luggage—other than the family luggage—on the new motor, it was almost beyond a joke.

"Me an' Mr. Cox 'ull fetch it in a minute, sir," said Louisa.

She dumped down the dressing-bag on the shining yellow seat, and then paused to scratch her elbows after her custom.

"Ees, Mrs. Hardy, ye'd never think what lots of beautiful things the young ladies be bringin'. They be goin' to stay the week at Heriots'. Mr. Leslie, he've gone up to London again. I'll have the house to myself. I'd be frightened, only me sister Jane, she be comin' to sleep wi' I. Ees, weren't it kind o' Miss Leslie to ha' thought on it? An' Miss Bess said I was to have a fresh egg for me breakfast every marnin'."

"It'll be to-morrow morning before we're off," remarked the chauffeur impatiently. "I wish you'd tell Miss Leslie I'm waiting; her ladyship is expecting them for luncheon."

Louisa, slowly backing away from the gate, stumbled against Kitty, who had heard the car arrive, and who was now hastening down the path, followed by Bess. Cox, having been with difficulty roused from one of his usual reveries on the landing, now summoned Louisa to his aid, and the two disappeared together into the house.

As Kitty stood buttoning her gloves she heard a rustle behind the hedge over the way, and caught sight of Mrs. Hardy, just as the latter was preparing to retrace her steps up the hill.

“Good-bye, Mrs. Hardy,” she called out. “Bess and I are going away for a week.”

“So I hear,” responded Rebecca, without turning her head. “I hope ye’ll enj’y ye’selves.”

Kitty hesitated a moment, and then, judging from certain bumping sounds in the house that it would be some time before Louisa and Cox succeeded in conveying the luggage downstairs, she crossed the lane behind the car, ran through the gate on the opposite side, and caught up Rebecca before she had proceeded many yards.

“I must say good-bye to you properly,” she cried, and kissed her.

But Rebecca held her face stiffly away from her, though there were symptoms of yielding in the kind reproachful voice.

“I thought ye wasn’t goin’ to take no notice o’ us any more,” she responded. “You as used to be always runnin’ in an’ out—an’ glad I’m sure we was to have it so. Ye haven’t been a-nigh us for a week very near. An’ now to go off wi’out so much as a word. Ye’d ha’ gone off wi’out a word if I hadn’t chanced to be lookin’ over the hedge.”

“I—we’ve been so busy,” faltered Kitty.

“That’s it, I suppose,” rejoined Mrs. Hardy, in an unconvinced tone. “Miss Bess, there, she’s so busy layin’ on the grass an’ talkin’ to the young gentleman—’tisin’t to be expected *she’d* find time to look in. But *you* was different always. I looked to have you pop in some day. I said as much to Stephen. ‘I wonder,’ I says, ‘Miss Leslie doesn’t come. Her head isn’t so easy turned as the other’s,’ I said. ‘I shouldn’t ha’ thought her fine friends and their motor cars an’ all that ’ud make her forget us!’ ”

“Oh, Mrs. Hardy, is that what you thought?” gasped the girl. “Oh, I’m not like that.”

“Well, it ’ud be only natural after all, my dear,” said Rebecca, slightly mollified. “Stephen hisself said it would be only natural.”

At this moment Bess hailed her sister imperiously from the motor, where she had already installed herself.

“Do come, Kitty, we’re late already. Don’t let’s be late for luncheon, it’ll make Lady Dorothea so cross. Is that you, Mrs. Hardy? Good-bye.”

She bowed in a regal manner and waved her hand, while Kitty, after snatching another remorseful kiss, hurried out of the field.

“Vraiment,” began Bess as soon as they were seated, speaking in a fierce undertone, and in French, as a further precaution. “Je suis étonnée que tu t’oublies comme ça. Celui qui nous conduit est aussi tout-à-fait surpris.”

“*Bother* celui qui nous conduit,” retorted Kitty, half vexed, half laughing. “You may speak openly, Bess. He can’t possibly hear you.”

“My dear, the word ‘chauffeur’ would catch his ear at once. Really, Kitty, I wish you wouldn’t do such strange things. What can he have thought of your kissing Mrs. Hardy? I never did anything of the kind, even when I thought of living the simple life.”

“Oh, is that what you call it now?” said Kitty.

“Yes, I told Teddy about it; I didn’t mention Farmer Hardy’s name, of course,” she added hastily. “But about my idea that it would be nice to work in a farm, and to make butter, and to live in a quite plain, unartificial way. But he said he thought the simple life was very much overrated. I am beginning to agree with him. These little peeps that the Heriots have given us of another world—our world, after all—do seem to open one’s eyes. These little tastes of luxury—oh, Kitty, I do love luxury. Oh, Kitty, do you think Providence will ever send a motor car my way? Just think if one had a motor car of one’s own. My dear, moo-cows and baa-lambs are all very well, but they don’t really satisfy one. And as for people—give me my intellectual equals.”

Kitty made no reply; she was thinking of Rebecca’s hurt face, and of how Stephen had said it was natural that she should prefer the company of her fine friends.

Everything was in such a tangle. How could she run in and out of the house on the hill as she had been used to do, and on the other hand how was it possible to seem other than negligent and ungrateful, particularly where Rebecca was concerned?

Bess' voice broke in upon her meditations.

"How dull you are, Kitty. I'll bet you're adding up accounts in your mind, or wondering how much money father is frittering away in London. Now be sensible for once. The unpleasantnesses are behind us—leave them there. We have come out to enjoy ourselves—let's do it. Take a leaf out of my book. *I mean to enjoy every minute of the time.*"

Kitty sat up suddenly. After all, the advice was eminently sound; why not follow it? She turned to Bess with a smile.

"I believe I will too," she said.

The swift motion of the motor car was certainly exhilarating, and when they presently turned in at the gates of Heriot Grange it was delightful to notice how the limes on either side of the long avenue were bursting into leaf, to watch the herd of deer moving slowly up a grassy slope, to feel oneself surrounded by everything that was beautiful and soothing. By and by the car stopped in front of the majestic old house, and their hostess came to meet them from the sunny corner where she had been sitting, while Teddy stood already on the doorstep.

Both were pleased to see the sisters, and almost before they had shaken hands they learned several pleasant items of information.

The house was full of guests—rather amusing people, Lady Dorothea said—there were to be theatricals and a dance. The latter was intended chiefly as a reward to the performers in the former.

"For I mean to work you all very hard," said she, smiling sweetly. "I shall be merciless at rehearsals."

Presently they were joined on the lawn by several of the embryo actors, and Kitty soon found herself talking to them all as gaily as though no such person as Stephen Hardy existed and she had a large balance at the bank.

The gong summoned them to the house, Bess being presently seated between Teddy and an elderly, rather silent man, who listened, nevertheless, to her conversation with a disconcerting smile which she took to be sarcastic. Her gay little voice could be heard prattling incessantly; she was evidently enjoying herself hugely.

On Kitty's left sat another edition of Teddy; a dark-haired, sallow-faced edition, it is true, but with Teddy's power of combining actual jollity with a suggestion of depths of hidden seriousness. After a few brief introductory remarks about cricket, of which he discovered Kitty knew nothing, he

tactfully changed the subject to Keats, thence, by an easy digression, to Shelley, and before she had finished her cutlet he had darkly conveyed to her that he was more than half inclined to share the last-named poet's unorthodox views.

The place on her right hand remained vacant for some time, but when the meal was half-way over a tall man slipped quietly into it.

Lady Dorothea greeted him with one of her lazy, captivating smiles.

"I want you to know Miss Leslie," she said. "She is going to help us with our plays. Kitty, this is Mr. Mowbray, our stage manager and principal lover—our chief prop, in fact. How late you are!" she added, turning to Mr. Mowbray. "You've wasted such a lot of time. I wanted you to cultivate Miss Leslie while you were having luncheon, and to discover her capabilities and characteristics, so that you might know which part would suit her best."

Kitty, looking up shyly, met the glance of very handsome dark eyes.

Mr. Mowbray was a good-looking man of about forty, with clear-cut features and hair prematurely grey.

"I shall make up for lost time now," he said; "I don't fancy the task will be a difficult one."

He smiled at Kitty, not contemptuously nor condescendingly but, nevertheless, after a fashion which made her feel suddenly very young and insignificant indeed.

With a somewhat heightened colour she turned to her left-hand neighbour, who was surveying the newcomer with great disfavour, and endeavoured to continue the interrupted discussion.

"No," said Mr. Mowbray firmly, "I'm afraid I can't allow trivial conversation. Miss Leslie is going to talk to me. I see she has nearly finished her pudding, so we can't afford to waste time. You'd better have some more mutton, Compton,"—this to the discomfited youth,—“and talk to your neighbour on the other side. Miss Leslie and I are going to discuss weighty matters."

Mr. Compton obediently, albeit somewhat petulantly, turned his shoulder on the couple, and Kitty glanced towards Mowbray with some defiance. He was smiling again, but this time quite good-humouredly.

"What are we to talk about?" said she, smiling too, unwillingly.

“I *want* to talk about you;” he returned; “but I suppose you’re hardly ready for that yet. Suppose we talk about me to begin with. It’s much better to talk about ourselves at once, instead of losing time over preliminaries. It’s the only subject we are really interested in, after all. Well, I wonder what you think of me?”

Kitty had been about to make the obvious reply that their acquaintance was yet too short to admit of her forming an opinion, when she encountered again the gaze of those curious eyes—lazily amused, faintly interested. She threw back her little head, and said quietly—

“I think you are rather impertinent.”

“Good!” cried the other. “A most promising opening. Do you know, I fancy you’re right, though no one ever told me so before. I have been called a bold, bad man, and a dangerous character—but ‘impertinent’—from you—is rather delicious.”

He laughed, and yet Kitty felt that he was secretly a little vexed, and the discovery gave her fresh courage.

“Dangerous!” she said. “In what way, I wonder?”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Mowbray with a little smile.

Kitty looked at him again with girlish indignation.

“I suppose,” she said quickly, “you pride yourself on being a lady-killer. Have you been called that too?”

His laugh rang out, genuinely amused.

“What a charmingly antiquated phrase!” he said. “You are really very quaint. Now, I’ll tell you something about you. You don’t like me. That’s rather refreshing; most people do.”

“Well, I don’t like you very much, so far,” owned Kitty with great frankness; “but I may change my mind—when you’ve told me something more interesting about your character. At present I only know that you fancy yourself.”

“Fancy isn’t the word,” said Mr. Mowbray. “I adore myself. I am always discovering new points in my nature, each one of which I think more admirable than the last. I’ll tell you some of them later on, and try and make you share my views.”

“Don’t tell me all at once,” cried Kitty; “it might be too much for me.”

They were both laughing now, and there was real approval in the glance which Mr. Mowbray bent on her.

The conversation continued on the same lines, Kitty letting herself go for once and saying the first thing that came into her head. By and by, however, a note of underlying seriousness was perceptible. In spite of herself she was interested in the man: he was clever, attractive in a way, as she unwillingly admitted, and, moreover, she could not help feeling a dominant personality. Her cheeks were quite flushed and her manner elated by the time she left the table.

“You got on splendidly, Kitty,” murmured Bess in a slightly envious tone. “What a handsome man!—and every one says he’s so interesting. They might have given *me* somebody nicer. I’m rather tired of Teddy, and the old thing on the other side was very taciturn. Mr. Heriot,” she cried, as their host paused near them, “I want you to introduce Mr. Mowbray to me too. I am jealous of Kitty.”

Both girls were surprised to see Heriot’s usually good-humoured face become overcast. “I can’t bear the fellow,” he muttered. “I can’t think why Dolly asked him here.”

The girls looked at each other.

“I believe he’s jealous too,” murmured Bess, as he passed on.

“Mr. Mowbray said himself he was a bad, bold man,” remarked Kitty.

“Oh, *I must* know him,” ejaculated Bess.

Coffee was served on the lawn in the sunny corner before mentioned between the conservatory and the house proper. Lady Dorothea was already deep in conversation with Mowbray, and presently called Kitty to join her.

“Our stage manager has discovered that you have marked dramatic capabilities,” she observed. “He wants to put them to the test. He wants you to take Lydia’s part in the *Rivals*.”

Kitty came forward, speechless with surprise and alarm. She had not been aware she possessed any dramatic capabilities whatever.

“I don’t really think I could,” she was beginning, when her hostess cut her short.

“Mr. Mowbray says you can—and, if he says so, of course you must. We all have to do what Captain Absolute tells us. Doesn’t the name suit him well? I shall always call you Captain Absolute in future,” she added, turning

to Mowbray, who sat sipping his coffee with an absent air. "The part was made for you," continued Lady Dorothea, the words sounding less complimentary than they appeared, from the fact that they were uttered so languidly. "Don't you think so, Kitty?"

"Miss Leslie thinks I am too old," observed Mowbray, looking up suddenly and catching Kitty's eye.

As a matter of fact, the thought was at that very moment present in her mind, and she blushed hotly, and was too much confused to make any disclaimer.

"Don't be afraid," he continued, smiling to himself. "I shall make up all right, particularly if you are Lydia," he added, dropping his voice.

Two or three of the other girls who formed part of the group glanced at the newcomers with some disfavour; one, as Bess afterwards declared, with positive malevolence. Evidently the stage manager's choice of a "leading lady" did not meet with general approval. Even Lady Dorothea looked rather blank for a moment or two.

"Are you quite sure you know what you are doing?" she inquired presently in a low voice. "It's my play, you know, and I do want it to be a success."

"It shall be a success," responded Mowbray unmoved. "That's a nice, impressionable girl; I shall do what I like with her."

Kitty, hemmed in between the bench and the angle of the wall, could not help overhearing the words, and was uncertain whether to be flattered or indignant.

"But poor Ethel," continued the hostess; "she'll be dreadfully disappointed, I'm afraid. She's come down from London on purpose. I believe she's having a dress made."

"That was a mistake," he rejoined tranquilly; "another time she will realise that it is unwise to be precipitate. She's got a snub nose," continued Mowbray, gravely considering the damsel who had seemed most irate at his choice of Kitty. "A snub nose and knobby hands. I can't have a Lydia with knobby hands."

"She's very clever," said Lady Dorothea.

"No, she can't be my Lydia," said Captain Absolute firmly. "The other little thing will do all right."

He cast a swift glance over the remainder of the party, his eyes lingering for a moment on Bess, who immediately assumed an expression of elaborate unconsciousness.

“The little red-haired creature will do for ‘Lucy,’ ” he resumed.

“Now, there you are right!” she exclaimed. “The part will suit Bess Leslie to perfection. But Kitty—I don’t know about Kitty.”

“I mean her to be my Lydia,” he returned with decision. “If she isn’t Lydia, I shan’t be Captain Absolute. My dear madam, I don’t want to be bored,” he added, more emphatically. “As you won’t consent to act, there’s not another woman in the house who wouldn’t bore me except this one.”

At this point Kitty could endure her position no more, and stepped out of her lurking-place in front of them.

“I’ve been an unwilling eavesdropper,” she began. “I heard every word you said—and, please, I think I’d rather not act at all. I’ve never done such a thing, and I don’t—I don’t——”

“You’re going to act,” said Mowbray; “and you’ll do very well—much better than if you had preconceived notions which had to be got rid of. What you don’t possess naturally I shall put into you.”

CHAPTER XX

The ensuing week passed like a dream, as Bess said; indeed, the phrase was apt enough; the days were packed so full of varied unlooked-for incident.

All their circumstances appeared so unusual, and the sisters themselves were conscious of so many new feelings and aspirations that, had there been time to pause, they might have doubted not only the tangibility of their surroundings, but their own identity. They were petted by their hostess, brought forward by Mr. Mowbray, and, being naturally gifted with certain quaintness and originality which marked them off from the ordinary run of girls, soon found themselves unexpectedly popular. It was lucky for them that their visit took place during the spring, for they were sufficiently well supplied with pretty, light frocks—remnants of their equipment for last year's Eights' Week, to hold their own with other more fortunate maidens; they were both extremely pretty, could dance well, and, moreover, under the stage manager's guidance, appeared indeed to possess those histrionic gifts which he had been the first to discover. Bess was a born actress, and, as Lady Dorothea had foretold, played "Lucy" to perfection. Kitty was adaptable, as Mowbray had remarked, and caught at his suggestions with a quickness which delighted the onlookers. It might be that these were not very critical, consisting as they did, for the most part, of admiring young men, with whom they danced and played tennis in less strenuous intervals.

Mr. Mowbray himself had a rare dramatic gift, and at times it seemed to the girl as though she caught a kind of reflex of his power. It must be owned that during these days her head was a little turned. Throughout the last year she had been starved of her girlish birthright of admiration and innocent pleasure, and now this sudden whirl of new and delightful experience carried her away. After all, she was young, as Bess had said, and pretty. She had never before realised how pretty she was, but she knew that people thought her pretty; she knew, in particular, that Mr. Mowbray thought her pretty. Not that he ever told her so in words. But she frequently caught his eyes resting on her with approval, and he managed to convey to her in many undefined ways an admiration that seemed to deepen as the days went by. It was chiefly when they were alone or unnoticed by their fellow-guests that he suffered this admiration to become evident. Once he gave her some beautiful white roses, evidently hothouse grown.

“Have you been robbing the conservatory?” she asked tremulously.

“No, I got these down from London for you,” he returned. “You remind me of them.”

“I shall wear them to-night,” said Kitty with a shy smile.

“No, don’t do that,” he rejoined quickly. “It’s to be a secret between you and me. I don’t want to make you remarkable,” he added.

She drew herself up with that little haughty look which always amused him, and he went on quickly before she could speak: “Carry them off to your room, and put them in water, and think of me whenever you look at them. That’s what I want.”

Meeting his eyes with a new ardour in them, Kitty found herself unable to protest.

Bess of course exclaimed over the roses, and Kitty did not hide the identity of the donor from her.

“He means business,” was that young lady’s comment. “I rather like his being so mysterious. Oh, why haven’t I got somebody exciting, too? Mr. Vavasour Raymond is so fearfully donnish; and, really, to old Oxfordians like us a don isn’t delirious. He used to be a Fellow of All Souls, Kitty; did you know that? And what do you think he talks about?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure—he does talk to you a good deal, Bess.”

“Well, he talks of nothing but father’s book! Fancy anybody being interested in father’s book! He really got quite animated over it.”

“How on earth did he know anything about it?”

“Oh, I told him. He said he was a philologist, so I said father was one, too—and it came about in that way. He wants to be introduced to father—Lady Dorothea’s to bring him over some day. I think he is interested in me, too—as well as father’s book, you know.”

“But, Bess—he is quite elderly.”

“Yes, he is rather ancient—still, he’s awfully rich. I dare say he’d give me a motor car, you know.”

“Oh, Bess, don’t talk like that.”

Bess sat crouching, elbows on knees and chin in hand, considering her. Presently she gave one of her elfish laughs.

“Kitty, do you think Mr. Mowbray is going to be the love of your life?”

“Hush!” cried Kitty indignantly.

“Well, but is he? I want to know.”

“I can’t tell,” replied Kitty slowly, “yet.”

“If I were you,” resumed Bess, after a moment’s reflection, with that precocious worldly wisdom which always shocked her elder, but which, nevertheless, as she was forced to own, was generally apt, “if I were you, my dear, I should hold myself well in hand. He is a delightful man, but I don’t think he’s trustworthy.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Kitty, turning quickly.

“Well, I feel it in my bones,” returned Bess. “Don’t you?”

Kitty made no reply, but her face clouded over.

That night it chanced that Lady Dorothea accompanied them to their room and caught sight of the flowers.

“My dear, what lovely roses,” she said, examining them more closely. “Where did you get them?”

“Captain Absolute presented them to Lydia,” said Kitty, after a moment’s hesitation.

Lady Dorothea paused, too, before speaking again. She looked at the roses critically, smelt them, and set down the glass. Then she laid her hand on Kitty’s white shoulder.

“Don’t burn your fingers, Kitty dear,” she said. She kissed her and moved towards the door; then she turned again.

“Remember there’s Lady Ellesmere to be reckoned with,” she observed with a little laugh. “Don’t tempt him from his allegiance.”

She was gone before either of the sisters could reply; even after the door closed neither of them spoke. Kitty unfastened her dress and took down her hair. Then she remarked, in an indifferent tone—

“I suppose he’s in love with Lady Ellesmere, whoever she may be.”

“Perhaps Lady Ellesmere is in love with him,” rejoined Bess. “If so, I fancy she’ll find herself out of it, poor dear lady.”

“I wonder if he’s engaged to her,” pursued Kitty. “Perhaps I oughtn’t to ——” she broke off.

“Oughtn’t to—what?” cried Bess. “You’re not doing anything, Kitty. It’s all on his side. He singled you out from the first.”

“You said yourself you didn’t think he was trustworthy.”

“Neither do I, and that’s just his charm. I hate your stolidly respectable pillars of men, who never vacillate. I should like a man best who had been in love with lots of women, but loved me most of all. There’d be some glory in that. Now don’t run to extremes, Kitty dear. You needn’t give your heart all in one piece straight away—but just hold on to it tight, and play a waiting game. And whatever you do, don’t choke him off.”

Having delivered herself of this sage advice, in an oracular tone which would, at another time, have provoked Kitty’s laughter, Bess devoted herself to the brushing of her own ruddy locks. This she invariably did in front of the looking-glass, her pleasure in their appearance being enhanced, on this occasion, by the fact that the electric light overhead brought out marvellous gleams from the crisp curls. She smiled at herself from different angles, and practised the particular roguish look which Teddy had found so damaging.

“If Mr. Mowbray wasn’t your property, Kitty, my dear,” she added by way of postscript, “I should certainly try to catch him myself. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to pick him off some other girl. I wonder if you would care? Should you care very much?”

“Bess, you’re distinctly growing vulgar,” rejoined her sister. “Now be quiet—I am going to say my prayers.”

She sank on her knees beside her bed, and Bess obediently kept quiet; quiet at least as far as externals were concerned, but there was a twinkle in her eyes which denoted the inward workings of her mind.

“She didn’t contradict me,” she said to herself. “She is beginning to care—I only hope she won’t care too much.”

CHAPTER XXI

“All good things come to an end,” said Bess dolefully. “Of course, I know that. You needn’t quote your homely little saws to me. I don’t mind the good things coming to an end so much as the bad things beginning. And that’s what’s going to happen to us.”

“You can’t say they are beginning,” said Kitty drearily. “Things have been bad—at least, pretty bad—for a long time.”

“Teddy says—I don’t think it is quite original—no, now that I think of it, it’s a distinct crib from Omar Khayyám—you know:

‘And by and by my soul came back to me,
And answered: Thou thyself art Heaven and Hell.’

Well, Teddy said that things assumed different aspects in their relations to us according to the changes in ourselves. For instance, we thought Louisa’s blunders rather amusing at first—but now, coming back from the Grange, where everything was so perfectly done, we shan’t see any fun in them.”

The girls were once more seated in the Heriots’ motor car, accomplishing the return journey with greater speed than suited their actual mood. Bess was the more melancholy of the two. Kitty was still a prey to the curious uneasy excitement of which she had been conscious during the last few days.

“Lady Dorothea is coming to tea to-morrow, you know,” she observed presently.

“And Mr. Mowbray,” added Bess. “I wonder what he will think of our squalid dwelling-place. I dare say he has imagined till now that we are quite smart, well-to-do people.”

“Lady Dorothea will have told him all about us,” said Kitty.

“I doubt it. She was much too much taken up with the play. Besides, she is such a dear, delicious, vague thing—she would probably fancy he would know our circumstances by instinct. I *feel* that Louisa has sent the best tea-cloth to the wash, and has knocked the handle off the cream-jug.”

Kitty thought both these hypotheses sufficiently likely, and made no effort to contradict either.

“Oh,” resumed Bess, after a brief and gloomy pause, “if there were only something nice waiting for us—but there won’t be. The letters will be all in blue envelopes with stripy insides; and father will be pensive and magisterial, and will just unbend enough to tell us he has spent his last penny in London; and Cousin Marian will be dropping in to tell us how foolish it is for us to indulge in pleasures beyond our station; and everything else will be flat, flat, flat!”

Kitty was still silent. Amid the prevailing gloom there was for her at least a bright spot—a brightness of the will-o’-the-wisp order it must be owned, but containing an element of fascination from its very uncertainty. Would Gordon Mowbray be as good as his word? Would he come? And if so, what would happen?

“Talking of the aspect of things,” went on Bess in a tone of sententious melancholy, “how differently we look on the Hardys now, don’t we? They haven’t changed, poor people. They have always been kind and common, just as they are now. But we have changed; you know we simply can’t meet them on the same footing.”

Kitty suddenly turned on her sister with an asperity that startled her.

“Bess, you have the most horribly crude, uncomfortable way of putting things. We are not snobs, I hope. I may have reasons of my own for not going to the Hill at present——”

“Ahem!” said Bess gently.

“But it is not—I say it is *not*—that we have made fine friends and want to give ourselves airs.”

“It’s all very well to talk,” rejoined Bess. “You must own it would be rather awkward if in the middle of tea to-morrow Rebecca Hardy were to tap at the window, or if Stephen were to walk in and ask if we should like a ride.”

Kitty was again reduced to silence, and Bess went on with triumphant intonation. “We made a mistake in allowing them to become so intimate. Now, in order to make them keep their distance, we have to do what is as painful to ourselves as to them. We must *ge-ently* drop them, Kitty, my dear.”

“I for one will never do that,” cried Kitty.

“Well, all I can say is,” exclaimed Bess, clutching her by the wrist to emphasise the words, “if Gordon Mowbray comes in contact with the

Hardys you'll be sorry for it."

Both were silent after this; a complex and very disquieting train of thought having been aroused in Kitty's mind. She could not share Bess' cool and somewhat cynical attitude. She was loyal by nature, and too fair-minded to wish to cast off such true friends as the Hardys had shown themselves, even to avoid the risk hinted at. Had it not been for Stephen's unfortunate revelation she would have stoutly refused to make any change in her relations with the farmer and his mother; but as matters now stood it would be impossible to carry on the former free and familiar intercourse.

A meeting between Mr. Mowbray and Stephen would certainly be awkward—awkward in many ways.

Oddly enough Kitty found herself more occupied with cogitations as to what Farmer Hardy would think of Mowbray than of the impression which the farmer would produce upon the fastidious fine gentleman, her more recent admirer.

As the car halted outside the gate of the Little Farm, Stephen rode slowly down the lane from the opposite direction. The space was so narrow that he had perforce to wait until the sisters' luggage had been removed. He took off his cap, but did not speak. Bess, after majestically acknowledging his salutation, went indoors; Kitty, however, lingered hesitatingly inside their own gate.

"I hope Mrs. Hardy is well?" she hazarded.

"Quite well, thank you," responded Stephen.

He sat motionless in the saddle, though his horse was exhibiting signs of impatience and alarm at the clattering of the motor. Kitty, after a pause, timidly remarked on this.

"I am afraid your horse will be frightened," she said. "The car will be going away directly, and it makes such a noise at starting."

"'Twill be a good lesson for him," he rejoined. "He will have to learn to put up with motor cars. This one will be here pretty often, I suppose."

His last words were drowned by the curious medley of sounds which heralded the motor's departure. The horse plunged violently, and, when a prolonged hooting announced the chauffeur's intention of turning into the main road, reared in somewhat dangerous fashion. Stephen, however, lost neither wits nor temper, and after a brief struggle obtained mastery over the frightened creature and trotted off briskly in the wake of the car.

Kitty turned into the house, impressed, but also a little annoyed. He seemed to concern himself with the prospective visits of the Heriots and their friends, and the changes which must necessarily ensue in the lives of his tenants, as little as with the capers of his horse. She smiled rather bitterly; she needn't have worried herself so much as to the effect Mr. Mowbray would produce on him—neither of the two men would trouble his head about the other.

On the next day Lady Dorothea and her party duly arrived, and everything, as Bess subsequently observed, went off splendidly. It was luckily warm enough to sit out of doors. Tea was served on the grassy bank near the shrubbery, all preparations having been made beforehand; and Louisa, by superhuman efforts, contrived to carry the kettle without spilling more than a third of its contents over her clean apron, and to bring fresh relays of buttered toast without letting the plates fall.

Mr. Mowbray, sitting cross-legged on the ground, appeared to enjoy himself amazingly; his eyes wandered from the budding lilac trees to Kitty's face, from the old moss-grown roof of the house back to Kitty again; from the undulating line of ricks which peeped over the crumbling walls, ever back to Kitty. Once, meeting his glance, she turned to him inquiringly, and he replied in a low voice to the unspoken query—

“I am making you fit in.”

“Is that difficult?”

“No, not at all; these quaint surroundings are very appropriate.”

Overhearing Teddy announcing his intention of appearing early on the morrow to finish the pheasantry, he turned to Kitty with a peculiar smile; and when Lady Dorothea and the remainder of the party had gone to inspect that lopsided erection, the future occupants of which were meanwhile languishing in a disused henhouse, he observed meaningly that young Venables was a privileged person.

“Why shouldn't I come over and do a little carpentering, too?” he added.

“Too many carpenters might spoil the house,” said Kitty. “Teddy is a very old friend,” she went on, after a moment.

“And I am a very new one,” said Mowbray. “I am the more anxious to make up for the lost time when I didn't know you. On second thoughts I don't think I care about carpentering, and it would rather bore me to come here at the same time as Master Teddy. But I shall drop in unexpectedly some day. It must be soon, because I am going away.”

He noted with satisfaction that her face fell.

“I think I’ll come to-morrow,” he went on, watching her.

“Lady Dorothea will think it odd,” said Kitty, regretting the words almost as they were spoken.

“I shan’t tell Lady Dorothea.”

“But Teddy will.”

“I’ll elude Teddy. What is that little wood up there on the crest of the hill?”

“Oh, that is—just a little wood,” returned she. “It belongs to our landlord.”

“Isn’t it called the Lovers’ Walk?” he inquired.

“How do you know?” cried Kitty.

“I know a great many things. You often walk there after tea, don’t you?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted unwillingly. “I suppose Bess told you.”

“Your sister did certainly draw a mournful picture of your solitary roamings in that wood, pointing out with great perspicacity that the Lovers’ Walk was obviously meant to be paced by couples.”

“I wish Bess wouldn’t be so silly!” exclaimed Kitty irritably.

“I don’t think the remark was intended for me; no, now that I think of it, it was addressed to young Venables, but he, no doubt, finds Elysium in the pheasantry. You and I would have the wood to ourselves.”

“I’ve never”—said Kitty falteringly—“I’ve never done things like that.”

“You will now,” he said persuasively. “If you have walked there by yourself, why not with me? Do you wish to avoid me?”

The last remark was made suddenly and in an altered tone. She glanced up a little apprehensively; there was an angry light in his eyes, his brows were drawn together.

“I may have much to say to you,” he added gently.

Approaching voices were now heard, and Kitty jumped up and ran to meet Lady Dorothea. Shortly afterwards the little party broke up, the girls accompanying their guests to the road where the car was stationed.

“This is the most exquisite hour of the day,” said Bess, letting her head fall back, and looking upwards at the clear sky, against which the treetops, as yet scantily clad, swayed gently in a light breeze.

“The weather is settled,” said Mr. Mowbray in his low even voice. “It will be just as exquisite to-morrow. It is six o’clock,” he added, drawing out his watch negligently—“just six. At six to-morrow I shall be in close conversation with a friend.”

“Shall you?” asked Lady Dorothea, glancing back over her shoulder.

“Yes, I promised to go and see someone to-morrow.”

“That man at Sturminster?”

“No—the other side.”

“But I wanted to take you to the Blairs’ to-morrow.”

“Very sorry,” said Mowbray. “You’ll have to go without me. This is a promise.”

Though he did not look at Kitty as he spoke, she understood his meaning. She feigned to be much occupied with Lady Dorothea, but when she had helped that lady to install herself in her special corner, and had shaken hands with her, and had responded to a number of farewell jests and injunctions, she had still to reckon with Mr. Mowbray.

“Au revoir, Miss Leslie,” he said, with an inflection, designed, as she knew, to call attention to the wording of his leave-taking.

“Good-bye,” said Kitty lightly.

He smiled and got into the car, leaving the girl baffled.

He seemed quite sure of her; her pride rose up in arms at this, yet, somehow, in her own heart she felt that he would not be disappointed. After all, why not? He had already spoken plainly enough, and had intimated that it was his intention to speak yet more plainly on the morrow. Was she not bound to give him a hearing? And why not in a place where they were unlikely to be disturbed? She could not fancy Mowbray at ease in their poky little sitting-room, with Bess popping in and out, and Louisa probably bursting open the door; not to speak of the possibility of a visit from Mrs. Turnworth. Kitty inwardly enumerated these arguments many times during the evening without, however, succeeding in convincing herself that they justified her proposed action. Should she tell Bess—perhaps ask for her companionship on the morrow? Hitherto she had never kept secrets from

Bess. They had till quite lately discussed Mr. Mowbray with extreme candour—on Bess' side at least. Yet somehow Kitty felt she could not take her into her confidence on this occasion. She was half afraid of Mowbray—in fact, at times she thought she feared more than she liked him. She had a nervous dread of making herself ridiculous in his eyes, and felt that she would rather stay away altogether than risk such a contingency. If she appeared in the wood with Bess by her side he might think her a prude, or else a silly child who made mountains out of molehills; he might even be really angry and break with her, and Kitty did not want that.

CHAPTER XXII

It was, as Mr. Mowbray had prophesied, just such an exquisite evening as the preceding one on which he strolled along the Lovers' Walk at the appointed hour or rather a little before it. He had decided that it would never do at this stage of affairs to let Kitty wait for him.

He had paced up and down the mossy path two or three times, always being careful to keep in sight of the stile, when at last he saw her appear.

"Good!" he said, coming to a halt, and smiling to himself as he flicked away a fragment of moss which had attached itself to his sleeve.

He had driven himself over in the Heriots' dogcart, which he had put up at the Crown, and then leisurely walked across the fields to the trysting-place. He was quite ready for Kitty—was she equally ready for him?

She advanced, looking about her in an agitated, not to say alarmed, way; he let her get quite close to the stile before he showed himself.

"I've been waiting ages," he said, extending his hand to help her over.

"It's only just six," said Kitty.

"I have been meditating mournfully on Browning's lines," he went on; "‘Never the time and place’—you know them?"

"Yes," said Kitty, reddening. She was now on the hither side of the stile, and he turned, walking with her up the path again, and quoting the lines in question under his breath:

“‘Never the time and place, and the loved one together,
This moss how soft to pace, this May, what magic weather’—

(It isn't May, yet, but that's a detail.)

‘Where is the loved one's face?’

I have asked myself that question a dozen times at least.”

Kitty was tongue-tied. She was not prepared for what seemed to be such an abrupt coming to the point. They walked on for a few moments in silence. A thrush was singing overhead; the first primroses, still in bud, were peeping out from among tufts of crinkled leaves; the wood anemones were in full bloom—Mowbray stooped and picked two or three, smiling to himself as he did so.

“They are so pretty,” said Kitty, instinctively snatching at what she thought a safe subject. “It is a pity they die so soon.”

“They require very delicate handling,” he rejoined; “they remind me of you.”

“Like the roses,” cried she with a little laugh; then, catching herself up suddenly, “do I require delicate handling?”

“Very; I am hesitating how to begin.”

“I don’t think you generally hesitate—much,” remarked Kitty with her eyes on the ground.

“That’s true,” he admitted.

A silence ensued, during which the girl’s heart beat fast. The remembrance suddenly flashed across her of her former dream in this very place, of a hero to come—a hero whom her fancy had constructed much in the likeness of the man at her side. Was it some premonition of her fate which had inspired her? Here was the tall figure, here were the keen eyes, here, in particular, were the long, artistic hands. Her dream lover was to have been an artist—well, in temperament, though not by profession, was not Mowbray eminently artistic? Did the inner man correspond to her ideal?

Looking up timidly, she met his eyes.

“Well,” he inquired, “what is the result of your meditations?”

“Meditations are private things,” said Kitty with an effort to speak in her ordinary tone.

“Are you wondering if you can trust me?” he went on.

“Not exactly,” faltered she.

“You do ask yourself that question sometimes, though, don’t you?”

“Perhaps.”

“Well,” he said, “some people would tell you I am not to be relied on.”

Kitty roused herself at this.

“So you said when we first met,” returned she with spirit. “I am quite willing to take the fact for granted.”

“Nevertheless,” he resumed, looking at her boldly, “I think *you* trust me; otherwise you wouldn’t be here. As you say, there is no use harking back to

our starting-point. Our intimacy has made strides since then. We may speak out our minds plainly. I am going to speak plainly to you now.”

“Are you?” asked Kitty, trembling a little.

He had stopped short and turned so as to face her. He leaned forward now, dropping his hands lightly on her shoulders.

“I am going to tell you point-blank that I love you,” he said gravely.

Kitty, too, stood quite still, flinching a little under his touch, and without daring to raise her eyes. So the moment had come—the great moment about which she, like other girls, had often vaguely speculated. She ought to feel overpoweringly happy, ecstatic even; no doubt that would come by and by; just then she was only bewildered, and very much abashed.

“I don’t know you yet,” she stammered, after a pause.

“You shall learn to know me,” said he. “You shall learn to know love. You don’t know what love is now, Kitty.”

“I suppose I don’t,” faltered she.

She felt her answers were lame and flat, and told herself that he must think her a very schoolgirl. She stood, looking constrained and awkward, her hands hanging stiffly by her sides, her head drooping. Mr. Mowbray’s right hand dropped from Kitty’s shoulder, and, after a moment’s hesitation, touched her chin, tilting her face upwards. He bent towards her, but Kitty, divining his intention, sprang back.

“It’s too early for that, yet,” she cried. “Besides, I—I haven’t said—I haven’t said——”

“I haven’t asked you to say anything,” he returned. “I am going to tell *you* some things, and you are going to listen. We are teacher and pupil, remember. You’ve got to be docile.”

He took her hand, and, although she made an effort to withdraw it, held her fast.

“You must listen,” he said. “This is the first of many talks. Let us sit down. Now, shall I begin to explain to you something of this wonderful problem—Love?”

“Yes, but—let me go, please. I—I must think——”

Mowbray went on laughing softly, without relaxing his grasp. “Why, what a baby it is! Are you going seriously to tell me that no one has ever

spoken to you of love before?"

Kitty's face changed; her eyes dilated with a sort of terror.

"Must I tell you that?" she asked, almost tremblingly.

He burst out laughing, and suddenly flung his disengaged arm about her.

Kitty gave a little scream.

"Mr. Mowbray! How dare you? I said I wouldn't allow it."

"You are simply too adorable," he began, but stopped short. His expression changed, and he quickly withdrew his arm, for Stephen Hardy suddenly came striding towards them through the undergrowth.

As he halted before them, Mowbray sprang to his feet with a short laugh, but he looked deeply annoyed. Kitty rose also, much confused, and presently, when she stole a glance at Stephen's face, alarmed. She had never seen him look like that before.

"What are you doing here?" he cried fiercely to Mowbray. "This is my land—I'll not have you set foot on it!"

He raised his arm threateningly as he spoke, and Kitty gave a little cry.

"Really, my friend," said Mowbray, speaking lightly, though he turned livid and stepped back involuntarily, "it's not necessary to be so violent, even if I am trespassing."

"Mr. Hardy," gasped Kitty, "I can't understand your rudeness. Why, everybody comes here."

Stephen wheeled quickly, and her eyes fell.

"I know what I am about, Miss Leslie," he said after a scarcely perceptible pause, his voice still harsh. "You've been free to come here; but I won't have you here in such company. You had better go home, now."

"My good fellow," said Mowbray, "I should hardly think it your province to choose Miss Leslie's company."

"It's my business to see that no young girl is in *your* company while I can help it," returned Stephen. "Go home, I tell you, Miss Leslie."

"You'd better go, Kitty," said Mowbray quickly.

"*Kitty!*" ejaculated Stephen. "Has it come to that already? You've not lost much time!"

“How dare you!” cried the girl, stung by his tone. “No, I shall not go away. I do not choose this gentleman—my friend—to be insulted on my account.”

“Then I’ll tell this gentleman—your friend—this much,” retorted Stephen grimly, “I give him two minutes to clear out. Two minutes. If he doesn’t go then I shall do what I’d be sorry to do with you standing by.” He drew out his watch as he spoke.

Mowbray gave utterance to a forced laugh.

“This is not a pretty scene,” he said, in a voice which shook—with anger, as Kitty thought. “I confess I have no mind to enter into a bout of fisticuffs with a clod-hopper; so I will say ‘au revoir,’ Kitty. I’ll explain matters to you another day. This fellow has evidently a spite against me.”

“One minute gone!” said Stephen.

Without another word Mowbray turned and walked quickly away, humming a tune, and catching at the leaves of the branches which crossed his path.

Kitty was momentarily taken back at this speedy capitulation, but almost simultaneously came the recognition of the dread such a man would have of a vulgar brawl, particularly in her presence. With flashing eyes she turned to Stephen; the latter, who had been scornfully gazing after the departing figure of his rival, brought back his eyes sternly to her face.

“Mr. Hardy,” she cried, “I will never forgive this insult—never! The fact of our being your tenants gives you no right to interfere with our private affairs, and if you *have* been our friend that should be a reason for you to show me respect instead of—instead of—— Oh, how could you bring yourself to speak as you did just now?”

She could hardly check her angry sobs, but Stephen seemed unmoved except to greater severity.

“The disrespect was not on my side, Miss Leslie,” he said. “And talking of insult—what made you call out just now—just before I came?”

Kitty’s eyes drooped, but she presently rallied her self-possession.

“That is a question you have no right to ask, and as for your hint that—that it was Mr. Mowbray who was wanting in respect to me, I can only say you are not speaking the truth.”

“Come, come,” said Stephen roughly, “there’s no use denying it, Miss Leslie. When a married man, and one that’s known to be a bad character, makes love to a young girl, what is he doing but insulting her? For that matter,” added Stephen, with increasing indignation, “ ’twasn’t a very respectful thing to ask you to meet him at this time of the evenin’. ’Tis the sort of way a man might carry on with a light-minded woman—not a young lady like you.”

Kitty’s brain reeled. *Married . . . light-minded*. Even amid the whirl of her thoughts these two words seemed to stamp themselves upon her brain.

“Married!” she exclaimed hoarsely. “It isn’t true! He can’t be! Oh, I know you are making a mistake!”

“No mistake at all,” answered Stephen. “He was down here for the hunting season two years ago, and I have seen him dozens of times, and his wife too—Lady Ellesmere. She’s a good bit older nor him, but that’s no excuse. There were tales enough about him that time, I can tell you. Since you know so little about him, Miss Leslie, let me warn you he is a man no young girl should be seen with.”

Kitty made an attempt to move away, but her limbs failed her, and she dropped upon the ground. Her first indignant impulse of disbelief was checked by the name which Stephen had just pronounced—Lady Ellesmere. What was it that Lady Dorothea Heriot had laughingly said? “Remember, there’s Lady Ellesmere to be reckoned with—don’t tempt him from his allegiance.”

“Don’t tempt him,” as a light-minded girl might do. No doubt Mowbray himself had deemed himself at liberty to play with—to insult her. If Stephen had not come up at that moment he would have kissed her. She felt ready to sink into the earth with shame. Now that the spell was so rudely broken, she could hardly realise how it had been possible to succumb to it—she who had always held her head so high, who had repelled with so much scorn the honest love of the man who now stood looking down at her with such grave disapprobation.

She buried her face in her hands, and presently he spoke again.

“I know I oughtn’t to take so much upon myself,” he said; “you think so, anyway. But there don’t seem to be anybody to look after you. Your father takes no care o’ you—an’ these new friends of yours—I don’t know what kind of folks they can be. So I’ll warn you, Miss Leslie, for this once. Don’t you play with fire, or you’ll get burnt.”

Kitty, still hiding her face, made no response. She heard Stephen begin to walk away and then pause, but she did not raise her head.

“There’s one thing—I don’t want you to think that I’ve been spying on you,” he said quickly. “I heard you call out, and I thought someone was hurting you—that’s why I came.”

He was gone. Kitty waited till the sound of his retreating footsteps had died away, and then, throwing herself face downwards on the ground, gave way to the sobs which she had long been struggling to repress.

CHAPTER XXIII

Kitty found, to her relief, the household of the Little Farm taken up with a new excitement when she slowly dragged herself homewards. Mr. Vavasour Raymond had called during her absence, and had, moreover, promised to return on the morrow, when her father had undertaken to read him certain extracts from the great work. Mr. Leslie had been much pleased and flattered by the visit, and by the admiring appreciation of the younger man, to whom he had, even in this first interview, outlined the general aim of the book. Under Raymond's genial encouragement the scholar had not only come out of his shell, but out of his sanctum, had drunk tea with Bess and their visitor in the girls' sitting-room, and now jubilantly awaited his elder daughter by the little gate.

"It has been a delightful experience, my dear," he said, after relating to her what had taken place. "I scarcely realised till now how absolutely starved I have been for the lack of intellectual sympathy."

"Just what I say!" exclaimed Bess. "Till Teddy came—and Mr. Raymond—one had no one with whom to exchange an idea. Gracious! Kitty, what have you been doing to yourself?"

At this moment she caught sight of Kitty's pale face and swollen eyes.

"I have been having a most dreadful headache," said Kitty, trying to speak lightly, "and I think I must go and lie down now."

"Do, my dear," said Mr. Leslie, who, however, scarcely glanced at her, so absorbed was he in recalling sundry gratifying items of the recent conversation. "Be quite well for to-morrow. We might have breakfast a little earlier. I shall be busy all the morning making selections and preparing notes. I am really quite anxious to know how the main scheme of the undertaking strikes our new friend. He seemed to catch even at the vaguest hint with"—he paused for a word—"with avidity—positive avidity."

He turned, smiling to himself, to re-enter the house, and Bess grasped her sister's arm.

"Come upstairs, Kitty; I'll help you to bathe your head."

She almost dragged Kitty upstairs and into their room, where she double-locked the door, and then, laying her hands on Kitty's shoulders, looked keenly into her face.

“Don’t try to humbug me with headaches,” she remarked sternly. “You’ve been simply crying your eyes out. Now, what’s it all about? Why didn’t you come in to tea? What have you been doing?”

“Oh, Bess!” cried Kitty, bursting into fresh tears. “I can hardly bear to tell you, even you. I’m a wicked, wicked, shameful, good-for-nothing girl! I’ve—I’ve been deceitful even with you, but I am awfully punished.”

Bess’ first impulse was to shake the shoulders that she grasped; but, melting at Kitty’s distress, she hugged her warmly.

“Never mind, my own darling sister, you said you would always love me, no matter what I did, and I’ll always love you; but I can’t think what you can have done that’s so dreadful. Still, you have been funny with me, lately—mysterious and queer. Do tell me everything now—I might be able to help you.”

But Kitty shook her head mournfully.

“Is it anything about Mr. Mowbray?”

Kitty hid her face on Bess’ plump shoulder.

“Bess, I’ll tell you—he—he asked me yesterday to meet him this evening in the Lovers’ Walk.”

“Oh—h—h,” said Bess with a wriggle of excitement; “and did you go? Fancy your never telling me anything about it,” she added, her voice dropping from the high key of delighted curiosity to an aggrieved tone.

“Oh, Bess—yes, I did go. I—I thought—he said he wanted to see me for something very particular, and I thought——”

“You thought he was going to propose?” cried Bess, her eyes almost jumping out of her head. “Well, didn’t he? Or did he only make love to you? He’s a slippery customer.”

“He’s worse than that,” groaned Kitty. “He’s only been playing with me. He’s married!”

Bess dropped into the nearest chair.

“Married!” she gasped. Then, with an impulse similar to that which had seized Kitty on first hearing the same fact—“I don’t believe it.”

“But he is. He’s married to Lady Ellesmere. Don’t you remember Lady Dorothea saying something about Lady Ellesmere? I suppose she thought

we knew she was his wife. No doubt everybody else in the house knew it. But she might have warned me when she saw how the thing was going.”

“I don’t suppose she realised how serious it was,” returned Bess gloomily. “She was entirely taken up with her play, and you know how vague she is at the best of times. Perhaps when she spoke about Lady Ellesmere she meant it as a hint. It was the day he gave you those roses, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Kitty, “it was the day he gave me the roses.”

She began mechanically to take off her hat and to smooth her ruffled hair, Bess watching the reflection of her pale, miserable face in the glass.

“Did he tell you himself?” she asked, after a pause.

“No; Stephen Hardy came up and found us together—I thought he would have knocked Mr. Mowbray down.”

“Really!” exclaimed Bess in amazement.

“Yes,” went on Kitty, speaking very fast. “It seems that Mr. Mowbray and his wife were both down here a year or two ago for the hunting, and that he—Mr. Mowbray is known to be a very bad man—so Mr. Hardy said.”

“Good gracious!” ejaculated Bess, still eyeing her sister’s reflection thoughtfully. “Well, of course, he must be,” she added, “or he would not have behaved so badly to you.”

“Oh, I dare say it’s all my own fault,” said Kitty. “Bess, I feel disgraced—I can’t believe it of myself. I’ve only known the man a little more than a week, and yet I consented to meet him like this on the sly.”

Bess suddenly began to giggle.

“I really can’t help it,” she cried apologetically. “If it had been *I*, who am constantly getting into scrapes; but you, my sober old Kitty—you who are always lecturing me!”

“I’ll never lecture you again,” said Kitty. “Oh, I can never hold up my head again. I suppose he thought me the sort of girl that he could play tricks with. He thought I was light-minded,” said Kitty, bringing out the word which rankled in her memory. “Every one must think me light-minded—I am sure Stephen Hardy did.”

She was hiding her face again, so that her sister could not see the hot flush which overspread it.

“Pooh!” cried Bess, “who cares a fig for what Farmer Hardy thinks! You mustn’t make mountains out of molehills, Kitty. Mr. Mowbray is a beast, and has behaved like a beast, so we’ll drop him at once, and for evermore; but nobody would think a penny the worse of you if they did know about his meeting you. Half the girls at the Heriots’ would have given their eyes to be noticed by him, and *they* knew all about Lady Ellesmere. The world, the great world, is very wicked,” summed up Bess with an air of detached and heavy wisdom.

There was little sleep that night for Kitty, but nevertheless she rose early on the following morning. The postman delivered their letters at about half-past six, and she was already dressed and on the lookout for his signal before the familiar knock came. Having listened until the gate swung to behind his retreating figure, she ran downstairs, and discovered the letters in a little heap on the floor of the passage, it being the postman’s practice to push them under the door on such mornings as Louisa “slept in,” which was frequently the case. Turning them over eagerly, yet with a sick feeling of dread, Kitty found the note which she felt would be forthcoming, and at the sight of the bold handwriting on the envelope she hesitated—her actual repulsion at war with the memory of the former fascination. Then she tore it open.

“MY ADORED LYDIA,” it began. (How dare he call her his “adored Lydia”?) She crumpled the letter in her hand, but, recovering herself, smoothed it out again, and read it to the end. It was a characteristic document, dwelling principally on the writer’s regret that their delightful interview had been so rudely interrupted, but expressing the hope that she would recompense him for the meekness with which he had submitted to its abrupt termination out of consideration for her, by granting him another at the earliest possible date. “And this time, my dear child, let us be more careful in our choice of a locality. Let us avoid trespassing on the property of rustic lunatics, and find some sequestered nook where we can be secure from interruption. I fail to realise why the brute who disturbed us just now should have taken me *en grippe*, as I have never to my knowledge set eyes on him before. But perhaps. . . . Pray, does your landlord consider himself vested with a proprietary right over his tenants as well as over the house they live in? But, no, I should know my fastidious Lydia better than to suppose she could ever tolerate such egregious

insolence. Still, I own I shall be curious to hear what you will have to say on the matter. Do not keep your Beverley waiting too long.

“I am staying another week here—afterwards, who knows? ‘The Swan’ is not a bad sort of place—I may possibly find myself detained in the neighbourhood on business!—Your faithful

BEVERLEY”

Kitty tore the letter into shreds; she could not bear that even Bess should read it.

“I oughtn’t to have opened it,” she said to herself; “I ought to have sent it back to him just as it was. Oh, what a fool I have been—worse, worse than a fool. I thought he would have guessed that Stephen would tell me. I thought he would have had grace to feel sorry and ashamed!—But perhaps he thought I knew!”

She was so much overwhelmed at this idea, which had not before presented itself, that she was obliged to sit down on the stairs, where Louisa presently found her, when she descended precipitously to atone for her sluggishness.

Then Kitty rose and went back to her room, where, sitting down by the window, she gave herself up once more to painful thought. Bess was still sound asleep.

Could Mowbray have supposed that, knowing his circumstances, knowing, perhaps, not only the fact that he was married, but that his character was such as to render him an eminently undesirable associate, she should nevertheless have wittingly embarked on a flirtation as dangerous as it was wrong?

Kitty searched her memory, extracting small comfort from the process as she recalled one by one sundry acts and words of hers which, though innocently meant, might have seemed to foster the man’s belief that she was a hardened little coquette, a plaything fit for no better usage than that he had accorded to her. Well, he should be undeceived now, and that without loss of a moment’s time.

It was dreadful to think he was haunting the neighbourhood, that he might at any time seek her out, force himself upon her, even in her own home, or, worse still, encounter her at some unlooked-for moment out of doors, when she might lack even the protection of Bess.

She got out her little desk, and with a furtive glance at Bess, who lay with golden eyelashes still fast locked, sat down to write.

Her pen flew over the paper, her cheeks burning the while, and angry tears rising to her eyes to be dashed impatiently away.

She read over the letter, decided that it would do, folded it quickly and enclosed it in its envelope. The missive contained but a very few lines, yet poor Kitty could not more completely have betrayed herself if she had penned a folio.

“DEAR SIR,—I am writing to tell you that I can never under any circumstances consent to meet you again. You are evidently as much mistaken in me as I have been in you. Until yesterday I was quite ignorant of the fact that you were a married man.—Yours truly,

“KATHARINE LESLIE”

Had she not been such a very child, so entirely unversed in the ways of the world, she would surely have known better than to send such a letter to a man of Mowbray's stamp. Being what she was, it seemed to her that her epistle would remove the stigma from her character, and put an effective stop to all further overtures on his part.

She posted the letter herself, and met her father at breakfast, feeling relieved and comparatively calm.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mr. Raymond duly arrived and was closeted in the study with Mr. Leslie for more than two hours. Both emerged with radiant countenances, mutually delighted. Mr. Raymond was so deeply interested that he proposed to return on the morrow, though as the following day would terminate his visit at the Heriots', his charming hostess might, he said, possibly think it a breach of courtesy that he should again absent himself.

"Nevertheless, under the circumstances, I think she will forgive me," he explained.

Obviously, in order to secure Lady Dorothea's good graces, Mr. Raymond should have returned to the Grange at once; yet he not only remained for luncheon at the Little Farm, but lingered for the greater part of the afternoon in a shady corner of the garden, where Bess was obliging enough to entertain him—Bess, in a very sedate, one might almost say melancholy, mood, gazing upwards with pensive eyes, while she related, in a minor key, a pathetic tale of wasted aspirations and blighted hopes.

"Father and I were just saying, the other day, that until you came, Mr. Raymond, we were *starved* for lack of intellectual sympathy."

Mr. Raymond glanced from the dimpled pink and white countenance to the chubby, folded baby hands.

"Isn't Mr. Venables a sympathetic person?" he inquired. "There can be no doubt of his being intellectual—I have too often overheard his conversation with you to fail to recognise it."

Bess brought down her rapt gaze with bird-like swiftness. "You have been eavesdropping?" she cried briskly.

The ex-don chuckled. "But isn't he intellectual?" he inquired. "You were discussing very deep subjects—transmigration of souls was one, I think."

Bess put on her rapt look again.

"Well, *I* firmly believe in it," she said in a very serious tone; "don't you?" Then as he continued to laugh gently, she went on with more energy, "As a philologist I am sure you ought to."

"You throw a new light upon my favourite science," he said, still laughing, yet with so kindly a look in his eyes that she did not feel offended.

“Pray let me hear you explain the connection.”

Bess, who was quick-witted enough to know when she was out of her depth, left off endeavouring to be intellectual, and embarked with mock solemnity on a long nonsensical tirade which hugely amused her listener.

The sound of her prattle and his laughter reached Mr. Leslie in his study, whither he had retreated after luncheon.

He had fully expected his guest to join him there, as soon as he had finished the cigarette, which, as Raymond explained, having noticed his host did not smoke, he would dispatch in the garden. He had now had time to consume a hundred cigarettes, yet he did not reappear. Mr. Leslie began first to wonder and then to chafe at the prolonged absence of his new disciple. At last a peal of merriment, unmistakably emanating from Bess, caused him to lose patience altogether. That freakish child of his had no doubt seized upon their visitor, whose politeness forbade him to endeavour to escape. What was Kitty about? Why did she not hold her sister in check? Really, it was time these girls learnt to be more considerate, not to say respectful. Mr. Vavasour Raymond was not to be placed on the same level as their friend Teddy Venables. Apparently he would be forced to see to the matter himself. After a pause, during which his indignation gathered fresh fuel, Mr. Leslie sallied forth to rescue the dignified scholar from the clutches of his unprincipled daughter. As he went blundering about the garden in his awkward short-sighted way, projecting himself towards all the wrong corners, Bess' shrill tones fell upon his ears—

“But it's as easy as anything. Like this, you see——”

And then followed something unintelligible, delivered in a kind of chant, which presently merged into laughter.

“Like this, you see,” repeated Mr. Raymond. “Is that where the puzzle lies?”

“Puzzle!” ejaculated Mr. Leslie to himself. What was that dreadful girl about—to what indignity was she subjecting her victim? Did she expect Vavasour Raymond to turn his thoughts from philology to puzzles?

Following the direction of the voices, and breaking into a stumbling run, he presently came upon the pair. Bess, stretched full length upon the grass, her curly head supported on her hand, was watching the movements of their new friend, who, sitting cross-legged in front of her, and shaking with laughter, was describing certain cabalistic signs with a long forefinger.

“The moon has a round face,” chanted Mr. Raymond, “two eyes, a nose, and a mouth.”

“Wrong again!” exclaimed Bess, raising herself in order to clap her hands.

“I assure you it must be right,” he protested; “I watched you closely—just like this.”

“No, you needn’t say ‘Just like this.’ Watch me. The moon has a round face——”

“What is going on here? I am afraid this daughter of mine is victimising you, Mr. Raymond?”

“On the contrary,” returned he, “I am very much interested. I find this problem of Miss Leslie’s more difficult to solve than many of those weighty ones which we discussed together this morning.”

Mr. Leslie, tickled at the subtlety of the jest, gave utterance to one of his rare chuckles.

“Perhaps you may be able to render me some assistance,” continued Raymond, looking up in the other’s face with his quiet smile.

Mr. Leslie came a step or two nearer and put on his pince-nez.

“Now, Bess, let us see.”

“The moon has a round face, two eyes, a nose, and a mouth,” gabbled Bess, describing a rapid circle with her forefinger, and indicating the features of the luminary in question by vicious little dabs.

“It seems to me perfectly simple,” commented her father, and, cautiously removing his right hand from his pocket, he imitated the girl’s proceedings. “The moon has a round face, and two eyes——”

“She doesn’t say ‘*and*’ two eyes,” interpolated Raymond anxiously.

“That point is immaterial,” returned Mr. Leslie with some asperity. “However, we can try again. The moon has a round face, two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. I think the conjunction is permissible here.” Having, as he thought, accomplished the feat with great precision and dexterity, he turned triumphantly to his daughter. “There seems to be no great difficulty about that.”

“There does not seem to be,” she responded; “but it’s quite wrong. Try again. It is awfully easy, really, once you get into the knack of it. Look here.

The moon has a——”

“*Look here!*” exclaimed both men in a kind of shout.

“I see the point, now,” said Mr. Leslie. “You have got to make some kind of introductory interjection: ‘Look here,’ ‘Watch me,’ or some such phrase. I have observed it since I have been standing here.”

But Bess shook her curls decisively. “No, no; if I did say anything of that sort it was quite accidental. See, I’ll do it without any preamble at all.”

She repeated the manœuvre, both onlookers jealously watching her, and then, dropping her hand by her side, laughingly desired them to try again. They obediently tried again several times, first one, then the other; Mr. Leslie devoting himself to the task with whole-hearted intensity, Raymond laughing, but equally determined not to be beaten.

Then Bess was good enough to give them another lesson, and Mr. Leslie imagined that he detected some change in her method of procedure.

“Of course if you chop and change about,” he cried irritably, “one can’t be expected to manage it.”

“Did I chop and change?” said Bess innocently. “I didn’t mean to. I’ll do it again the old way. It really is most simple.”

She went through the performance once more, slowly and conscientiously, and her father and Mr. Raymond followed suit.

“Wrong again,” cried she.

“Then,” said Mr. Leslie, pocketing his hand in great displeasure, “I am sorry to say, my dear, that you are not speaking the truth. Both Mr. Raymond and myself reproduced your movements precisely.”

“No, no,” said Raymond hastily, adding, however, with a somewhat vexed tone, “the—ah—joke evidently lies in the fact that everybody’s efforts meet with the same response. That is the point, is it not, Miss Leslie?”

“No,” said Bess, dimpling all over with delighted smiles. “The point is this—you always use your right hand, and I use my left! You did not chance to notice that.”

No, they had not noticed it, and even when elucidated both thought the joke a very poor one. Nevertheless Bess’ jubilation was delightful to witness, and Mr. Raymond forgot his irritation as he watched her.

"I think I really have made a conquest," Bess remarked to Kitty, after their visitor had left.

"Oh, but, darling, he's too old," said Kitty, looking up from the book which she was ostensibly reading.

"He's fifty-two," announced Bess reflectively. "Just exactly fifty-two. He told me so. He said I had been making him forget his fifty-two years."

"Well," said Kitty, "of course he is a nice man, and it is awfully good for father to have him to talk to. And one needn't—one needn't jump to conclusions even if he does admire you."

"I like to review possibilities," returned Bess. "You know at one time I thought we should never, never, never have any chance of marrying, or even meeting anyone in our own rank of life. And then Teddy turned up. Now Mr. Raymond has turned up. He is a nice man, as you say, Kitty—and *faute de mieux*, you know."

"Oh, Bess, don't talk like that! I am sure it is wrong and—unlucky. For goodness' sake don't let us think of every man we meet as a possible husband. I, at least, have had a cruel lesson."

"Now, it is you who are talking nonsense," cried Bess, hugging her impetuously. "Certainly no one could accuse you of anything of that kind. You were quite justified in thinking what you did about Mr. Mowbray. He paid you marked attention, and of course you couldn't know what a wretch he was. You didn't really care for him, did you?"

"Don't ask me," said Kitty. "I don't know, I can't tell—I feel now as if I must always have hated him."

Her new-found repulsion for Mowbray was intensified by the answer to her letter which she received on the following morning. It was brief, as brief as her own, and yet it seemed to Kitty that it contained as many insults as there were lines.

"You are quite right, there have been mistakes all round. I did not realise that you were such a woman of business. I must apologise for wasting your valuable time. Nevertheless, console yourself; the hours spent with me were surely useful practice, and I am vain enough to imagine myself an efficient substitute for Friend Hodge, who has no doubt served his turn."

Every word was a poisoned dart to poor Kitty, who must perforce conceal her wounds even from Bess; the allusion to Stephen was in itself sufficient to render her dumb. But the fierce shame, the agony of wounded

pride with which she dwelt on them, made her actually ill, and she lay throughout the whole of that long bright day on her little bed, too miserable even to weep.

Bess was very sympathetic, a good deal mystified, and slightly irritated at Kitty's complete collapse, but too much taken up with her own affairs to spend much time in inquiring into its cause.

"You were better yesterday, Kitty," she did indeed remark once; "I don't know why you should be so much cast down to-day." Then, without waiting for a reply, she started off at a tangent—"Do you know, Mr. Raymond is really awfully interested in father's book. He says he thinks it a most valuable contribution to the literature of the age."

"Does he?" said Kitty faintly gratified.

"He does really. I asked him, 'Honour bright,' and he said there could not be two opinions on the matter. So of course I looked very profound, and pretended to admire it too. Though, as a matter of fact, I always thought father a second Mr. Casaubon—great cry, little wool—that sort of thing. But Mr. Raymond says the book is a miracle of erudition and research. He wants father to go up to London next week and be introduced to a publisher—one he knows, an awfully good man."

"Next week," cried Kitty, sitting up. "And is he going? Oh, I hope he won't! I don't want him to go away so soon again. I did hope that this quarter we should be able to pay off that debt at the bank."

"What, that miserable eighteen pounds? Isn't that paid off yet? Well, it doesn't matter if it isn't. If Mr. Raymond is right, this book is going to make all our fortunes. Father mustn't be hampered now, for the sake of a few pounds. Going! I should think he was going! He's simply skipping with joy and excitement."

Kitty lay down again with a groan. "You must remember that Farmer Hardy went security for us," she said. "It isn't honourable to spend money that really does not belong to us. What must he think, and what must the people at the bank think? Father ought to pay his just debts before he does anything else. If he acts dishonourably it won't bring him luck."

"You're not a bit like yourself, Kitty. You never used to think about luck before."

"How can I help thinking about it now? We haven't got any. We are the most unlucky, the most unfortunate people in the world—everybody's

pointing at us—we are in the valley of humiliation,” said poor Kitty in strangled tones.

Bess stared, pursed up her lips, and then, after a vain search for words of consolation, patted Kitty’s pillows, and laid a soothing hand upon her brow. But in spite of the comforting intent of her plump little cool hand, her sister’s spirits did not rise. The new train of ideas suggested by Mr. Leslie’s approaching departure proved even more disquieting than the recollection of Mowbray’s insolence; the thought of their indebtedness to Stephen recalled Stephen himself. What a contrast to Mowbray! Stephen at least was good and upright—the most upright man she had ever known, and he had been their friend. But now they never would be friends again.

CHAPTER XXV

Mr. Raymond's suggestion led to unexpected and beneficent results. The publisher to whom he introduced Mr. Leslie was so much struck with the scheme and development of the book, that he not only entered into an agreement with him on generous lines, but, gathering from Mr. Raymond the straitened circumstances of the writer, and the difficulties which retarded the completion of the work, volunteered to advance a certain sum on account of future royalties, in order that Mr. Leslie might more easily prosecute his researches in London.

By the advice of Raymond—not perhaps altogether disinterested—Mr. Leslie exchanged the hotel, where he usually stayed, for quiet apartments within reach of the British Museum, where his friend proposed that the two girls should join him.

“I fancy I am right in supposing that you are not entirely qualified to take care of yourself,” he observed. “Your two charming daughters will look after your creature comforts, and make sure that you are not worried about petty cares.”

Mr. Leslie, blinking at him and slowly rubbing his hands, inwardly reflected that his two charming daughters had hitherto rather augmented his sum of petty cares than diminished it; but he was not ungracious enough to say so aloud.

“Besides, even such a worker as you must require some relaxation,” continued Raymond; “and I can imagine no more delightful form of relaxation than feminine companionship—especially such companionship as those girls of yours must afford you.”

“Kitty is a good child,” said Mr. Leslie. “She has not been looking well of late—a change may do her good.”

“And Miss Bess!” exclaimed Vavasour enthusiastically. “Surely you could not do without your household sunbeam?”

“H'm,” said Mr. Leslie, “my household sunbeam is sometimes a trifle too dazzling.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed the other heartily.

“She does not possess the solid qualities of her sister,” pursued the father pensively. “Kitty may very possibly, as you suggest, take care of me; but I rather fancy that I shall have to take care of Bess—and, really, at such a serious juncture——”

“Don’t worry about that,” cried Mr. Raymond with unusual vivacity. “I am quite willing to take her off your hands. I will show her all the sights, and promise myself much pleasure from observing the effect they will produce on a mind so absolutely fresh.”

“No, no, you must not think of such a thing!” exclaimed the obtuse parent. “I cannot consent to your being martyred in my stead. It would be too much to expect *you* to act deputy father to my tiresome child.”

Mr. Raymond reddened, and looked blank for a moment, then, being possessed of a strong sense of humour, laughed in a way which much puzzled the innocent philosopher.

“Sometimes an old fogey can be quite young at heart,” he remarked. “I assure you I shall enjoy our little jaunts just as much as Miss Bess herself; and I promise you I will take good care of her, so you need have no scruples.”

The summons to London filled both sisters with satisfaction. Bess, indeed, went almost mad with excitement, and Kitty hailed with delight the prospect of escaping from a neighbourhood which contained such odious associations. Moreover, the news of the unexpected and welcome addition to the funds at her father’s command promised relief from one, at least, of her troubles. The bank should be repaid without delay, and Farmer Hardy delivered from all responsibility on their behalf.

She wrote to her father, reminding him of the debt in question, and urgently begging him to send a cheque to defray the amount immediately.

Though, as Mr. Leslie informed her in dignified terms, he himself saw no necessity for hurry, and could not understand her eagerness over such a trifling matter, he complied. Kitty’s natural irritation over this view was increased by the fact that he enclosed the cheque to her instead of sending it straight to the bank. It was invariably his custom to save himself trouble in small matters, and it seemed to him easier to oblige Kitty to walk two miles on an unpleasant errand than to bring down his mighty intellect to the composition of an additional letter of perhaps five lines.

“As you know all the circumstances, my dear,” he wrote, with his customary vagueness, “I wish you to take the cheque yourself to the bank,

ascertain that it is all in order, and obtain a receipt. It is well to be business-like, even in such small matters.”

Had it not been for this particular injunction, Kitty would have performed the task by letter; recollections of her last interview with Mr. Watson were still fresh in her mind, and she much dreaded further evidences of that gentleman’s jocosity.

Mr. Watson was not, however, inclined to jest on the day she called. He was bland, extremely bland, hoped Kitty had not inconvenienced herself, assured her that *any time* would have done, and added, just as she was about to turn away—

“As a matter of fact, Miss Leslie, I had considered the business more or less settled. Mr. Hardy looked in a few days back and made everything square. I chanced to mention the little matter to him, as I fancied it might have escaped Mr. Leslie’s memory. He thought that this was probably the case, owing to Mr. Leslie’s studies, so he made it all right with us, and said the matter could be settled with him at the same time as the rent. No doubt he intends to tell your father this.”

“No doubt,” faltered Kitty. “Will you place the cheque to Mr. Hardy’s credit then, and let him know about it?” she asked.

“Certainly,” agreed Mr. Watson; “unless you would prefer to hand it to him yourself.”

Kitty uttered a hasty negative, and made her escape as quickly as possible.

She had thought no greater depth of humiliation awaited her, but surely here was one. Yet the pang which shot through her heart was not all of shame. How good Stephen was, how generous still, how chivalrous in his anxiety to spare her family, even though he now despised herself so much! Oh, what a pity to have lost for ever his esteem! She dared not even thank him now, and yet—oh yes, she must! It would be impossible to allow him to suppose she was aware of what he had done and yet suffered his action to pass unnoticed.

“What *are* you doing, Kitty?” asked Bess, meeting her sister a little later in the day standing beside the letter-box which was fixed in the wall about a quarter of a mile from their house.

“I was just wondering whether I should or should not post a letter—but I’ve done it now,” after dropping an envelope through the aperture.

“Who is it for?” inquired Bess, astonished, and slightly suspicious.

“Mr. Hardy—I felt I had to thank him for what he did about the cheque.”

“Mr. Hardy—you post a letter to a man who lives just over the way—that *is* a penny wasted!”

“I couldn’t make up my mind to take it over. I should feel ashamed to meet him now, Bess.”

“Gracious, what a fuss you make about nothing! It doesn’t matter what Farmer Hardy thinks, and I am sure I should not have bothered to write to him. No doubt he would have tacked the debt on to the rent, and perhaps added a bit for interest. What did you say? I hope you didn’t butter him up too much.”

“I only said we were all very grateful——”

“*I’m* not,” interrupted Bess, “not a bit—it was all a matter of business.”

“Well, I said you were, anyhow,” returned Kitty with some exasperation. “I said we were all very grateful for his kindness, which was more than we could have expected, that he ought to have been relieved of his responsibility before this, and that, as a matter of fact, I had taken a cheque to the bank to-day, which was now placed to his credit.”

“Was that all?”

“That’s all—at least I said we would never forget his kindness.”

Bess stamped her foot. “Really, the way you crawl to that man! You’ll be going down on your knees to the butcher next, because he did not county-court us for our bill. My dear, Stephen won’t think a bit the better of you for it, I’ll tell you that.”

And in truth, Bess’ surmise was unconsciously correct. Kitty’s little letter served to incense Stephen rather than to mollify him. It must be confessed that she had not over-exaggerated the effect which the recent encounter with Mowbray had produced on him. He was not only angry, but deeply scandalised. In spite of his natural resentment at her attitude towards himself, he had hitherto looked on Kitty as the first of women, and now it seemed to him that she had fallen low indeed. He judged Mowbray from his own knowledge of the man’s character and antecedents, without pausing to inquire to what extent Kitty was aware of them. Indeed, it was enough that in so short a time, in scarcely more than a few days, she had permitted any man to be on such terms with her. His idol was shattered.

Her letter, as has been said, added fuel to the flame of his indignation. What were a few pounds here or there when there were other such considerations at stake? Was she trying to bribe him to silence, he wondered, becoming ungenerous in his bitterness of spirit. She need not be afraid—he was not given to tattle. Since she had paid in the cheque to the bank, Watson had no doubt given her a receipt; it was unnecessary, therefore, for him to acknowledge it, and he was glad of it. So, though Kitty expected a word in answer to her piteous effort at reconciliation, none was vouchsafed to her. She did not venture to approach the Farm on the Hill, and even set out on her journey to London without a good-bye to Rebecca.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Leslie's lodgings were small, and, it must be owned, rather gloomy, and necessarily situated in an unfashionable quarter. After the first bustling of unpacking and settling down both sisters felt disappointed and melancholy. Kitty found that the change in her surroundings by no means altered the bias of her thoughts, and Bess pined for gaieties which were very unlikely to come her way. She did not care in the least for Westminster Abbey, or the Tower, or the British Museum, and the other venerable precincts which she visited under the escort of Vavasour Raymond; the company of that estimable gentleman began to pall on her, as she admitted to her sister. One day she flatly refused to accompany him to the Natural History Museum, declaring she had no wish to see skeletons and stuffed beasts and birds, and imploring him instead to take her to the Park.

"The Park!" ejaculated Mr. Raymond, looking in dismay from his grey coat-sleeve to the pot-hat which he held in his hand. These, though well enough suited to an educational pilgrimage, would be out of place in Rotten Row.

"Oh, do take Kitty and I to the Park," pleaded Bess, becoming, as usual, ungrammatical in her excitement. "We are both feeling so moped and miserable!"

Moped and miserable! This was not to be thought of. Mr. Raymond, spurred to unwonted energy, announced that he would return home to effect a change of garb, and would then take both sisters to lunch at the Carlton, after which they would adjourn to the Park.

Bess danced with delight, and even Kitty hailed the prospect with pleasure. They were waiting in their best muslin frocks when Mr. Raymond returned.

Their first impressions of the Carlton were wholly delightful; the gay scene, the noise and bustle, the crowd of smartly dressed folk were sources of interest and amusement to both alike. But presently Bess grew a little pensive. There were several good-looking young men in their neighbourhood, talking and laughing with girls of her own age. Why could not she, Bess, flirt with somebody a little younger and livelier than Mr. Raymond? Besides, now that she considered other people's garments, she realised that her own were all wrong. What had been fashionable in the

previous year, and what had passed muster at a country-house party, seemed hopelessly out of date in London during the season. Kitty, too, had her own cause for uneasiness. The figure of a man sitting at some distance from them, in company with a somewhat over-dressed woman, whose laugh dominated the medley of other sounds, reminded her forcibly of Mowbray. She could not withdraw her fascinated gaze, and by and by, pushing back her chair a little, caught sight of the man's face in a mirror. It was Mowbray.

Just as she was about to avert her eyes they met the reflected glance of his, which fixed itself steadily upon hers. The corner of his lip twitched in an almost imperceptible smile, and then, dropping his large full lids, he appeared to concentrate his attention on his plate.

But Kitty's peace of mind was gone. He had recognised her; he had doubtless seen her terror and confusion—what if they should presently meet—what if Raymond, all unaware of her cogent reasons for avoiding one who had been their fellow-guest at Heriot Grange, should also see and recognise him—perhaps hail him? How would Mowbray conduct himself under such circumstances? Would he cut the sisters, or would he greet them with insolent familiarity? Either contingency seemed dreadful. She mechanically helped herself to each dish in turn, but found herself scarcely able to swallow a morsel. At last, leaning across the table, she inquired with feverish eagerness if they would not be late for the Park?

“Don't you think we had better go now?” she added.

Mr. Raymond began to laugh, but Bess jumped up, and declared herself quite ready.

“I felt almost ashamed of sitting there,” she murmured in Kitty's ear as they descended the steps. “We seemed so dowdy among all those smart folks. Our sleeves are hopeless, and our hats are quite the wrong shape.”

“Perhaps we shan't be so much noticed out of doors,” suggested Kitty, hurrying on.

“That isn't at all what I want,” said Bess dolorously.

Poor Mr. Raymond's well-meant endeavours to amuse the sisters were doomed to be unsuccessful that day. Bess sat twitching at her sleeves, and occasionally jerking her hat to what she considered a more fashionable angle; her eyes wandered discontentedly over the passing carriages, and she now and then heaved an envious and regretful sigh. She responded to Raymond's pleasantries in peevish monosyllables and made no effort to disguise the fact that she was bored. Kitty, too, was nervous and abstracted,

and seemed unable to fix her attention on any of the interesting people whom he pointed out to her, and when, turning away in despair from Bess' pettish shoulder, he devoted himself to the entertainment of her elder sister, she appeared to be looking for someone, he thought; indeed she started and changed colour several times.

Kitty, however, was not, as he supposed, anxious to identify an acquaintance, but rather dreading an encounter with a person whom she very much wished to avoid. Scores of times she imagined she saw Mowbray approach, and watched with heart beating to suffocation the advancing figure of some total stranger.

At a sudden touch upon her shoulder she uttered a stifled scream; but it was only Bess, who had extended her arm behind the drooping and disconsolate back of Mr. Raymond in order to attract her attention.

"Gracious!" exclaimed she, in an angry undertone, "what are you in such a fright about? Don't you see there's Lady Dorothea beckoning to us from that carriage? She wants us to go to her."

Bess was already on her feet, and Kitty followed to the pretty victoria, where their friend was installed.

"I *am* surprised to see you two," said she, after the first words of greeting. "What brings you to London, my little country mice? And why didn't you tell me you were coming up?" she added in rather an aggrieved tone.

"It was all settled in such a hurry," said Bess. "We *thought* of writing, didn't we, Kitty?"

"And have you come to the Park all by yourselves, or—surely that is Mr. Raymond?"

"Yes," said Bess; "he brought us. He has been showing us the sights of London."

Lady Dorothea began to laugh.

"I shouldn't have thought the Park was in his line," she said.

Mr. Raymond now made his way to the carriage, looking, it must be owned, not altogether pleased at the meeting, and standing somewhat awkwardly while Lady Dorothea rallied him.

"'Squire of Dames' is quite a new rôle for you, isn't it?" she cried, when in answer to her amused questions Raymond had enumerated the different

“sights” to which he had personally conducted the sisters.

“Dames?” exclaimed Raymond, with a twinkle in his eye. “Say damsels.” And he glanced at Bess.

“Oh,” ejaculated Lady Dorothea, gazing at Bess, too, with the air of one suddenly enlightened, though nothing could have looked more sublimely unconscious than the young person in question. “Well,” she went on after a pause, “you will have to content yourself with looking after one damsel for half an hour or so, for I am going to carry off the other. Jump in, Kitty; I want to talk to you.”

Kitty obeyed after a moment’s hesitation, and Bess, recalling her absent gaze from a passing carriage, consented to return to her former place, escorted by Mr. Raymond.

“But I think it is rather a shame to deprive you of Kitty,” she remarked as they strolled back.

Meanwhile Lady Dorothea smilingly hoped she had done the right thing.

“It *is* Bess, isn’t it?” she inquired. “It is not you this time? Even if it is I must have a talk with you. He’ll just have to spare you.”

“Oh, I think he was quite willing to spare me,” said Kitty, smiling too, but constrainedly. “I suppose it’s all right for Bess and Mr. Raymond to be sitting there without anybody else.”

“My dear child, why, he’s old enough to be her father! Besides—nowadays—and anyhow I am going to keep you half an hour. Little Kitty, how demurely she said it! You are not always so demure, my dear—in fact I have carried you off to scold you.”

“Oh, don’t,” said Kitty, shrinking away from her; “please!”

“Yes, I will. At least I must warn you——”

“*Don’t!*” pleaded Kitty again. “There is no need. It is all over now, quite over. I am so awfully ashamed, I can’t bear to talk about it. I didn’t know,” she added incoherently, “about his being married, I mean—of course, if I had it would have been different.”

“You didn’t know he was married! Now, Kitty, don’t pretend. What’s the use of telling such stories to me! Everybody must know that Gordon Mowbray is married, because everyone knows how badly he behaves to his wife. Besides,” she added after a moment’s pause, “I warned you myself. I told you it wasn’t fair to Lady Ellesmere.”

“But I didn’t know who Lady Ellesmere was,” faltered Kitty.

“You poor babe!” ejaculated Lady Dorothea, mollified for a moment, but resuming presently in a more severe tone. “Still, you must have seen that he was a fast man. And, really, to make assignations——”

“Did he tell you?” interrupted Kitty in a strangled voice; then, sitting upright, she clenched her hands. “Oh, how hateful of him, how dishonourable!”

“You really make me think the matter has gone farther than I imagined,” said her friend, staring at her in astonishment. “I saw a letter in your handwriting.”

“Did he show it you?” broke in Kitty almost inarticulately.

“No—he laughed over it a good deal, but he wouldn’t tell me what was in it. I wormed out of him about your meeting in the wood, though. Really, I could hardly believe it. A man like Gordon Mowbray!”

“Why did you have such a man in your house, then?” said Kitty, goaded to boldness. Her eyes were blazing in her white face. It was characteristic of Lady Dorothea that she liked her the better for the outburst.

“My dear child,” she said very kindly, “you mustn’t hold me accountable for this business. I have known Mr. Mowbray a long time. He is very amusing and a capital actor. It is nothing to me that he doesn’t get on with his wife—whom, personally, I can’t bear;”—she added in parentheses. “It never occurred to me that you did not know all about him; and I thought my little hint on the subject of those roses would stop the flirtation.”

“The flirtation!” gasped Kitty. “You thought I would flirt with a married man?”

“What a little innocent it is! All the same, I can’t quite make you out. I can’t understand how——”

“Oh, don’t let us talk of it any more,” pleaded the girl. “I don’t understand myself now. I was mad, I think—and, of course, I suppose we are very ignorant—and there is nobody to tell us anything——” Her voice trembled on the verge of tears.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” said Lady Dorothea. “I don’t want to bother you, but still, there is nobody else to do it—Kitty, what about that other man?”

“Do you mean Mr. Raymond?” asked Kitty.

“Mr. Raymond! No—he is as safe as a church. Little Bess, if Bess is his choice, might do worse than marry him. He has heaps of money and would make her very happy—no, I am talking of the other man—the man who met you in the wood. Mr. Mowbray said he was quite a common creature—a labourer, or looked like one.”

“He is nothing of the kind,” said Kitty, breathing quickly, but speaking firmly and with deliberation. “I suppose you are talking of Mr. Hardy. He is our landlord—and an educated man.”

“An educated man!” ejaculated Lady Dorothea. “Mr. Mowbray said he was a rough country fellow, and alarmed me by adding that you seemed on most intimate terms with him.”

“Mr. Hardy has certainly been our friend,” said Kitty with white lips. “I don’t know what Mr. Mowbray can have meant by calling him a rough fellow. He is, of course, a farmer—a large farmer——”

“How odd you look, child,” interrupted Lady Dorothea. “A farmer, a large farmer—as far as you are concerned, he might as well be a large grocer. Surely, Kitty, it is impossible that there should be anything between you and a person of that kind? Though I did question you about him, I never really believed—I thought it was one of Gordon Mowbray’s fairy tales.”

“There is nothing between me and Farmer Hardy,” said Kitty. “He used to be very kind to us, but he was so—so horrified at my meeting Mr. Mowbray—that he—we don’t speak any more.”

“And a good thing too,” commented Lady Dorothea.

“I don’t think it at all a good thing,” broke out Kitty. “We hadn’t a friend in the world when we came to the little farm, and Mr. Hardy’s kindness made all the difference to us. He is an honourable man—the soul of honour. Certainly Mr. Mowbray is not qualified to judge him!” she added bitterly.

Lady Dorothea, moving a little in her seat, gazed at her with a pained and puzzled expression.

“It is really dreadful,” she observed plaintively. “Kitty, you *must not* talk like that. My dear child, it is all very well to be ignorant and innocent, and, of course, one must make allowances for your bringing up—but, still, such things as these are the A B C of life. Because you have had an unpleasant experience with Gordon Mowbray, it doesn’t follow you are to make a hero of a common farmer. Somebody ought to take you in hand,” she added rather wearily. “I only wish I had time myself.”

No doubt if Lady Dorothea had not had so many engagements and been so much sought after, she would have made time to educate Kitty; but as it was, in the whirl of the season, the “little country mice,” as she called them, were speedily forgotten.

In the course of the following month Mr. Heriot met the girls in the street, and received from Bess a somewhat doleful account of their doings; and on returning home he recalled the fact of their existence to his wife, coupled with the remark that he thought she ought to do something for them.

As a result of this intervention, Kitty and Bess received an invitation to a ball, to which Lady Dorothea said she would herself chaperon them. Bess’ exultation was somewhat clouded by her longing for the unattainable in the shape of a new frock; while Kitty, who was still out of spirits and somewhat out of health, almost dreaded the exertion. However, the invitation was accepted, and the best evening dresses of last year were got out and furbished up for the occasion. The sum advanced by the publisher, large as it had seemed to Mr. Leslie, had been much diminished by a residence of several weeks in London, and he refused with some acerbity to allow the girls to call in the assistance of a dressmaker. They snipped, and turned, and cobbled with their own hands, therefore, and Bess, moreover, had the happy thought of ironing both dresses herself; the result was an amazing limpness and a total loss of freshness.

With palpitating hearts they awaited Lady Dorothea’s arrival in the cloak-room of the big house to which they had been conveyed, feeling more and more nervous and dispirited as their fellow-guests crowded in. Magnificent, haughty-eyed matrons in tiaras, beautiful girls, exquisitely dressed—each fresh arrival seemed to depress the sisters more.

“Look,” whispered Bess, pointing at a cheval glass. “Look at us, Kitty. Those two little shabby things are *us*! We look positively dingy. For two pins I’d put on my cloak and go away again.”

“No,” said Kitty, “we couldn’t do that. It would be too rude to Lady Dorothea. I dare say she’ll come soon. I think you look all right, Bess,” she added lamely.

“I don’t!” retorted Bess. “I’m cross, and I am always hideous when I am cross, and my dress might have come out of the rag-bag. And so might yours—and you haven’t a bit of colour to-night, and one side of your hair is fluffier than the other. Oh, I *wish* Lady Dorothea would come.”

But Lady Dorothea did not come for a considerable time. She had forgotten, as she subsequently explained to the girls, that she had another invitation for that night.

“I had to go there first—I couldn’t have taken you, you see—and what could I have done with you?”

Kitty and Bess, meekly following her up the broad stairs, wondered within themselves what she was going to do with them now. As a matter of fact, she did not do very much. She found and introduced a man to each, and then disappeared.

Bess very incautiously admitted to her partner that she knew no one in the room, and hinted that she would be much gratified if he would make known some of his friends to her.

“And I must introduce you to my sister,” she added. “She doesn’t know anybody either.”

The youth murmured very politely that he would be delighted. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of their dance he was obliged to hurry off, he said, in order to catch somebody whom he particularly wanted to speak to, and, oddly enough, he never returned. The young man who had fallen to Kitty’s lot also disappeared before she had time to introduce him to Bess, as had been her intention. Both men belonged to the category of the worldly wise, and permitted themselves no admiration except at a much besieged shrine.

The little sisters scarcely looked as pretty as usual to-night, nobody knew whom they were, and Lady Dorothea’s playful pet name of “country mice” was not qualified to further their interests. They stood in a corner, therefore, forlorn and neglected, while Lady Dorothea conversed at length with a personage who interested her. It never could be said that Lady Dorothea flirted, but on such occasions as these she was liable to become absorbed. It seemed terribly, unconscionably late when she at length stood before the weary little outcasts, inquiring if they were ready, and hoping they had enjoyed themselves.

“Very much,” returned Kitty with a quivering lip.

Bess made no answer; her hands were clenched in her long gloves.

“I’ll marry Mr. Raymond,” she said to Kitty in a vengeful tone as they mounted the stairs together to their room, after being dropped at their own door by their friend.

“I’ll have a man of my own, even if he is an old one. I have been holding him at arm’s length all this time, but I’ll just let him come on now. I’ll trot him about too, I can tell you.”

Kitty made no answer, and Bess kept up a grumbling tirade all the time they were undressing. When at length her little voice was still, and they lay side by side in the merciful darkness, Kitty let her mind dwell on the green fields, the leafy woods in the neighbourhood of the Little Farm, and thought of Stephen Hardy.

He would not have left them in the lurch, as those other creatures had done. Whenever they had seemed desolate, or at a loss, he had always thrown himself into the breach. Was she making a hero of him, as Lady Dorothea had said? No, he was no hero, but he was a man—a true man.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

Late one June evening Stephen Hardy rode homewards after a long, busy day, spent for the most part at the other side of the county, where he had attended a sale. About half-way up the little lane which led to the farm he encountered a female figure, which, standing as it did in the gloom of the hedge, he did not perceive until it stepped forward. His horse swerved, and he cried out impatiently—

“Who’s that? What are you doing? What do you mean by startling my horse?”

“It’s me,” said Sheba’s voice. “I have been watchin’ out such a long time, I couldn’t seem to wait no longer, when I see’d ye comin’. My father’s had a bad accident—I d’ ’low it’ll be the death of him.”

“How’s that?” interrupted Stephen commiseratingly. “I am sorry. I shouldn’t have spoke so harsh if I’d known it was you.”

“He was run over,” returned she, in a dull, despairing voice. “It must ha’ happened last night, they think, but they only found en this morning. I couldn’t think whatever had become on en; I was searchin’ for him all night, an’ made sure he must ha’ fell i’ the river, but this mornin’ at daybreak they found him in the lane up at the back o’ the Blue Fox. I never thought o’ lookin’ there—he mostly goes to the Three Choughs, ye know.”

“I suppose he’d been—drinking a bit,” suggested Stephen.

“We think that must ha’ been it,” returned Sheba with a sigh. “The waggons goes that way, ye know, for a shart cut to Wimborne. They mostly has but the one light, ye know, an’ mustn’t ha’ noticed poor father lyin’ there, and he wouldn’t be able to call out.”

“I am sorry,” said Stephen again. “Is he very bad, Sheba?”

“Both his legs are broke,” said Sheba; “an’ he’s hurt inside as well. The doctor thinks he won’t get over it. They took him straight off to the Cottage Hospital. It was done afore I know’d, else I wouldn’t ha’ let him go.”

“He’ll be well taken care of there,” said Stephen soothingly. “But it must be terrible for you all alone in that little house. Ye’d better come an’ bide with us to-night.”

“No, no,” she returned vehemently. “I am as well at home as anywhere—what does it matter about me? It’s him I’m thinkin’ on—that he should die like this, an’ I promised mother to take care of him.”

She began to sob, but checked herself almost immediately.

“Time enough for cryin’ arterwards,” she said, half to herself and half aloud; “he’s asking for you, Stephen—that’s what brings me. He come to hisself soon after two o’clock, an’ has been callin’ out for ye ever since.”

“For me?” said the farmer, much surprised. “For me, Sheba? What can he want me for?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” she replied; “but his mind’s set on seein’ ye. He’ve a-kept up a regular charm about it.”

“I’ll just put my horse up,” said Stephen, “an’ then I’ll come at once. I’ll take the short cut by the railway, an’ will be there as soon as you are.”

“Thank you,” she said, and turned away, her tall figure being soon swallowed up in the dusk.

Poor old Richard Baverstock had been made as comfortable as his damaged condition would allow in the accident ward, of which he was at that time the sole occupant. They had managed to make him clean and tidy, and, in spite of his battered state, he looked more respectable than he had done for many a long year. Stephen had half expected to find him wandering, but such was not the case; Mr. Baverstock was not only entirely sober, but perfectly conscious.

“Here’s Stephen Hardy, father,” said Sheba, bending over him. “Stephen Hardy’s come to see you, as you axed.”

“Oh, he be come, be he?” said Baverstock, with the air of polite surprise which he always assumed when he desired to create a favourable impression. “Farmer Hardy be come. I take it very kind o’ he.”

“I am sorry to see you struck down like this,” said Stephen compassionately.

“Struck down,” repeated Baverstock in a pleased tone, “that’s it—’tis what I do tell ’em all. They will have it as I were layin’ i’ the road, but, as I do say, why should I lay i’ the road when I’ve a bed to lay on? Some o’ they waggoners, drivin’ shart road to Wimborne, must ha’ knocked I down,” he added reflectively. “They do drive awful careless—I shouldn’t wonder but what the man were a bit drinky,” he added, shaking his head.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” agreed Stephen; “I hope you’re not suffering very much,” he pursued.

“Well, ’tis this way,” returned the sick man, “I be that bad I be scarce sufferin’ at all; an’ ’tis a bad sign that. I heard doctor tell the young ’ooman so. Be the young ’ooman there?” he inquired mysteriously; “her what do nurse I?”

“I’m here,” responded the nurse, coming forward. “Can I do anything for you?”

“Well,” said Baverstock, with an ingratiating smile, “I’ve a word to say to Mr. Hardy—’tis a private matter, if you’ll excuse me—a private matter between him an’ me. Sheba ’ull ha’ to go away too;” this in a propitiatory tone.

“Very well, we’ll leave you,” said the nurse, smiling. “Perhaps you would like to wait downstairs, Miss Baverstock.”

“Do, my dear,” said her father, before Sheba could answer. “Farmer Hardy ’ull let you know when him an’ me be finished wi’ our talk.”

The two women left the room, and the invalid contemplated Hardy for some time before speaking; at last, lifting the hand which lay outside the counterpane, he jerked the thumb significantly upwards.

“I d’ ’low I be goin’ up-along,” he remarked. “I be a-goin’ to shift to the Noo House. I be a-goin’ to heaven,” he concluded with a pious air.

Stephen, slightly at a loss, murmured inarticulately in reply.

“If ’tis the Lard’s will, I be ready to go,” resumed Baverstock. “Yes, I’ve a-had a miserable life enough these last years. Never could get no work, ye know, and Sheba scarce earnin’ enough to keep us i’ dry bread. I’m not blamin’ the maid,” he added hastily; “she be a good maid—she do do her best. ’Tis about she I did want to speak to ’ee.”

“What can I do for Sheba?” asked Stephen, as he paused.

“I be terr’ble troubled i’ my mind about she. I always looked to pervide for her—’tis that what do upset I. There she be, thrown upon the world, all alone—nobody to look to. ’Tis a awful bad thing for a maid.”

“Sheba knows how to take care of herself,” said the young farmer consolingly. “She’s a good maid, as you say—she is bound to get on.”

It was impossible to avoid realising that Sheba was far more likely to get on after the demise of her disreputable parent than before; but he was not

cruel enough to allude to this probability.

“Anything that I can do for Sheba shall be done, you may be sure,” he continued, bending over the bed. “Sheba and I were always friends.”

“Ye was, indeed,” agreed Baverstock heartily; “an’ ye mid ha’ been more nor friends if it hadn’t ha’ been for my misfortun’s. Yes, ye mid ha’ been more nor friends—I did look for that once—an’ so did her poor mother.”

Stephen, entirely taken aback, slowly resumed his upright position, and stood gazing down at the other without speaking.

“When you and Sheba were children ye used to play at courtin’,” went on Baverstock unabashed; “an’ my poor missus did often say to I, ‘If this play were to turn to earnest ’tis the very best thing as could happen.’ She did talk about it often when she lay sick, poor soul. ’Twas pretty nigh the last word she did ever say to I. ‘Baverstock,’ says she, ‘so soon as our Sheba grows up ye must try an’ bring about a match between her an’ Stephen Hardy.’ The thought has been constant in my mind ever sin’, though it didn’t seem a likely thing, what wi’ me goin’ down i’ the world an’ you goin’ up—but blood is thicker nor water, they say. I mid ha’ come down i’ the world, but Sheba’s your eq’al, though she do have to work so hard. Her mother an’ your father was half-cousins. Sheba, there—she’s your own flesh an’ blood. She mid ha’ no fartun’, but your mother didn’t ha’ no fartun’, an’ your stepmother didn’t, an’, talkin’ o’ that, your stepmother was only a sarvant, an’ my Sheba never took arders from nobody.”

Mr. Baverstock put forward these pleas one after another as they occurred to him, in a tone that was less persuasive than argumentative, and he concluded with the emphatic assertion, “I tell ye, ye mid make a worse choice nor my Sheba.”

Stephen stood dumbfounded. He had never dreamt of marrying Sheba, nor since their childish days had he felt more than a friendly interest in her; it would, in fact, have been impossible for him to contemplate a union between himself and a girl whom circumstances had so far removed from his sphere. But this was a difficult thing to say to the dying father.

“I will always be a friend to Sheba,” he said after a pause, awkwardly enough; “but as for marrying her, I’ve never thought of such a thing, and I’m sure she hasn’t, either.”

“Hasn’t she, though?” exclaimed Baverstock, and, in spite of the solemnity of the occasion, he screwed up his countenance with something

very like a wink. "Why do she keep your presents treasured up, then? Ye gived her a wold watch once, when ye was a boy—a wold silver watch what had got broke. Your father gived you a gold one, an' ye took an' give t'other to Sheba. An' she've a-kept it locked up so careful ye mid think it 'ud melt if the daylight did get to it. An' another time—'twas the very last Christmas we did spend at the Little Farm—you an' Sheba—makin' out you was sweethearts, ye know—exchanged rings out o' crackers we had. Ye gived Sheba a little brass ring wi' a red stone in it. Well, she've a-got that ring locked up along o' the watch."

Stephen felt himself reddening, and spoke roughly in the hope of ending the matter.

"That's all nonsense, Mr. Baverstock—you shouldn't talk like that—Sheba put the things away and forgot all about them."

"She did nothing o' the kind," answered the father. "There, I'll tell ye how I know. I was in want o' money very bad a month or two back—terr'ble bad I was—an' I went searchin' among Sheba's things to see if I could find a few pence, an' I come upon a little box hid away at the bottom of her cupboard. The box was locked, but I forced it wi' my knife, an' there war the watch an' ring an' a letter what you wrote her once—not long ago either—about a job o' trantin' you was gettin' for her. There 'twas, folded up and put away careful."

"Hush, for God's sake!" broke out Stephen, unable any longer to restrain himself. "You shouldn't tell me such things. If you forgot yourself so far as to poke an' pry among the poor maid's secrets, you ought to be ashamed to talk of it."

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun, recalling the fact that the man before him had not many hours to live; but, finding himself unable to endure with calmness the eager, inquisitive scrutiny of Baverstock's bleared eyes, he took an agitated turn about the room, being presently brought up short by the sound of the old man's voice.

"No need to be so angry, farmer; ye mid jist so well hear me out. I took the watch, what was the only thing that I could raise a few shillin' upon—an' the maid fair went wild."

"Hush, I tell you," interrupted Hardy, turning away again and crimsoning to the roots of his hair, as much with shame as with anger. He felt as though he himself were committing an act of desecration.

“There’s not much more to it,” went on Baverstock doggedly. “’Twas her bein’ so angry set me thinkin’ an’ callin’ to mind her mother’s notion o’ the makin’ up a match between you. I didn’t see how ’twas to be done—me seein’ ye so seldom, ye know; but, now that I’ve got my call to go up-along, I must speak out afore I go. Ye mid think on’t, Stephen. Ye mid do worse nor marry my maid. She’s a good maid, my Sheba—she’d make ye a good wife. An’ you’d make her happy—jist about. There, she’ve never looked at any other man, nor thought of any other man.”

Stephen, who had been standing looking out of the window, now turned and came slowly back again; his hands, which had been hitherto wrathfully clenched, relaxed, the gaze which he bent on Baverstock, though fixed and somewhat startled, was no longer indignant. Baverstock returned the glance, a sudden eager hope flashing into his face.

“Jist give me your word ye’ll think on it,” he said.

After a long pause Stephen answered gravely—

“I will think of it.”

“Then I’ll die happy,” said the other. “Ye mid call the maid back to I now, farmer; she’ll be wantin’ to come back, poor Sheba will. She do think a deal of her old father; I don’t know whatever she’ll do without me,” he added half to himself.

Stephen looked at him a moment longer, nodded, and went away. He was in no mind to be amused at the high esteem in which poor old Richard evidently held himself, or the compassion which he felt at Sheba’s loss of so valuable a parent; the one spark of genuine feeling which underlay these absurdities compensated for them as well as for the past villainies which he so coolly owned to. Neither did he marvel at the old sinner’s calm expectancy of death, nor his comfortable assurance with regard to the hereafter. He was entirely occupied with the new overwhelming idea which had been presented to him. There was one woman in the world who loved him—she had always loved him—she had never looked at or thought of any man but him. For three months he had been eating his heart out with shame and grief and mortification because of the treatment he had received at the hands of another woman, and because of his disappointment in her character.

Sheba Baverstock was not fickle or untrustworthy; one great passion had mastered her all her life, and it was he who had inspired it; she was his for the taking, he had but to speak—to stretch out his hand. Sheba, his old

playmate, his very flesh and blood, as her father said—no fine lady this, to despise a plain man; he would raise Sheba by marrying her. She was all alone—why should he not save her from being thrown upon the world?

His pulses throbbed as he strode along; his mind was in a whirl. Now anger against Kitty leaped up within him, hot and strong; driving him from her who had failed him towards the woman who was true. Again a chill crept over him. It might be that Sheba loved him, but did he, *could* he ever love her as a man should love his wife? He walked on more soberly, but the half-formed resolution strengthened itself nevertheless. That dream of his had been a foolish one; now he was awake and in his right mind. He was no fit mate for Miss Leslie, yet a man must marry some time—why should it not be now, and Sheba, who loved him?

CHAPTER II

On the following morning, in response to Stephen's inquiries at the Cottage Hospital, he was told that Baverstock's condition had not altered since the previous night; he called again in the afternoon with a like result; the old man still lingered between life and death.

"He may last till morning," said the nurse. "That poor girl must go home, though. She sat up with him all last night, though it is against the rules, but now for her own sake she must try and get some rest. It might go on for days," she added. "It's difficult to tell in a case like this."

"I'll see Miss Baverstock home," said Stephen. "Tell her to come down now; I'm waiting for her."

Sheba presently appeared, pale and heavy-eyed. She gazed at Stephen, almost sullenly, making no response to his greeting.

"You must come with me now," he said authoritatively. "Come home, and take some rest. You can be here as early as you like to-morrow morning."

"An' supposin' he dies in the night?" said Sheba.

"They think he may last for some days. It is against the rules for you to be here. In any case, Sheba, you must have some sleep."

"I'm like to sleep well in yon lonesome place by the water, bain't I?" she interrupted with fierce irony.

Stephen said no more until they were outside; and then, before she was aware of his intention, he drew her hand through his arm.

"You're not going home," he said quietly. "You are coming back with me to our place."

"Who says so?" she cried, endeavouring to twitch away her hand; but the farmer held it firmly imprisoned within his arm, and bringing forward his other hand, laid it upon it.

"Somebody must take care of you, Sheba," he said. "I think I'm the oldest friend you have—I'm going to do it."

The kind yet masterful tone, the quiet restraining touch, had instant effect upon the girl. She gave one startled glance at his face and began to

sob under her breath. Stephen's strong fingers closed on hers.

When they reached the main street of the little town she wiped her eyes, and again endeavoured to disengage her hand, but he still held it fast.

"Bide as you are, my dear," he said kindly; "you're weak and worn out—not fit to walk alone."

"I don't know what the folks'll think," said Sheba with a pitiful attempt at a smile. "They're starin' at us, some of 'em."

This was true enough. More than one curious glance had been cast after the couple, who were, of course, well known and easily recognised even in the dusk.

"Let them think what they please," returned Stephen.

"After all, they can but think the one thing," went on Sheba, after a pause, rather bitterly; "Farmer Hardy be helpin' Sheba Baverstock home—along o' charity."

"I hope folks know better than to talk like that," he announced gravely.

"You are helpin' me out o' charity—you're takin' me in to your own place out o' charity—you'm maybe thinkin' o' doin' summat else out o' charity."

The young man started perceptibly, and his grasp of Sheba's hand momentarily relaxed; was it possible that Baverstock had taken the girl into his confidence? Sheba instantly drew away her arm, and her next words seemed to confirm his surmise.

"What were father a-talkin' to 'ee about last night? I d' 'low I can guess."

Absolutely taken aback, he turned to gaze at her. She was swinging along at a pace that belied his assumption of her weakness. She carried her head high; as the light of one of the few street lamps fell upon her face he saw that it was set in hard lines.

"I suppose I can't help myself," she went on doggedly; "I suppose what has to be must be—but it's wi' no consent o' mine."

He walked by her side in silence, too angry indeed to speak. Baverstock had spoiled everything! Degraded the girl in her own eyes; rendered his, Stephen's, task needlessly complicated. Her next words, however, showed him where the mistake lay.

“I d’ ’low father asked ye for money,” said Sheba. “I d’ ’low he’ve a-been frettin’ about how he’s to be buried. I’ve been frettin’ too about that. I can’t have him buried by the parish. An’ you’m the only friend we’ve got—’tis true enough what you said just now. I d’ ’low you’ve promised father to let me have enough to bury him decent—but I’ll work it out. I won’t take a penny from you wi’out that’s agreed on—I’ll work it out.”

They had left the town behind now, and were walking under a tall unclipped hedge. He could not see Sheba’s face, but her voice was full of energy. Stephen opened a little gate which gave access to a field.

“We’ll go this way,” he said. “It’ll bring us to the farm all right an’ ’tis quieter. I want to speak to you, my girl.”

His heart had leaped as he took in the situation. Sheba did not know of her father’s breach of confidence—she need never know. She might come to him in gladness, not in humiliation. The girl’s last words were a revelation alike of her circumstances and character. She had not even wherewith to lay her father in the grave, yet her pride rebelled against asking for help. She would indeed only accept it on condition of repaying it to the full.

The path lay through high dank grass in which the buttercups glimmered like faint stars, past groups of chestnut trees in full bloom, crossing the field to a double line of hedges with a green track between. Some farm horses, turned out for the night, moved slowly out of the way; one colt, more easily startled than its fellows, broke into a lumbering canter, the ground appearing to shake beneath the thud of its heavy hoofs. Faint sounds came from the village in the hollow on the left; yet nevertheless the night seemed very still.

“Take my arm again,” said Stephen. “You might trip—the path’s rough.”

She obeyed, slackening her pace, and seeming to grow calmer amid the peace of her surroundings.

“I don’t know what ye’ll think o’ me,” she said. “I’m not even thanking ye—I tell ye plain, if I could manage in any other way I’d not take money from you. But I can’t help myself. There’s one thing though ye must agree to start wi’—to let me work out every penny. I can’t get the dubs together quick enough workin’ as I do, odd jobs here an’ there, an’ trantin’—so I’m willin’ to take the dairymaid’s place what Mrs. Hardy have so often offered me. I’ve always said no, for I couldn’t a-bear the thought of bein’ your servant, Stephen—me, what had always been your equal. But I’ll be your servant, now—I’d sooner be—I’ll pay ye back quicker that way.”

Again Stephen’s warm strong clasp engulfed her hand.

“No, my maid,” he said, “there’s a better way than that. You needn’t be my servant—be my wife.”

She started away from him; even in the fading light he could see her face working and her bosom heaving.

“Your wife!” she cried.

“Yes,” said Stephen quietly. “I don’t want a dairymaid—I want a wife. ’Tis not the first time we’ve talked o’ that,” he added smilingly.

She turned towards him then, and stood poised in an attitude half hesitating, half yielding; her lips were parted, her eyes shining.

“Stephen,” she faltered, and her voice assumed a wonderful tone of deep emotion and tenderness, “Stephen, ye mind that too—ye mind those days so well as I do?”

Without speaking Stephen put out his arms to enfold her, and she half involuntarily stretched out hers. But before he could clasp her she stepped quickly back again, dropping her arms.

“ ’Tis only out o’ charity,” she said, almost in a whisper. “ ’Tis all of a piece, Stephen—’tis because you’m sorry for me. I’ve nowhere to go, nobody to turn to—an’ so you think——”

“I think nothing,” said Stephen firmly, “except that I have known you all my life, and always known you to be good and true. Once you were my little sweetheart—now I want you for my wife.”

Again Sheba made a slight fluttering movement, but she restrained herself.

“Once your sweetheart!” she said in a low voice. “But it’s long since ye thought of me like that, Stephen—I d’ ’low ye’ve thought of other folks though, even this year—that pretty lady yonder at the Little Farm—I could see you had no eyes but for her—I don’t understand—about her.”

“Well, I’ll tell you then,” said he. “All men make mistakes an’ I mid ha’ made one. I’ll not deny that I was in love with Miss Leslie; yes, I reckoned there was nobody like her in the world. I had hopes she might marry me—I asked her straight out—an’ she answered me as straight. She let me see what a fool I was. That’s over,” he added, drawing a long breath.

Sheba came closer to him; she even seized him by the wrist, scarcely knowing what she did.

“If you be hankerin’ arter her still,” she whispered, “tell me so. Speak out; be as plain wi’ me as you was wi’ her. I’m not one as could be content wi’ half a man’s love.”

“As God sees me,” said Stephen, “I’m trying to be plain wi’ you, my maid. I tell you I made a mistake. And I tell you more. I’m thankful now that she said no to me—yes, I’m thankful,” he added emphatically. “If we’d wed we’d both have been miserable. Come, say the word, Sheba—say yes. You’ll make me as happy as I hope to make you.”

He drew her to him as he spoke, and this time she did not resist.

“I hope to make you happy,” said Stephen very earnestly, and he kissed her.

Her dark head drooped on his shoulder, her arms crept about his neck.

“I am happy,” she murmured in a low voice. “I d’ ’low ’tis almost wicked to be so happy when I know father’s dyin’, an’ that marryin’ me ’ull seem to disgrace ye i’ the eyes of everyone what knows ye. I can’t think o’ that—I can’t think o’ nothin’ but how much I love ye.”

The clasp of her hands tightened about his neck; she uplifted her face to his, and for a moment the tide of passionate emotion which overwhelmed her seemed to sweep over Stephen also; he kissed her again with deep tenderness.

“I wish I could die just like this,” said Sheba, “you holdin’ me an’ lovin’ me, an’ I feelin’ that you chose me an’ that you are mine.”

They stood long thus in the shadowy space between the hedges, Sheba now and then uttering broken words expressive of wonder and delight; Stephen wondering, too, and giving himself up to the emotion of the moment.

This surrender was, indeed, almost demanded by the absolute surrender of Sheba; she seemed to abandon herself to him with such entire confidence, such ecstasy of love, such intensity of devotion that he would have been less than man had he not been infected by her ardour.

The tall hedges which cut them off from the sleeping world about them, held many hidden sweetnesss that would by day have revealed themselves as wild rose and honeysuckle, and even lingering patches of late-blooming hawthorn; all these woodland odours seemed to be entangled in the perfume of the summer night; the scent of dewy grass and moss and leaves and little woody spices from the hedge. Now and then a horse moved in the adjacent

field, or an owl hooted in a distant copse, and from far, far away, came the fluty note of a nightingale.

All at once amid a splendour of fleecy cloud the moon rode forth, and the lovers realised that it was night. Stephen was the first to speak.

“It must be late. Rebecca won’t know what has become of us. And you must be tired out.”

“Oh, I’m not tired,” said she. “I’m—I’m sorry to go.”

“But you must rest,” he returned, beginning to move onwards, holding her still encircled by his arm. They paced along in silence, their feet falling in rhythm on the sod. As they emerged into the open space beyond the hedges Sheba glanced back with a sigh. It had been a perfect hour in there—would it be ever possible to feel so happy again?

Rebecca was anxiously on the lookout; she was, indeed, standing on the doorstep peering into the darkness, her sturdy figure outlined by the light streaming from the living-room.

“Stephen, be you there?” she cried. “I couldn’t think what had come to you. ’Tis past ten o’clock. Why, whoever have you got with you?”

“’Tis Sheba Baverstock,” said Stephen, as they followed her indoors. “I’ve brought her here for the night. You must give her a bed, Rebecca, and look after her. She’s fairly worn out.”

Mrs. Hardy gently pushed Sheba into the parlour, and then, stepping back, whispered in Stephen’s ear—

“Be her father dead?”

“No, they think he may last some time yet, but they wouldn’t let Sheba bide at the hospital, and I didn’t want her to go back to that lonesome house by the river, so I made her come along with me.”

“Oh,” said Rebecca, in a mystified tone. “Then ye haven’t been to Sheba’s place? I thought maybe ye’d gone there to fetch her.”

“Oh no,” answered he. “We came straight away from the hospital.”

“Why, what time did ye leave the hospital, my dear?” asked Rebecca in astonishment. “I thought they shut up at eight o’clock.”

“Yes, that’s true; but we came through the fields.”

By this time they were in the room, and Mrs. Hardy, who had been struck by something significant in Stephen’s tone, turned hastily to look at

Sheba. The girl stood in the full light, and the beads of dew on her hair glittered. Her skirt, too, was soaked with dew, and stained green from contact with grass and leaves; but these were not the things which arrested Rebecca's attention. The expression of Sheba's face, the very pose of her figure, denoted strong excitement, intense emotion. She looked back at Stephen, almost with alarm.

"I'd best tell you at once," said he, answering the look, "that Sheba and I are going to be married."

"Lard ha' mercy me!" exclaimed Rebecca, dropping into a chair. "This be terr'ble sudden, bain't it?"

"'Tis a bit sudden," agreed Stephen. "We've made it up at once and without any courting; but we know each other, you see—we know what we're doing."

"Oh, Mrs. Hardy," cried Sheba, "I know I'm not his equals—I know he mid ha' looked much higher and done much better for himself, but nobody ever could love him so well as what I do. Oh, do say you wish us happy."

"Well, an' so I do, love," exclaimed good-natured Rebecca, getting up from her chair and going across to Sheba, whom she gathered in a most motherly embrace.

"I do give 'ee joy wi' all my heart. 'Tisn't what I looked for—I'll not deny it—but since you'm both so happy and so well content wi' each other, I can wish for nothin' more."

"Don't think I don't feel myself that I bain't a fit wife for him," went on Sheba, as the good woman released her. "No one knows it so well as me. I be poor an' common an' ignorant. I be a-comin' to him wi' nothin' but the clothes I stand up in—but he's chose me. It do seem like a dream. He's chose me—he chose me of hisself."

"An' so he did," said matter-of-fact Rebecca. "As for bein' poor, my dear—there, he's well enough off hisself, an' needn't look for money in a wife. An' as for bein' ignorant, well, *I* bain't no great scholar, an' never found it come much in my way. I'll tell ye one thing, Sheba, no other maid i' the parish can match wi' you in looks. So I'll give ye joy too, Stephen. Ye've chose for yerself, as the maid says, an' I d' 'low ye've chose well. I be a bit took aback—I don't say but what I be a bit took aback—but Sheba were always a favourite o' mine."

"Yes, I'm sure you'll get on well together," said Stephen. "It'll make no difference to you, Rebecca," he added kindly. "There's room for us all here."

Mrs. Hardy's good-natured face clouded for a moment. This aspect of the matter had not hitherto struck her. Visions of diminished authority, of relinquished bunches of keys, of a future in which she should stand silent while Sheba gave orders, flitted across her mind's eye. She was about, nevertheless, to reply with the best grace she could muster, when Sheba interposed—

“Don't think I'd ever *want* to take your place, Mrs. Hardy,” she said earnestly. “Since Stephen axed I, I've never thought o' nothin' but him, an' I don't ever want to think o' nothin' but him. I'll never get in your road,” she added.

Stephen patted his stepmother on the shoulder.

“There, take her to bed, Rebecca,” he said. “Make her eat a bit o' summat an' take her to bed. It'll be time enough to settle everything when daylight comes. There's no reason why we shouldn't all get on,” he added, with masculine disregard of details. “But take a bit of care of her to-night, for she wants it.”

“Ye shall sleep in my own bed, my dear,” said Rebecca, beginning to bustle about. “'Tis big enough to hold a regiment, an' ye can be sure it is well aired,” she added with a chuckle. “Come into the kitchen an' sit ye down by the fire, while I make ye a cup o' tea. Ye must be chilly bein' out so late, though it be summer. You come too, Stephen; we'll all have a cup o' tea together for company's sake.”

A fire was still glowing in the kitchen, and Rebecca drew forward one of the wooden elbow-chairs for Sheba, and began to make eager preparations for the meal. Stephen, sitting down in the opposite corner, lit his pipe and smoked thoughtfully, glancing every now and then at Sheba, and marking with approval the turn of her handsome head, the length of her dark lashes, the glow upon her cheek, the mould of her form. Rebecca was right. She was a beautiful creature.

A flame leaped up as Mrs. Hardy drew the coals together, and Sheba raised one hand to screen her face from the blaze—a shapely hand enough, but brown and roughened with work.

All at once Stephen thought of that memorable Christmas night when he had sat opposite Kitty and she too had gazed into the embers and shaded her face with her hand when the flames darted out. A little hand, half the size of Sheba's, and white as milk; held thus against the blaze it had almost seemed transparent. Kitty was nothing to him now—he had been thoroughly

disappointed in her and was pledged to another woman, yet at the remembrance of that little white hand a pang shot through his heart.

CHAPTER III

As Stephen passed through the yard of the Little Farm on the following morning, he was struck by unusual signs of activity. The shutters of the upper rooms were thrown open. Cox was laboriously cleaning windows on the ground floor; Louisa, with flushed cheeks and a ruffled head, was galloping in and out shaking mats, trailing fragments of carpet over the grass, and otherwise making herself very busy.

“My young ladies be a-comin’ whoam-along to-day,” she announced gleefully, as Stephen passed her on his return from the granary, where he had been inspecting the condition of certain potatoes reserved for seed.

“Are they?” said he, pausing.

“Ees,” returned Louisa, nodding; “the wold gentleman he be a-bidin’ a bit longer in London, but Miss Leslie an’ Miss Bess, they be both a-comin’ whoam-along. I did get the letter yesterday, an’ Mr. Cox an’ me have been so busy as anything ever since. They’re to be here at three o’clock.”

Stephen passed on without replying; he felt angry.

“There was peace while she was away,” he said to himself. “Why should she come back now?”

Then other thoughts intruded themselves. What would Kitty feel when she heard how things were between him and Sheba? She would scorn him more than ever. He had picked up a mate from the fields; he had extended the hand which he once deemed worthy to clasp hers to that brown one of Sheba’s, a hand used to rough work, to turnip-picking, hauling hurdles—work which was unfit for women to do. That vision of Kitty’s little white hand still haunted his thoughts. She would wonder at his insolence. Then he checked the thought with fierce remorse. Sheba’s hand was browned with toil, but honest—faithful; he should pray Heaven to make him worthy to hold it in his. At tea-time, when he and his stepmother were sitting opposite each other, somewhat silently, for even good-natured Rebecca could not immediately readjust her ideas to the prospective change in their lives, there came a tap at the door, and Kitty walked in—Kitty, rather pale and very nervous, wearing a pretty dress of what Mrs. Hardy inwardly designated as a “new-fangled fayshion,” and looking very shy and sweet.

“We’ve just come home,” she said, kissing Rebecca, “and I couldn’t help running across to see you.”

“And you’re welcome, too, Miss Leslie,” cried Rebecca warmly; “I’m sure you be.”

Kitty turned towards Stephen timidly, and extended her hand.

“How do you do, Mr. Hardy?”

He muttered a response, and dropped it coldly. Kitty raised her eyes, which she had involuntarily dropped in greeting him; there was reproach, even entreaty, in her glance.

“There, sit ye down, my dear,” cried Rebecca joyfully. “I’m sure it be a pleasure to see ye again—lookin’ so nice an’ dressed so pretty, too. And how did you like London, my dear?”

“I didn’t like it at all,” said Kitty. “I wasn’t a bit happy. I was longing all the time to get home.”

Stephen’s lip twitched. Just so had Bess been wont to speak, with a roll of limpid eyes and an affected sigh. Everyone knew how much Bess’ contempt of worldliness and hollow shams and aspirations after the simple life were worth. He had been amused at the little creature’s play-acting, but had deemed her sister to be of a different stamp. Yet here was Kitty play-acting too, and for what purpose?

“I think I was made to be a country girl,” went on Kitty, still in a tone that was unconsciously appealing, and with a reproachful glance now and then at Stephen’s grim face. “I felt lost in London—such a small, small, insignificant waif. Everything was so dazzling and so noisy, and so—so heartless,” she added, with a sigh that in Stephen’s ears was the echo of Bess’ own. He pushed back his chair and rose suddenly.

“I have one or two things to see to outside,” he said, and, nodding curtly towards the visitor, he went out. Kitty sat in blank silence until his figure passed the window and then sprang up too.

“I want to ask Mr. Hardy something,” she cried. “I’ll come back presently to have a long chat with you.”

She had flown from the room before Rebecca could rejoin her, and, darting eagerly out of the house, caught sight of Stephen in the rick-yard, standing still and prodding viciously at a weed with the point of his stick. The bright afternoon light showed the strong lines in his face; the brows were drawn, the lips compressed.

“Mr. Hardy,” called Kitty falteringly.

He looked up quickly and came towards her.

“Do you want me?”

“Only for a minute. I want to ask you something.”

He halted opposite to her and waited, still with a clouded face.

She was about to carry out a resolution which had formed itself during her exile in London, and to make one more effort to break down the barrier which had arisen between herself and her former friend. She had often imagined the scene, and rehearsed the words she meant to use, but now that the time had come for speaking them her courage almost failed her.

“Mr. Hardy,” she said tremulously, “I want to ask you if we can’t be friends again. I’ve thought of it so much while I was away. I—I—you and Mrs. Hardy have been such kind neighbours. I can’t bear you to think me ungrateful.”

Stephen looked away over the lines of golden stacks to where the birch trees which shaded the Lovers’ Walk moved lightly in the breeze.

“I see you do think me ungrateful,” said Kitty. “I can’t help it, I suppose. I must submit to it. But there’s one thing I can’t submit to,” she went on, her voice trembling, not with timidity this time, but with pent-up emotion; “you accused me once of being light-minded—I can’t bear that—I won’t bear it. You’ve no right to be so unjust to me.”

Stephen looked at her frowningly; her hands were clenched, her blue eyes shining; the words came in little gusts because of her quick breathing.

“Well, Miss Leslie,” he answered sternly, “I don’t want to judge you harshly, but what else can I think? The man I saw you with——”

“I didn’t know he was a married man,” she broke out. “I told you I didn’t know it.”

“It’s not that,” said Stephen slowly. “The man was a married man, and, young as you are, I think you must have guessed that he wasn’t a good man—not fit to be trusted. But it’s not that—it’s—somehow I didn’t think you were that sort—I didn’t think it would be your way to take up so quick with the first man you met—the first man o’ your own class, I should say,” he added bitterly. “I didn’t think you’d make little of yourself like that. There’s the truth.”

The colour rushed over Kitty's face, and angry tears sprang to her eyes. But something merciless within him prompted him to continue—

“I'm not speakin' o' myself—yes, I will speak o' myself,” he added, interrupting himself fiercely.

At that moment no other woman existed for him in the world but Kitty; the remembrance of his engagement to Sheba had absolutely vanished from his mind.

“I mid ha' been mistaken, but I thought what I thought—an' to see you turn from me to him in scarce more than a few days—well, I do call it light conduct. Ye packed me about my business an' ye took up wi' the first man that came to hand. Things had gone deep wi' me, ye see, Miss Leslie—I couldn't seem to understand it.”

“That will do,” said Kitty; “I can't explain it—there's no more to be said.”

She turned away, holding her head very high and walking unflinching across the yard and through the gate; she had forgotten all about her promise to return to Mrs. Hardy.

She went upstairs slowly, avoiding the sitting-room, as she wished to evade Bess' questions anent her visit to the farm on the hill. On opening the door of their joint bedroom, however, she was dismayed to find, not only her sister there, but Louisa, who was kneeling before a half-unpacked box.

“Come in, Kitty, come in!” cried Bess, as Kitty was about to close the door. “I want to tell you something. What do you think? Louisa says Farmer Hardy is courting Sheba Baverstock.”

Kitty stood still, her breath for a moment so completely taken away that she was unable to respond. Louisa squatted back upon her heels, balancing on her red arms a pile of underclothing and wagging her head in high delight at finding herself the centre of interest.

“Yes, miss, 'tis the talk of the whole place. Baker, he says to me this mornin' when I did tell him I should want a extry loaf along o' my young ladies comin' back, says he, ‘Ye'll be havin' a bit o' stir about this here wold place again, then,’ he says; ‘an' if the tale be true what they do tell I in the town, there'll be a deal o' stir at the Big Farm up-along!’ ‘Why,’ says I, ‘what stir?’ ‘A weddin’,’ he says. ‘They d' say Farmer Hardy, what do never seem to look at any maid, have a-took up at last wi' Sheba Baverstock.’ ”

“Nonsense!” said Kitty quickly.

“It isn’t nonsense, though,” cried Bess. “Just you listen—go on, Louisa.”

“Well, miss,” continued Louisa, with modest triumph, “the baker did tell I as Sheba Baverstock an’ Farmer Hardy were a-walking through the town arm-in-crook last night so friendly as everything—walking along plump in face of all the folks in town.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Kitty again, and she smiled to herself a little bitterly; had she not the best of reasons for knowing how impossible such a wooing would be? Her cheeks were yet burning at the tone in which Stephen had condemned her own instability of purpose. He might be angry, he was unjust, but fickle—light-minded, as he would say himself—never.

Meanwhile Louisa was happily babbling on.

“Wold Baverstock was run over two or three nights ago, an’ brought to Cottage Hospital for dead. He bain’t dead yet, but he be wounded in the in’ards summat terr’ble, an’ he can’t laist long, doctors do say, an’ butcher did tell I as he did meet Sheba an’ Farmer Hardy a-walkin’ through the marketplace so lovin’ as anythin’. She was a-holdin’ on to his arm, an’ he was a-lookin’ down at her that earnest! Butcher was very much surprised. ‘ ’Twas commonly thought,’ he says, ‘as Mr. Hardy ’ud look much higher. Everyone be a-talkin’ about it,’ he did tell I. ‘ ’Tis a strange thing for he to pick up a girl what do work i’ the fields.’ And that’s true,” commented Louisa. “Sheba Baverstock, she do work i’ the fields when she bain’t trantin’. She be terr’ble common, Sheba be. She do speak in a terr’ble common way—she haven’t a-had no eddication at all. I’d ha’ thought Farmer Hardy ’d ha’ looked higher; shouldn’t you, Miss Bess? Bain’t there somebody a-knockin’ at the door?” she exclaimed before Bess could respond.

“Go down and see who it is,” said Kitty severely. “Pull down your sleeves and put your cap straight; and you needn’t come back any more—I’ll help Miss Bess to unpack.”

Louisa departed, with a slightly offended air, and Kitty, going towards the dressing-table, began to divest herself of her hat.

“Well, did you ever hear such a thing?” asked Bess. “Fancy Sheba Baverstock! It just shows that Stephen Hardy is really a low-minded sort of man. He hasn’t the least bit of genuine refinement.”

Kitty slowly drew out a hat-pin before replying. “You oughtn’t to gossip so much with Louisa. I can’t understand how you can do it.”

“I must talk to somebody,” responded Bess tartly. “And if I don’t say a word or two to Louisa now and then I shall have to talk to Cox. There’s not a living soul to speak to in the place now that we can’t go to the Hardys’. How thankful I am that we gave them up. Really, I think we were a little mad to have ever made friends with them. Only fancy what a mess we might have got ourselves into! Why don’t you speak, Kitty?” she added irritably. “Don’t you think it’s rather humiliating to think that Stephen Hardy is that sort of man? You know at one time I actually thought—of course, it was the wildest, most idiotic idea, and if father and you hadn’t put it into my head it would never have occurred to me—but, you know, he really did admire me, and that’s what’s so humiliating now. To be admired by a man who is just as ready to fall in love with any tramping gipsy sort of creature. Isn’t it humiliating, Kitty?”

Kitty was saved the trouble of responding by the clattering return of Louisa, who burst into the room all agog with an unpleasant piece of information.

“Mrs. Turnworth be a-sittin’ downstairs, miss. I said you was busy unpackin’, but she came right in, an’ she says she is in a hurry.”

The girls descended the stairs, Bess grimacing behind her sister’s back.

“Now for it,” she whispered. “Sinful extravagance—idle folly—Going up to London when we haven’t any money to spend. Father’ll run through all that he’s to get for his book before it comes out—I know.”

But Mrs. Turnworth said none of these things. She told Kitty that she looked pale, and Bess that she had grown fat—preliminaries that were irresistible because likely to be distasteful to the recipients—and, after a portentous sniff on hearing that Mr. Leslie had not yet returned, started off at a tangent.

“I didn’t know you were back till Mrs. Hardy told me; I have just been to see the Hardys. By the way, Kitty, Rebecca said that you had been in this afternoon.”

“Yes,” said Kitty.

“I never knew you went to the Hardys’,” remarked Bess in a resentful tone; “you’re always doing things without telling me, now, Kitty.”

“There was no need to tell you,” rejoined Kitty quickly. “I only went in to see Mrs. Hardy for a minute.”

“Oh, I know they’re great friends of yours,” interposed Mrs. Turnworth, with the laugh which the sisters found so trying. “Did you hear anything about Hardy himself? Perhaps Rebecca may have given *you* some information, though I couldn’t get anything out of her. In fact, she was quite rude. She said Stephen knew his own business, and could talk about it as much as he wanted himself. Very fishy, I call it.”

“Do you mean about his engagement to Sheba Baverstock?” cried Bess eagerly.

“Engagement!” cried Mrs. Turnworth; then, after another sniff and a suggestive pause, she continued, “well, call it that if you like. *I* think he’s just what the servants call ‘carrying on,’ and I dropped in to put Mrs. Hardy on her guard. It’s really disgraceful—a man who ought to give an example in the parish. I must talk to Mr. Moreton about it.”

“I suppose the butcher told you?” observed Kitty, with a little note of sarcasm in her voice. “I believe he was Louisa’s informant.”

“Oh, of course, everyone is talking about it,” returned Mrs. Turnworth comfortably. “I hear they’ve been parading up and down Branston in the most shameless way. And, worse than that, they—but I hardly like to tell you girls.”

“Oh, do!” cried Bess. “We are not so young now, Cousin Marian, and we know lots of things.”

“Well, really, as you are such near neighbours of the Hardys and have seen so much of the man, it is perhaps just as well you should be warned about his character. Mrs. Green is working for me to-day—I am again cookless—such a creature as I have sent packing!—Mrs. Green couldn’t come to me till to-day because she’s been all the week with some woman in Branston who has just had a baby. She has had to come home quite late at night, and last night when it was pitch dark—long after ten—she turned into the fields (intending to take the short cut, you know), and she caught sight of a man and a woman standing at the far end just where the path goes between two hedges—*you* know. The man had his arm round the woman’s waist—they were, in fact, embracing each other. Mrs. Green was rather curious, and went towards them cautiously, keeping under the trees; and when she got close she found, to her great surprise, that they were Stephen Hardy and Sheba Baverstock.”

“I thought you said it was pitch dark!” exclaimed Kitty; her cheeks, which had, indeed, never cooled since her interview with Stephen, glowed

even more deeply, and she tapped her foot on the floor.

“Oh, there was moonlight, or starlight, or something, I suppose—enough to see by. Anyhow, the fact remains. Mrs. Green works for the Hardys, you know, and so, as she thought Farmer Hardy would probably not like to know that she had seen them, she went back as she had come, and returned home by the road. I must say I think the affair is *very* peculiar.”

Kitty made no remark, but her foot continued to tap the floor; Bess shook her head and looked extremely wise.

“But Louisa says that everyone in Branston thinks he’s going to marry her,” she observed after a pause.

“Marry her!” exclaimed Mrs. Turnworth, laughing again. “You poor innocent babe! I only ask you, is it likely? A well-to-do man like Mr. Hardy—a man of some education, too—do you think it probable that he should marry the daughter of that drunken old reprobate, Baverstock? Why, the commonest girl in any of the villages about would refuse to do what the Baverstock girl does. She works like a man, when she does work, but she and her father have spent half their lives on the roads. A common tramp—is she the wife for Hardy-on-the-Hill? I was wondering if Mrs. Hardy had mentioned the subject to you, Kitty.”

Kitty shook her head.

“It looks all the more suspicious,” said the visitor, rising. “Well, I must be going. I’ll just run round to the Moretons’ and put the Rector on the track. Something ought to be done—it’ll be a public scandal. . . . And so your father has not come back yet?”

Mrs. Turnworth was half across the room by this time, but Kitty did not follow her. She could hear her voice, however, as Bess went out with her.

“Yes, he’ll run through what he gets for that book before it is published.”

“Cousin Marian couldn’t go away without fulfilling one of my prophecies,” said Bess, returning. “Well, isn’t it rather shocking about Stephen Hardy?”

“I don’t believe one word of it,” said Kitty. “Either Mrs. Green or Cousin Marian is telling untruths, probably both!”

“Goodness, you need not get so hot about it!” exclaimed Bess. “I don’t see why it shouldn’t be true—I shouldn’t mind if there were a scandal in the neighbourhood—it would wake us up a bit, and I am not so very enthusiastic

about Stephen Hardy now. It is just like you, Kitty, to take him up when nobody wants you to.”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘taking him up,’” said Kitty more calmly. “And I am not at all enthusiastic about Mr. Hardy; but I hate injustice. I’m certain he is quite incapable of acting in the way Cousin Marian says, and I, for one, will never believe it.”

“Gracious me, we have changed our note all of a sudden!” commented Bess. “It was you who always held aloof, who never wanted to accept the commonest little favour from him.”

“Oh, Bess, can’t you see? That’s just it! We have accepted favours—too many favours! He has been our friend. We oughtn’t to stand by and hear his character taken away.”

Bess whistled, which she sometimes did when she was in a provoking mood, and Kitty continued warmly—

“I don’t say I like the man—I don’t know that I do like him—he can be rough and rude and disagreeable. Perhaps, as you say, he is not very refined—why should a farmer be refined? But that’s no reason why he should be defamed.”

“Then you think he *is* going to marry her?” said Bess, gazing at her sister through half-shut eyes. Kitty, who had been going out of the room, turned at the door.

“I have the best of reasons for knowing,” she cried, “that Stephen Hardy is not thinking of marrying Sheba Baverstock, or anybody else.”

CHAPTER IV

Sheba came back from the hospital an hour later, and encountered Stephen at the end of the lane. After his parting with Kitty, the remembrance of Sheba and his obligations towards her had returned to him, and he was the more resolved to fulfil these last-named to the letter, because of an underlying sense of remorse.

“I was just going to meet you,” he said; “I thought it would be about your time for coming home.”

“I don’t know that I ought to go to your place,” returned Sheba in a dull voice. “I think I must ha’ been mad to think you and me could ever get married. There, I scarce know how to tell you. I feel so wicked! I did ought to be cryin’ for joy, and here I be nigh cryin’ for grief. The folks at the hospital think father ’ull very like get well, Stephen.”

“Oh, and do they?” said Stephen blankly. It was a little difficult to adjust his ideas to a prospect so utterly unlooked-for, and so completely undesirable. So the old reprobate was going to cheat Death! Many a good man would have been laid low by half the injuries he had received, yet here was Richard Baverstock recovering, to resume his former life, no doubt, to be a drag upon his daughter for an indefinite number of years, and a discredit to all who were connected with her.

Though Sheba did not look at him, she guessed what was passing in his mind.

“Ye needn’t say anything,” she murmured presently. “I know, without your tellin’ me. And, anyhow, I wouldn’t be your wife now, not if ye was to beg me on your knees. I’ll not disgrace any man by marryin’ him while father’s alive.”

“Nay, now,” said Stephen, “don’t be in such a hurry, my maid. You’ve given me your word, and you can’t go back on it. I’ll take care of your father. He shan’t want for anything as long as he lives.”

Sheba glanced up at him with a sudden softness in her dark eyes.

“It’s terr’ble good o’ ye, Stephen, and I’ll never forget it, but ye’ll not make me change my mind. Father and me must shift for ourselves so long as he be livin’. The doctors bain’t sure how long that may be—they bain’t even sure whether he *will* get over this, but they say there’s a chance. Oh,

Stephen, isn't it awful wicked of me not to be glad there's a chance? My own father?"

"My dear," said Stephen, "he hasn't been much of a father to you—there's no use pretending. And I'm not going to give you up, so don't think it. What's settled is settled."

He spoke very gravely, and looking straight before him; and drew a long breath after the last words.

"No need to make plans yet," he went on, after a pause. "We must see what's best to do when your father comes out of the hospital. But come in now, and have a cup of tea and rest a bit—you look very tired."

She glanced up at him hesitating.

"There's one thing I'd like to ax ye," she said falteringly. "There, I've been a-thinkin' of it all the way along. It bain't late yet—not so very. If ye didn't mind, Stephen, you and me mid go up-along to the Lovers' Walk yonder just for a little bit. I'm not so very tired. It 'ud rest me."

Probably no request could have been more unwelcome to Stephen; he stood gazing at the girl with a perplexed expression.

"I know you must think it terr'ble foolish of me," she went on hastily; "it's just a fancy—but I *would* like it."

"I don't understand—why," returned he. His voice was harsh, but she was so intent on her own thoughts that she did not perceive it.

"Ye haven't forgot," she said, "how you and me used to play there long ago? When we did use to play at being sweethearts, we did always go a-courtin' in the Lovers' Walk. Now we be real sweethearts—but God knows how long it will last! I'd like to go up there wi' you this once, and just to find it had all come true, what we did pretend, and what I have so often _____"

She broke off quickly, her natural reticence reasserting itself, and forbidding her to finish the phrase. "Longed for," had been the words which had risen to her lips. Stephen pulled himself together. The Lovers' Walk had hateful associations for him, but that was no reason why he should balk the girl to whom he was pledged of her very natural desire.

"Come," he said, "we'll step up there then, and try to fancy we are children again."

“Not children,” murmured she, and, though she spoke softly, that wonderful new tone which had of late come into her voice made itself heard.

“Not children, Stephen! No, no, we be man and woman! I be thinkin’ o’ now—*now*! Oh, how I wish it could always be now, wi’ no looking forrard, no fear of anythin’ comin’ between us!”

He drew her hand through his arm without speaking, but with great tenderness. Nevertheless, as they rounded the corner of the lane and passed the Little Farm, he averted his face, dreading to see Kitty’s form, or hear Kitty’s voice.

Though he was silent, and preserved an outward appearance of composure, a turmoil was raging within him. He was cursing himself for a coward, reproaching himself, even, with treachery towards the trusting creature by his side. Why should the turn of Kitty’s head, the tone of her voice, have haunted him all day, when it was Sheba’s head which was so near his own, Sheba’s voice which but now had assumed a tenderness that should have thrilled his heart?

They did not speak to each other as they mounted the rough track between the hedges which led to the wood, but as they followed in this the custom of rustic lovers, the silence did not strike Sheba as peculiar. Her face, indeed, wore an expression of such bliss that Stephen’s heart smote him when he glanced at it.

Here was their goal at last, the Lovers’ Walk, the lovers’ hour, sunset; and here they were, they two, man and woman, as Sheba had said, full of youth and health and vigour—yet only one heart sang to itself the lovers’ pæan of joy.

The wood was very still, with that intent stillness which comes only in midsummer and in midwinter. On either side of the path the trees were scattered, and it seemed a very hall of light, every motionless leaf a little point of fire, every tree-trunk a pillar of pale or ruddy flame as birch or beech alternated with sturdy fir. As the couple advanced, they snapped lush stalks of bluebells, the sweet scent of which weighted the air about them; other flowers in the place, ragged-robins and orchises, made little glowing filters for the sun’s rays. Farther on, all was mystery, gentle twilight, with here and there a sombre shape looming forth.

“Stephen,” said Sheba, “I’m going to have my way for once. Who knows what may happen to-morrow? ’Tis what I do keep a-sayin’ to myself.

But we be here, now, you an' me, an' I be a-goin' to have a proper lovers' walk. You'll not think me bold-faced, will ye?"

He looked down at the face which was upturned to his—upturned a very little way, for Sheba was a tall woman—and saw that it was glowing with feeling, wistfully tender, expectant. With an effort he concentrated his whole thought upon her.

"A proper lovers' walk?" he said. "Yes, sure, Sheba love."

He put his arm round her waist and kissed her; and Sheba, with that innocent trustful ardour of hers, clasped both her hands about his neck and kissed him back. But as she loosed him again she uttered an exclamation, and withdrew quickly from his embrace; her face was startled, angry. Stephen, turning, glanced in the same direction, and there, just emerging from one of the more secret recesses of the wood, stood Kitty Leslie. She was gazing at them with an expression of shocked, horrified amazement, such as Stephen had never seen on her face.

Rallying her self-possession, however, she wheeled, and would have plunged back into the depths of the thicket if he had not called to her.

"Wait a bit, Miss Leslie!" he cried.

"No, Stephen, let her go," exclaimed Sheba. "'Tis too bad that we couldn't have these few moments to ourselves wi'out bein' spied on. I don't want to talk to her."

"Stay there if you like, then," said Stephen. "I must tell her. There mustn't be any misunderstanding."

"I'll come wi' you, then," cried Sheba, and stepped along by his side with the grace, the restrained energy of a young panther, with something also of the watchful savagery of the wild beast in her gaze. Kitty awaited their approach with an expression of haughty surprise, as though wondering that Stephen had hailed her.

He was breathing quickly as he halted before her.

"I want to tell you, Miss Leslie," he began abruptly, "that Sheba Baverstock has promised to be my wife."

"Indeed?" said Kitty coldly. "I congratulate you."

"I d' 'low you're a bit surprised," interrupted Sheba defiantly.

Kitty turned to her with a scarcely perceptible curl of the lip.

“Why should *you* think me likely to be surprised?” she rejoined with a faintly sarcastic emphasis.

Sheba stepped back as though she had received a blow. The remembrance of their previous encounter on this very spot, and of Sheba’s subsequent confidences, were in the minds of both. Sheba did not speak, however; and Kitty glanced, still with the same ironical smile, at Stephen, stepped past them, and walked away.

The couple stood still till the swish of her skirts was no longer heard, and then Stephen drew near Sheba again.

“Come,” he said.

He extended his arm mechanically, and she took it; they walked on in silence, but not the silence of a little while before which had been so fraught with happiness for Sheba. The sense of shame and remorse of which Stephen had been conscious had previously been all for the sake of the girl beside him; but now it became twofold. What kind of figure must he cut in Kitty’s eyes? How could she reconcile his recent words with the state of things which she had just witnessed? It well became him to reproach her with fickleness of purpose, when he himself, who had professed to love her with such depth and earnestness, had turned so lightly, as she must think, to another woman. He writhed inwardly as he remembered the pale, scornful little face, the derisive smile which he had never before seen on Kitty’s lips.

Sheba broke in upon his painful meditations.

“Your arm’s just same as a block o’ wood, here in mine!” she cried with a kind of passionate impatience. “What’s come to ye?” Then without waiting for an answer—“Oh, I wish, I wish we’d never met her! We might ha’ had one hour. Jist the one hour I craved for—but she’s come between!”

Stephen stopped short and looked at her.

“You mustn’t say such things as that, my girl,” he said. “We are promised man and wife. I’m not the man to let anyone come between us.”

But Sheba, unconvinced, clutched his arm.

“Tell me one thing—was it to be revenged on her you took up wi’ me?”

“No!” he cried angrily. “I wonder you dare ask me such a question! Miss Leslie is nothing to me. If I had my will I’d never see her again,” he added bitterly.

“That’s summat,” said Sheba, half to herself. Then, with one of her swift changes of mood, she flung her arms about his neck and Stephen kissed her sorrowfully.

“Oh,” she cried, drawing away from him immediately, “I don’t know how I can forget myself like this! I think we had better go home-along now,” she added in a different tone, for he did not speak, though he would have given worlds to have found loving words. “ ’Tis gettin’ dark, and I d’ ’low you must be tired, if I’m not—you what’s goin’ about all day.”

“I’m not tired,” said Stephen; nevertheless he turned, and the two went slowly homewards; Sheba’s heart yearning, and Stephen’s like a stone.

CHAPTER V

“Stephen!”

Stephen halted outside the milk-house door; he could see Sheba within bending over one of the long “leads” which contained milk in different stages, from the still foaming evening yield to the already cream-covered product of the morning.

“Did you call me?”

“Yes; can you step in a moment?”

Stephen went in, but Sheba continued to skim without turning her head.

“Did you want me for something?” he asked a little impatiently, and then, “Isn’t it tea-time?”

“Yes, but your mother’s got company.”

“Well, but we must have our tea, I suppose.”

“It’s Miss Kitty Leslie,” said Sheba, straightening herself and turning round.

Stephen came a step or two farther into the milk-house and Sheba resumed her work. He stood by her, tapping his boot with his riding crop.

“Well,” said she after a moment, “you bain’t in such a hurry to go in now?”

“I’ll wait till you’re ready,” returned he.

“You’ll wait till she’s gone, then,” said Sheba; “I bain’t a-going in till then. I don’t know why Mrs. Hardy did bring her in, I’m sure, for she wasn’t so very willin’.”

Stephen made no direct reply; he crossed the flagged floor to a shelf in the corner on which sundry rolls of butter, each neatly folded up in its own particular square of muslin, lay piled for to-morrow’s market.

“Did you have a good churning this morning?” he inquired.

“Ees, the cows be givin’ a deal of milk now. This lot be waitin’ for Frisby’s cart. We sold twice as much this marnin’.”

“Did you?” said he.

“Ees,” replied Sheba. She tapped her skimmer against the side of the shallow pan and went on to the next.

Stephen stood still, whistling under his breath. Sheba, though apparently intent on her work, watched him furtively.

“You’ve got a new customer for cream,” she remarked after a pause.

“Have we?” returned he.

“That lady what have a-took Parson Filton’s Rectory, she’ve ordered it to be sent twice a day.”

“Rather a bother for a small order.”

“Mrs. Hardy says if folks mean to do business they must show themselves willin’ to carry out all orders, great or small. Don’t you agree wi’ she?”

Stephen, looking absently out of the window, made no reply.

“Don’t you agree, I say?” asked the girl, and the hand which held the tin skimmer shook a little.

“I beg your pardon,” said he, going towards her again. “I’m afraid I wasn’t listening just then. What did you say?”

“It doesn’t matter. I saw you warn’t listenin’ to I. You was listenin’ to summat else, though.”

“What do you mean?”

Sheba made no answer, and in the ensuing silence the tread of light feet could be heard on the path without, and presently Kitty’s figure passed the window and the open door and made its way to the gate. Stephen did not turn his head to look at her, and Sheba watched him with that wild-beast expression once more transforming her beautiful eyes. The gate opened with its familiar creak and swung to again. Then Sheba flung the skimmer down and turned to her lover.

“It’s more nor flesh an’ blood can stand,” she exclaimed. “Do ye think I’ve no eyes in my head an’ no feelin’ in my heart? Why, ye’ve got another face on when ye hear her step. You was a-watchin’ out for’t and a-holdin’ your breath. I see’d ye—and this bain’t the only time, it’s always, always! I shan’t come to this place no more. Father and me must get along so well as we can; but I’ll earn enough to keep us somewhere else.”

Stephen, confounded by the outburst, angry, ashamed, remorseful all at once, had no words with which to reply.

“D’ye think I didn’t notice yesterday when we was at dinner,” she went on vehemently—“your mother just named her and ye got up and looked out o’ the window just for a pretence to hide your face. I very nigh choked over the morsel what was i’ my mouth. I’ll not eat your bread, and I’ll not take your pay—I’ll——”

“Sheba,” exclaimed Stephen, taking her firmly by the wrists and looking into the wild eyes with a sternness which seemed to steady them. “You mustn’t talk like this—you mustn’t think such things.”

“I tell ye it’s no use,” she went on more quietly, but still with a kind of desperation. “I’ve tried an’ I’ve tried—many a time I was longin’ to fly out an’ I checked myself—I swallowed my feelin’s down, but I can’t go on. How is it to end? When you an’ me are man an’ wife—if we are ever man an’ wife—do you think I can bide that other maid livin’ at a stone’s-throw from our door? To know you’re meetin’ her twenty times a day, lookin’ up at her windows, thinkin’ of her——”

“I never do that,” he cried impatiently.

“Ye never think of her?”

“No, I mean I never look up at her windows.”

“Ye can’t say ye never think of her, ye see,” she returned with a kind of fiercely sad triumph. “There must be an end on’t, Stephen, either she must go or I. I have often wondered she doesn’t go—anybody else would. Well, if she don’t, I must.”

Stephen took a turn about the room and then came up to her.

“You are quite right,” he said in a dull voice. “’Tis too much to expect any woman to bear. It isn’t right. They must give up the house.”

“Ye’ll have a grudge against me now for askin’ it,” she said, watching his face attentively.

“No; why should I bear you a grudge? ’Tis too much to expect, as you say, for any woman that’s jealous of another to have her living a stone’s-throw from her door.”

“Jealous!” exclaimed Sheba. The angry light leaped up once more in her eyes, and she drew a long breath as though in preparation for another outburst; then all at once she calmed herself and continued brokenly: “Well,

I am jealous. I'll own to it—maybe I've cause an' maybe I haven't. I did ought to give ye up, Stephen—that 'ud be the right thing to do—I did ought to leave ye to her!”

“Haven't I told you a hundred times,” said Stephen, in a voice that trembled with anger, “that Miss Leslie and I can never be anything to each other? If there wasn't another woman in the world and there wasn't another man it 'ud be the same—we be nothing to each other.”

Sheba went to him timidly and laid her hand upon his arm.

“I know I didn't ought to be jealous,” she said pleadingly. “I know your promise ought to be enough, and I ought to content myself. I'll try to content myself. I'll try to be patient and not expect too much. Ye'll not be angry wi' me, Stephen?”

“No, I'm not angry,” said he, “the thing has to be done—it ought to have been done before. It's right every way,” he added, half to himself.

He went out of the milk-house, and when Sheba, after finishing her task, followed him, she found him already seated at the tea-table. Mrs. Hardy was unusually and disagreeably loquacious throughout the meal—disagreeably, I say, for though the good woman had no intention of making herself unpleasant, the subjects which she selected for discussion were one and all calculated to give pain to her hearers.

“At long last,” she announced triumphantly, “I managed to persuade Miss Kitty to pop in for a moment. I can't think what's come to her. I did use to think she was taken up wi' her fine friends, but she don't seem to care for them now. ‘No,’ says she to me, ‘give me the country, Mrs. Hardy. I'd rather have the Little Farm nor all the fine houses I've been seeing lately; I'd give all the parks and all the chimney pots for the view from my bedroom window!’”

A dead silence ensued, broken at length by Stephen, who nerved himself to make some response.

“Chimney pots! I reckon they're ugly things to look at, at the best of times.”

“Well, an' so they be, my dear. 'Tis just a fayshion o' talkin' o' London town, I s'pose—I reckon there are more chimney pots nor anything else there. She bain't lookin' so very well, I don't think.”

As no answer was returned to this remark, Rebecca repeated it emphatically: “I say Miss Leslie bain't lookin' so very well, Stephen.

Haven't ye noticed it?"

"I'm sorry to hear it," returned her stepson gravely.

"I thought ye'd ha' noticed it," repeated Mrs. Hardy in a satisfied tone. "She seem to have lost her spirits too. She were always quieter nor Miss Bess, but she an' me used to have our little jokes together, an' now she do sit so mournful like—an' she do seem so nervish—terr'ble nervish. There, she do fair jump whenever a door do open."

This remark appeared to call for no answer, and neither of the listeners volunteered one.

"I do feel a bit hurt in my feelings about Miss Bess," continued Rebecca. "There, she do never come a-nigh us now, her as used to be poppin' in and out at all hours, makin' believe to help me wi' this an' that. 'Tis a little weathercock—ees, sure, she be just like a weathercock wi' that little red head an' all."

The conceit tickled Mrs. Hardy's fancy, though, as a matter of fact, weathercocks are not, as a rule, remarkable for red heads. She laughed loudly, suddenly breaking off, however, with an aggrieved face.

"There, I declare, I mid jist so well sit down to table wi' a couple o' Injun mummies. Never a word from one or t'other o' ye since we began tea—an' this be my second cup. I bain't used to doing all the talkin'. What makes ye so silent, Sheba love?"

"I've never got much to say, Mrs. Hardy," rejoined Sheba.

"You do look a bit put out. Be there summat wrong, Stephen?"

But Stephen, knowing that his turn would come next, had already risen, and now left the room without pausing to answer her summons.

He went to his room and washed his hands, changed his coat for a better one, and went straight out to the Little Farm. His views were always extremely simple, and it never would have occurred to him to write a letter to a man who lived at a few yards' distance. Moreover, a certain directness in his nature hindered what he would have considered the shirking of an unpleasant duty. The thing had to be done—it was better to do it at once, wasting as few words as possible over it.

Mr. Leslie was, as usual, surrounded by papers, and had been grappling with some knotty point, as was evidenced by his frown and the somewhat dishevelled condition of his hair, through which he had been irritably passing his long nervous fingers. The expression which his already annoyed

countenance assumed was positively ferocious when Louisa, after a preliminary thump at the door, which made him jump in his seat, burst in with the gleeful announcement—

“Mr. Hardy to see you, sir.”

“I can’t see anyone now,” responded Mr. Leslie irritably; but Stephen’s tall figure already stood towering over Louisa in the doorway.

“Please, sir, I said I thought you was busy,” observed Louisa in an eagerly explanatory tone; “but Measter Hardy said——”

“There, that’ll do, my girl. You are only taking up your master’s time. I’ll say what I have to say for myself.”

This from Stephen, who had by this time entered the room, and now stood close to Mr. Leslie’s sacred writing-table.

“Really,” said his tenant, “I’m rather surprised, Mr. Hardy. I thought you knew I disliked being disturbed when I am at work.”

“I’ll only keep you a few minutes,” said Stephen.

Mr. Leslie shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

“Oh well, a few minutes. The thread of my thought is broken now—it doesn’t really matter much whether it’s for a few minutes or more.”

“I am sorry to have disturbed you,” said the visitor, who still stood overshadowing the writing-table.

Mr. Leslie made up his mind to accept the inevitable.

“How do you do?” he murmured with a groan, endeavouring at the same time to clear his brow. He looked at the hand which held the precious pen, discussing with himself the advisability of laying aside that implement, and extending the hand in question to Stephen; but apparently decided that the young farmer did not deserve to be rewarded for his intrusion.

“I came to see you, Mr. Leslie,” said Stephen after a pause, “about a rather unpleasant matter. I am sorry to say, sir, that I shall have to ask you to leave the Little Farm.”

“What!” cried Mr. Leslie, with an expression of such blank astonishment and dismay that Stephen’s heart smote him.

“I am very sorry to have to ask you to give up possession,” he went on, however, firmly enough; “but I wish to get the place back into my own hands.”

Mr. Leslie leaned back in his chair, his jaw dropping, his already pale face becoming still paler. His intense dismay would have seemed ludicrously out of place to anyone less deeply concerned than his landlord.

“But, Mr. Hardy, it’s impossible,” he gasped at length. “It is monstrous—I could not possibly turn out now. This is the most critical period of my life. My great book is now almost completed. I have collected all the materials for the final chapters—the most important, mind you, of the whole work. The success of the whole scheme of the work depends on the development of these chapters. I have, as you know, perhaps, been at great pains and expense in order to complete my researches—and now at the very time when, of all others, quiet is absolutely essential, you talk of disturbing me. The idea is preposterous.”

Stephen stood motionless, his face much distressed, but showing no signs of relenting. Mr. Leslie threw down the pen and began to fidget nervously with his papers.

“Where, in Heaven’s name, do you expect me to go to?” he inquired, in so tragic a tone that an eternal and not temporal destination might have been under discussion. “You talk of my giving up the place as if I had another home all ready to move into. Where could we move to, I ask you, even if I were disposed to move—which I am not?”

Hardy did not answer. This point had not before presented itself. Where, indeed, could these three children—for the grey-haired scholar was a child in practical matters—where could they hope to find another Little Farm or a landlord disposed to accept their tenancy on such favourable terms?

“I did not expect you to be so inconsiderate, Mr. Hardy,” went on Mr. Leslie majestically. “I thought you a—a superior young man. I considered your intelligence more than ordinarily developed. I—flattered myself that you entertained some regard for myself.”

He gazed half angrily, half appealingly at the farmer, but the latter remained immovable.

“I’m afraid I must ask you to give up the place,” he said firmly.

Mr. Leslie began to grow angry.

“But why?” he cried excitedly. “You have a reason, I suppose. One would think—er—Christian charity would in itself seem to forbid the infliction of such an injury upon another. Have I not been a good tenant?”

As a matter of fact, Mr. Leslie was too much of a bookworm and too little of a man of business to recall such insignificant items as the regular payment of rent, and the sum due for the last quarter was considerably in arrears; but Stephen hastened to assure him that it would be impossible to discover a more desirable tenant.

“Then what is it?” went on Mr. Leslie with increasing irritation. “Am I to suppose that I am personally obnoxious to you? Perhaps my daughters are unfortunate enough to meet with your disapproval,” he added sarcastically.

Stephen’s eyes had been bent upon the ground, but he raised them now.

“It’s nothing of that sort,” he said, almost roughly in his desire to make an end of the interview. “The place is mine, and I want it back in my own hands. I am going to be married before very long, and I don’t know what changes may come o’ that. I must have a free hand.”

Mr. Leslie clutched at his fine grey hair and clacked his tongue distractedly; his eyes roved round the room over his rows of books, the safe which contained his most important papers, the tall, narrow bureau, the drawers of which were full of notes and manuscript essays, at the sunny window which cast just the right amount of light over the big, belittered table, then they reverted to Stephen, and a sudden determination leaped into them.

“I won’t go,” he announced deliberately. “If you want to get me out of this house, Mr. Hardy, you’ll have to evict me by force. I’ve come here to finish my book and I’m—damned if I don’t finish it here.”

It was probably the first and only time in his life that Mr. Leslie was known to swear, and he did so with an emphasis which startled both himself and his companion.

Stephen could not forbear smiling, and all at once Mr. Leslie smiled too, and gingerly rubbed his delicate hands.

“Nothing short of a posse of police will accomplish my removal,” he cried. “I doubt if even they would do it. I’ll entrench myself, Mr. Hardy—these walls are thick enough—you’ll have to take possession by force of arms.”

“I don’t think it will come to that,” said Stephen, still half laughing.

But Mr. Leslie had become very serious again. “I mean every word I say, you know,” he cried doggedly. “I mean to keep to it, too.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to think the matter over,” returned Stephen after a short pause. He took up his hat and moved hesitatingly towards the door.

“Good-day,” said Mr. Leslie.

Stephen went out half annoyed and half relieved. He had hated the business which had seemed to him shabby, unfriendly, but inevitable; now it seemed it was not inevitable. The Leslies might continue to profit by the shelter of the home which they had been so glad to find; he at least need not be the reluctant cause of their being driven forth afresh to struggle with poverty, to seek, perhaps vainly, some refuge adapted to their narrow means, yet not wholly unsuited to their station. His conscience need not reproach him—even Sheba need not reproach him. If Mr. Leslie refused to give up possession, surely he could not be obliged to turn him out by force.

CHAPTER VI

Mr. Leslie locked and bolted his study door as soon as Stephen had departed, but his sense of injury out-lived that of personal triumph, and deepened as the moments passed. That a young man who had seemed so respectful, so thoroughly well convinced of the importance of Mr. Leslie himself, and of the great book which he was laboriously bringing to a conclusion, who had, moreover, hitherto shown himself obliging, considerate, even friendly after his own fashion, should suddenly contemplate so utterly vile and abominable an action, seemed to him inconceivable.

Mr. Leslie was much hurt and astonished, and so full of resentment, that he found it impossible to settle down afresh to the unravelling of that knotty point, and presently rising, flung open his door and marched precipitately into the garden, where the girls were sitting on the grass. Kitty was mending one of his socks, Bess was holding forth in a grumbling tone, and with a discontented expression. It was curious how often the child wore that expression of late.

Both sisters looked up in surprise at his sudden and tempestuous appearance.

“What is the matter, Father?” cried Kitty, her mental vision blurred for the moment by a confused medley of unpleasant possibilities; monetary loss, bills of abnormal size, the alienation of his enthusiastic disciple Raymond, being chief among them.

“What do you think!” exclaimed Mr. Leslie. “That extraordinary—most ill-conditioned—er—ruffian—wants to turn us out of doors!”

Kitty was speechless; but Bess jumped up, amazed and questioning.

“What ruffian? You don’t mean Farmer Hardy?” (as Mr. Leslie nodded gravely in the direction of the house on the hill). “He—wants . . . to turn us . . . out! Not really?”

Mr. Leslie nodded again.

“He came and told me so just now.”

“But why?”

“Just what I asked him. Why?”

“I don’t suppose we have paid our rent regularly,” said Bess meditatively; “have we? I don’t remember your saying anything about it.”

Mr. Leslie ran his hand through his hair with an annoyed look, and then examined his fingers as though to ascertain if they had been materially damaged by the process.

“Rent?” he said, knitting his brows; “I imagine it has always been paid with a very fair regularity. It is an insignificant matter—just a few pounds. It would seem to me quite immaterial whether Farmer Hardy received that trifling amount in one month or in another. No, that supposition of yours is beside the mark.”

“But did he give no explanation?” queried Bess, her voice growing higher and more plaintive as she pursued the inquiry.

“No, none whatever; he said he wished to get the place back into his own hands—a very flimsy excuse! It is practically in his own hands now. *We* are not much in his way, I imagine.”

“Perhaps he thinks he would be likely to find us in his way soon,” said Kitty in a low tone; “after his marriage, I mean.”

“His marriage would be no reason,” retorted Mr. Leslie, casting a vexed glance upon her. “He is not likely to want to live in two houses, I presume, even if he is married—nor is he likely to put his wife in one house and remain himself in the other.”

“Well, the girl has got an old father, and he has got an old mother—at least a stepmother—perhaps he wants to put one of them in here—or perhaps both,” cried Bess with a little giggle, then suddenly relapsing into gloom. “Just think what desecration! This dear little superior house.”

“No,” said her father, after considering the hypothesis, “I don’t think it is that; if he had any such idea, surely it would be easy to mention it. He saw, of course, that I was deeply annoyed—quite overpowered. Had he been able to justify himself he would have done so.”

“Did he not try to justify himself?” asked Kitty.

“I tell you no. The man appeared to be acting from some hidden motive—possibly some personal grudge. I can’t pretend to explain it. But one thing is quite certain. We are not going. I told him so quite plainly—he hadn’t a word to say.”

“Surely, Father,” cried Kitty, in a trembling voice, “you have too much pride—we all have too much pride—to stay on after such an insult! If he

wants us to go, of course we must go.”

“My dear child, don’t talk such nonsense. It is absolutely out of the question that I should be disturbed at present. I explained the situation, and the fellow will have to submit. Now pray, my dears, don’t begin to harass me on the subject,” he added irritably. “I thought it right to tell you of this circumstance, that you should share in my surprise and indignation. All impulses, though prompted naturally enough, I dare say, by resentment at such conduct, must, however, be conquered. Out of this house I do not budge until the last page of my book is written. Then it will be time enough to think about making changes. But, indeed, the publication of the work will very possibly lead to events which may revolutionise our whole mode of existence.”

With this cryptic utterance Mr. Leslie withdrew, the girls watching his tall, angular figure in silence till it disappeared within the house. Then Bess gave a little laugh.

“The dear man is right for once,” she observed. “Stephen Hardy has a grudge against us—that’s the long and the short of it. But who would have thought he would have stooped to such a petty revenge!”

“Why should he have a grudge?” asked Kitty, without raising her eyes.

“Well, my dear,” said Bess, simpering, “one needn’t look very far for the reason. I suppose the poor wretch *had* hopes, though it was very silly of him, and of course I never gave him any real encouragement; still, he evidently did count on connecting himself with the noble house of Leslie,” she added, with her favourite uncanny little cackle; “and I suppose he’s furiously resentful now. I didn’t think he had it in him to be so vindictive. Did you, Kitty?”

“No,” said Kitty.

“I thought him quite a good sort of man in his way,” went on Bess. “Just fancy his being so spiteful! It’s rather a base way of paying us out, isn’t it? He knows very well how poor we are, and, if he did send us packing, we should be driven into Heaven knows what hovel. But I presume he doesn’t care as long as he can pay me out. *Kitty!* Why don’t you answer? Isn’t it plain that he has a grudge against us?”

“Quite plain,” said Kitty.

“And don’t you think it base and unworthy of him?”

“Most unworthy,” agreed Kitty, plucking idly at the grass.

“For once we think alike,” remarked Bess, taking up her book again. “Well, all I can say is, I hope he has the grace to feel ashamed of himself now. I’m glad father stood up to him.”

“Well, I’m not!” cried Kitty, getting up quickly as she spoke. “I think it was horribly undignified. I’d rather do anything in the world than remain here at that man’s mercy.”

She picked up her working materials and went towards the house.

“Kitty, you are quite impossible!” Bess called out after her, and then returned to the consideration of her own peevish grievances.

What a fate was hers! Buried alive in that hole of a place—it was not much comfort to reflect that they were liable at any moment to be turned out of it. The only real admirer she had ever had turning out to be an ill-conditioned ruffian. The only real admirer! That was the truth. Though Bess had left off holding Vavasour Raymond at arm’s length, he had not taken advantage of his opportunities. The Leslies left London without any declaration on his part, and Bess, surprised and piqued, had begun to doubt if his admiration had not, after all, been of a semi-paternal and eminently unsatisfactory nature. And there was nobody else—nor was it likely that there ever would be anybody else. Bess, for one, did not believe that her father’s book would revolutionise their existence.

Kitty went up to her room and stood looking out of the window, her eyes dim with angry tears. Presently, however, she wiped these away and leaned out. She saw Sheba come out of the farm on the hill and go towards the gate, turning half-way to call out something to Mrs. Hardy, who stood in the doorway. She had divested herself of her apron and wore her hat, and was evidently on her way home. Now she passed through the gate and came out into the lane. Kitty drew back quickly, fearing that she would glance up at her window, as she nearly always did. But this time Sheba hurried past without turning her head. When she was out of sight Kitty leaned forward again. Mrs. Hardy had gone indoors, but presently Stephen appeared, and, instead of following Sheba, went round the house, and, passing through the yard at the back, emerged into the field that sloped upwards towards the wood.

It was on the chance of such an opportunity that Kitty had watched, and now she swiftly ran downstairs and out of the house, and in a few moments had come up with Stephen as he sauntered meditatively along the track which edged his wheat-field. He turned at the sound of her flying feet, but neither of them spoke until Kitty halted in front of him.

“I wish to tell you, Mr. Hardy,” she began, endeavouring to speak calmly, though her voice trembled with wrath, and her eyes positively blazed, “I wish to tell you that I am no party to my father’s decision—in fact, I most strongly disapprove of it.”

Stephen plucked a leaf from the hedge on his left, looked at it, and then threw it away; he made no attempt to answer.

“I wanted you to know this,” went on Kitty, trying to steady her voice; “and also to set your mind at rest. Of course I know perfectly well, that, though you want to get rid of us, you have no personal grudge against my father or even my sister. I need not tell you that *I* know who the obnoxious person is.”

“Obnoxious!” exclaimed Stephen.

“Yes,” she returned hotly; “don’t let’s beat about the bush. You are anxious to get rid of one particular tenant—well, that one shall go. Whatever my father may say or do, nothing will induce me to stay on an hour longer than is absolutely necessary under any roof that belongs to you. Now we understand each other. If you will have the patience to wait a few weeks, Mr. Hardy, I will make arrangements.”

“How do you mean—arrangements?”

“Oh, I am not quite destitute of friends,” retorted Kitty. “I shall find someone to take me in till I can get a situation.”

“A situation!” he exclaimed. “*You!*”

“I suppose you think I am not competent to earn my living,” cried Kitty; “but I imagine I could teach young children, or go out as a companion. I shouldn’t care if I had to be a shop girl—anything would be better than the ignominy of staying here.”

She looked fiercely at Stephen, whose eyes were bent upon the ground, and continued after a moment—

“It need not be for long. Though my father refuses to move until he has finished his book, he will of course be quite willing to give up the Little Farm as soon as it is done.”

Stephen still remained silent, and she was about to turn away, when he suddenly stopped her.

“Miss Leslie!”

“Well?”

“You used to call me your friend; you used to say that Rebecca and I helped you a little. I know it was very little, but I can truly say if we couldn’t do much for you it was not for want of goodwill.”

“Why are you throwing your favours in my teeth now?” exclaimed the girl quickly.

“God knows I’ve no mind to do that! I do but want to ask you for the sake of—of bygone days, when we were good friends and neighbours, to give up this notion.”

He spoke with deep emotion, and Kitty, taken aback, gazed at him without replying.

“It’s a thing,” he went on confusedly, “that I can’t bear to think on. Whatever I may have said or done, Miss Leslie, and whatever ye may think ye have against me, I haven’t got to that yet—to drive you away from your family—to force you—*you* to work for your own bread. Can you really believe I could wish for such a thing?”

“Then what is the meaning of it?” she cried hotly. “Tell me what you *do* want, Mr. Hardy. If it was not on my account that you wished my father to give up the Little Farm, what was your reason?”

Stephen stood stock-still, his arms hanging by his sides, his eyes, which before had eagerly scanned her face, once more cast down.

“Some things can’t be explained,” answered he after a pause. “You said so yourself once. Well, I say so, now. It was very ill done of me to have asked Mr. Leslie to shift, and if I’d ha’ thought you’d ever take it up as you have, I’d have cut out my tongue before doing it.”

“But you did think it would be better for us to go,” said Kitty more gently. “It may not be altogether a personal reason, yet I dare say it is a good one. Perhaps—I dare say—Sheba——”

She broke off in confusion, and Stephen raised his eyes and gazed at her steadily.

“I don’t want to talk about Sheba,” he said. “There’s no need to do that. I acted too quick just now—I thought I was doing right—but I see now it couldn’t be right. If you can make up your mind to stay after what’s passed, Miss Kitty, I’ll put things to rights in another way. Feelings can be got over easy enough if folks set their mind to do it. Likes—and dislikes—can all be got under.”

He spoke half to himself, looking straight in front of him, and with a movement that was wholly unconscious brought forward his right hand, letting the fingers close in a resolute fashion as though crushing something. If ever a man looked capable of conquering inconvenient “feelings” Farmer Hardy was he.

“We can keep out of each other’s road,” he added. “We needn’t interfere with each other, but I do ask you, Miss Leslie, not to put such an affront on me as to go out of the place like this.”

Kitty looked up, at first disposed to adhere to her determination, but, meeting his glance, her eyes fell.

“Well,” she said with a sigh, “I agree. I don’t understand, but it is quite true that some things can’t be explained. I suppose as long as the world lasts,” she added, with a little dreary sententiousness which, had it been possible to doubt her sincerity at that moment, might have reminded Stephen of Bess—“as long as the world lasts people will go on misjudging each other.”

She turned away upon this; and Stephen presently pursued his solitary ramble across the field.

On the following morning Sheba found him waiting for her by the milk-house door. Having slept badly she had risen unusually early, and was surprised that he should be already afoot; no one else was about.

“I want a word with you, my girl,” he said, and paused.

“What is it?” she asked quickly. “I thought you and me had words enough yesterday. I spoke out my mind plain for once. It’s to be me or her.”

“See here, Sheba,” said Stephen, “let’s understand each other. I told you the truth about Miss Leslie and me, and I told you what I tell you again—I’d be glad if she was gone. I went yesterday and asked her father to give up the house to me, and he said straight out he wouldn’t do it—not for a few months, anyhow. Now, if they won’t go willingly, I can’t turn them out.”

“You’d rather turn *me* out?” cried Sheba, with flashing eyes.

“No,” he rejoined; “you know very well you’re my promised wife, and you come first. But I have made up my mind to ask you to have patience. Mr. Leslie will leave as soon as he has finished some book he is writing. She, Miss Leslie, would go at once if I would let her. She came to me yesterday.”

“Did she?” exclaimed Sheba.

“She did. She said she knew very well that she was the one I wanted to get rid of, and she’d take a situation.”

Sheba laughed.

“A situation—what ’ud she be fit for?”

“Just so,” returned he. “There are some things a man can’t do, Sheba, and one is to turn the girl he once loved out o’ doors, particularly when she’s helpless and ignorant of the ways of the world. Come, Sheba, you’re my promised wife—the wife I chose for myself—won’t you trust me, my maid?”

The two pairs of dark eyes looked searchingly into each other, and Sheba’s face relaxed.

“You’ve never known me go back on my word, have you?” he continued. “I’ll be faithful to it, and to you. I’ll always give you the best I have.”

“The best ye have,” she repeated slowly; “and what’s that? Pity!”

She looked at him with a kind of agonised eagerness, as though searching for a contradiction, but Stephen did not speak, and her face fell.

“Well,” she said, drawing in a long breath. “I’ll try to content myself. I’d rather have the little you can give than another man’s all. I’m like a beggar—thankful even for a crumb. I didn’t ought to try your patience, same as I’ve been a-doing,” she added humbly; “I’ll not complain again. You *did* choose me—there’s comfort in that thought.”

They parted then, and Stephen went about his customary business.

Sheba remained very pensive, and, when her morning’s work was concluded, stood for some time by the open door of the dairy, gazing downwards at the Little Farm. All at once she set out with her swinging, graceful gait down the path and across the lane to the Leslies’ precincts. She had descried Kitty in the garden.

“I’ve summat to say to ye, miss,” she began abruptly.

Kitty gazed at her half fearfully, half haughtily. Many emotions were warring in Sheba’s heart, and the struggle was reflected in her face.

“Stephen did tell I what passed between you an’ him yesterday,” she said, “an’ I thought I’d step across an’ put in my word. I trust Stephen, Miss Leslie.”

For a moment the girl's face was beautiful; but it clouded over when Kitty replied earnestly—

“Indeed, you have every right to do so. He is a most honourable man.”

“’Tis a pity you didn't value him better, then,” she broke out. “You treated him like dirt, an' Stephen bain't the man to stand that. There's no need for you to be so condescendin' now. If ye was to ax en to forgive ye on your bended knees, he wouldn't look at you.”

“Really,” cried Kitty, absolutely taken aback by the suddenness of the onslaught. “I don't know how you dare say such things to me! Go away. I have no wish to speak to you any more.”

“Nay, bide a bit,” said Sheba in an altered tone. “I didn't come here to insult ye. ’Twas quite t'other way round, but it drives me mad to see how ye despise us—me an' Stephen.”

“I don't,” exclaimed Kitty, goaded into a denial.

“You do!” averred Sheba fiercely. “I see'd it in your eyes when ye come on me an' Stephen in the Lovers' Walk that day. ‘Why should *you* think me likely to be surprised?’ says you, meanin' that ye'd see'd me watchin' out for en time and again. I reckon ye thought I'd put myself in his road, an' made up to en maybe—but I didn't. ’Twas him as picked me out. He did say so hisself this marnin'. ‘You're my promised wife, Sheba,’ he says; ‘I chose you.’”

She broke off, breathless. In reality she was speaking as much to reassure herself as to confound Kitty. The latter stood silent and motionless, curiously stung by the words. After a moment she found her voice.

“I do not doubt it,” she said at length; “but I really should be obliged if you would go away now. All this has no interest for me.”

Sheba retired a few paces and then paused again, with a half-puzzled expression.

“I meant well,” she muttered. “I come here meanin' well. I don't know why I've been sayin' all they things. I come here to ax ye to give up any notion o' lookin' for a situation, Miss Leslie. Arter what passed between me an' Stephen this marnin' I couldn't be jealous no more.”

“Jealous!” ejaculated Kitty. She tried to laugh, but some sudden emotion seemed to catch her by the throat, and, moreover, there was that in Sheba's eyes which startled her—a tortured look.

“I think I ought to go,” she said.

CHAPTER VII

But Kitty did not go. While she was torn with doubts and scruples as to whether it might not be more advisable to break her promise to Stephen, an important event took place. Mr. Raymond wrote to her father, making a formal proposal for the hand of Bess.

"It's the most preposterous thing I ever heard of," said Mr. Leslie, coming into the girls' sitting-room. "I thought Raymond would have known better. He is just two years younger than myself—two years! And he actually thinks I could consent to give him that child—that baby—why, she's not out of short frocks yet."

"I am," cried Bess, jumping up. "Oh, it's too bad, it really is too bad. The idea of his writing to you, Father! I dare say I'll never have a chance of another proposal, and that he should go and spoil it all like this!"

Mr. Leslie gazed at her blankly; there were tears in her eyes.

"There's no need to be so much upset, my dear," he said, mistaking the cause of her agitation. "Of course, I shall write at once—unless you would prefer to do so," he added, his usual desire to shift a troublesome task on to other shoulders than his own rendering him for the moment oblivious of what was proper to the occasion.

"Of course I'll write," exclaimed Bess promptly. "But he *is* stupid. However, I can tell him to come down and talk the matter over—that will be the best. I'll keep him in suspense a bit."

"No, no," said her father. "Far better to put the man out of pain at once."

"But I don't want him to be out of pain. I want him to be on tenterhooks till he comes down, and meanwhile I can question my own heart."

Bess was beginning to enjoy herself.

"Question your heart?" ejaculated Mr. Leslie, blinking at her. "You surely don't mean to say that you are thinking of accepting him."

"I am *thinking* of it," returned his daughter. "I'm not quite sure whether I shall do it or not. He's a very nice man, and I should feel very safe with him. It might be my duty. I shall just wait and pray for guidance," she added piously. "May I see his letter?"

Mr. Leslie drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it to her. Then, after a pause, during which he had eyed his child with wondering dismay, he went out of the room, turning in the doorway to beg her hurriedly to be careful not to commit herself.

Bess nodded, and drawing the letter from its cover read it carefully.

“Quite a nice document,” she observed in a satisfied tone presently; “but it would have been much better if he said all those pretty things to me instead of to poor dear father. He never appreciated me, so, of course, he can’t appreciate them.”

“Bess,” said Kitty, speaking for the first time, “you don’t seriously intend to marry a man nearly thirty-five years older than yourself?”

“Is it as much as thirty-five!” returned Bess. “Well, you know, there’s a proverb about it’s being better to be an old man’s darling than a young man’s slave. Mr. Raymond is very nice and very kind and very, very rich, and fifty-two isn’t *really* old—and perhaps nobody else may turn up. That is the point, you see. Our season in London was a desperate failure—no doubt about that. And who do we see here—who are we likely to see? There’s Teddy, of course—Teddy does very well to play about with—but he hasn’t a penny, and he’ll probably be in love a dozen times before he marries, anyhow. I come first on the list, so I don’t stand much chance, even if I did wait till he made a fortune.”

She walked to the window and looked out, drumming on the pane.

“But, Bess, you don’t—you can’t—love Mr. Raymond?” faltered Kitty.

Bess turned round; the sunshine piercing through the mullioned window made a nimbus of her ruffled curls; her tone and attitude were in keeping with this sanctified effect.

“The companionship of the mind,” she observed, “comes next to the companionship of the heart. In some cases it is what is best for one. I dare say my soul will be the gainer, Kitty dear. But I shall be better able to decide when he comes.”

In answer to Mr. Raymond’s proposal she composed a very pretty, diffident little letter, which, while it made no definite promise, did not debar her elderly admirer from hoping, and, moreover, gave him permission to pay his addresses in person.

“I’ll tell him he’d better put up at the Crown, though,” she observed. “We couldn’t make him really comfortable here; besides, we might have too

much of him,” she added with engaging candour.

Kitty, came flying across the room.

“Oh, Bess, tear up that letter, do! You can’t even like him, or you wouldn’t talk of him like that.”

“Don’t take me up so,” ejaculated Bess, wriggling out of her embrace. “I must have a little time to myself. I must be free from—from—his personal influence if I’m to keep my mind clear. It’s an important decision, you know. There, don’t—don’t worry me—I really can’t be worried,” she added, with an unconscious and ridiculous imitation of her father’s manner.

Kitty forbore to press her further, but remained very anxious during the next few days. Her own personal doubts and fears were forgotten in her dread of an unwise decision on the part of her cherished little sister.

When Mr. Raymond arrived he was quick to note the nervous, almost suspicious, manner in which Kitty watched his advances, and in the course of the evening startled her by saying—

“I see that you are no ally of mine.”

“I don’t quite admit that,” returned she quickly; “it is only—oh, Mr. Raymond, I can’t help feeling that Bess is so young!”

“And I am so old,” he added half sadly. “Do you suppose I don’t realise it? If it had not been for that, I should have spoken before you left London. I was much tempted to do so, but was held back by this very consideration. Yet, on reflection—on calm reflection, I decided that it might not be altogether such a bad thing for her.”

“Oh, how can you tell?” cried Kitty impulsively. “She can’t know her own mind yet. Supposing she were to marry you now—before she was twenty she might discover that you were the wrong man.”

“That would be very sad,” agreed Mr. Raymond. “But, on the other hand, you see, she might find out that I was the right one. I should try and make sure of that. I think I understand her—perhaps better than anyone else could. I should know how to—be forbearing. I think I could make her happy—I think—I think in time her nature would expand. It is a rich nature—full of possibilities. You will excuse me for saying that no one has as yet plumbed its depths.”

Kitty was astonished and somewhat abashed. She had not yet discovered that these depths existed.

“You have made a plaything of her,” pursued the wooer. “She is well adapted for play, but, later on—with scope——”

He stopped abruptly, for at that moment Bess, strolling across the room, seized Kitty’s finger and described a rapid circle with it, her lips moving inaudibly the while. Kitty jerked away her hand and rose.

“It is too late to play games now, and besides, father wants me.”

“How tiresome of you!” exclaimed Bess, pouting. “I wanted to see if Mr. Raymond would guess. You can’t have forgotten already?” she added, turning to him.

The door was already closing behind her sister, and Mr. Raymond quietly took possession of Bess’ own hand.

“Yes, I guess,” he said. “It is the left hand, isn’t it? And you have been drawing a ring?”

“Oh, you’re not going to speak *now*,” cried Bess in alarm; “don’t do it now. I want you to approach very gently and give me lots of time. You mustn’t take everything for granted like that—talking about rings already. Besides, I don’t want you to propose in here—I want it to be out of doors—in the garden—by moonlight, perhaps—that’s how I should like it.”

“You haven’t thought of what I should like, have you?” said he. “It is very pretty play, Bess—but this is a serious matter for both of us.”

Bess looked up at him with round solemn eyes and a pursed mouth; she was rather paler than usual.

“You must know me pretty well by this time,” he went on, “and I think I know you. But one thing I don’t know yet—could you learn to love me, Bess?”

Bess, becoming more and more serious, nodded without speaking.

“Ah, but wait a bit,” he went on quickly. “I want you to realise what you are doing. You are scarcely more than a child, and yet—and yet from the moment you agree to be my wife you accept the responsibilities of a woman. I am too old for you—I know it—much too old—but I think I could make you happy. I will not insult you by talking of what I could give you—what I could do for you—in a material way, I mean, because I know you well enough to realise that such considerations would have no weight with you; but——”

“Mr. Raymond,” said Bess, and then stopped short, breathing very quickly. Large tears were standing on her pink cheeks; all her little affectations had dropped from her. Suddenly, rushing past him, she flung herself in a corner of the sofa, burying her head in the cushions; he hurried after her in alarm, and presently went stiffly down on one knee beside her.

“What is the matter, my child?”

Bess turned a little sideways; she was sobbing, yet nevertheless there was a dawning satisfaction in her face. Mr. Raymond was kneeling to her—even if it was only on one knee—that was a great thing to happen to anybody.

“What is it?” he repeated.

She sat up with a gasp.

“Oh, I am so sorry and so much ashamed, but I will tell you the truth. I’m not a bit what you think me. I’m a horrid, horrid, sordid little wretch, and I—I—you’re quite wrong in thinking that I haven’t counted on what you can do for me in a material way—I’m *dreadfully* material. I hate being poor, and never having anything pretty, and being shut up in a dull hole like this, and never seeing anybody nice or doing anything amusing, and I thought—yes, I did—that if I married you——”

She hid her head in the cushions again, and Mr. Raymond slowly rose and stood looking down at her. After a long pause and many tumultuous sobs, Bess peeped up again; he was smiling.

“Now supposing you sit up and make room for me beside you,” he observed.

Bess obeyed, mopping her eyes vigorously with a dilapidated little handkerchief. He waited until her self-possession was in some measure restored, and then put his hand in his pocket.

“Since you are fond of pretty things I must show you one,” he said. He placed a little velvet case in Bess’ hand; it contained a diamond ring.

“This brings us back to our starting-point,” he remarked.

Bess extended a small plump finger, for which the ring proved an excellent fit. She turned it round and round, opening and shutting her mouth several times before she could make up her mind to speak. At last she said, still hesitatingly—

“You know I’m not naturally serious, and it would be dreadful if you expected me to live up to you. I simply couldn’t! I never thought about being a woman.”

“Perhaps I was a little premature,” he returned.

Bess meditated for a moment or two, still balancing the ring on her finger; then she turned towards him with a resolute air.

“You know, Mr. Raymond, I want you to understand what you are doing. I have told you I am not naturally serious, and I’m not sure that I want to be.”

“When you are my little wife you shall play as much as you like—at the proper times.”

“And I’ve got a sordid soul,” continued Bess earnestly; “and I—when you asked me just now if I could learn to love you I was just going to say yes, but now—I’m not so sure—and I don’t think I ought to tell you a fib.”

“Put that on one side for the present,” said Mr. Raymond quietly; “I am quite willing to wait.”

“Then don’t you want to have this back?”

“No, I want you to keep it.”

Bess, with a little sigh of satisfaction, replaced the ring which she had removed, and after a pause looked shyly at her lover. He had really a very fine head, she decided, and did not look as if he were fifty-two. He had rather puzzled her, yet, somehow, she felt that she had never liked him so well. All at once she raised her hand tentatively.

“Should you like to kiss it?” she asked.

“Very much,” he rejoined; “but I’ll wait for that, too.”

“Well, I think I’ll go to Kitty,” observed Bess after a pause. “It’s—it’s been rather agitating, you know—I want to talk it over with Kitty; oh, Mr. Raymond, there’s one thing I forgot to tell you—once a long time ago—several months ago—I almost thought I’d like to marry a farmer.”

“What!” exclaimed Mr. Raymond.

“Yes, quite, quite a common farmer—at least not quite common, because he was educated in a way, but he isn’t a gentleman. He’s our landlord, and he was very kind to us and used to take us out riding, and we never saw anybody else, and I thought it would be so dreadful to be an old maid——”

“Yes—well?”

“Well, that’s all. I did think of it. I wanted you to know that. Would it make any difference?”

“Not the slightest.”

He made a step towards her as she reached the door.

“Bess, you have told me a great many things to-night, and I have told you hardly anything, but I think you know what I feel about you. Try to think of that sometimes while I am waiting.”

He opened the door for her and she walked away very slowly, calling discreetly on her sister’s name outside the study door. Receiving no answer, she galloped upstairs to their joint bedroom, and flung herself impetuously into the arms of Kitty, who anxiously started up to greet her.

After a strangulating hug she disengaged herself and held up for inspection the finger wearing the ring.

“Already!” exclaimed Kitty. “You are engaged already, Bess?”

“I don’t know,” rejoined Bess reflectively. “I suppose I am in a way, but I want to tell you and see what *you* think. He began by saying—no, I don’t think I can tell you—I feel queer—I feel very queer. I wish I wasn’t such a horrid grovelling wretch. I told him I was—and he didn’t seem to mind, and he—oh, Kitty, he says he’s waiting—I do hope he won’t be disappointed.”

“My darling, I don’t understand you.”

“I think he’s waiting for me to turn into a woman—and of course we all do that—and one can be a woman even at eighteen if one goes about it in the right way. I think—oh, I don’t know what I think—he doesn’t seem a bit like the Mr. Raymond who used to take us about sight-seeing in London—he’s quite different, and somehow—I don’t know——”

“You don’t know that you like him so well?” inquired Kitty anxiously.

“No,” corrected Bess, emphatically multiplying her negatives. “I don’t know that I don’t like him the more.”

Each sister had now certain reserves with the other, and yet they had never clung more closely together. Kitty could not contemplate leaving home in the present unsettled state of the little household. If Bess made up her mind to accept Raymond, then surely it was right that they should see all they could of each other before the separation that must ensue; if, on the other hand, the semi-engagement came to nothing she could still less bear to

leave Bess alone, disappointed and depressed. It was, moreover, very easy to avoid the Hardys and Sheba. Kitty's bedroom was a point of vantage whence she could watch their goings and comings; and she could in consequence time her own in contrary fashion.

Once or twice, indeed, Rebecca made some excuse for coming to see the sisters, but gradually these visits ceased. Bess, full of her actual importance and prospective dignity, did not encourage them, and Kitty was nervous and constrained, though she never failed to hug her kind old friend at parting with a warmth which astonished that good woman, and caused her to feel yet more puzzled over their changed relations.

Raymond stayed a week in the neighbourhood and then returned to London, leaving his ring in Bess' keeping, but extracting no definite promise from her before departing. He preferred to wait, he said, and meanwhile Bess was not to worry; though she was to think of him as much as possible, she was not to endeavour to come to any fixed decision with regard to him.

“When a man has waited as long as I have, he can afford to wait a little longer,” he said.

He held her hand a moment at parting, but he did not kiss it; and when he had gone, Bess went upstairs to her room and cried.

CHAPTER VIII

The summer had waxed and waned, and now it was autumn again; not such a golden autumn as had witnessed the installation of the Leslies in the previous year, but wild and wet. Some of the corn was even yet unharvested and stood brown and sodden in the marshy fields; the roads and lanes were strewn with wet branches which the never-ceasing wind wrenched from the wayside trees. The dank grass of the pastures was half hidden in places by the fallen leaves, some still green, others a sickly yellow—none of the vigorous reds, and browns, and oranges, which as a rule enliven the autumn landscape, were to be found this year. The floods were out in the neighbourhood of the river—seldom, indeed, had the springs been known to “break” so early in the season.

On one particular afternoon Richard Baverstock, seated opposite his daughter by the cottage hearth, was in a mood that would have seemed to harmonise with the stormy condition of the world without, had it not been for a single item—he complained most bitterly of being dry.

“There, Father, do give over!” exclaimed Sheba impatiently, as she tossed a darned sock on to the pile which she had been mending. “It bain’t half an hour since we’ve a-had tea.”

“Tea?” said Mr. Baverstock with the greatest scorn. “I tell ye, Sheba, it bain’t *tea* as ’ull quench the drith o’ *my* mouth!”

The girl made no reply, and after a while he went on with a kind of whimper—

“It bain’t in rayson—’tis what I do tell ’ee! Here be I, so hale an’ hearty as ever I’ve a-been in my life, I mid say. Gie I my crutch an’ I’ll get along the road as fast as anyone. A moderate glass an’ a chat wi’ a friend ’ud do I all the good i’ the world. Yet ye do let I sit here day in an’ day out, month arter month, all alone by mysel’ an’ feelin’ that lonesome——”

“Father, ye know I do have to go out to earn money for us both to live on.”

“Psha!” exclaimed her father with withering scorn. “You what mid be Mrs. Hardy-o’-the-Hill, any day ye liked. Stephen Hardy told me so hisself t’other day.”

“What!” exclaimed Sheba. “Ye never got talkin’ to en o’ sich a thing?”

Old Richard wagged his head portentously.

“I *did* get a-talkin’ wi’ en, though. I did think it my dooty. I did ax en straight out when he were a-goin’ to keep his promise an’ marry ye, an’ he answered me back in them very words: ‘It do depend on Sheba,’ says he. ‘She do know,’ he says, ‘she can be my wife any day she’d like to name.’”

“ ’Tis too bad!” exclaimed the girl indignantly. “Ye didn’t ought to ha’ meddled at all, Father. ’Tis for him an’ me to settle. Nobody else has any right to interfere.”

“Well, I be treated terr’ble bad,” resumed Baverstock, returning to his original grievance. “Tuppence, that’s all I do ax of ’ee. Stephen Hardy ’ud give ’ee so much money as ever ye want—ye know he would——”

“I’ve told ye a hundred times, Father, an’ I tell ye again, I’ll not take no money fro’ Stephen Hardy except what I can earn. ’Tis by his wish I bain’t earnin’ money i’ the wold way, wi’ field-work an’ trantin’; but if he has too much pride to wish me, what’s to be his wife some day, to take wage from other folks, I’ve too much pride to take money fro’ he wi’out it’s as wage—an’ I’ll not take a penny more fro’ he nor what I’d do from anybody else.”

“ ’Tis all a girt piece o’ nonsense,” growled Baverstock. “What be puttin’ off weddin’ for?—that’s what I do want to know. Theer’s no sense in it. An’ it’s crool hard on me. If you was once married ’tisen’t here in this lonesome place I’d be bidin’, but up-along at the Hill Farm. An’ ’tisen’t beggin’ for tuppence I’d be—my son-in-law ’ud not see I go shart——”

Sheba’s temper, never of the meekest, flared up.

“ ’Tis hard on others so well as you,” she cried hotly. “If you could content yourself wi’ a quiet life an’ every comfort, an’ wasn’t for ever cravin’ for drink, there’d be nothin’ to prevent my marrying Stephen now. But you know I never could trust ye.”

“Well,” said Baverstock with deep indignation, “this is a pretty thing! So it’s just to prevent your poor wold father havin’ a happy home for his last days that you be a-holdin’ out this road! Well, you *be* a reg’lar onnat’ral!”—he paused for an epithet—“Jezybel! I be sorry now I done so much for ye. Let me tell you ’tis *me* what made Stephen Hardy think o’ marryin’ ye—*there* now! So ye needn’t be that sot up! Your wold father mustn’t meddle, mustn’t he? Well, ye mid so well know as if it hadn’t ha’ been for your wold father the match ’ud ha’ never been made up.”

Sheba, who had sprung from her chair, dropped back again, pale and trembling.

“What do you mean?” she cried.

“What do I mean?” repeated her father triumphantly. “I mean ’twas me as axed Stephen Hardy to have ye—there now!”

There was a long silence—a silence so long that Richard had time to exchange triumph for alarm; never had he seen his daughter look so strange.

At length, however, she seemed to collect her energies and forced herself to smile.

“That’s nonsense-talk, Father,” she cried. “Stephen’s not the man to do such a thing. He bain’t sich a fool as to marry a girl he don’t care about, jist because her father axed him.”

“Bain’t he?” queried Richard with returning courage. Sheba spoke quietly enough, though she looked so queer.

“Come, let us hear about it,” she cried, still affecting incredulity. “’Tis one of your notions, Father. When do ye think ye axed him?”

“When? The night arter my accident, my maid—when I did think I weren’t above an hour or two for this world. I axed en solemn, as a dyin’ man ’ud be like to do.”

“Was that it?” murmured Sheba, her great eyes seeming to grow larger with anxiety. “Did ye ax en to make ye a promise because ye were dyin’?”

“Nay, he wouldn’t make no promise, my maid,” returned Baverstock, now assuming a narrative tone, and being evidently pleased with his own importance. “He wouldn’t make no promise, an’ he did tell I to my face as he’d never thought o’ such a thing.”

Sheba’s lips parted, but she did not speak. Richard continued, chuckling

“An’ what’s more, he did tell I as you’d never thought o’ sich a thing. But as I told en straight out I knowed better. ‘Why,’ I says, ‘the maid have been fond on ye ever since you an’ her were children. She’ve never thought o’ no one else, an’ she’ve allus hankered arter you!’ ”

“He wouldn’t believe you!” interposed Sheba huskily.

“He wouldn’t at first, but when I did tell en about the watch an’ about the bit of a note he wrote ye, what ye had hid away——”

“Father, you didn’t tell en that!” exclaimed the girl—the words came in a sort of cry, but Mr. Baverstock, being now in the mood to prove his own

powers of argument, continued emphatically—

“Didn’t I, though? ’Twas that what done the job. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I’ll think on it.’—Why, Sheba, what be the matter, my maid? What do make ’ee look at I like that?”

“Because I’ll never forgive ye,” she cried passionately; “never, never! Oh, it was wicked!”

“Hush, there now, give over, Sheba! Ye didn’t ought to say sich things—I done it for the best, I’m sure——” Here he broke off to whimper, continuing in a deeply injured tone, “An’ it done ye no harm, my dear—ye did ought to thank I for gettin’ ye sich a nice husband.”

“He’ll be no husband o’ mine,” said Sheba. “Never! No, Father, I haven’t fell so low as to let any man take me out o’ charity. Ye’ve shamed me—brought me down to the dust, ye have, but I bain’t come to that—I’ll tell en so this very evenin’—I’ll not let another night go over my head without his knowin’! I’ll never eat another mouthful in his house, nor take another penny of his money. You an’ me ’ull go on the tramp again—we’ll earn our own livin’ wi’out bein’ beholdin’ to Stephen Hardy.”

“On the tramp!” gasped Baverstock. “Why, what good will that do us?”

“It’ll do us that much good that I can get away from this place where I can never hold up my head again. We bain’t beggars that we need live on Farmer Hardy’s charity—’tis nought but that—nought but charity. We’ll pack up to-morrow, and get the wold cart out an’ see if us can’t find a home where the folks won’t be lookin’ down on us.”

She had dashed across the room while speaking, and possessed herself of her hat, and as the last words fell disjointedly from her lips, she opened the house door and rushed out.

Richard sat staring at the door with starting eyeballs and a dropping jaw, and presently began to cry like a child. Was there ever such a hard case as his? Deprived in five minutes not only of a prospective son-in-law and the hope of the comfortable home which, his daughter’s obstinacy once conquered, could at any moment be theirs, but of all sense of security. They were to leave even the miserable roof which now sheltered them, and to start again on their precarious wandering life.

“We’ll get the wold cart out again,” Sheba had said. Well did Richard know the discomfort of travelling in that old cart, and the hardships it entailed—cold, hunger, wet—while those occasional “tuppences” which alone brightened his existence were doled out at ever-lengthening intervals.

They had often wandered thus for weeks at a time, halting at different places, and obtaining employment in potato-getting, or turnip-hoeing; formerly Sheba had occasionally persuaded her father to assist in these labours; in his present crippled condition that would be impossible; nevertheless, it would be almost as bad to sit shivering in the waggon or by the roadside, as he would probably be made to do now.

If he could only find his crutch, he would have hobbled off to the Blue Fox in search of the only consolation known to him; but it was Sheba's custom to hide it away in her room whenever she left home. Without its support her untrustworthy parent was comparatively harmless, and previous to her enforced absences she was wont to lock her door and carry off the key in her pocket. It was, indeed, unlikely that Richard, in his decrepit state, could have climbed the ladder leading to her room, but he had shown himself on various occasions so artful in his endeavours to circumvent her that she took care to provide against even the seemingly impossible.

As Baverstock, in the intervals of wiping his bleared eyes, suffered them to wander round the room, they fell all at once upon the door in question, and, starting from his chair, he exclaimed aloud—

“Why, she've a-forgot to take key wi' her this time!”

In her frenzied anguish and excitement Sheba had, indeed, forgotten her usual precaution.

Baverstock's tears stopped as though by magic, and a sly grin twisted his mouth as he shuffled across the room, supporting himself on the various pieces of furniture, and reaching the stairs, dragged himself slowly up them.

Sheba's room was but a small one, and the crutch was not very cunningly concealed, but stood propped up by the bed.

“Ah,” chuckled Richard, “she did think I couldn't get up the stairs, and she did take advantage of I.”

Having possessed himself of the needful support, he descended with great caution, and hobbled promptly out of doors. As he passed the shed, from which a portion of the battered waggon protruded, he paused to shake his fist at it.

“I'll get the better on ye yet!” he cried.

All the way to the Blue Fox he cogitated on the possibility of destroying the waggon. If that were once got rid of Sheba could not “toll him off”

round the country. But how to get rid of it in the short time which must elapse before Sheba put her threat into execution—that was the puzzle.

“Maybe I mid find someone to advise me at the Blue Fox,” he said to himself.

But, strange to say, although some of his cronies were weak enough to treat him, he received neither sympathy nor proffers of help. Even the boozers gathered together at the Blue Fox had conceived a certain respect for the girl whose self-sacrifice was known to all the countryside, and they refused to abet her father in circumventing her.

Richard was inebriated but not exhilarated when, at the landlord’s instance, he took his way home again, a thousand wild projects forming themselves in his muddled brain, all dealing with the wished-for abolition of the detested cart, but each in turn being rejected as unfeasible.

“It’ll come to I yet, though,” said Richard, as he stumbled across his own threshold. “It’ll come to I if I do think long enough.”

CHAPTER IX

Mrs. Hardy was sitting by the window, making the most of the fading light, and humming to herself as she neatly inserted a patch on one of her best pillowslips; suddenly she heard the outer door open and shut with a bang, and Sheba burst into the room.

“Back again, my dear?” said Rebecca, looking up in placid surprise. “I thought you reckoned to bide at home this afternoon.”

Sheba looked round the room, her eyes were strained, her face eager, excited, miserable.

“Bain’t Stephen here?”

“Nay, love, he bain’t. He be out somewhere about the place.”

“He bain’t, though,” returned Sheba. “I’ve been huntin’ all round for nigh on an hour an’ I can’t find him nowheres.”

“No, nor you won’t,” agreed Mrs. Hardy, suddenly recollecting herself. “He’ve a-rode off to Wimborne—I mind it now. He did get up directly after dinner, and said he mid be back late for tea.”

Sheba uttered an impatient exclamation.

“Why, whatever be to do, love?” asked Mrs. Hardy in surprise. “Be summat amiss?”

“Everything’s amiss,” said Sheba.

“Dear, dear, that’s bad,” returned Rebecca, laying aside her work and going towards her. “Couldn’t ye tell me about it, maidie?—there, it ’ud ease your mind.”

“No, no, you can’t do nothin’,” said Sheba with a stifled sob. “Ees, ye mid do one thing, though. Ye mid ax Stephen to come over to our place so soon as he do come in.”

“Why, that’ll be late, my dear, an’ he’ve a-had a long day.”

“Oh, I can’t help that. I took an oath I’d not let another night go over my head wi’out makin’ an end of all between us. If he don’t care to hear it from my own lips, if it be too late an’ he be too tired to come to me, ye can tell him so from me, Mrs. Hardy.”

“Dear heart alive!” gasped Rebecca in deep distress. “I thought you an’ Stephen did seem to be gettin’ on so well. Whatever have he done to you, my dear?”

“He’ll know,” rejoined Sheba. “He won’t be surprised. Tell him, tell him I’ve heard summat as I didn’t know before, tell him—well, I’ll tell him myself if he’ll come—an’ if he don’t want to come, it is enough he should know as him an’ me’s to part.”

Before Rebecca could recover from her amazement the girl had rushed away as impetuously as she had come.

Left alone, Rebecca cogitated for some moments, and then, after folding up the pillowslip very neatly, took her shawl from its accustomed peg and hastened down the path to the Little Farm.

Without even going through the form of summoning Louisa she thrust her head in at the sitting-room door, and discovered Kitty alone by the fire. Coming cautiously in, and flattening her back against the door, which she had closed behind her as though to prevent any intrusion, she hailed her breathlessly—

“Where be sister, Miss Kitty?”

Kitty looked up, startled; it was long, very long, since Mrs. Hardy had visited the Little Farm, and now her sudden appearance, coupled with her mysterious air and evident agitation, alarmed the girl.

“Is anything the matter? Bess has got a headache and is lying down upstairs. Do you want her, Mrs. Hardy?”

“No, dear, no. I were looking for a few words wi’ you, if you can spare me a minute.”

“Certainly,” said Kitty anxiously. “Sit down, do. I am glad to see you. It’s a long time since you have been here.”

“It be a long time,” agreed Rebecca. “I’d not ha’ put myself forward now, but—well, it do seem a queer thing to trouble ye about, but there, I be a bit upset, ye see—well, not exactly upset, but took aback—I don’t seem to make head or tail o’ this here business.”

“But what is it, Mrs. Hardy?”

“Well, ’tis about Sheba and Stephen, Miss Kitty—’twasn’t a thing that I did ever look for, an’ ’twasn’t, I mid say, exactly what I did wish for, but there, she was his own choice, what he did pick out for hissself, an’ it didn’t

become me to go a-turning up my nose. I can't forget how kind and respectful Stephen have always showed hisself to I, though he mid ha' looked higher for his father."

Kitty was too much astonished and concerned to smile at what might otherwise have struck her as a somewhat quaint idea.

"Sheba was his ch'ice," resumed Rebecca, "an' I did think she'd make him so good a wife as another. An' her mother was a nice woman an' belonged to a good family. 'Twas but her father as stood i' the road, an' she'd settled not to get married while he was livin'; it did seem to be jist a question of how long the owd gentleman 'ud last. . . . Well, but she comes here to-day in sich a takin' as never was—downright wild she did look, an' she'd a-been huntin' about for Stephen, an' when she couldn't find en, she bid me tell him straight out the minute I see him as all was over between them."

"Why, what's the meaning of that?" cried Kitty, much startled.

"I'm sure I can't tell ye," said Mrs. Hardy, shaking her head portentously; then, after a pause, she continued slowly, "I thought maybe *you* mid be able to throw some light on it."

"I!" exclaimed Kitty.

Rebecca continued to wag her head, but this time as an indication of some arch under-meaning, while a semi-jocular smile played about her lips. After a moment, seeing the girl's evident annoyance, she became more serious, and, bending forward, whispered in her ear—

"It mayn't be your fault, my dear—I'm sure it bain't your fault—but Sheba be terr'ble jealous o' you."

"Oh, Mrs. Hardy!" gasped poor Kitty, crimson.

"Well, I scarce like to say sich a thing, Miss Kitty, an' I do hope ye'll not take it as a insult, but there was one time when Stephen thought the very world o' you."

There was a time—but how long ago!

"He doesn't think much of me now," said Kitty after a pause.

"No, to be sure not, my dear," agreed Rebecca dubiously; "but there was a time. Of course I'm not sayin' there ever could ha' been anything serious in it—ye wouldn't ha' fancied the notion most like, an' I reckon Stephen 'ud never ha' dared to look so high—though a young lady mid do worse nor

Stephen, an' he bain't, so to speak, a common man. But I'm not talkin' about that," she added hastily, noting Kitty's increasing discomfiture. "I'm only saying there *was* a time—I used to notice Stephen colouring up when ye came nigh the place, an' listenin' for your voice, an' lookin' up at your windows, an' a-makin' hisself so smart whenever he were takin' ye out ridin' an' sich-like. And I d' 'low Sheba must ha' noticed summat too, an' it do keep comin' back to her mind like—most onraysonable, for she hasn't no cause not to feel sure o' he."

"No, indeed."

"No, indeed," repeated Mrs. Hardy, sucking in her breath. "An' to-day when she came burstin' in, she talked o' having heard summat which she never knowed before."

"But it couldn't—it couldn't have been anything about Farmer Hardy and me," stammered Kitty.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure. Folks about here d' seem to have sharp eyes an' long tongues. Nay now, miss, dear, I don't want to frighten ye, nor to offend ye, neither—I only say maybe somebody put some sich notion in Sheba's head, an' it'll be a pity if she goes an' picks a quarrel wi' Stephen along o' that. Stephen, he bain't a man what'll stand no nonsense, an' if she did tell en to his face she wanted to break wi' en, so like as not he'd take her at her word."

Kitty returned her puzzled look with one still more perturbed—with even a kind of terror.

"But what can I do, Mrs. Hardy?" she faltered at length; then, dropping her eyes, "Why do you come to me?"

"Well, my dear," said Rebecca slowly, "I hope ye'll not think it terr'ble impudent o' me—but the thought did cross my mind that mayhap ye'd be willin' to say a word to Sheba as 'ud put things to rights. If ye was to say to her straight out summat o' this kind—'I know ye've got some notion in your head about Stephen Hardy an' me, but I do assure 'ee it is all stuff and nonsense'—she couldn't but believe the word of a young lady like you, an' the thing would blow over."

"Very well," said Kitty in a low voice, "I'll go to her now."

"It's not so very dark," said Mrs. Hardy with an anxious glance through the window, which belied her words. "If ye was to run straight there an' back, Miss Leslie dear, ye'd get home afore 'twas real late. I'd go wi' ye an' welcome, only, if she was to see me, she'd think I'd put ye up to it, an' that

wouldn't do any good. An' I'd tell you to wait till to-morrow, only, ye see, she bid me send Stephen to her the minute he comed whoam, an' if he don't go she'll be back here arter him, an' then all the fat 'ud be in the fire—otherways I'd never ax ye to be out so late."

"I'll go now," rejoined Kitty, rising quickly.

Her hat and jacket lay on the sofa where she had thrown them down half an hour previously on coming in from the garden. Mrs. Hardy now helped her to put them on so eagerly that the girl was infected by her haste, and started off almost at a run. As she sped through the shadowy hedges and across the dim fields she kept repeating to herself—

"I must stop it, I must stop it!"

She must, if possible, avert the mischief which no doubt she had unwittingly caused. She should have left the neighbourhood before; she must tell Sheba that she really would go now.

The door was ajar when she reached the cottage, and, to her horror, she caught sight of old Baverstock standing by the table. She hesitated for a moment and then knocked. Richard made a staggering step towards the door, uttering some inarticulate remark in a very husky voice; he was evidently drunk. Rallying all her courage, however, the girl stepped in, looking anxiously round the room, which was lit only by the glow of the wood fire, though from a strong smell of paraffin Kitty inferred that Baverstock had been endeavouring to light the lamp.

"Sheba!" she called timidly, then raising her voice in her alarm, "*Sheba!*"

"Sheba!" echoed Baverstock raucously.

The door at the top of the ladder-stairs opened, and Sheba looked down at them.

"Who wants me?" she cried. "Is it you, Stephen?"

"It's I—Kitty Leslie. I only want to see you for one moment—can I come up?"

Kitty was indeed already half-way up the ladder.

"I'm busy," returned Sheba; "I've all my packing up to do. I haven't time for talk. We're going to trant out o' this to-morrow."

"I only want to say a few words," persisted Kitty.

She had reached the top of the crazy stairs by this time, and now, with unusual boldness, pushed past Sheba into the tiny bedroom.

“Be quick, then,” said the other, closing the door.

Richard stared after them.

“Well, I’m dalled,” he muttered. “She be reg’lar set on’t! ‘Trant out o’ this to-morrow,’ will we? There’s two words to that.”

His indignation seemed partially to sober him. After a long pause, during which he remained staring vengefully at the door of Sheba’s room, his countenance cleared. The key was still sticking on the outside of the lock! Baverstock kicked off his heavy boots, and, going to the ladder, dragged himself up it. The excited voices within Sheba’s room drowned the grinding of the key in the lock. In another moment it was withdrawn and dropped into the old man’s pocket. He slid down the ladder, and sat for a moment on the floor to recover himself. A plan of action shaped itself dimly in his mind. His redoubtable daughter was safe out of the way; now he would dispose of the old cart—but how—how? It would take a long time to chop it up, and his arms were none of the strongest. His eyes wandered stupidly from the axe in the corner to the blazing logs, and thence to the oilcan from which he had been trying to fill the lamp; and all at once his face cleared.

“Dally! If I don’t burn the old thing an’ make an’ end on’t for good an’ all. It be so dry as tinder—the job ’ull be done in next to no time.”

Propped on his crutch he staggered across the room, seized the can, and went stumbling out of the door and along the house wall till he reached the shed which sheltered the cart. A whinny from the horse attracted his attention, and after a swaying pause, balanced on his crutch, Richard set down the can, and hobbled to the door of the tumble-down stable.

“Come out wi’ ye,” he whispered. “Us don’t want to make a bonfire o’ you.”

He drove out the old beast with a clap on its lean flank, and it went shambling across the little yard to nibble at the bare hedge over the way.

Richard, however, dallied a moment longer in the stable, emerging presently with a bundle of straw destined for the animal’s fodder, and catching up the can again entered the shed.

Soon certain crackling and hissing sounds announced that he had put his project into execution; he waited a moment to make sure that the dry body of the old cart was satisfactorily ignited, and then limped noiselessly away.

He paused, chuckling to himself as he remembered the two girls imprisoned in the upper room.

“They’ll be safe out o’ the way till all’s over. They’ll be company for each other.”

CHAPTER X

“I don’t know why ye should come botherin’ me!” exclaimed Sheba, standing defiantly opposite to Kitty, the flickering light of her tallow candle accentuating the set lines in her white face. “I’m going away—right out o’ this. Ye’ll be glad to be rid o’ me—as glad as I’ll be to see the last o’ you. Ye needn’t ha’ come here to mock me just at the end.”

“That’s the last thing I want to do,” returned Kitty. “Sheba—listen! It’s all been a mistake——”

“I know that,” flashed out the other. “Ye needn’t tell me that. Ye needn’t come here to crow over me.”

“I don’t know what you mean!” exclaimed Kitty, taken aback at the sudden fury in Sheba’s eyes. “What have I to crow about? I only came to say that you mustn’t think of going away—it is I who must go. I have felt all along I shouldn’t stay. I will write to-night to a friend of mine who will take me in while I look about me.”

A plan did indeed form itself at that very instant in her mind, as she stood quailing beneath those glowing miserable eyes. She would ask the mistress of her old school in Brussels to receive her as teacher of English for a few months till her father’s book was published, or till she could obtain a better situation.

Sheba, however, far from being mollified, seemed more incensed than before, too much incensed for a moment to speak. She flung open the battered old chest which contained her scanty wearing apparel, and began to toss its contents on to the floor. All at once she straightened herself, and said with a bitter laugh—

“It’s easy talkin’—ye know so well as I do Stephen ’ud never let ye go.”

“If it hadn’t been for my father,” responded Kitty with some indignation, “we should all have gone long before this. Mr. Hardy told my father he *wanted* us to leave the Little Farm.”

“Don’t you believe it,” retorted Sheba, tossing her head. “’Twas all pertence—he’ve a-been pertending all along. Ye know it,” she added violently; “and I don’t know what brings ye here to spy at me, an’ mock me. I’ve been a fool—an’ no one do know it better nor you—but ye mid ha’ kept away from me jist this one night.”

“Sheba,” said Kitty earnestly, “I assure you you are wrong—I don’t know what can have happened to-day to upset you so much, but——”

“Oh, nothin’s happened,” interrupted Sheba. “My eyes was fast closed, an’ now they be opened—that’s all. I thought myself Stephen’s free choice—I did boast an’ brag of it to ’ee, didn’t I? I thought, though he mid ha’ loved ye once, he loved me now, an’ picked me out because he wanted me—but he didn’t. He never wanted me—he never chose me—he only took me out o’ charity because father axed him—an’ father told him what I thought nobody knewed except myself, an’—an’ maybe you—that I—that I—oh, my God!”

Kitty seized her hand impulsively, as she broke off.

“Oh, poor Sheba!” she cried; “I am so sorry.”

“No, ye bain’t,” retorted the other fiercely, as she wrenched away her hand; “ye be glad—that’s what ye be. Ye think ye’ll have him for yerself now—but ye won’t, I can tell ye that. Stephen bain’t the man to humble hisself twice—he told me wi’ his own lips as he was thankful ye said no to en.”

So direct and sudden was this stab that Kitty winced involuntarily. Sheba was quick to perceive it—

“Ha, ye do feel that, do ’ee? I’m glad on’t—I’m glad ye do feel summat o’ what I be feelin’. If he don’t belong to me he’ll never belong to you, make up your mind to that.”

“I have no wish whatever that Farmer Hardy should ever belong to me,” returned Kitty, with an assumption of haughty coldness which belied an anger almost as fierce as her rival’s.

Sheba took a stride across the room and stood close to her, glowering down at her, dominating her for the moment by the force of her stronger personality.

“That’s a lie!” she cried. “And you do know it’s a lie. Ye daren’t look me in the face and say ye don’t love Stephen Hardy.”

“How dare you say such things to me!” cried Kitty; but her eyes wavered and fell.

Sheba flung out her arm with an exclamation of triumph.

“Ye dursn’t deny it.”

“I do deny it,” said Kitty, forcing herself to gaze full in Sheba’s flashing dark eyes. “Stephen Hardy is nothing to me—I do not love him, and I never did.”

“God forgive you!” ejaculated Sheba contemptuously as she turned away.

Stung by the tone and still more by the innuendo, Kitty went quickly towards the door.

“There’s no use my staying,” she said. “I can do no good—good-bye.”

She lifted the latch, but the door did not yield. After abortive pushing and shaking she turned to Sheba, who was again stooping over the chest.

“I am afraid I must trouble you to open the door for me,” she said; “I don’t understand the trick of this latch.”

Two of Sheba’s strides brought her across the room; laying an impatient hand upon the latch, she, too, lifted and shook it, but the door did not yield. She stooped and peered through the keyhole, no obstacle impeded her vision into the firelit room below.

“We’re locked in,” she cried, “and the key’s gone. This must be father’s work—there’s no sayin’ what mischief he’ll be up to when he’s drinky, though how he got at the drink beats me. When I got back I see’d he was the worse, but I didn’t stop to think about it. Father!” she cried angrily, “come back this minute. Let us out, or I’ll stop your beer for a month—you’ll see if I don’t.”

There was no answer, and she looked again through the keyhole.

“He bain’t there,” she exclaimed, “and door’s open. He must ha’ got out—he must ha’ got at his crutch some way,” she added, looking quickly round. “Yes, it be gone. I mid ha’ knowed when I see’d en as he must ha’ got at it an’ found his way to the public. I must ha’ left the key stickin’ in the lock.”

“But won’t he come back and let us out?” gasped Kitty.

“He’ll have gone straight back to the public,” rejoined the other; “he mayn’t be back till midnight.”

She returned to the door, throwing her weight against it and endeavouring to force it open. But the lock held firm; it was, indeed, a new one which she had recently purchased.

“I don’t know whatever we’re to do,” she cried, coming back exhausted to her visitor; “we two be shut up here together—the Lord knows for how long. Maybe somebody ’ull pass by, or maybe father’ll come back sooner nor we look for, but we mid ha’ to pass the night together—make up your mind to that.”

“Then if we are to be together,” said Kitty earnestly, “let’s try to come to a better understanding. I had a good intention in coming here. I meant to put things right. I thought if you knew I was going away you and Stephen would keep friends.”

“What’s the use o’ talkin’ o’ that now?” returned Sheba with a kind of weary impatience. “I come down low—I know I did. I started wi’ sayin’ I’d never be content wi’ half a man’s love—and then, when I found ’twas only half a love he could gie me, I tried to make myself content wi’ that—I told en once I could be grateful even for a crumb—but I did think the crumb was given free—not axed for—I’ll not be a burden to en—I’ll not be forced on en—I haven’t fell so low as that.”

“Dear Sheba,” said Kitty timidly, but the other cut her short.

“Nay, I’m not your dear Sheba—I’ve got no trust in one so false as you be. Ye did lie to my face—I’ll not ha’ nothin’ to say to ye. I *know* ye love Stephen—an’ there’s an end on’t.”

Kitty’s pulses were beating like hammers, but her lips remained obstinately mute. In the pause which ensued, the clattering of hoofs was heard, and the neigh of a horse—a curious neigh—almost a scream.

“Why, whatever’s that?” exclaimed Sheba. “Bob must ha’ got loose—he must ha’ hurted hisself,” she added anxiously. “Hark how he do call out—an’ I be locked in an’ can’t get to ’en.”

Kitty ran to the window.

“That’s no use,” cried the other impatiently. “It do look out on the river—ye’ll not see nothin’ there.”

But Kitty had seen something. Though night had fallen, the swollen, murky waters just beneath the window reflected a red glare. She leaned out; a curious, crackling, spluttering sound was audible, accompanied by a dull roar. As she was about to draw in her head in alarm, a shower of sparks fell downwards, hissing as they touched the water.

“Sheba,” she gasped, “it’s fire!”

But Sheba had already seen.

“An’ here we be shut in like two rats in a trap!”

“Is the roof thatch?” asked Kitty faintly. “If so, it’ll be over in a few minutes.”

“A bit on it is thatch,” returned the other, who stood by curiously inert. “Some on it is tiled. But if it’s the thatch what’s caught fire the house will go like tinder.”

Kitty stood opposite to her swaying a little, then, with a sudden impulse, flung her arms round Sheba’s neck.

“I won’t die with a lie on my lips,” she cried. “Oh, Sheba, you shall know the truth, I do love Stephen Hardy with all my heart.”

Stephen, riding back from Wimborne by the higher road, and pondering in somewhat melancholy fashion as he jogged along, was startled on turning a corner by an ominous glow in the neighbourhood of the river.

“Somebody’s stack’s afire,” he said; then raising himself in his stirrups and peering over the leafless hedge, he took more particular stock of the scene. He could see where the fire was now—close to that bend in the river known as the Old Ford; he realised that it was not a stack which was being consumed, moreover—it was a house—a cottage—Sheba’s cottage!

He put his horse to a gallop, but almost immediately reined up again—a shadowy figure blocked the way.

“Let me by, let me by!” he shouted. “There’s a fire down at the Old Ford.”

“Yes, I know that,” answered the familiar voice of Richard Baverstock. “’Tis a good turn what I’ve a-done ye. Stephen—ye’ll get Sheba for your wife now.”

“Good God, man, get out of the road? Where’s Sheba?”

“Locked up in her own room,” chuckled Richard. “She’ll not be able to put fire out.”

“Locked up!”

Stephen clapped his heels to his horse’s sides and the animal sprang forward again.

But a few minutes sufficed to cover the stretch of road which intervened between him and the doomed cottage. As he drew near he saw that the

adjoining shed was blazing fiercely, and the thatch which covered one portion of the cottage roof was also on fire; little tongues of flame ran in and out even of the tiles.

The roar was almost deafening, the volume of smoke illuminated by the flames, hung in a fiery cloud about the place. Sheba's old horse, which had retreated to the farthest corner of the yard, was neighing with the same wild, unnatural sound which had first attracted the girls' attention; and Stephen had only time to fling himself from the saddle before his own horse, infected by a kindred terror, stampeded in the direction whence he had come. Stephen rushed towards the cottage, but saw to his dismay that there was no possibility of entering; flames and smoke were issuing from the open door, and the latticed windows of the kitchen were lit up by a glare that came from within and not without.

Richard's unsuccessful endeavours to fill the lamp, and consequent spilling of the oil, had rendered the danger twofold. One of the many floating sparks had set the paraffin alight, and a secondary fire was burning actually within the little dwelling. There was no getting to the prisoner from that side, but Sheba's room looked out on the river—thank Heaven for that!—he could reach her by means of the river. The Baverstocks' cottage was built on a high bank that shelved out over the water, and in the water was safety. He had to leave the yard and run a little way down the road to gain a suitable place from which to attempt the rescue.

He flung aside coat and hat as he hurried along, calling loudly on the girl by name.

Now he was in the water, and now a few bold strokes brought him beneath the cottage wall. The swollen river had overflowed its boundaries; and, though the bank was high, it was entirely submerged, and the water touched the house itself. He gazed eagerly upwards as he swam, noting to his joy that Sheba's window, a double one, was sufficiently wide to admit of her escaping through it. She had evidently taken note of this herself, for the lattice had been removed from the aperture. But why did she not hasten to save herself? Swimming back a few yards, and again looking upwards, he could see two dark shapes outlined against the glare, and amid the turmoil of the flames he distinguished voices—two voices—Sheba's loud in desperation—

“Jump, I tell 'ee—'tis the one chance!”

The other, uplifted in a very wail of anguish—

“I can’t—let me die here.”

Stephen hastened forward again, swimming till he came to the bank, and then wading waist-deep till he reached the house wall. The lower window-sill was just above the flood, and climbing on to it he found a precarious foothold on the projecting ledge. Supporting himself by grasping with one hand the ivy which still clung to the smoking wall, and which emitted a pungent odour as it shrivelled in the heat, he sent forth a loud shout—

“Sheba—for God’s sake, Sheba! There’s not a moment to lose! Get out of the window and let yourself drop—I can catch you.”

“ ’Tis you, Stephen—thank God! Miss Leslie’s here—take her first.”

Stephen paused for the fraction of a minute, and then said—

“No, you first. Come.”

She, too, hesitated, her face bright, as it often seemed to him afterwards, with another light than that of the flames; then, climbing through the window, she lowered herself cautiously down by her hands, and he caught her in his free arm. She clung to him as he steadied himself in preparation for the downward climb, and he felt her lips upon his face. Then, before he realised her intention, she broke from him, crying—

“Save her—I can save myself;” and leaped downwards into the water.

“Come, Miss Leslie—quick!” called Stephen. “I’m waiting for you—don’t lose a moment!”

Kitty crept through the window, endeavoured to lower herself by her hands, as Sheba had done, and dropped in a heap in his arms. The impetus almost threw him down, but he managed to regain his balance and waded with her for a few yards along the bank; and then as it grew suddenly deeper took perforce to the water again. Sheba could swim; he felt no qualms on her account. But after depositing the dripping form of Kitty in a place of safety, he returned to look for her. “Where are you, Sheba?” he cried.

There was no sound but the crackling of the flames.

He plunged into the water again, and, bethinking him that she might have crossed the river, swam rapidly to the other side. The deserted house was now a very sheet of flame, and every object on the opposite bank was to be seen as clearly as by the light of day; but there was no sign of Sheba.

Filled with foreboding, he turned and swam back, keeping close to the house wall, and looking anxiously about him. Then all at once, close against

the shelving bank, a little lower down than the window, he saw a dark form—a woman's—Sheba's.

He seized it with frenzied eagerness, and struck out with his free arm, cleaving the flood with incredible speed, and gaining in a few minutes the place where Kitty sat.

He laid Sheba flat on the ground, and Kitty, edging nearer, lifted her by the shoulders so that her head might rest upon her lap. But the head fell back in a curious way; at sight of which Stephen uttered an exclamation. He raised it again, feeling hastily the back of the neck. Then he laid her down with a kind of groan.

“Oh,” gasped Kitty in an agony, “is she much hurt?”

“She jumped into shallow water,” he said; “she must have come full on her head!”

“Is she—is she——” faltered Kitty, with terror gripping her heart.

Stephen bent over Sheba and gazed into her face. The eyes were closed, the smiling lips parted as though with that last kiss.

“She is dead,” he said.

CHAPTER XI

“Why was it not I?” This was the burden of Kitty’s thoughts. If she had only jumped as Sheba had first suggested, and before Stephen had come to their aid! She had shrunk back, cowardly as usual, as she told herself, preferring rather to wait passively for death, than to seek it of her own accord.

If she had only jumped she would have died, as Sheba had died, and, after all, death can come but once. Or if Stephen, in obedience to Sheba, had rescued Kitty first, both would have been saved, but he had said, “You first,” to Sheba. In the midst of her grief and remorse the recollection stabbed her. Sheba first, let Kitty take her chance. It was right, a thousand times right, and not for all the world would she have grudged the dead girl her moment’s triumph. Stephen had chosen her then of his free will, if he had not chosen her before. Kitty was glad for her sake, but she wished with all her weary soul that she too were lying with hands folded, and heart still for ever.

Mrs. Hardy told her that same night that she had kept from Stephen the story of Sheba’s search for him and of the message left with her.

“There, it could but vex and grieve en now,” she explained. “’Twas a mistake, and it never can be cleared up; ’tis best the poor fellow should know nothing of it. I thought I’d ax you to keep the secret too. She’s at rest, poor dear, an’ lookin’ that beautiful, it fair makes me cry to see her. You’ll come across to-morrow, won’t ye?”

“I’ll keep Sheba’s secret, Mrs. Hardy,” said Kitty. “But I don’t know if I dare go and look at her. If it hadn’t been for me she’d be alive now. It was to save me she jumped out of Mr. Hardy’s arms.”

“Well, well, and the Lard ’ull reward her for it,” groaned Rebecca. “’Twas none of your fault, my dear, and don’t you think it. Sheba was took for her good, ye may be sure o’ that. Ye have but to look at her to see how happy she be.”

They had carried the poor girl’s body to the farm upon the hill, and on the following day the inquest took place.

Kitty, to her horror, was obliged to appear as witness. She gave her evidence falteringly, being oppressed by the inward consciousness of the purport of her last conversation with Sheba, though naturally her statements

were confined to the circumstances which could possibly throw light on the origin of the fire. Her wish to keep secret Sheba's intention of leaving the cottage, resulting as it did from her resolution to break with her lover, made her dread that she should be questioned as to Baverstock's possible motive in locking the bedroom door, an action which she inferred was connected with his desire to prevent the impending departure. Luckily old Richard's character and habits were so well known that nobody dreamed of inquiring into the reason of his action, though the few words he had spoken to Stephen would seem to prove that he was the cause of the tragedy. He had been discovered in a drunken sleep by the roadside, and hurried, still in a dazed condition, to give evidence. No coherent statement, however, could be elicited from him, and nobody who contemplated the wretched, broken-down creature, or listened to his rambling, inarticulate speech, could have held him worthy to be treated as a responsible being. A verdict was returned of "Death from misadventure," and Stephen undertook to ensure that Baverstock did no more harm to the community. Through his means the old man found a refuge in a home for inebriates, where he passed the remainder of his days in great comfort, though he never ceased to lament, with equal pathos, the absence of his accustomed stimulant and the malevolent effects of cold water.

"If it hadn't a-been for the water, my maid 'ud be alive now," he would say, shaking his head. "I told her harm would come o' living so nigh to the river, but there, she wouldn't take any advice, and now she be drowned."

When the inquest was over and the Big Farm with its lowered blinds was once more still, Kitty crept out of her room and made her way cautiously across the road and up the flagged path which led to her landlord's house; she had only proceeded a few paces when pattering steps behind her made her start.

"I guessed you were going to see poor Sheba," said Bess, passing her arm through hers, "and so I thought I'd come too. I don't like you to go alone, it might be too much for you, my poor Kitty."

She spoke in a subdued tone, and looked at her sister with dim eyes. She was full of sympathy for her, and was, moreover, shaken by the tragic occurrence.

Though Kitty would have preferred to go alone, she made no protest, and entering the farm, the two girls were motioned upstairs by Mrs. Hardy, whose face was disfigured with weeping.

“Funeral’s to be day after to-morrow,” she informed them in a loud whisper, “and I am mortal busy. Stephen wants everything o’ the very best. But go straight up, dears—’tis the room at the top o’ the stairs.”

As they opened the door, Stephen, who had been standing by the bed, slipped hastily past them, and went out without speaking.

“She looks beautiful,” said Bess in an awestruck voice.

The tranquil face of the dead girl was indeed stamped with a beauty greater than it had possessed in life; the features seemed chiselled in marble—Bess afterwards descanted on their almost classical regularity—the long lashes lay placidly on the fine-grained cheek, the dark hair waved over the smooth brow. But Kitty noted none of these things. She saw the smile, the settled serenity of the expression—the look of peace—of absolute security—and she thought once more of how Sheba, at the very instant of her supreme self-sacrifice, had possessed all that life could give. Looking down on the unruffled brow, she could scarcely credit that it belonged to the passionate creature whose scathing words were still ringing in her ears. She would think of them no more, she vowed, she would keep Sheba’s secret, even as those smiling lips must perforce keep hers. Stooping, she kissed hands and brow, and then went sorrowfully downstairs, followed by Bess. Stephen was standing in the yard, and Bess stopped as they passed.

“Mr. Hardy,” she said in a voice full of sympathy, and gazing at him with eyes brimming with compassionate tears, “I can’t tell you how sorry we are—both of us. I can feel for you now in a special manner. I don’t know what I should do if——”

She broke off to shudder, glancing at the ring which gleamed on her finger, and continued hastily—

“I know what you must be going through—you who loved her so.”

“I am going through—enough,” said Stephen in an oddly harsh voice, turning away to end the conversation.

A melancholy winter followed on this gloomy autumn, Christmas being unbrightened by any festivities at the Big Farm, which was still, as Mrs. Hardy said, a house of mourning.

The Heriots were abroad, and the Grange in consequence shut up; the Leslies exchanged few civilities with their other neighbours, including Mrs. Turnworth, whose animadversions on the subject of Bess’ future had proved

more than the prospective bride could bear. The engagement had now come to be considered an established fact, but the marriage was not to take place for a year, not, in fact, till Bess had celebrated her nineteenth birthday.

Meanwhile Mr. Raymond came and went, and Bess sometimes tried to live up to him, and sometimes petulantly declared this achievement to be unattainable. Nevertheless, in whatever mood he found her, her imperturbable wooer seemed equally content. In the spring the monotony of the sisters' lives was varied by another short visit to London. Bess enjoyed the importance of going about with Mr. Raymond, being introduced to his friends, and escorted by him to theatres and other places of entertainment. Kitty accompanied her father to the British Museum, or stayed at home and helped him to correct his proofs. She was glad to return to the country, though a barrier seemed to have risen between her and the Hardys. Rebecca did indeed visit her sometimes, and now and then, having made sure that Stephen was absent, Kitty would run up to the farm on the hill and spend an hour in Rebecca's company; but the former cheerful intercourse seemed impossible now.

Mr. Leslie's book was published in September, and, contrary to his daughters' expectations, proved a great and immediate success. It attracted the attention not only of his own scholarly compatriots, but of thinkers in almost every country in Europe.

He bore his honours without any undue elation, expressing, indeed, surprise, and not infrequently annoyance, when letters flowed in upon him and great men sought to make his acquaintance.

But he showed real satisfaction and pride when he was invited to deliver the Romaine Lecture in the following November, and set out for Oxford in the highest spirits.

The girls accompanied him, Kitty finding as much pain as pleasure in revisiting the familiar scenes, and Bess torn between the natural importance of returning an engaged woman to the place that had known her as a child, and a certain unconquerable longing to throw aside her responsibilities and frolic as of yore with the youth about her.

She was in this latter mood one day, shortly after the lecture had taken place, when Raymond, having vainly searched for her elsewhere, discovered her sitting pensively on a bench in Addison's Walk. Teddy had offered to take her out in a "canader," but she had refused, knowing that her betrothed would expect her to walk with him. Her little nose was pinched and red, and she sat twirling her engagement ring disconsolately round and round the

finger of her ungloved left hand. If she dared to follow her own inclinations, she would have asked Mr. Raymond to take her to see the hockey match now going on in the parks; but he would probably want to escort her to the Bodleian. He sat down beside her, smiling kindly—

“You look cold,” he said, “and dismal. I am afraid I’ve kept you waiting, but I did not remember that you had appointed to meet me here.”

Bess had done nothing of the kind, but did not think it necessary to say so; she had, indeed, felt a perverse pleasure in the thought that her wooer would find it difficult to discover her whereabouts. She smiled sweetly now, and then sighed.

“It makes me feel so old to come back here,” she said; “dreadfully old. Kitty and I used to have such fun—in former days. We used to make up parties for picnics and things, and had so many friends. But most of the men we knew have gone down—and of course, anyhow, under present circumstances it would never do for me to play about as I used.”

Mr. Raymond smiled encouragingly, and then, without replying to Bess’ pathetic speech, remarked that he had brought her a piece of news which he thought would cheer her up.

“I wanted to be the first to tell you,” he added; “it is great news, Bess.”

His eyes were shining, his face full of triumphant joy.

“Kitty’s engaged!” exclaimed Bess.

“Good gracious, no!” he rejoined, vexed for the moment. “What put such an idea as that into your head?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bess, confused. “There’s such lots of men here—I thought—but of course it was silly of me.”

“After all, how could you guess?” returned he, once more kind and jubilant. “This news concerns your father, but indirectly concerns you all, for you will both be proud of the honour done him, and Kitty at least will benefit materially by his good fortune. He has been offered the Chair of Poetry, Bess. It has been thought of here for some time, and his lecture clenched matters. The emoluments are by no means to be despised; he will probably live here altogether—it will be a good exchange from the Little Farm.”

“Oh,” cried Bess, clasping her hands, while tears jumped to her eyes—not tears of joy, as Mr. Raymond at first supposed, but tears of genuine,

unmistakable distress. "Oh, if I'd only known! What a good time Kitty will have."

"My dear child," said Raymond very seriously.

"Oh, I can't help it," sobbed Bess. "I know I'm a beast, but still I *am* very young, and it's dreadful to be finishing one's life just when one might be beginning it, and have to be staid and matronly and all that, when I might be having—a real fling."

The tears were running down her face now; visions of unnumbered undergraduate adorers, of river parties, picnics, dances, delirious excitement of Eights Week and Commem'—all, all would fall to the lot of the free and happy Kitty while she was trying to live up to the standard of her elderly husband. Mr. Raymond's voice broke in upon her meditations—

"The mistake is not irremediable—it can easily be put to rights, my dear little girl," he said. "Give me back that ring."

Bess looked up with a gasp. His face was pale, and had suddenly aged.

"Give me the ring," he repeated firmly. "You shall have back your freedom, child."

The sight of his face, the sound of his voice roused something in Bess which had hitherto lain dormant, unguessed at by anyone except Raymond himself—something not thoroughly awake yet, but which nevertheless pulsed and stirred. For a moment the childish soul rose to the heights of womanhood. She stretched out her hand—not the hand that wore the ring—and clasped his.

"No," she said, "I couldn't do that. I couldn't break my word—besides I—I do think I love you. I wasn't really sure till *now*," she added naively.

Her eyes met his, and Raymond, after one glance at them, stooped and kissed her.

"God bless you, my little Bess," he said. "And now give me back that ring—you shall have your fling, my child—you shall dance and play and flirt as much as you like. Perhaps some day you will have had enough of it, and then if you have not changed your mind with regard to a certain old fellow, you will find him waiting still."

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST

All preparations had been made for a hasty flitting, and Mr. Leslie and Bess joyfully prepared to begin life afresh under prosperous auspices. But Kitty secretly mourned; it seemed to her that she had taken root in this green remote corner, where, nevertheless, she had loved and suffered so much; the very tendrils of her heart seemed to cling to it, and she scarcely knew how she should endure being torn away from it.

A day or two before that fixed for their departure she gathered some violets and carried them to Sheba's grave; having arranged them in a little wreath upon the sodden grass, she leaned against the cross which headed it, so lost in thought that she did not hear Stephen Hardy's approach.

"I thought you were coming here," he said, as she turned with a start, "and I followed you. I have something to say, and it's easier to say it here. I owe it both to the poor girl lying here, as well as yourself. I wronged you both."

"Oh no," said Kitty faintly, "not me—you didn't wrong me."

"I wronged you in my heart," he cried; "I think you knew that. I was too harsh—too hard—altogether unjust. I beg your pardon."

"Oh, you were right to blame me," returned Kitty. "I deserved to lose your good opinion. And I was unjust too."

"Nay, my good opinion isn't worth much," he returned sorrowfully. "God knows it isn't. 'Twas natural enough for you—so young as you were—scarcely more than a child, to be a bit weak—but I! It little became me to set myself up in judgment."

He glanced downward at the grave and went on brokenly—

"I did her a cruel wrong in asking her to marry me, for I never loved her as she ought to ha' been loved—the thought o' that's been my punishment. It's lain heavy on my heart ever since I lost her, and I couldn't part from you wi'out your knowing the truth."

"Oh, don't say that now," cried Kitty with deep emotion; "don't say it here. Don't forget—your last words to her were, 'You first.'"

“I can’t let you think she was first!” he exclaimed vehemently. “Ye’d best know the whole truth. If Sheba was deceived, I thank God for it—I thank God my poor girl went to her death without a doubt of me—but when she called out to me to save you first I was sorely tempted to take her at her word. You’re going away, they tell me, very soon now, and I may never meet ye face to face like this again—I’ll not be a hypocrite at the last. Good-bye.”

He was turning away when Kitty uttered a little cry—

“Oh, Stephen—don’t go!”

The words escaped her involuntarily, but even as they fell from her lips it seemed to her that the whole world—the little conventional world she had known—broke up and fell in ruins about her. Pride, hereditary instinct, reticence—these had hitherto been the mainsprings of her conduct, causing her frequently to vacillate, cramping even her natural honesty and generosity; but courage had come to her now, and she knew her own mind at last. Let everything go, everything—except Stephen.

But Stephen did not speak, and Sheba’s warning returned to her with almost stunning force—

“He’ll not humble himself to you twice;” and then another warning—Stephen’s own—

“I’ll never ask you again.”

He too was proud—and he never broke his word. It was her turn to humble herself now. She stretched out her hands to him across the grave—

“Stephen,” she faltered, “I don’t know how to say good-bye.”

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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 *Hardy-on-the-Hill* by Mary Elizabeth Francis]