Flash

Judge Ruegg

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FLASH

By His Honour
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"John Clutterbuck" and
"A Staffordshire Knot"

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Flash

CHAPTER I

THE STRANGER

Something less than a hundred years ago a postchaise stopped in the centre of a small old market town or hamlet situated in the wild moorlands of North Staffordshire and two travellers descended from it.

The elder of the two was a man apparently about thirty years of age, of attractive appearance and unusually fine physique. The younger, little more than a youth, was in every respect a contrast to his companion—a rather wretched-looking youth, thin and cadaverous in appearance. His eyes were large and wild looking and had a very obvious squint, despite which he seemed to keep them constantly fixed on his companion's face, who, shielding his own eyes with his hand to ward off the rays of a blazing August sun, seemed to be scanning the surrounding country as far as vision could extend.

The view from the place where the man was standing which was at least twelve hundred feet above sea level, was a captivating and beautiful one. On every side desolate and almost uninhabited tracts of bare or heather clad hills and moorland, much of it a sheltering place for grouse, fenced as it were by long ridges or chains of hills, running in a north-east to south-west direction. Many of these hills terminated in or contained tremendous cliffs, composed of immense blocks of stone of mystic shapes. Some of them overhung their base and looked as if about to fall. Between the hills valleys of great depth ran in every direction. Down some of these large rivers flowed. Down some mountain streams could be seen meandering like threads of silver, sooner or later to join the larger streams, and eventually lose themselves in the Trent, the chief river of the county.

Beautiful indeed, but bleak and lonely to a degree almost unparalleled in England, no matter in which direction the gaze should wander; and even when, as now, the beauties of nature were at their meridian and much of the beauty doubled by the shadows cast by the setting sun. In winter the neighbourhood would be inexpressibly dreary and as wild as any mountain district in the Highlands of Scotland. Yet it was a district likely to prove very attractive to a lover of solitude or to an artist.

It became apparent that the elder of the two travellers was of the artist's profession, when, on a sign from him, the postboy took with other cases from the vehicle painter's trestles and boards and other things required in the exercise of the painter's craft.

"Shall I take them across?" asked the postboy, pointing to the luggage and then to a comfortable looking inn nearly opposite where the chaise had unloaded.

"No, leave them where they are at present. I must look for something quieter than an inn," said the elder man. And then: "I wonder who in this dreamy village is sufficiently awake to answer questions?"

Looking round the buildings which bounded the quadrangle and constituted nearly the whole of this small hamlet, he observed a low picturesque shop or store marked "post office."

Here was a likely place for enquiry. It was only a few steps away. He entered, and the mingled scents of a general store were at once apparent; the tarry flavour of rope and string, of hardware, seeds, and various foodstuffs, among which the scent of cheese predominated, and a *soupçon* of medicines, all showed that the general wants of the village were supplied here.

Standing behind the counter was an unusually tall and hard visaged, one-eyed female. This female was the proprietress of the store, and the local postmistress, a person esteemed by the villagers almost, though not quite, as highly as she esteemed herself. At the moment this lady was engaged in sorting, or it would be more correct to say investigating the post bag which the mail coach had a few minutes before deposited at the office.

This was always a longish task, for the lady was of a highly inquisitive disposition, and each letter had to be inspected in a leisurely and minute fashion before it was given out to the recipient, who was expected to receive it rather as a favour than as of right, and in a bashful kind of manner, as though this authoritative official of government need not part with it at all unless she so wished.

The number of letters which arrived every other afternoon at this remote town was small, but it was the event of the day for Miss Tritsy Turner—such was the euphonious name by which this unattractive-looking woman was known. The name was a corruption of her Christian name "Tryphena." Her godfathers and godmothers had christened her after the original "Tryphena," saluted by St. Paul, by proxy, with a holy kiss.

Her insatiable curiosity amounted to a passion, in which she seemed to live, move and have her being. Intimate acquaintance with every dweller in the hamlet, their ways and doings, failed to satisfy this passion. This could be known to everyone. What concerned her was to discover their secrets, their hidden doings, and even their undisclosed thoughts. To this end a minute examination of their letters, despatched and received, was no inconsiderable assistance.

Though possessed of one eye only, what she failed to see or divine relative to the affairs of every dweller in the village may be regarded as undiscoverable.

When the newcomer entered the store the lady was passing each of the newly arrived letters slowly through her hands, and, with skill derived from long practice, generally finding out who was the sender, and often making a shrewd guess as to the contents.

She was never guilty of violating her trust, though the temptation must often have been great. No; what she could not discover by holding the envelope up against the light, or induction drawn from previous letters between the same parties, she had perforce to remain in ignorance of.

"Could you spare me a moment?" the intruder asked politely.

"Don't you see that I am engaged," Miss Tritsy replied abruptly. Taking no further notice of the stranger, though her eye wandered constantly towards him, she continued her examination with running comments designed for her own enlightenment, but which were distinctly audible.

"Ah, this one is from Joe Tilling. So he and Minnie are corresponding again, though I know her mother forbade it, and yet she carries on shameful with big Bill the young gamekeeper. This one is for Mrs. Lewis. So her husband has written her at last, and not before he ought. He has been away just ten days. This one I know is from Truefitts, the third letter asking for their little account, and little chance they have of getting it this side of Christmas. The girl puts all her money on her back. This one looks like a lawyer's letter. Yes, it is from Catch and Crushem. I am sorry for poor Dr. Gregory. I don't think he knew his wife had that new carpet from Derby. Oh,

here is one for Widow Smale. A widow indeed! and what about that child who lives with her? I have always doubted that child." Having now exhausted the interest of the post-bag, she turned to the newcomer, as to whom, though she had taken her own time to interview, she was full of curiosity.

"And what may your business be?" she asked.

"I should be obliged if you could tell me where I can get apartments in the village."

"I would have you know this place is a township, not a village," was the quick reply.

"Well, township or village, I want apartments, and it will be kind if you will help me. I suppose you know everyone."

A rare opportunity this for Miss Tritsy Turner, which she prepared to enjoy. She at once shifted the rôle of interrogator from the stranger to herself.

"Are you going to live here?"

"Yes, for a time," was the reply.

"Why?"

The question was curt and almost rude.

"It is rather difficult to say why. I am taken by the locality and I am an artist."

"Do you sell your pictures?" the postmistress next asked.

"Sometimes, but not very often. I am not a well-known artist."

"How much can you pay for your apartments?" was Miss Tritsy's next enquiry.

"Well I can pay any reasonable sum, depending of course on the accommodation," replied the gentleman, who appeared not in the least offended, but rather amused at the woman's inquisitiveness.

"I don't know your name," was the next curt remark.

"My name is Geoffrey Frevile."

"Frevile! Frevile! I don't ever recollect seeing that name on a letter, but who is the other man?" pointing to the younger of the two travellers, who was loitering in front of the store.

“That is my servant,” was the reply.

“Oh, so you can keep a man-servant.” Miss Tritsy was evidently impressed, and henceforth assumed a less arrogant manner. She continued: “Let me see now, who could have you? I must consider. There is Mrs. Connor, she lets two rooms, but her beds are not clean.”

“That won’t do,” said the artist quickly.

“The Woodwards have some nice rooms in their cottage. He is the coffin maker.”

“Does he make the coffins at his cottage?”

“Yes, he makes them in the back kitchen, but he is not always engaged doing this. We have only about ten deaths a year.”

“I fear this would hardly be suitable.”

“Well, there is only one other place—the Grindons. She is a good sort of woman, a bit extravagant. They have had the brokers in twice this year—once in February and once in June.”

“Well, it strikes me it might be a kindly act to take their rooms,” said the artist. “Will you give me their address?”

“They have seven children, and such noisy, rascallious children as never were seen. The mother has no control of them. They make the place unbearable.”

“Then I fear that must be struck off the list; but are there no larger houses, occupied by people with whom I might live as one of the family? I should prefer this.”

“We have not many society families about here,” said Miss Tritsy. “There are the Huddlestones of the Hall, and Sir James Knebworthy, he is a baronet and lives at the Manor, but they would not take in a boarder. Of course there is the Plumbley family. We don’t call them society in this district, though he is always boasting of his twenty shops.”

“Twenty shops!”

“Yes, but he is only a grocer.”

The tone of contempt in which the woman who kept a grocery store herself refused to allow the owner of twenty shops any claim to be considered in society tickled the listener, though it was no unusual manifestation of English middle-class opinion.

"Would they be likely to take me in?" was the next enquiry.

"I am sure they would not. They don't want money, but they are not gentlefolks."

The artist was about to give the quest up as hopeless when Miss Tritsy suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, there is Doris Gregory coming up the street now. I forgot the Gregorys. They have a large house. Would you like to live with the doctor?"

"It certainly might be convenient."

"Yes, they might have you; the doctor's poor, and his boy Walter is spending far too much at Cambridge."

Miss Tritsy tapped vigorously on the shop window to attract the young lady's attention and at the same time beckoned to her to come in, remarking in an undertone as she passed the window, "How that girl does deck herself out."

Doris Gregory was an extremely pretty girl, with the fresh delicate colouring and fair hair peculiar to natives of this county, and which distinguish them from the darker types of the counties even immediately adjoining. From her youthful, almost childish, looks one would have judged her to be in her early teens, but she was really nineteen years of age, intelligent and exceptionally well educated for a girl of the period when the Sailor King reigned in England.

She had been paying afternoon visits and was dressed fashionably, according to the fashion of the time. Her skirt was of black silk of thick and rich material, such as the looms of Macclesfield at this time turned out, and reached down to, if not below, the feet; the bodice was trimmed with black bead or bugle trimming. A large black picture hat with white feather almost concealed the curls which hung around the shapely head.

To have worn a dress which showed the knees, or indeed the ankles, would have been thought the height of indecency; and to have bobbed or shingled the hair, an insane if not a wicked spoliation of what was considered a woman's chief charm, but *autres temps, autres moeurs*, and "fashion is female, therefore has whims!"

When Dolly entered the store she dropped a pretty curtsey to the stranger.

"This is Mr. Geoffrey Frevile," said Miss Tritsy—the lady never forgot a name. "He wants to find a family to live and board with in the township. Do

you think the doctor would have him to live at your house?"

Dolly blushed, as of course she should, but answered prettily:

"I think mother would have most to say about it"—and after a pause—"and me."

Geoffrey Frevile took off his hat and bowed low as the fashion required, bestowing upon the girl a smile which was entirely natural, but the witchery of which few could resist.

"May I be my own advocate with you, and plead at all events my necessity?" he asked.

Doris, who was fascinated by the stranger's appearance and manners, blushed more deeply than ever, as she replied:

"Perhaps it would be best if you came with me and saw my father and mother."

Miss Tritsy, who had been writing on a piece of paper torn from a memorandum book, folded it and handed it to Doris with the whispered remark, "Give that to your mother from me."

After the man and his young companion left the store the postmistress watched them intently, and as they passed together out of sight she sighed. What the sigh portended it is impossible to say. Perhaps it had some affinity with the half-muttered remark she made as she turned from the window to resume her duties:

"As sure as my name is Tritsy Turner she will set her cap at him."

CHAPTER II

THE GREGORY FAMILY

"Daddy, who is that coming up the garden walk with Doris?" And then, "Oh, what a good looking man!"

The speaker was Mrs. Gregory, who was standing with her husband at the drawing-room window of the doctor's house, "The Hermitage."

Dr. Gregory was the only medical practitioner in Longnor, and, indeed, the doctor of all the villages of the moorlands. He was an overworked and very ill-remunerated man, leading the hard life led by so many who practise the healing profession in poor and sparsely populated districts. He was, as he often said, at the beck and call, by day and night, of any dweller in this extensive and wild locality. Practically all his patients were workpeople, but he never refused their calls or neglected their ailments, real or imagined, though they often neglected to pay his very moderate fees.

He had married, when a student at Guy's, a pretty though rather weak girl, considerably older than himself, and they had been settled in the moorlands of Staffordshire over twenty years.

He was quite satisfied with his life. They had two children—Doris, of whom her father was immensely proud, who had developed a much stronger character than her mother, or indeed than her rather easily influenced father, and Walter, a weak youth of eighteen, a very counterpart in character of his mother. At present the boy was at Cambridge, where for the last year he had taxed and overtaxed his father's slender and hardly acquired income.

Doris brought her companion at once into the drawing-room. "Daddy this is Mr. Geoffrey Frevile, who is an artist, and wants to know if he can board with us."

"Wants to live with us!" It was the doctor's wife who spoke in a surprised tone.

The situation was certainly embarrassing. The newcomer relieved it by quietly suggesting that perhaps it would be convenient if he had a few words with the doctor alone.

Mrs. Gregory and her daughter left the room. As soon as they were alone together Doris could no longer restrain her excitement, and burst out: "Oh,

Mother! we must have him. He is charming. I think he must be a nobleman in disguise, and then he is an artist—think what that will mean for me."

"He is certainly very handsome, and we want money badly enough. Your father is being worried for payment of that carpet I bought for the drawing-room, and he can't get in his accounts."

Something in this speech seemed to remind Doris of the missive entrusted to her by Miss Tritsy. She handed it to her mother, who opened it and read as follows:

"The gentleman I send you is rich. I am sure he will pay anything you choose to ask."

Miss Tritsy was evidently anxious that her own proposition should fructify, which must account for her rather exaggerated assurance as to the gentleman's means and liberality.

"Mother, he has a man-servant—such a queer-looking young man," said Doris.

"We can't possibly put up his man-servant."

"I don't think he wants that. Mother, I feel that I shall fall in love with him, if I have not done so already."

This was quite unusual from Doris. It was generally the mother who saw in every man, eligible or ineligible, who met her daughter a positive suitor for her hand and heart. Though each one was quickly discarded in favour of the next, if one could accept her mother's assurance, it was always Doris who had drawn back, and never the deeply smitten gentleman.

She at once caught her daughter's ardour. In a minute she had visualised the situation. The unknown visitor was a nobleman in disguise, and Doris was engaged, nay married, to him. Her ambition was at last realised; they had become on terms of close intimacy with the Huddlestones of the Hall and the Knebworthys of the Manor. Her thoughts flew to what would be a fitting residence for the young couple, and she was still debating this important question when they heard the front door close. Immediately afterwards her husband joined them.

"Well, Daddy, what have you arranged?" they cried out almost with one voice.

The doctor's impetuosity was not so great as that of his wife and daughter. He replied slowly and after hesitation:

"I have not arranged anything."

"How stupid of you," said his wife.

"Oh, Daddy!" added his daughter reproachfully, "then we may lose him after all."

"My dear, these things cannot be arranged in a minute. You see, I really know nothing of the gentleman, except that he is very good-looking and has a man-servant."

"Look at that," said his wife, placing before him Miss Tritsy's confidential note.

"Well, that is certainly satisfactory so far as it goes, though I can't conceive how Miss Tritsy knew," was the doctor's reply after reading the note.

"Don't you yet know, Daddy, that Miss Tritsy finds out everything?" said his wife, almost angrily.

"My dear, the fact is this. He being an entire stranger to me, I said something to him about a reference, and it seemed to disconcert him. It seemed to me as though he blushed, though doubtless I was mistaken in this; but he answered that if prepayment for any length of time I choose to name would do instead, it would relieve him of some inconvenience."

"Ready money is the best of all references," exclaimed Mrs. Gregory.

"And, Daddy, he has a man-servant; surely that counts," said Doris.

"I spoke to him about the man-servant," replied her father, passing over his daughter's enquiry, "and told him we had no room for his man-servant."

"And what was the reply, Daddy?"

"He certainly made no difficulty about that. The man was not a body servant, and could be lodged elsewhere. He thought the undertaker's cottage would do for him."

"Then how did you leave matters?" enquired his wife.

"I left matters in this way. I promised to consider it and discuss it with both of you, and to let him know to-morrow at the hotel he proposes staying at for a day or two."

"Which hotel is he staying at, Daddy?"

"The Old Cheshire Cheese, my dear."

“You must write and secure him at once; you must Daddy,” Doris almost shouted.

“He has come upon us in such an unconventional way,” was the reply.

“I will vouch that he is a gentleman, and then look at his name,” said Doris.

“Frevile? Yes, it is a good old name. They came over with the Conqueror. I believe the lords of Tamworth Castle were Freviles, and king’s champions after the lords of Marmion had lost possession of it,” said the doctor.

“Then, what more can you want?” asked his wife.

“Of course, he may have assumed the name,” said the doctor slowly.

“Oh, Daddy, how suspicious you are. Can’t you see honesty written in his face?”

It has been said that Doctor Gregory was easily influenced. He was quite unable to resist the combined attack of his wife and daughter, with the result that in a couple of days Geoffrey Frevile was installed as one of the family at the Hermitage.

The man-servant, who appeared to have no other name than “Sid,” possibly short for Sidney, did not go to the undertaker’s after all, but was quartered with the Grindons. “What do the children matter to me,” he said, “if there were seventy of them.” If he had been located in a barn he would have been content. Not being a body servant, he was not often found at the Hermitage, but his own view of his duty required him to be always in waiting when his master put a foot outside his new house.

He would wait for long periods in the road, not to miss the first glimpse of his master emerging from the front door, join him at the gate and never leave him till he again entered the forbidden territory. He was an exceptionally ugly youth, but his doglike fidelity to his master was exhibited in his every look and action. His squinting eyes were always fixed upon him, though they might appear to be turned in another direction. This was sometimes a little inconvenient, even to the good-natured Geoffrey Frevile himself, who would often banteringly say:

“Take that Guy Fawkes face away from me.” This request was always received by Sid with a broad grin, making his face, if possible, still more ugly, but was never obeyed. He was not able to obey it. The lodestone of his master’s presence always attracted.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the Gregory household was enraptured with their new inmate. The doctor cottoned to him at once, and the attachment appeared to be mutual.

The doctor, who had been in the habit of driving his hardly-worked horse himself, was now often accompanied by Geoffrey on long drives to far-off villages. Geoffrey never seemed to tire of waiting whilst his companion paid his professional visits. Sid was generally perched up behind the gig, for the practice did not run to a coachman, and the doctor only kept a young lad to look after the horse in the stable and sometimes to come with him on his rounds.

The wife almost from the first regarded "their visitor," as she called him, as being as good as affianced to Doris, though no love passages had passed between them. His advent was also regarded by her as distinctly raising the status of the Gregory family in the neighbourhood. The descendant of the lords of Tamworth Castle was now their friend, and a member of their family. Why should the Huddlestones and the Knebworthys look upon them as inferiors? The Frevile family was older than the Huddlestones, and in comparison with them the Knebworthys were *nouveaux riches*, having only received their baronetcy from George III.

The lady's ambition to rank in social equality with these two families had never been sufficiently gratified. Occasionally the Gregorys had been asked to a garden party at the Hall, but these were very mixed affairs, and two or three times they had dined at the Manor, for the doctor attended the servants there, and in emergencies had been sent for to see a member of the family, though he had never doctored the baronet himself.

The Plumbleys were on their regular visiting list, though the Gregorys, like Miss Tritsy Turner, regarded them as possessing no claim to be considered "in society."

But it was Doris who had been completely carried off her feet by the new arrival. She had from the very first lost her heart to him. He was an artist. She laid claim to be an artist also. She had been at a finishing school at Buxton for two years where everything could be learnt—as an extra—and had taken up water-colour painting. The girl's thoughts were henceforth centred on this good-looking member of the male sex. She lived on his smiles and small attentions.

It was a red letter day in her rather colourless life when he proposed a day's painting together in some part of the beautiful surrounding district. To leave home early and spend the whole day on these entrancing and ever-

changing moorlands, lunching on sandwiches carried in their pockets, and pure cold water from one of the mountain streams seemed to Doris a perfect enjoyment.

They were almost always accompanied by Sid, except on the special occasions when Doris mustered courage to suggest that he might be left behind, a suggestion which Geoffrey always acceded to, though sometimes he seemed to hesitate momentarily.

They painted generally the same scenes, in sketch books, with water-colours, though it was understood that Geoffrey proposed later to transfer some of his studies to canvas. A patch of full-flowering heather near an old gravel pit, a farm and its outbuildings surrounded by trees, the ruins of a disused copper mine, a tiny waterfall wandering down the small channel it had made for itself—there was no end to the delightful sketches the neighbourhood furnished.

Doris's skill was far less than that of Geoffrey, who really was, in spite of his protestation, a clever artist. She always submitted her productions to him for his criticism or approval. He would often make valuable suggestions for their improvement and sometimes carry these suggestions out himself. Happy indeed was Doris when words of praise were forthcoming, or she was told that in his opinion there was distinct improvement.

Geoffrey Frevile had only been a few weeks resident at the Hermitage when the son Walter arrived home. He had been in London, and spending money somewhat freely for a few weeks after the Cambridge session had closed. The boy had all the making of a thorough ne'er-do-well about him, and was a source of much worry to his father. His laziness and extravagance were always condoned by his mother; the latter quality rather encouraged, as being smart and fashionable.

Like the rest of the family, he took a great fancy to Geoffrey Frevile. He discovered that he was possessed of enormous strength. According to Sid he could remove mountains, or accomplish any other feat of strength beyond human power, and had, according to the same authority, often performed acts of valour and bravery, in the doing of which he took delight, but which were never mentioned by him afterwards.

"He do glory in danger and he do enjoy it as a cat do milk," was Sid's inapposite figure of speech.

"I expect," said Walter to him one day when they were alone together, "your master will soon get tired of this slow place. Not much chance of brave deeds here."

“Don’t you fear,” was the reply; “my master will do brave deeds wherever he is.”

The arrival of a newcomer in the quiet township of Longnor was a rare, almost unprecedented event, especially so distinguished looking a gentleman as Geoffrey Frevile. It was a subject of gossip for every member of the small community. Everyone in the little place was a newsmonger, and curiosity ran high as to why and whence he had come. The rumour ran that he was immensely rich. This probably originated with Miss Tritsy Turner, who claimed to know more than anyone else of the stranger’s affairs.

Miss Tritsy was, despite her harshness of manner, an impressionable female, and from the first day of meeting the good-looking stranger he had been much in her thoughts, even to the partial neglect of her duties.

When it became common knowledge that he was much in company with Doris Gregory, not a few ill-natured tongues were ready to spread scandal.

It would have been hard to trace this to the postmistress, though there is little doubt that she was a party to disseminating it. It was clear that Miss Tritsy had become jealous of Doris, even from the time she and Geoffrey had walked away from her store together. She knew at what hour they generally passed through the village, and at what time they returned, and at such times could generally be seen, either standing at the door or looking through the window in the hope, or rather expectation, of seeing them pass.

Why do people so often watch for that which it gives them no pleasure to see?

After they passed she usually turned away with a contemptuous shrug, and showed more than usual signs of ill temper for hours afterwards. Had Miss Tritsy herself fallen in love with Geoffrey Frevile? Why not? No one knew her exact age, but she was not very old, and not devoid of tender feelings, and Cupid’s arrows are shot indiscriminately at the ill-favoured as at the attractive female.

Certainly when he entered her shop, as he sometimes did, she felt her heart beating more vigorously and her thin pale face took on a slight colouring. The examination of the letters of the villagers was now of secondary interest. What she was always looking for was letters directed to Geoffrey Frevile, from which she might learn something of his former whereabouts and draw what deductions she could from the postmark and handwriting. She had always prided herself on being able to discover character from handwriting, and she herself was the authority for the statement that she had never been proved wrong.

For many weeks she had no success, but one day a rather large letter arrived in the mail-bag bearing the postmark "Glasgow," and clearly directed in an uneducated handwriting.

"It is a man's writing," Miss Tritsy murmured. She appeared relieved to find this was so.

The same afternoon Doris Gregory entered the post office and enquired for letters for the Hermitage.

"There is only one, and that is for Mr. Geoffrey Frevile," replied the postmistress.

"I will take it," said Doris.

"Indeed, you will not. I don't give the letters of one person to another," was the quick reply.

The remainder of the afternoon was passed by the postmistress in a state of nervous excitement. At every footstep she visibly started, and looked up expecting to see the man who was now too much in her thoughts—and she was well aware of it—enter the store, but day followed day and the owner never came to claim his letter. Before it was demanded another letter arrived for the same gentleman. Miss Tritsy experienced a shock as she read the direction on the envelope for it was in a woman's handwriting. It was directed:

Mr. Geoffrey Frevile,
Longnor,
Staffordshire.

"This is written by a lady, not by a common woman," said the postmistress, turning it over and over and scrutinizing it carefully. She then held it up against the light, but the envelope or covering was a thick one, and not a single word of the contents could be distinguished.

Miss Tritsy sat down upon the one chair, which had no back to it and was always kept behind the counter, and communed with herself as follows:

"Perhaps this is from his wife. The writer has character; that I can see by the firmness of the downstrokes. I should not be surprised if he was married. Oh, how foolish I am!"

Then, after a long pause:

"I rather hope that he is married. That girl will not get him, at all events."

After another still longer pause:

“Well, he must come for his letters now, and I shall see him soon.”

The love-smitten lady got up from the broken chair and took up the two letters and placed them together on a shelf.

When at last Geoffrey did call at the store she was, as she herself would have described it, “all of a twitter,” but she was a woman of great self-control, and received the much looked for visitor with her accustomed indifference.

Geoffrey had not called for letters, but with a very different object.

“Miss Tritsy, I want two pounds of sweets—your best sweets,” he said.

“You don’t eat sweets, do you?”

“Yes, I do sometimes, but these are for the Grindon children.”

“For those terrible children!” the shopkeeper retorted, raising her eyebrows.

“I think they are jolly children. I often play with them for hours, and I want you to send them, at my expense, the same amount each week-end.”

“Two pounds is far too much. I shall only send them one pound.”

This reply, so typical of the woman whose love of authority surpassed even her desire for profit, tickled Geoffrey. He laughed so heartily and loud that he could have been heard in the houses on the other side of the square.

“Well, have it your own way,” he said.

When his letters were handed to him he just glanced at them and put them quickly into his pocket.

“Good afternoon, Miss Turner. Don’t forget the sweets.”

He was gone. “Don’t forget the sweets,” was the sum total of all she had been waiting for.

She turned away with a deep sigh. Was it possible her eye had a tear in it?

Poor Miss Tritsy Turner.

CHAPTER III

HOIST BY HIS OWN PETARD

Mrs. Gregory's augmented social position led her to issue invitations for a luncheon party.

It was the first occasion, during a residence of over twenty years, that she had ventured on such a social function, and it was with much satisfaction that she regarded and despatched her cards of invitation. A luncheon party was quite an aristocratic thing; more so than a dinner party, and not to be mentioned in the same day with a tea party.

Her object was two-fold, first and foremost to make their distinguished friend and visitor, Mr. Geoffrey Frevile, known to her invited guests, and also the hope that the bait of luncheon might induce the "notables" of the neighbourhood to accept her invitation.

Accordingly invitations were sent to the Huddlestones of the Hall, the Knebworthys of the Manor, in addition to the Plumbleys of the Grange—to Miss Hilda Alton who was always acknowledged as a "lady," though she lived in a very small house in the pretty village of Reapsmoor, and to several others.

The first two families sent polite refusals, pleading "prior engagements," which the would-be hostess knew the exact value of. The fact that invitations had been sent to these "notables" she kept locked up in her own breast.

All the other guests accepted "with many thanks."

The day fixed on was one of the early days in October. A splendid summer was drawing to a close, but the weather remained fine and clear, and the moorlands were very attractive.

The sunsets were, if possible, more beautiful than they had been during the summer months, though morning and evening mists were again beginning to make their appearance, and the days were only too visibly shortening.

The day of this luncheon party was unusually sunny and attractive, and it seemed to Doris that to spend it in what she called "the stuffy dining-room,"

when it might be spent sketching with her companion on the moors, was nothing less than a sin.

She expressed this view in these very words to Geoffrey who only smiled and replied:

"We must support your mother."

The luncheon was intended to be a *recherché* one, and for the township or district it certainly was. A fashionable caterer at Buxton had been engaged to supply both the dishes and attendance.

When the catering van arrived and the tables, which had to be placed in the form of a tea square, were being laid by the two waiters, in somewhat greasy dress clothes, with glistening glass, cutlery, and silver dishes containing sparkling salmon trout, oyster patties, cold grouse and chickens, pigeon pies, jellies and creams, the doctor entered the room, and could not resist raising his eyebrows, whether in approval or disapproval of such an unaccustomed spread, no one from his sign would have been able to infer, and he uttered no word. Possibly the thought occurred to him that it would take many medical fees at two and sixpence each to pay for all this grandeur.

Mr. Frevile had asked the hostess' permission to supply the champagne —"Oh, in such a modest and gentleman-like way"—and the request had been granted.

Doris had decorated the tables with late heather and autumn coloured leaves. Eleven guests had to be accommodated in addition to the family, making sixteen in all.

Everything went off well. The dishes were much appreciated and the champagne was excellent. It was refused only by the donor, and the Vicar of the parish, the Reverend Anthony Adams. The conversation was merry and incessant, though, as is usual, it rested chiefly in the hands of two or three of the party.

The vicar enquired of Geoffrey Frevile if he was a teetotaller on principle, to which the reply was, "No, hardly that." Did he think alcohol unhealthy? The answer was, "I should think not." Perhaps he disliked intoxicants, was the next enquiry, and elicited the reply, "I think I am rather fond of them."

The questioner knew he could not continue his enquiries. It would not be polite, but he felt rather intrigued.

Mr. Plumbley interposed. He was a large, rather pasty-faced man, bald and assertive, but by no means unamiable. He was a great talker, not a conversationalist, for though in and out of season he talked incessantly without even "flashes of silence," he rarely if ever imparted any knowledge, and never wished to collect any in reply. He was more attached to the sound of his own voice than to anything else in his little world, and though very imperfectly educated, loved to assume the rôle of mentor.

The whole family consisting of himself and his wife, his daughter, Edwina, and his son Adolphus, had accepted and were present at the luncheon table.

"The temperance question is one of those on which I have not yet made up my mind how I shall act when I get into the House," exclaimed Mr. Plumbley, evidently with reference to the previous conversation.

"So you intend to go into Parliament," said the doctor.

"Certainly, as soon as this new Reform Act, of which I entirely disapprove, is in full operation, I shall put up for one of the newly-enfranchised towns. I am already nursing one or two."

"What is nursing?" asked Miss Alton innocently.

It was an indiscreet question and no answer was returned.

"I suppose if you got into Parliament I should go to Court?" exclaimed Mrs. Plumbley suddenly.

This lady had no conversational, or even talking, power, but she harped continually upon this, her one social aspiration. To go to Court and see the King and Queen had always been in her thoughts since her husband had become a rich man.

"Would you enter Parliament as a Whig or a Tory?" enquired the Vicar of the would-be member.

"Most certainly as a Tory. As an upholder of our ancient aristocracy and landowners. I am the architect of my own fortune. When I was a youth I slept under a counter, and now I am the possessor of twenty shops—I mean establishments."

Walter Gregory spoke for the first time.

"Are you pretty sure of your seat?"

"Sure, there is no doubt about it at all. 'If money go before, all ways be open.' Who said that, Adolphus?"

“Dad, I wish you would not ask me always ‘who said that?’”

“My dear boy, you have been educated at a public school. Three hundred a year you cost me for four years and I, at a like age, I slept under a counter.”

“I wish Dad would not talk so much about sleeping under a counter,” muttered Edwina.

“Well,” continued Mr. Plumbley, now thoroughly launched, “I am what I am, and don’t profess to be anything else. I am the architect of my own fortune and though I never boast, it is a pretty considerable one. My party must recognize commercial success. I may in time secure a title and my wife become a lady. I would give the party twenty thousand pounds——”

“Perhaps,” said his son interrupting, “we had better not speak of that.”

“If I was ‘my lady’ I should certainly go to Court,” said Mrs. Plumbley, as though to herself, but in a voice distinctly audible.

A turn was given to the conversation by the vicar’s sister making the enquiry whether anyone knew if the Huddlestones were at home.

“Who are the Huddlestones?” asked Geoffrey Frevile. “I knew a boy of that name at Eton.”

Everyone pricked up their ears, and Doris and her mother exchanged triumphant looks. So their friend Geoffrey had been at Eton. What better cachet of position could possibly be required? Mrs. Gregory thought she might find in this a link between the two houses, more effective than the luncheon party.

“It is probably the young Mr. Huddlestone you knew,” she said. “Would it not be well to call upon him?”

No reply was made to the question, and the conversation shifted itself off to the charms of the locality in which they lived.

“I have seen a good deal of England and something of foreign countries,” said Geoffrey Frevile, “but I have never seen a more bewitching district than the country for a ten mile circuit of where we are now sitting.”

“Rather monotonous country,” said Adolphus Plumbley.

“Monotonous!” Geoffrey turned upon him and spoke with animation. “It is full of variety, infinite variety. Though I have not been here long, I am sure it exhibits delightful diversity at every season of the year.”

"I agree with Mr. Geoffrey Frevile," said Doris, "and I can speak of it at all seasons."

"We understand you are an artist, sir," remarked the Vicar.

"Oh, I spoil a certain amount of canvas, like other amateurs," replied Geoffrey gaily.

"I should be very pleased to give you a commission to paint my house here, the Grange, or my London Mansion, if you will tell me your usual charges," said Mr. Plumbley with infinite bad taste.

But Geoffrey took it lightly. "I charge five thousand pounds for a house, and double if I am required to paint the owner on the doorstep," he replied, laughing.

Everyone laughed, even Mr. Plumbley himself.

"Would it be too inquisitive if I was to enquire if you have ever exhibited at the Royal Academy?" It was the Vicar who spoke.

"Once I sent up a small oil painting. It surprised me very much when I found it was accepted, and still more when it was sold. I have always said one of my acquaintances must have bought it for a joke, though I have never found out who it was."

"I don't believe it was bought as a joke at all," exclaimed Doris quickly. And then she blushed very prettily. The artist bowed.

Presently the talk became more general. The shooting of the grouse moors and the fishing of the rivers was talked of, where the best fishing could be found and what reaches were best stocked. In such matters everyone in the locality took interest. A fisherman of either sex always loves to talk of these things, and to recount his or her personal experiences —"fishermen's stories"—which each is prepared to vouch for, and which are received with more or less incredulity by other members of the fraternity, who have either told these stories themselves or had experiences still more striking.

As they rose from the table; the Vicar having pronounced his *Benedicto benedicatur*, which words Mr. Plumbley tried to remember with the view of asking Adolphus on the way home what they meant, a rather vigorous discussion was in progress as to the time and seasons when the moorlands displayed their greatest charms. Doris declared for the early mornings in springtime; others thought the long midsummer days the most attractive as well as the most enjoyable. The doctor, who had traversed the moors at all

times and seasons, and knew far more about them than anyone else, was of opinion that they were never so beautiful as in the autumn when the sun was setting, or shortly after the setting, and before the ever-changing glows that died out from the sky. Geoffrey Frevile, who gave his opinion last, had found his walks at night by moonlight intensely lovely. There was a weird, almost an uncanny attraction in the moorlands at such times, which harmonised well with the artistic temperament he supposed he could claim to possess.

"Have you ever encountered the Headless Rider in any of your night pilgrimages?" enquired the doctor. This allusion gave fresh impetus to the talk. Everyone had heard of the Headless Rider, who, in his decapitated condition, haunted the moorlands by night on a white horse, and had been seen at places far apart at the same time. His rides were limited to the moorlands of North Staffordshire; at all events there was no evidence that he had ever been seen elsewhere.

A ghost, and a very ghastly one certainly, but not a malignant spirit. Even if he possessed the power, he had never been known to harm anyone, beyond the fright inseparable from his appearance.

More than one of the company was not quite sceptical of the reality of this strange apparition. It was an age when superstition held a stronger place than at present in the imaginations even of the educated, whilst the uneducated lived in what may be described as an atmosphere of superstition, and enjoyed it.

The peasants living within the circuit of this phantom's gruesome perambulations would as soon have doubted their Bibles as the reality of the Headless Rider.

The Vicar appeared to be "not quite an unbeliever," as he had been known to call himself. True, he had never seen the Headless Rider, but he had spoken to so many who had, and whose veracity was unimpeachable, that it was impossible not to give some credence to their circumstantial stories.

Geoffrey replied to the doctor's question with enthusiasm:

"Seen him! No, I have never seen him, but I would give ten pounds to do so"; and he laughed heartily.

"Perhaps when you have seen him you will not be inclined to make so light of it," said the Vicar in a reproving tone.

"Well, I am walking across the moorlands to-night, so wish me luck," was the good-natured reply.

Good byes were exchanged, and the company dispersed. Miss Alton was going home with the Vicar and his sister. Rumour said, and rumour for once was correct, that Miss Alton was violently in love with the vicar, and it was believed that it would be only a question of a very short time before their engagement was formally announced. The Vicar was greatly esteemed, indeed beloved by everyone. He was of a most kindly nature, and his entire unselfishness and participation in the joys and sorrows of his parishioners was acknowledged by everyone. To preach the Gospel, in which he believed simply and faithfully, and to rejoice with those who rejoiced and show loving sympathy with those who wept, summarised the life of this modest and holy man.

After the guests had left the Hermitage the languid, "What shall we do with ourselves?" sort of feeling, which always follows a midday entertainment, took possession of all the inmates. Geoffrey threw himself into a hammock and was soon fast asleep. Doris sat on a garden seat near, putting finishing touches to a sketch she had made the day before, and turning her eyes often in the direction of the sleeping form. The doctor drove away on his visits. Little time for repose was ever left to him. His wife, in the seclusion of her little sitting-room recalled the events and conversation of the party, and came to the conclusion that on the whole it had been a success.

Dinner, at the request of Geoffrey was served early. A far more modest spread than appeared at the last meal, for the caterers, to Mrs. Gregory's annoyance, had taken away with them all the remnants of the feast.

"Who will walk with me across the moors?" asked Geoffrey when the meal was over. "I shall not be home till after it is dark."

This statement prevented Doris from offering herself as his companion as she would dearly have liked to, and for a time no one volunteered.

"Will you come, Walter?" addressing the son of the house.

"Where are you going to?" replied the youth.

"I am going to Flash."

"Whew! that is five miles, and five miles to return makes ten," exclaimed Walter.

“That ought to be nothing to a young athlete like you, but don’t come if you would rather not. I can take Sid; he is sure to be waiting outside for me.”

Whether it was the compliment to his athletic powers or his disinclination to be superseded by Sid is unnecessary to enquire. Walter made no further objection.

“Why, you won’t be home before midnight!” exclaimed Mrs. Gregory.

“Yes, we shall; we shall be back well before midnight, but in any event I have my latchkey. I am often as late as we shall be to-night.”

“The shocking hours you keep is the only fault I find in you,” said the lady with studied amiableness.

“Yes, but you never hear me come in; I let myself in at all hours without disturbing anyone.” And then, “Come on, then, Walter. Perhaps we may meet the Headless Rider.”

The youth did not appear so pleased with the chance held out to him as possibly his companion thought he would be. The fact is that Walter, though he talked much of athletics and his own proficiency in boxing and other sports, was something of a coward, and as superstitious as any old woman of the district.

It was about eight o’clock when they left the Hermitage. A brilliant day had given way to a cloudy night. Though the moon was almost at the full, it was nearly obscured by clouds.

The main way from Longnor to Flash, until it joins the old Roman road running between Buxton and Chesterton, was not the well-made road which may be seen to-day. It was little more than a cart way defined by deep wheel ruts, and in winter, when, as so often happened, the moorlands were snow covered, was only traceable by following the rough stones each nearly a yard in height, which had been placed as marks at intervals along it. There was another and shorter way between the two villages viâ Hollinsclough, but this way was only used in the summer months.

On this night not a creature, not a sound, could be heard by the walkers save the occasional whirr of a bird rising from the surrounding heather or fern. The road typified solitude.

Masses of low clouds were passing quickly overhead, with occasional breaks allowing glimpses of moonlight to appear. The effect of this sudden emergence into silvery light, followed immediately by total eclipse, was to

produce strange and unnatural shapes and shadows in the outcrop of rocks and small stunted trees, and fully justified Geoffrey's description of the place as being at night weird and uncanny. Even the "snow stones," as they were called, took the forms and appearances of pixies or stooping old witches.

They had walked several miles in silence, the youth having some difficulty in keeping up with the rapid strides of his companion, when the former exclaimed: "You keep yourself jolly fit. How do you do it?"

"Well, I avoid town life. I have always been fairly strong."

"Fairly strong! I should think so. I heard of your carrying Miss Tritsy's barrel of sugar into her store which two men were struggling with, and you took it as though it was nothing."

"There is a bit of a knack in lifting weights," was the only reply.

"I am sure we drink far too much at Cambridge. Do you think it is taking no intoxicants that accounts for your good fettle?" asked Walter.

"No," was the answer.

After a pause. "Do you mind then telling me why you never take it?" asked the youth.

"My man, Sid, used to take too much. I said I would give it up if he would."

This statement was made without comment, and Walter made no response.

After another mile or so Walter resumed the conversation:

"I am afraid you will not stay with us long. I have known this district all my life. I think it is the most God-forsaken place in England."

"Odd," said Geoffrey, smiling, "that I should regard it as the most God-favoured place. I shall certainly stay here"—after a considerable pause—"well, as long as I can."

They had now reached the junction with the high road, and had stopped to refill their pipes, when they heard a sudden cough quite close to them.

"What is that?" exclaimed Walter, evidently startled.

"It sounds like someone coughing," said Geoffrey quietly.

"Yes, but where is he? I can see nothing. What an extraordinary night this is; I don't think I have ever been on the moors on a night like this

before. It seems just the night when the Headless Rider might be abroad."

"Yes, but he can't cough," said Geoffrey.

A few more steps and the explanation was found. Apparently from behind a low stone wall three men suddenly appeared. The sky was so dark they could only see them as shadows. They seemed to belong to the class of tramps who at this time infested all the roads in England, doing no work, often unable to obtain work had they wished it, and securing a wretched existence by begging and robbery.

"Good-night, Guvners," said one of the men gruffly; and then, "Could you gie us a bit of baccy?"

Walter pulled his companion by the sleeve, as though anxious they should hurry away from such questionable companions, but Geoffrey stopped at once.

"Come here, and let us have a look at you," he said. The men shuffled—a tramp always shuffles rather than walks—a few steps nearer, and were then seen to be three as ruffianly looking characters as one could conceive.

Two of them were big men and seemingly strong, the other was small, thin, and pale-faced. Each of them had "jail bird" unmistakably written on his features, and they all looked despondent and miserable.

"Where are you bound for?" enquired Geoffrey.

"We be bound for Newcastle. We 'opes to get work in the coal mines. We be miners we be."

"Oh, no you are nothing of the sort; you have never any of you worked in a mine. You are not the type," responded Geoffrey quite pleasantly.

None of the men contradicted this confident assertion, but one of them asked if they were on the right road.

"Yes, keep straight on. It is five miles to Leek, and in another ten or twelve miles you will reach Newcastle; that is if you really intend to go there."

"Could'e tell us the time?" asked the same man, who appeared the leader, certainly the most conversational of the small gang.

Geoffrey pulled out his gold watch and exhibited it within reach of the tramps as he replied, "It is now nine-fifty; you had better get on. Good-night." They walked on and left the men standing there.

"It was a bit rash, was it not, to show your watch in that way?" asked Walter.

His friend only laughed. He seemed in buoyant spirits.

They had passed the Royal Cottage Inn with its taking sign and mounting block outside the door, the inn so-called because Charles I slept there, and had turned off the main road to the left towards Flash, when Walter stopped and listened, and then exclaimed:

"I believe those men are following us!"

"I thought they would," was the quiet reply.

Walter looked at his friend. He was evidently intrigued by the way in which he received the information.

"Look here, Walter," said his friend presently, placing his hand on the youth's shoulder, "we are going to have a bit of fun to-night. Are you ready for it?"

"What do you mean, Geoffrey?"

"Those men mean attacking us. I have been hungering for some excitement; this will do as well as anything else. I can't live without adventure. I was called at school 'the Adventurer' and it grows upon me. I can't help it if I would, and wouldn't if I could. It was born in me."

"Shall we come out of this all right?" asked Walter.

"Certainly, you need have no fear. It will be an easy matter."

"They are three to two," said Walter. If the clouds had not been so dark it could have been seen that Walter looked frightened. Geoffrey only laughed.

They were now close to the tiny village of Flash, and several lights were shining in the cottage windows.

"They will not follow us into the village," said Walter.

"No, they will wait for us on the way back. Come, let us turn back."

"Have you nothing to do here?" asked Walter.

"Nothing. I have taken a studio here. It is more convenient for my work than Longnor. I only wanted to see how long it would take to walk here."

"Geoffrey, don't you think we had better stay here or get some assistance?" asked Walter, now quite frightened.

"No, certainly not. You are not afraid, are you?"

What could a Cambridge undergraduate say but that he was not afraid, far as it might be from the truth?

They saw nothing of the men at first on their return walk, and Walter began to hope they had given up their design.

When they reached again the Royal Cottage Inn Geoffrey suggested they should go in and have some ginger beer or tea; he said he felt rather thirsty.

They had been scarce a minute inside the inn when the three tramps slouched in and demanded beer. By the light of the lamps they looked even more formidable and repulsive than they had looked in the moonlight. Walter whispered to his companion, "Would it not be well to give them five shillings and leave them drinking it," but Geoffrey without answering stepped up to the men and said:

"This is not the way to Newcastle."

"No, Guvnor, we know that. I suppose we may change our minds, Guvnor!" said the spokesman of the party in a surly voice.

"Oh, certainly," was the reply. "I hope you will find that it will repay you to have done so," and he laughed loudly and merrily.

The men seemed a little disconcerted by this jocular manner, so easy and unconcerned, almost the manner of a comrade. A close observer would have seen them nudge one another as Geoffrey produced a well-filled purse and displayed it openly when paying for their meagre refreshment.

"Come on, Walter, we must get on." And turning to the men once again, he said, "We are going off to the left, the road to Longnor, we are not going your way."

When they left the inn and turned on to the Longnor road Geoffrey sauntered along at a pace very different from his usual walking rate.

"I think it was wrong and foolhardy to show your purse before those men," said Walter, who in addition to being thoroughly frightened was now angry.

"I was not going to be done out of my adventure," was the reply; and then, "Do you think, Walter, with your boxing experience of which you have often told me you can take on the little one. There is no fight in him. He will give you no trouble."

"I don't know. I am not at all sure that I can," was the reply in a quavering voice.

“Then,” said Geoffrey, stopping in the middle of the road, “I will tell you what to do. When they come up to us wait for my signal, and then jump on the back of the little one and cling on like grim death. He can do nothing with you on his back.”

“But the other two!” said Walter.

“Don’t trouble about them. I can settle with them—and look here, this would keep us safe anyhow,” and he pulled from his pocket a pistol. “I have summed up our friends. I shall not need to use it.”

He then proceeded again at the same slow walk, whistling merrily, but keeping always in the centre of the road, which was here bounded on the left by a low stone wall.

The night was now very dark and some rain was falling, which the wind was driving in their faces.

“I am sure they are just behind us,” Walter whispered.

“No, they are not here yet, but they are coming on. Don’t turn until I call ‘Now’! Then turn and jump. They shall not attack us; we will attack them.”

It was certainly sufficiently exciting. In less than half a minute the stealthy steps of their followers creeping nearer and nearer became audible. “Not yet,” whispered Geoffrey, but ten seconds had not elapsed when he shouted “Now!” in a voice which echoed in the rocks and valleys for half a mile round.

At the same moment he jumped backwards, a jump of at least two yards, his right arm went out like a flash, and one of the followers measured his length on the road as though struck down by a cannon ball. Without the delay of half a second he stooped almost to the ground, thereby avoiding a desperate blow aimed at him with a thick cudgel by the head of the gang, and seizing this miscreant below the middle, threw him from almost the centre of the road clean over the wall. The man fell in the bracken nearly four feet beyond the wall. It was a feat of astounding power and skill, only possible to one skilled in what are now called the rules of ju-jitsu, and possessed of almost superhuman strength.

Walter had followed his directions well. He was now hanging on to the small man’s back in the manner which made any effort on his part to come to the aid of his companions useless.

But there was no need of such a close embrace. This man had no stomach for a fight. He was trying to run away, carrying Walter with him.

The first man placed *hors de combat*, who had only been partially stunned, had risen, and was following his laden companion, when Geoffrey shouted, "Come back or I fire."

The men were all cowards. They were not professional highwaymen, but poor wretches much to be pitied, who had little option but to starve or rob when opportunity presented itself.

They came slowly back to the place of encounter while Geoffrey vaulted the wall to see how fared his most formidable antagonist. He found him on the ground groaning.

"Now, friend, get up; there is not so much wrong," he said pleasantly. The man was doubtless surprised to be spoken to in a friendly manner, but he continued to groan and exclaimed, "I think my arm is broken."

"Let me see," said Geoffrey, and then after examination, "No, the arm is not broken, but it is pretty badly bruised."

"What are you going to do with us? You are not going to hand us over to the constables are you?" said the bruised man.

"Oh, for God's sake don't," said the small man, now released of his burden, who had come to the side of the wall; "it is a hanging matter."

It was a hanging matter at this time.

"Don't be afraid; no constable shall ever hear of this. You have given me a capital time, but next time you attack be sure that you are strong enough."

Probably the men were grateful, but they appeared unable to speak.

"And now, my good fellows, good-night. I fear you will be late in reaching Newcastle."

He took out his purse once again in their presence and handed them a sovereign. Then he started at his usual quick pace, and evidently in high spirits, on the return to Longnor.

Notwithstanding what he called "the interlude," they got home, as Geoffrey had said they would, before midnight.

CHAPTER IV

CONFIDENCES

Although Geoffrey never mentioned the adventure with the tramps, it was impossible that it should remain unknown. Walter was inordinately proud of the share he had taken in it, and, if the account he gave of the encounter had a distinct Falstaffian flavour, much could be urged in excuse. It was the first adventure in which he had borne a part.

"They were sturdy ruffians, and we took them on together, and together we bested them."

He would speak in this way even in the presence of Geoffrey, who never disputed his version, but, on the contrary, would smile and nod acquiescence. Mrs. Gregory boasted of her son's exploits right and left. She spoke as though he had been the hero of the fray and Geoffrey a useful auxiliary. Doris had her doubts. She knew Walter, and she had come to know Geoffrey well. She knew his modest nature and reticence where his own doings were in question. On one of their sketching days a few days after the eventful walk she could not forbear asking him if Walter had really played the valorous part he pretended.

"Yes, certainly, Walter played his part well," was the answer.

"But there were three to two," she continued. "One of you had to fight two men, and the other one we hear was only a little man. Which of you fought the two big men?"

"'Curiosity, thy name is woman.' You have heard that before, Doris," said Geoffrey, laughing.

"You need not answer, for I know now."

Doris blushed; not because she had been convinced of what she believed before, or at the old taunt at femininity, but because Geoffrey had for the first time called her by her Christian name. Her heart beat quickly, and this showed in the colour in her cheeks.

How do present day girls manage to keep emotion from invading their cheeks? In and before the Victorian era the one appeared to follow the other as by a mechanical law. Have they discovered a way of hiding all objective

signs of excitement—a sedative which neutralizes it, or is the heart itself less susceptible than formerly?

The echo of the fray on the Flash road was not limited to the villagers, but reached the ears of Mrs. Gregory's "notables," with the result that the Huddlestones left a card at the Hermitage for Mr. Geoffrey Frevile, and Lady Knebworthy sent to Mrs. Gregory and family a card of invitation to tea, with these words upon it: "And bring, if you can, your friend Mr. Frevile with you."

Geoffrey accepted this invitation. He was always ready to fall in with any suggestion made by a member of the Gregory family.

In a short time he was a more or less regular visitor both at the Hall and the Manor, and made much of in both households. He took it all in the same easy way in which it seemed his nature to take everything. Always good-tempered, ever ready to oblige in any way, liberal with his sketches, which he gave away right and left to any one who expressed a liking for them, it is not surprising that his popularity grew from month to month, and that it should have amounted in the case of more than one of the young ladies to a kind of idolatry.

He seemed to have special influence in bringing the society of the place together. The Huddlestones and the Knebworthys now fraternised with the dwellers at the Hermitage, with Hilda Alton, and with the Plumbleys of the Grange, all of whom they had up to this time neglected.

The hospitality and goodwill of the neighbourhood thus enhanced was doubtless productive of pleasure to some of the residents. It undoubtedly was so to Mrs. Gregory, but this new condition of things become painful to Doris.

She was Geoffrey's first friend, his companion and his pupil, and she wished to keep him to herself. She had become jealous of any girl who exhibited a liking for her gallant, or even took, or appeared to her to take, opportunities to throw herself into his company.

To be sure there were not many eligible girls to be jealous of. When she had run through the names of Hilda Alton, Edwina Plumbley, the vicar's sister, the two Huddlestone girls, as she called them, and one or two girls from the town of Leek who occasionally came to garden parties, she had exhausted the list of all those it was possible to regard as rivals.

She knew Hilda Alton's affections were deeply engrossed and that it was impossible anyone could in her eyes supplant the Vicar. The Vicar's sister

was elderly. Doris did not know her exact age, but she must be over thirty—quite ancient to the girl of nineteen; and, besides this, she was fully occupied with her good works, and had shown no pleasure in Geoffrey's company. As to the Huddlestone girls, it was currently reported one of them was already engaged to a gentleman in London. The other was certainly eligible, and Doris was worried when, as not infrequently happened, Geoffrey visited the Hall.

With feminine intuition, which seems as mature at nineteen as at any greater age, she had divined the condition of Miss Tritsy Turner's feelings, and had even chaffed Geoffrey on having so quickly captivated the one-eyed postmistress.

He received this badinage with a slight shrug of the shoulders, and the reply that "it was pleasant enough to secure the affection of anyone."

But it was Edwina Plumbley who gave Doris her chief uneasiness. She was about her own age, and Doris could not deny to herself that she was pretty, and that she had at least one attraction which she, Doris, did not and never would possess.

Edwina would undoubtedly be rich one day, and though as far as Doris could judge, and she had studied her sweetheart carefully, he did not seem to set undue value on money, her common sense taught her that no one, man or woman, is quite indifferent to it.

And then he often dined at the Grange, and Doris and Miss Tritsy Turner had both discovered that the small pink scented notes of invitation were directed by Edwina and probably written by her.

During the last few months Doris had become very intimate with Hilda Alton. If two girls are in love, and know it, the very condition seems to draw them towards one another, each probably influenced by the feeling that the other must show herself as sympathetic, and is a fitting confidante of the feelings it is so difficult to keep locked in one's own breast.

However this might be, it had become quite usual for Doris, when Geoffrey was not at her disposal—nothing was ever allowed to intervene when he was—to walk in the afternoon to the little village of Reapsmoor and partake of tea and have a chat with her friend.

One afternoon when Geoffrey had been lunching with the Plumbleys, and the Plumbley groom had brought a message that he was staying on to dinner, Doris arrived at her friend's house in a flushed condition, evidently labouring under excitement beyond suppression.

“I wish that girl Edwina would not throw herself at the head of every man she may happen to meet,” she exclaimed as soon as she was seated by her friend.

Hilda only laughed.

“It is all very well to laugh. Her behaviour is shocking, and we introduced him to her. I wish we had never given that lunch party.”

“Of what ‘him’ are you talking?” said Hilda, who could not resist the opportunity of teasing her friend.

“Oh, Hilda, don’t! You can’t imagine how serious it is.”

“Well, my dear, I won’t, but you must not be unreasonable. It always seems to me that a girl in love parts with her common sense.”

“Have you not parted with your common sense then, Hilda?” asked her friend, archly.

“Many times, but I have struggled, and sometimes got it again, I fear only partially.”

“How long have you been in love with the Vicar?” Doris asked suddenly.

Hilda did not attempt to deny the soft impeachment, but she paused a considerable time before she answered:

“I have been in love with him since I was eighteen; now I am—well you know what I am, and can make the calculation yourself.”

“He must know it,” said Doris.

“I think he does,” was the quiet reply.

“Everyone thinks you are engaged to him.”

“I am not engaged to him, for the best of all reasons; he has never asked me. Yet he wishes to marry me.”

“Then he ought to ask you.”

Doris spoke abruptly.

“Doris, you do not know the Vicar, no one knows him as I do. He is the most unselfish and unworldly man that God ever created. I believe he thinks he can’t afford marriage.”

“Very unworldly!”

Doris spoke with contempt.

"Yes, unworldly! He gives the greater part of his small income away."

"Surely your joint incomes," Doris was beginning.

"My income is very small, though there is a chance that it may be greater one of these days. Then I am extravagant and fond of pleasure, and he knows it."

Doris remained for a time silent whilst the little maid-servant, a child of about sixteen—the sole domestic, and, as will hereafter appear, the confidante of her mistress—brought in tea on a prettily embossed Sheffield plated tray carrying diminutive silver teapot, cream jug, and sugar basin, dishes containing toast and dainty hot cakes made by the mistress of the house herself.

"Hilda, how is it that I always enjoy my tea here, and don't care for it at home?"

"I don't know, unless it is our conversation that acts as a kind of appetiser," was the reply.

Tea being finished and the things removed, Doris could no longer refrain from recurring to the topic which dominated her mind.

"Hilda," she exclaimed, speaking quickly and with visible excitement, "I am jealous, wildly jealous. I so want to keep Geoffrey to myself, and not let anyone else come near him or speak to him."

"That, my dear, is impossible, and don't you think it is also selfish?"

"I know it is, but I want to be selfish where Geoffrey is concerned."

"It is Edwina you wish to keep him from, is it not?" asked Hilda.

"Yes, it is, she really pursues him, but thank Heaven they are all going to London for the winter, to what Mr. Plumbley calls his 'town mansion.'"

"You could not keep him to yourself all your life."

"Why not?" said Doris.

"Doris, my dear, I am years older than you, and though I have not seen much of the world I know that is what every girl wants when she first falls in love, but it won't do, and it is a good thing it won't, for if it came about he would be your slave instead of your lover."

"How splendid it would be to have him for one's slave," exclaimed Doris, speaking as though to herself.

"Oh, you silly girl!" said her friend, laughing.

"It is not silly. He is the whole world to me, and I want to be the whole world to him, then we should neither of us want anyone else."

"He would want friends. That is a necessity for everyone."

"Yes, but not girl friends."

"Doris, dear, don't tell me unless you like, but do you think Geoffrey loves you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think he does, sometimes I think he does not. He is always good and kind to me, never refuses to do anything I ask, and seems pleased to be with me. I have asked myself the question thousands of times. I lie awake in bed and toss about and can't sleep, and think of nothing else. Oh, Hilda, he is so strange; it is breaking my heart." And the pent up emotion gave way to sobs.

"How is he strange? Tell me all about it. You know I will keep your secret."

"When we have been alone together on more than one occasion he has looked at me in such an earnest and admiring manner, and has even taken my hand and held it for a second or two, and I am sure he meant to say something; yes, I am sure he did, and my heart has begun to beat quickly, and I have trembled all over, and then, then something seemed to come over him and his look has changed, and he has let go my hand and turned away and begun to talk on some trivial matter. He seems to avoid looking at me again. Oh, there is a mystery—something tells me there is a mystery."

"My poor Doris, how I wish I could comfort you."

"Mother says all men act like this before they propose, that father treated her just in the same way," said Doris, seeming to derive some comfort from the recollection of her mother's experiences.

"Then try to believe that your mother is right," said the elder girl.

"Hilda, what do you think Miss Tritsy said to me when I was calling at the post office for letters yesterday? She said she thought it possible that Mr. Geoffrey Frevile was a married man. She did indeed, but she is in love with him herself. Oh, she is a wicked woman!"

"Is she wicked for thinking him married, or for being in love with him?" asked Hilda.

"For both. The idea of an old frump with one eye having the presumption to fall in love with my—I mean Mr. Frevile, and to say he is

married. It is scandalous."

"But she didn't say he was married."

"It is just the same thing." And Doris rose from her chair as though nothing more could be said, and wished her friend good-bye. She looked amazingly pretty as she drew herself up to her full height, her eyes glowing, and her cheeks flushed a delicate crimson, and proceeded to walk down the small garden walk which led to the latticed gate.

Apparently there was something more to be said, for she had not passed through the gate when she returned and again addressed her friend.

"Hilda, I did not tell you one thing. Geoffrey has asked mother's permission to paint my portrait."

"That is the most encouraging thing I have heard; but did he not ask yours?"

"He took that for granted. I am going to sit to him at his studio at Flash and Sid—you know Geoffrey's servant—is to accompany us when mother can't come."

"Yes, I know Sid. A curious chaperon," muttered Hilda as Doris passed down the garden again.

As soon as Doris had left, Hilda lapsed into thought trying to recall as well as she could the conversation she had just taken part in with a half-conscious desire to extract from it some comfort either for Doris or for herself.

The position of the two girls was certainly peculiar. Each of them was in love, and believed that her love was reciprocated by the object of it, and both awaited a declaration which, for some unfathomable reason was strangely delayed.

"Yes," she said to herself, "Doris and I seem to be in the same boat, or rather in boats very much alike. I wonder where we shall both of us drift." Then she rang the bell for her young maid, whose name was Marion.

"Marion," she said, when the good-looking and neatly dressed maid appeared, "when you have cleared up—and you must be very careful with the china, for it is our best, and I can't afford to buy more—you can bring your sewing and sit here for an hour."

The truth was she felt a strong desire to review the talk she had just held with her friend, for which purpose some sort of coadjutor was indispensable.

Yes, it would be a relief to her to talk it all over again, in an indefinite sort of way with her little maid, and even to gather her views upon it. Of course she would put it all before the young girl as hypothetical—something which had come under her notice, and in which she was interested. She would make no allusion either to Doris or herself.

To discuss affairs of this nature at all, either as real or imaginary, with so young a girl would have been thought by many to be not only impolitic but rather scandalous, but Hilda lived a very lonely life. She had no friends or relations with whom she could take counsel, and she had got into a habit of talking very unreservedly with her young maid, whom she knew was not only faithful, but quick and intelligent, and of almost startling precocity. To talk over the position at which she and Doris seemed to have arrived even with Marion would at any rate necessitate her thinking about it again, and perhaps give birth to some new idea which might be useful to one or both of them.

"Well, Marion," she said as soon as her maid appeared in her neat pinafore and carrying a bead box and small square of crimson velvet, "what are you at work on now?"

"Please, Missis, I am making a pin cushion for my cousin, who is going to be married before Christmas."

No reply could have provided a better opening.

"Has your cousin been engaged a long time?"

"She has only been engaged six months, but, lor, she walked out with him for two years before he said anything," replied Marion.

"Then she had almost given up expecting him to say anything, I suppose."

"Lor no, Missis, she knew he was going to ask her."

"How do you think she knew he was going to 'ask her'?"

"Why, of course, every girl knows that," Marion answered confidently.

"How would you say she gets to know it? But of course you don't know."

"Oh, yes, I do. He looks at her continual like, a loving kind of look—the look a girl understands, and he brings her toffee and ribbons, and later, he kisses her a lot if she will let him."

"So that is the way in which it comes about in your class, is it, Marion?"

“Yes, Missis, but of course it is not the same with you and the Vicar.”

Hilda started. “What do you mean, Marion? Me and the Vicar!”

“Well, I expect he don’t bring you ribbons, or kiss you—much.”

This would not do at all. Hilda was getting more than she bargained for. It was quite necessary now that the situation should be straightened, and made clear to the young girl. Therefore she asked:

“Do you think I am engaged to the Vicar?”

“No, Missis, I don’t think that exactly, but I knows you want to be.”

“Marion, who told you such a thing as that?”

“No one told me. I have see’d it myself.”

“Then you must understand for once and for all that I am not engaged to the Vicar, and if anyone speaks of such a thing you must tell them so.”

“Yes, Missis, but it seems a funny thing you are not engaged when the Vicar wants it too.”

“Marion!” exclaimed Hilda, trying to speak severely and failing, for such an assertion even from such a source came as balm to her troubled feelings. “You must not say or even think such a thing.” Then, after a pause, “Where did you get that idea from?”

“I didn’t get it not from nowhere. I just see’d it myself.”

“Where did you see it?”

“I sees it every time the Vicar comes here to tea.”

“Marion, you are a precocious child. You should not even think of such things.”

“Every girl thinks o’ ’em, Missis.”

Hilda felt perplexed. What was to be done? Should she get rid of the girl and talk to her no more, or should she encourage her to continue? To tell the truth, her conversation was not distasteful, but if it was to be continued Hilda wished to divert it from her own affairs and direct it into another channel.

“Marion,” she began, “as you seem to know a great deal more about these matters than you ought to, what should you say a girl should do under such circumstances as these:

“Suppose I knew a girl who was deeply in love with a very fascinating man, and—”

“How old is the girl Missis?” Marion interposed.

“Oh, I am putting a pretended case, but suppose we say about nineteen, and the gentleman is often with her and is very kind, and often looks as if he was going to say something, and then turns away and says nothing. What do you think the girl should do?”

“Well, I knows very well if I was Miss Doris——”

“Miss Doris!” exclaimed Hilda. “What do you mean?”

“Of course I knows, Missis, you are talking about Miss Doris and Mr. Frevile.”

“Did I not tell you, Marion, it was a pretended case?”

“Ah!”

This was all, but it was uttered in such a dry manner, and accompanied by such a cunning little wink, that Hilda could not help laughing, and knew it was beyond her power to keep up the pretence any longer.

“Well, Marion, let us imagine it is Miss Doris I was referring to.”

“Why imagine, Missis, when I knows it was?”

“Well, you forward child, then we will say it was.”

“I knows what I should do if I was Miss Doris. I wouldn’t see him for a long time, and I wouldn’t walk out with him, and I wouldn’t speak to him.”

“He lives in Doris’s house. She must see him and speak to him sometimes.”

“Then I would just do it when I couldn’t help. I would answer him very short, and I would not let him kiss me, that would soon bring him to the scratch.”

“Marion, what makes you think that would ‘bring him to the scratch’ as you call it?”

The young girl tossed her head as she replied, “I knows by experience.”

“Marion, you are a terrible child. I can’t think how you learnt such things.”

“I never learnt ’em, Missis, they just com’d.”

“Well, you may go now.”

As Marion left the room she mumbled to herself, “There, I haven’t sewn one bead on the pin cushion all this time, but lor, it have been interesting it have.”

CHAPTER V

HILDA'S SHIP COMES HOME

It was not to be expected that Hilda should pay much heed to the advice of her maid, notwithstanding what the young girl had vouched as "her own experience," and yet she found herself more than once thinking it over. She even went so far, when a day or two after Doris paid another afternoon visit, as to tell her, in a half serious, half laughing manner, what Marion, with her mature experience, had counselled.

Both girls of course professed to look upon it as quite a good joke, and yet on both of them it produced some effect. Their behaviour towards the men to whom they had given their affections became a little stand-offish. Without admitting it they were adopting the child's advice, though it was more apparent in the case of Doris than with Hilda.

And who can venture to say it was not based on sound philosophy?

"Follow love and it will flee; flee love and it will follow thee." So says the proverb, and many have experienced its truth. Doris had taken herself and her conduct somewhat severely to task.

"Perhaps I have been too desirous to please Geoffrey. He may think I have been throwing myself at his head from the first. It would be terrible if he thought that, and yet I know that is what Miss Tritsy thinks, from her manner and little remarks she has made to me."

She would try to act differently, but even as she made this resolve she had no confidence in her ability to keep it. She was far too much under the influence of the man to resist his wishes, or voluntarily to deprive herself for long of his society.

Still she made the attempt. When a day or two after Geoffrey proposed a sketching expedition, saying it would probably be their last chance for the season, she pleaded an engagement, and suffered terribly.

Her mother had chaperoned her for the first sitting at the Flash studio, but as she was unavoidably prevented from doing so for the second sitting, Doris thought, at all events said, if it was all the same to Mr. Frevile this had better be postponed till her mother was at liberty.

It was a great wrench to give up even for an hour or two the undivided companionship of her friend, or a companionship alloyed only by the presence of Sid, who would sit as a statue, and apparently pay no regard to anything.

Geoffrey received the excuses without showing any irritation or apparent signs of disappointment, and replied to Doris' expressed view that the second sitting had better be postponed till her mother was at liberty, with his usual good-humoured smile, and the remark that "perhaps it had."

She continued the experiment for less than a week. Before that time had elapsed things were on their old footing. Doris surrendered unconditionally and experienced much happiness in the surrender.

As to Hilda, she had made no resolve to try Marion's experiment. It was almost unconsciously that a certain reserve and shyness appeared in her talk and behaviour on the next occasions when she found herself alone with the object of her affections.

She would certainly not have been aware of any change of behaviour but for the remark made by Marion after one of the customary tea-takings.

"Lor, Missis, you did sheer off from the Vicar this afternoon."

Whether the "sheering off" was noticed by the Vicar is doubtful. It certainly produced no change in his behaviour.

When together he was, like Geoffrey, ever smiling and good natured. Knowing her from childhood, he had always treated her with familiarity, had given her his full confidence, and discussed the affairs of the parish with her. He also took great interest in all that concerned her, and she, on her part, told him all her secrets, with the one great exception, which she was quite sure he knew without being told.

Such being the relationship between them, how came it about that he had not long before this asked her to be his wife?

The question could hardly have been answered satisfactorily by the Vicar himself. He was in love with her and knew it. Over and over again he had been on the point of telling her so, and then something held him back. He often asked himself what this "something" was, but the reply was always elusive.

Though he was fond of his sister, and she managed his house well and economically, their dispositions were very unlike. She performed with rigorous exactness every task she undertook—most of which could be

summed up in the words "good works"—and with that degree of renunciation of self the work necessitated, but she did everything, from the control of the church decorations to the gift of a pair of baby's socks, in a masterful and arrogant way that deprived the action of half its merit. Though respected and rather feared in the parish, she was certainly not loved.

In fact, she was one of the numerous class of women who are intent on doing their duty, who live what is generally called a "praiseworthy life," directed to, what they conceive to be, the good of others, and at the same time have made the word "duty" synonymous with everything harsh and repellent.

Whether this class of women have a right to be considered unselfish may be doubted. In many cases the question may fairly be debated whether what would be sacrifice in others, is with them anything more than indulgence of their exaggerated desire for precedence or authority.

Her brother, equally active in good works, infused into them so great a measure of his own loving and unselfish spirit as to make them doubly welcome. Such works with him were not duties, but pleasures. When bestowing charity, either as almoner of the parish charities or, as more often happened, out of his own limited means, his countenance was ever irradiated with benevolence, and proved how fully he understood the teaching of the Master he served, that it is better to give than to receive.

The sister had never been a barrier or shown objection to his marriage. She possessed a small private income, as she often said, "enough for all her wants." She was quite ready to leave the neighbourhood, for which she had never greatly cared, as soon as her brother brought anyone to the vicarage to fill her place.

Then what was it that stood in the way of his securing the happiness which could be had for the asking, and which he fully believed would result from a marriage with Hilda Alton?

Hilda herself was probably as near the truth as it was possible to get when she told Doris she thought his hesitation had something to do with money. Any personal sacrifice which would have brought joy to Hilda would have meant happiness to him, but without knowing it a subconscious feeling was ever present that it would be procuring happiness for himself, and for himself at the expense of his poor, that his ability to relieve distress might be interfered with. It was literally more than half his income he had set apart for charity. He had never said anything of this sort to her, but she had divined it. Once she had jocularly said to him something about its being no

more expense to keep two persons than one. He only smiled and replied, “It depends on what the requirements of number two are.”

Sometimes the feeling had occurred to him that he might be acting unfairly to the girl. He satisfied himself in part with the thought that she was absolutely free, that he was keeping no other aspirant from her, that there was not likely to be another in a neighbourhood where eligible bachelors could be counted up on the fingers of one hand, and that their association, platonic as it was, brought no small measure of enjoyment to both.

On one afternoon on a cold and boisterous day near the end of November, Hilda, who had just finished her tea, was sitting near the window of her little sitting-room, watching the rain which was descending heavily and shutting out her customary delightful views. She had been very lonely all day, and was just thinking of summoning Marion for a talk to relieve the tedium, when the garden gate opened and she perceived the Vicar coming up the path.

He was struggling against the gusts of rain which were being carried with great velocity over the moors. He had no umbrella, and she remembered for the first time that she had never seen him carry an umbrella. “I shouldn’t be surprised if he hasn’t one,” she thought. “He never buys anything for himself.”

Though he was in the habit of coming without notice she was rather surprised to see him on this particular afternoon, for it had been very wet the whole day, and her cottage was more than a mile from the vicarage.

“Vicar, what has brought you out on such an afternoon as this, and why have you no umbrella?” were her first words of greeting; and then, “Oh, how shockingly wet you are, come to the fire and take off that coat, and Marion shall dry it in the kitchen.”

“The wet never hurts me. I often walk over the moorlands when it is raining as hard as this,” said the vicar, as he approached the fire and stretched his hands out to the cheerful blaze. Hilda put her hand on his sleeve.

“Take off your coat at once, you are wet through,” she exclaimed. But the Vicar showed considerable hesitation.

“Really,” he said, “I am quite accustomed to let my wet clothes dry upon me. It never seems to hurt me.”

“Vicar, I insist on your taking off your coat at once.”

The Vicar never resisted a request from anyone which he could grant, least of all would he refuse a request from Hilda, unless it clashed with what he thought was his duty.

He divested himself of his long, thin, black surtout, which, shiny for years past, had in its wet condition a positive glassy lustre, and Hilda with feminine quickness, at once saw the reason of his hesitancy.

The sleeves of his old flannel shirt were mended in numerous places and patched with material of several colours, some of which were not flannel at all.

"Don't look too closely at my shirt," he said with his pleasant smile; "I do some of my mending myself."

The condition of the wretched garment showed, more clearly than any words could have done, the character of the wearer, and touched Hilda to the quick. She felt an inclination to take the poor wet man in her arms and kiss him.

"Have you had tea?" was her next enquiry.

"No, I don't think I have."

"Don't think!"

"Well, sometimes when I am about the parish I forget whether I have had meals or not. I am very forgetful; I forget far more important things than that."

Hilda rang the bell vigorously. "Marion, make fresh tea at once, and put some of my little cakes in the oven for the vicar." Then turning again to her visitor:

"Now will you tell me why you came this afternoon?"

"I came with two objects. I have not seen you for a week, and I felt that, despite the weather, I could not delay longer. I felt I must see you, Hilda. I have been thinking so much about you lately, and then I have a letter for you."

Was the long delayed declaration coming at last? Something seemed to tell Hilda it was. She was very nervous, but she only said "A letter!"

"Yes, I called at the post office and Miss Tritsy said she had a letter for you from London, which looked to her like a letter from lawyers. I said I would bring it to you, and she gave it to me; I think I must have come to you even without this."

So it was only letters to Geoffrey Frevile which could not be entrusted by Miss Tritsy to another hand.

Hilda took the letter. It was a large business looking missive.

She looked at the postmark and saw it was "London," then she turned it over and over in her hands, but did not attempt to open it; she forgot the letter. She raised her face to the vicar and saw in his eyes the look she had seen before—the look which according to Marion "a girl never mistakes." It was a look which said plainly as words could say, "I love you, and can delay no longer telling you this."

Before these words or any words could be uttered Marion entered with the tea things, and for the next few minutes the declaration, which was trembling on the vicar's lips, was necessarily delayed.

In one of Marion's temporary absences he placed his hand on Hilda's arm and more with the object of breaking a highly embarrassing silence, than for any other purpose, whispered:

"My dear, the letter."

So reminded Hilda opened her letter, and commenced to read it. Then her brows contracted, and for some seconds she looked puzzled. Then, to the vicar's infinite dismay, she dropped the letter from her hands and burst into tears. Marion entered the room at this moment.

"What is the matter, Missis?" cried the frightened maid.

"Oh, Marion, go away. It is nothing you can understand."

Marion left the room, saying to herself: "I think I do understand it though."

The Vicar was greatly disturbed.

"Hilda, what is it? Something has happened! Can I help you?"

Hilda made no response, save by picking up the letter from the floor and handing it to him.

"Read it," she said.

Taking the letter from her hand, he read it aloud. It ran as follows:—

14 Lincoln's Inn Fields,
London.
Nov. 25th, 183—

Dear Miss Alton,

We have to-day heard from our agents in Melbourne, Australia, informing us that their client, Mr. James Macfarlane, of Paika, died a week or two ago.

We gather from our agents that he was your great-uncle, but that you had never seen him. He was unmarried and had no near relations.

It is our duty to inform you that by his will nearly the whole of his fortune is left to you. You are sole executrix and residuary legatee.

There are a few trifling legacies to servants and others. Our agents are not able to say the precise amount of the estate, but they assure us that the amount you will receive, after all expenses are paid, will be considerably over thirty thousand pounds.

If you wish us to act for you, we shall be honoured by receiving your instructions, and in that event will at once send a representative to Longnor to learn your wishes and commands.

We remain,
Your obedient servants,
Leith and Marshall.

To Miss Hilda Alton,
Reapsmoor Cottage,
Nr. Longnor,
Staffordshire.

When he had finished reading, the Vicar let the letter fall from his hands precisely as Hilda herself had done, and for over a minute not a word was uttered. Surprise seemed to have sealed the lips of both.

Hilda was trembling, but she was no longer weeping. Her tears had not been induced by the news of the death of a distant relative she had never seen, but by the surprise and emotion arising from the contents of the letter, which had so unexpectedly broken upon her when already in a state of nervous excitement.

During the whole time the letter was being read aloud Hilda seemed to be watching the reader intently to see what effect it produced on him.

When it was finished she sat with her mouth slightly opened, her head bent forwards, her look riveted on his face.

Her first, indeed her only, thought for the time being was as to the manner in which this momentous news would be received by him.

Presently he spoke:

"Had you any idea of this, Hilda?"

"I received a letter about a year ago from a Mr. James Macfarlane, a letter in which he said he believed he was my grandmother's brother, and that at his death I should probably hear something to my advantage, but I never thought of such a thing as this," she replied.

"Hilda, I congratulate you; I congratulate you with all my heart."

He spoke with evident sincerity, but seemed unable to say anything more. Both parties, for whom this news meant so much, found difficulty in finding words which fittingly expressed their feelings. After another silence, the vicar, apparently with the view of saying something, asked:

"How much does the letter say?"

"I think it says over thirty thousand pounds."

The letter was still lying on the carpet. Neither of them attempted to pick it up.

"Oh, Hilda! What unlimited means of doing good."

"I mean to enjoy myself with it," said Hilda. The words came quickly and reflected little more than a passing thought, but the moment she had uttered them a sharp sense of regret smote her. It was a very natural thought to which she had given expression, when it is remembered that her whole life had been passed in straightened circumstances. She was not more selfish than the majority of persons who have had to look at every pound of their expenditure and to deny themselves continuously many things they want, but that this should have been said to him, her first utterance respecting her fortune, and said in reply to his altruistic comment, conveyed to her in a moment, as perhaps nothing else would have done, the wide difference of character between them.

She actually said to herself, in the language of exaggeration excited females often use, that she would have bitten her tongue out rather than have said it.

"Over thirty thousand pounds." The Vicar repeated her words. "What an enormous sum of money. Can you realise such a sum, Hilda? I can't." And then, "It seems a little thing to mention now, but I wanted to tell you of a

stroke of luck that came to me to-day of no account when we think of yours.”

“Tell me what it was,” said Hilda.

“Some years ago I lent Evans, the blind bootmaker, five pounds. To-day he returned it to me. He had been saving it up shilling by shilling. Wasn’t it splendid of him?”

“Well, it was honest at all events,” replied Hilda.

“Honest! Oh, do think for a moment what it must have meant to him. He is really very poor; think what a sacrifice, saving these shillings one by one until they reached the whole amount, must have necessitated. This knowledge gratified me far more than getting the money again.”

“I am quite sure it did,” was the quiet reply.

A quaint idea now struck Hilda with respect to this insignificant sum, possibly induced by having just seen the condition of his clothing, or it may be only as the opportunity of saying something.

“Vicar,” she exclaimed merrily, “you must use that five pounds to buy yourself a new coat; and I think it would run to an umbrella also.”

The Vicar smilingly reasserted his entire independence of umbrellas.

“You really should have one. Look at your coat to-day. Now be good and promise me you will do as I ask.”

“I would willingly promise you more than that, but it happens to be impossible now.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hilda.

“Well, I haven’t got the money now. I lent, or perhaps I should say gave, it to Mrs. Challington who is sadly in arrears with her rent.”

It may seem unnatural that so small a matter should have furnished material for conversation between them at such a time, were it not that it is common experience that where startling news which must affect the lives of two people is suddenly made known to them, there is a disposition at first to avoid discussing it, to talk of anything else in place of it.

Here there was an evident desire to avoid the larger event, to put it on one side for the time. It had paralyzed them both.

“Of course you will be very busy now. You will have letters to write. I ought not to detain you longer to-day,” said the Vicar, rising from his seat.

He seemed restless, and did not look at her. He clearly wished to bring their colloquy to an end and to get away, and when a minute or two later Marion brought in the coat, only partially dry, he put it on, despite expostulations, and turned again to Hilda.

"Well, Hilda, may God bless you, and may your fortune bring you nothing but happiness."

He held her hand for several seconds, and without saying more left quite hurriedly.

Hilda watched him as he passed down the garden and until he got out of sight, then she sighed. Her feelings were strangely mixed. It was natural that she should be dazed by the events of the afternoon. It seemed like a dream—a rather impossible dream—from which she might at any moment awake.

One thing stood out clearly and paramount to everything else—the Vicar loved her and had told her so. Not told her in words, but no words could have more clearly manifested his feelings. She was sure he had been about to tell her in words when something intervened.

What was it? It had happened before—something—though not quite the same. This had something to do with the letter she had received and handed to him to read.

Then, after a time her mind became clearer. Her common sense asserted itself.

"It was the money! Yes, the money and nothing else. It was so like him. No other man would have taken this wonderful news as he did. I ought to have known. Oh, why did I show him the letter? Why did I hand it to him to read? I ought to have kept the news to myself, at all events till I had had time to think it over—to reflect on how it might disturb him.

"But for this wretched letter," she thought, "everything would have been right at this very moment; he would have been pledged to me and I to him. Then later I could have told him of my good fortune, and it would have come as a delightful surprise."

Now she felt it had wrecked her happiness, and something seemed to say to her that it was wrecked finally, that the words so nearly uttered, words she had been looking forward to for years, would never be heard by her.

"Why," she asked herself, "should this stranger leave me a fortune which brought with it such miserable consequences? I did not want his fortune.

And why should it have come of all times in my life at this particular moment?"

Her head was aching. She could not yet think clearly. Her thoughts strayed to and fro from the news itself to the baneful result which had accompanied it.

Presently she found herself repeating the words of the letter—"Considerably over thirty thousand pounds." How much was thirty thousand pounds? She had never thought in such sums as this.

Could she spend it in a lifetime?

She knew nothing of the growth of money or of interest. Everything she spent she thought would come out of this sum, and the total be proportionately reduced. Such was her view. She had always lived on her small investments, amounting to little more than two hundred a year.

Since receiving the letter from her great-uncle a year ago she had from time to time visualised the idea of being rich. She had even in an indefinite manner thought of what she would do, and how and where she would live if money was no object.

The Vicar, on his part, during his walk home was a prey to varied feelings. On the one hand he sincerely rejoiced in Hilda's good fortune, but when he regarded it as affecting himself he felt perturbed and unhappy.

After a long struggle between what he conceived to be his duty and his inclination he had conquered his misgivings, and had made the journey to her cottage that afternoon through the rain, with the firm determination to hesitate no longer, but to declare in words the love which he had for a long time known she returned.

He had looked forward to this visit as one which would undoubtedly result in more personal happiness than anything his life had secured.

And it was now all over, and all over for ever.

Like Hilda, he said to himself it was final. It could never come right again. The thought was almost overpowering; but how could he, under such changed conditions, ask her to become his wife?

Once, and once only, the thought flashed across his mind how a marriage with a rich wife would increase his opportunities of usefulness, his power to help the poor. What a great thing it might be for the parish; but the thought

was dismissed almost as soon as conceived. The bare idea that he could ever have any claims upon Hilda's fortune was repellent to him. He must give up all thoughts of such a marriage. It seemed to him that a Power greater than his own had intervened and prevented, as it had done before, his design from being realised.

The reasons which had induced him so often to pause before, were they not infinitely stronger now?

But, of course, there was Hilda to think of. Had he any right to make her suffer? Would she suffer? Probably a little at first, but only at first. There would be no lack of suitors now she was rich, and some of them, in her changed position, would be far more suitable than he would be.

His determination never to leave his own little parish, a determination he knew she was acquainted with and formerly approved, she could not be expected under present circumstances to acquiesce in. Even if, influenced by the generosity of her love, she should consent, it would be asking from her a sacrifice which he had no right to accept.

No, he could not ask her to continue to live at Longnor; she would wish to travel; would want amusement and gaiety.

Had she not told him she meant to enjoy herself with her money?

Again something seemed to whisper—was it a tempter?—he was not sure: "You could remain in your own village and not interfere with her, but leave her to enjoy her fortune where and how she liked."

A moment's reflection, and he was sure this would be wrong. It would be unfair both to herself and to him.

It was with a feeling of some relief the recollection occurred to him that although he had gone to her cottage with one object he had not in words made his desire known, but then, again, had he not asked her by conduct as unmistakably as he could have done by words, and would it not be dishonourable to withdraw now? Surely it must have been a divine interposition that could so stay at the last minute a decision which had taken him so long, and which he had found so difficult to arrive at.

Perhaps it would be the right and honourable course to pursue to leave it all to her. To acknowledge his love, and his intended declaration, and leave it entirely in her hands whether to accept or refuse it, acknowledging, as of course he would, that the changed circumstances gave her the undoubted right to refuse.

The more he thought, the more difficult his position appeared. He could make no absolute resolve.

He was nearing the end of his walk. The rain had recommenced, and was descending more heavily than before. He was again becoming drenched. What should he do? Not go home. No; something had to be done first. Never had he stood in such sore need of light and guidance.

He directed his steps towards the place where he had ever sought them. He always carried the key of the side door of the little church with him. He took it from his pocket, unlocked the door and entered.

It was almost dark now, but he knew every bit of his church in the dark as well as at midday.

With bowed head he walked slowly up the nave and entered the tiny chancel and, his body wet and cold, but his heart warm with divine trust and love, knelt before the altar.

CHAPTER VI

MORE LOVE AFFAIRS

The crisis in which the love affairs of Hilda had become involved was but little more satisfactory than the state of things which continued to exist between Doris and Geoffrey Frevile.

As stated, Doris had given up all pretence of playing the haughty maiden, and was once again Geoffrey's acquiescent follower and admirer.

It was not with her that the course of true love refused to run smooth. It was only too smooth, the doubt being whether it was running at all. It might have been likened to a stagnant lake with unruffled and shining surface, rather than to a running stream whose gentle current is ever disturbed by obstacles, but which continues to flow onwards.

Doris had reconciled herself to the belief that things must take their course, that nothing could be done to push them forward, but to her mother the position was a cause of much vexation.

"If Mr. Frevile does not declare his intentions very soon I shall speak to him myself. I am not going to allow him to continue to act towards you like this," she said, on a day when Doris and she were alone, and Doris seemed badly depressed.

"Mother, you must do nothing of the sort," Doris rejoined.

"Indeed, I have quite made up my mind, whether you like it or not. It is the parents' duty. I have asked your father several times to do it, but he refuses. He is much too easy going. Mr. Frevile is always wanting your company. He has painted your portrait, and is getting you talked about. In fact, he is simply playing with you."

Though the same view of Geoffrey's behaviour had sometimes occurred to Doris, she hated to hear it rudely conveyed in words.

"If you say a word to him, I don't think I should ever look at him or speak to him again. Promise me, mother, that you will not do it."

Mrs. Gregory would not promise, but after a time consented to postpone any interference for a period of three months.

“Mother,” said Doris, as the former was leaving the room, “you know I care for Geoffrey. I have never concealed this from you, but I do not want to marry him unless he wishes it. Indeed, I would not. I ask you to recollect that.”

Still things proceeded as before. The portrait had been finished some time and the artist had presented it to Doris. It now hung in the dining-room. It made an extremely pretty picture. Geoffrey had caught a most captivating expression on the girl’s face, and transferred it successfully to the canvas. Everybody admired it, and it was really no mean work of art. She saw something less of him now the painting was finished, and the weather no longer allowed the sketching rambles on the moors, but the girl’s infatuation had so entirely absorbed her, that she was becoming morbid and unhappy.

She would sit alone in the dining-room for long periods, looking at her portrait. Not admiring her own good looks, but thinking always of the artist. She could recall everything he had said to her while each part of the picture was in progress, and would dwell on it all again with mixed feelings of pain and pleasure. The long contemplations generally finished by her retirement to her own room, where, as often as not, she gave way to almost hysterical crying. She asked herself continually whether Miss Tritsy’s suggestion that Geoffrey was not free to marry, because he was married already, was not the true key of the situation.

She even summoned sufficient courage, on one of the daily visits to the post office, to ask the postmistress directly why she was spreading the rumour that Mr. Frevile was a married man.

“I spread a rumour!” replied Miss Tritsy Turner. “I have never spread a rumour in the township in my life.”

“But you have said you thought he was,” said Doris.

“And what if I have. I suppose I am entitled to my own opinion? What is it to you?”

This reply was abrupt and almost rude.

Doris did not say it meant everything to her, but Miss Tritsy knew it.

She only said: “Well, he lives with us, and it was through you that came about, and we know so little about him. It is natural we should wish to know more.” Doris spoke in a propitiatory manner, which seemed to some extent to appease Miss Tritsy’s ill-humour. She replied less abruptly.

"What I know is this—he receives letters from a lady. No common woman, but a lady of education and of strong character."

"How can you know that? Have you ever seen her?"

"I can judge character by handwriting," was the reply.

"Then that is all you know about it," said Doris.

"I did not say it was all," replied Miss Tritsy.

"Oh, do be good-natured and tell me what you know."

Miss Tritsy looked round the store to see if there was anyone present, then, in almost a whisper, she said in a mysterious tone of voice:

"If you care to come and see me between seven and eight to-night, after I have closed the store, I will show you."

"Show me! What do you mean?" asked Doris.

"Never mind what I mean. Come or not as you choose." Miss Tritsy's tone of voice had again become discourteous.

"I will come," replied Doris.

The appointed time found the women again together in the little parlour at the back of the shop. Doris had been let in at the side door. Miss Tritsy appeared to her to be excited and rather nervous.

"You must promise faithfully that you will never tell a living person what you may learn in this room to-night," she said.

Miss Tritsy then commenced preparations as if about to enter on some mysterious rites. She brought a small table up to the fireside, extinguished the two tallow candles, when there only remained a glimmer of light from the wood fire. Then she unlocked a drawer and produced a small mahogany box. Unlocking this in turn, she took from it with great care, as though handling something very precious, a small crystal wrapped in a silk handkerchief, and placed it on the table.

So Miss Tritsy was a crystal gazer.

Doris at first felt some inclination to laugh outright, but regarding her companion she saw she was in a state of acute stimulation, and evidently a believer in the superstition she was about to practise.

"Am I to look into this?" Doris asked pointing to the crystal.

“No, give me your hand, and then think hard of anything you desire to know. Be sure not to speak, or, if you speak, speak low, or the spell will break. I will tell you what I see.”

Doris, though entirely sceptical, did as she was bidden, and there was dead silence for a long time, disturbed only every now and then by the cracking of the wood fire. From her distance of several feet away Doris tried to watch the crystal, and thought she saw in it prismatic rays, which might have been caused by the glow of the fire falling upon it.

At the end of what seemed almost an interminable wait Miss Tritsy spoke in a low and awestruck tone of voice.

“I see a man and a woman, the woman is agitated. She is talking violently, the man is only smiling.” Then after a pause she continued, “I have seen that smile before. The woman calls to a child—a pretty little girl five or six years old—the man lifts the child and kisses her; now it has all disappeared, I can see nothing. It is all mist.”

Doris had no inclination to laugh now. She was intensely interested.

“Look again,” she said.

Again another long period of waiting. The gazer presently continued in the same voice as though there had been no interruption:

“I see them again, the man is evidently trying to leave the woman, but she pursues him—they are getting further away by a road over a moor; I see his face still. He is no longer smiling, his expression is one of suffering. They are passing on and on; the road runs past me as I look. It represents their life. Some terrible calamity has come upon the man, I am sure of it. The woman seems further and further from him. The man vanished suddenly—It means, I think, that he is dead. We shall know nothing more.”

With these final words Miss Tritsy quickly covered the crystal with the silk handkerchief, and placed it again in the box.

Evidently nothing else was to be attempted. Doris finds her heart beating rapidly. Though she knows the answer she is constrained to ask one question:

“Whose is the smile you saw on the man’s face which you said you had seen before?”

The reply was delivered in curt, almost angry tones.

“The smile was Mr. Geoffrey Frevile’s smile.”

“Remember,” said Miss Tritsy, as she let Doris out by the side door, “not a word to any human being of what you have seen to-night.”

“I have seen nothing, and I don’t believe a word you have told me, but I thank you for the amusement you have given me.”

Miss Tritsy shut the door abruptly.

Mrs. Gregory was determined to keep her promise to say nothing to Geoffrey Frevile for three months concerning his behaviour and intentions towards her daughter, but this time had now nearly run out.

She did not regard the promise as restraining her from prosecuting enquiries elsewhere, which might possibly supply a reason for his behaviour.

Meeting the man Sid alone one day, it occurred to her that perchance something could be gathered from him as to his master’s antecedents, or history, that might furnish a clue to his behaviour.

She found the man, whatever he might know, hostile to all questioning on the subject of his master.

When she asked him if he had known Mr. Frevile long and if he knew anything of the other members of his family, he replied rudely:

“Why don’t you ask him if you want to know?”

“Well, you know,” the lady responded with a smile intended to be ingratiating, “he lives with us, and we are all very fond of him, and should like to know all about him.”

“Yes, I know your daughter wants to marry him,” the man replied in the same rude manner.

“It is very wrong and improper of you to talk like that. Even were it true that she did, is there any reason why she should not?”

“You had better ask him.” The answer was as surly as before.

“You are so very uncivil when I ask only a civil question, that I think I shall complain to Mr. Frevile of your behaviour.”

An immediate change came over the expression and manners of the man. He was humbled, and looked frightened, and responded to the threat in a different manner from that he had before exhibited.

“Oh, don’t do that, Mrs. Gregory. I beg you not to.”

“Ah, then you know he would scold you, and you deserve it.”

“He can say and do what he likes to me. That is his right, I am not afraid for myself. I fear it might worry him,” replied Sid.

Mrs. Gregory thought it worth while to try to lead him on by a sidepath.

“So you are very fond of your master.”

The man actually laughed, and displayed his Guy Fawkes face in its most unpleasant aspect.

“Fond!” he almost shouted. “I love him. I love every inch of ground he puts his foot on. If you knew what he had done for me you would believe me.”

“I do believe you. Tell me what he has done for you.”

“He wouldn’t like me to tell, but I would tell the whole world if he would let me,” Sid replied with fervour.

Mrs. Gregory thought she would try the argument which generally succeeds when all else fails.

“Sid,” she said, “if you will tell me all you know about your master I will keep it secret and I will give you a sovereign.”

His curt manner returned immediately.

“If you were to tear me to pieces with wild horses I would never tell you anything.”

Evidently determined to hear no more, he turned and walked away. Even if he possessed information, which seemed doubtful, it was abundantly clear that it was not to be extracted from him. No, it was certain there was only one person who could impart what she so much wished to know. If information was to be acquired it must be by a direct application to the fountain head.

Only a week or two now remained before her promise to Doris would expire. She fully determined she would not wait a day longer than this, and would then take the step necessary to regulate the position of her daughter with regard to the man whom she thought was not treating the girl fairly.

But, as it turned out, before this short time ran out events transpired which rendered interposition on her part impossible.

It was to Doris herself a measure of enlightenment came, though it came in a mode which only deepened the mystery surrounding the conduct of the

man to whom she had given such unlimited affection.

It arose in the following manner:

Christmas was approaching. The district had for a fortnight been covered with deep snow, and, no unusual thing on the Staffordshire moors, in places where the wind had driven it even to a depth of four or five feet, but a rapid thaw had ensued. Though snow still lay in patches in all parts, the roads for the last day or two were no longer impassable.

On one of these days Geoffrey had remained in his own room till midday, and immediately after lunch was putting on his overcoat, in which operation Doris was assisting, when she timidly enquired: "Are you going for a walk?"

"Yes, Doris." He always called her now by her Christian name.

"Might I come with you? Not of course if it is inconvenient."

"I shall be delighted to have your company."

Geoffrey looked really pleased, and Doris ran upstairs with much satisfaction to put on coat and hat.

She kept him waiting less than two minutes, but he would not have shown impatience had she taken the usual quarter to half hour most young ladies occupy in what they call "putting on their hat."

They walked away together from the township in the direction of Moneyash, passed the charming hamlet of Crowdecote and mounted the hill beyond. From this solitary road the wildest parts of the moors became visible at a single glance. The prospect delighted them both, and bore out to the full Doris's opinion that the moorlands were equally attractive at every season of the year.

A sinking sun was throwing its rays athwart the rugged hills and vales, exaggerating the pure whiteness of the patches of snow, which, owing to their sheltered position, they did not directly fall upon, and lighting up others with the most glorious prismatic colouring of pink, green and purple, resulting from the rays of light falling upon the facets of the minute snow crystals.

An odd idea struck Doris.

"What a lot of beauty is wasted," she suddenly remarked. "This is a fairyland all around us for miles, and we are the only human beings who see it, or will ever see it."

She glanced at her companion as she spoke. He seemed to have become suddenly oblivious to the surrounding beauty and was looking at her, looking at her as she had seen him look before. He said nothing in reply to the rhapsody her artistic temperament had prompted.

He seemed strangely silent, and it was Doris who broke the ice by asking what he was doing in the studio now.

"I am enlarging several of the studies we made together," was the reply.

"You never ask me to the studio now," said Doris.

"No, but I always think of you when I am there."

"Do you really?" exclaimed Doris; but the words were uttered in such a low tone as to be scarcely audible.

She raised her eyes to his face and dropped them immediately. What was it that made her feel weak and faint and caused her to tremble?

They stopped as by one accord. He was leaning against a small stunted oak tree apparently dead, on the withered branches of which snow was still resting.

She stood before him with her head slightly bent, and cheeks pale, her demeanour a perfect picture of modest English maidenhood.

Something was bound to be said now. Things had gone too far, even had the girl's fascination been resistible.

He placed his hand upon her shoulder and asked quietly:

"Doris, do you care for me?"

Doris did not raise her head, but after apparent hesitation whispered:

"I don't think you ought to ask me that"; and then, after a pause, "first."

"I know what you mean, Doris"; and then followed, surely, the strangest question ever addressed by a lover to the object of his love:

"Doris, my dear, tell me, has a man ever a right to tell a girl he loves her if he cannot marry her?"

Doris was trembling violently, but the reply came after a time in a quite distinct voice:

"I think she would like to know."

"Doris, I have tried hard not to tell you how much I have come to care for you, to love you, but it is stronger than I am, and whatever the

consequences I must say it now; I love you."

So the long hoped for declaration had come at last.

Doris experienced a feeling of rapture, a kind of happy delirium. She forgot for the time the strange question Geoffrey had immediately before addressed to her. The only thing which stood out clearly were the words, "I love you." They absorbed everything else, and deprived her of all power of speech. She held out her hand to Geoffrey, who took it into his own, but after a minute or so let it drop, as though a pledge of her troth he had no right to retain.

His next words were uttered in a grave tone, and with much feeling:

"Doris, though I love you, I can't ask you to be my wife."

"Why?"

The word came in a feeble voice.

"Because a marriage with me could bring nothing but sorrow to you."

The girl raised her eyes to his face and spoke more firmly than before:

"I would willingly share sorrow with you."

"Oh, Doris! Doris! you tempt me almost beyond control. Can you ever forgive me?"

The girl raised her eyes to his. Her paleness had disappeared, and she was flushed and beautiful, though there was a pained expression on her face.

The look she gave him was full of affection and trust, as she replied:

"I am quite sure I could forgive you anything."

"The fates are against us," exclaimed Geoffrey, petulantly, "but, if I had had the luck to know you before I never would have acted as I have done."

Now the thought, banished for some time, arose vividly before Doris's mind—Geoffrey was already married. Miss Tritsy was right after all. This was the mystery, it could be nothing else. The impulse came to her to ask him, to know the worst. Anything was to be preferred to this horrible uncertainty. She recollected her mother meant to question him. She would spare him this. Far better the truth should be extracted from him by her.

"Geoffrey," she asked, "is it that you are already married?"

A reply in the affirmative would have put the matter at rest for once and all. He was greatly tempted to say, "Yes." Would it not be better for the girl

to stay further enquiry by alleging that her suspicion was correct? But as he looked and saw her innocent and trustful face upturned towards his own, he felt that, whatever else was possible, he could not lie to her.

"I have never been married," he answered, "but there is a barrier between us as impassable as marriage would have been."

"Geoffrey, I feel I have no right to question you further, but there is just one thing I should like to know—is it on my account, to spare me suffering that you set up the barrier between us?"

"Partly it is," was the reply.

"Then I want to tell you now, for I shall never speak to you of my own accord about it again, that I am not afraid of suffering for myself, and if the suffering is likely to come to both of us, I should be content and happy to share it with you, and perhaps lessen it for you, for I love you."

Geoffrey had turned away. He was visibly affected by the words of this unselfish girl, but he had nothing to say in reply to them.

Presently Doris said:

"I think we had better go home."

There was infinite pathos in her voice.

Geoffrey had been leaning against the small tree all this time, but he turned at once, and they commenced to walk homeward. On the journey Doris did not volunteer speech at all, and Geoffrey spoke once only, when he said:

"Doris, you may tell your mother what you like, but don't spare me. I suppose I ought not to continue to live with your people?" She answered the latter part of his speech only by saying:

"I should prefer that you did."

They separated at the garden gate, and Doris entered the house alone, and at once sought her bedroom. There her mother found her. What took place between the two it is not necessary to narrate. It is sufficient to say that Doris did not obey Geoffrey's advice not to spare him but rather attempted to hold up his conduct as both honourable and disinterested, a procedure which left Mrs. Gregory more mystified than ever.

When at last she was alone Doris threw herself upon her bed, and tried to think out the position in view of the startling occurrences of the afternoon.

Her firm conviction that his conduct was not actuated by selfish motives, but, for some cause quite incomprehensible to her, was self-renunciatory in character, and persisted in for her good, gave her some comfort. But despite this she was soon a prey to the thought which brought with it such bitter grief, that all the hopes of happiness she had indulged in, without openly acknowledging them even to herself, were destroyed for ever.

As she began to appreciate what this meant to her in the future her feelings obtained the full mastery and she gave way to a passion of tears. She lay long in this agonized condition, starting up occasionally and throwing out her arms as though with an intention of following something which was escaping from her, and then gradually a ray of comfort seemed to penetrate her suffering and diffuse itself through her whole being. It appeared to her to come as a light, driving away before it all her pain and unhappiness, and its outward effect was presently to take away the look of pain from her face, and in its place to implant a beautiful smile of joy, as, her tears yet undried upon her cheeks, she threw herself back upon her pillow, exclaiming in tearful voice, and yet in tones of perfect content:

"He loves me! He loves me!"

CHAPTER VII

THE ELECTION

The great Reform Bill of 1832 had passed into an Act of Parliament, and the first election under it was about to take place.

Whether it would spell the destruction of the country remained to be seen. Many people thought it would, and the struggle over the Bill was probably the most violent and embittered struggle which the Parliament of England has ever experienced.

That it abolished many anachronisms which were incapable of being seriously defended is certain. Never again would nine members of Parliament be returned by a single nobleman, as was the case with Lord Lonsdale, or two members by the chance dwellers on a green and grassy mound, as was the case with Old Sarum, or a member by a borough which had for centuries been quietly reposing under the North Sea, as was the case with the Borough of Dunwich. It abolished what were called "rotten boroughs," and gave members for the first time to such towns as Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds and other large towns.

Viewed in the light of the present day, it would appear to be no very revolutionary measure. It gave votes to occupiers rated at fifty pounds per annum in counties, and in boroughs to those who lived in houses rated at ten pounds per annum, retaining the right of the old owners of land of the annual value of forty shillings.

The excitement over the first election which was to take place under the new condition of things was immense throughout the whole country. It represented a great struggle between the upper and the middle class in which no pains were spared to gain the victory.

Of the new boroughs which were enfranchised by the Act several were situated in Staffordshire. One of these was the Borough of Fairport, which was not a port at all, but a moderate sized town on the north-east side of the county and quite close to the boundary of Cheshire.

It was scheduled to return one member only. It was generally thought that the fight for this seat would be a close and fierce one. No peer had any proprietary or controlling interest over the town, and the contest was regarded as a direct struggle between Tories and Whigs.

To the dwellers in the township of Longnor this election was a matter of absorbing interest, for the reason that the champion of the Tory cause was on this occasion one of their fellow townsmen, being in fact no other than Mr. Plumbley, of the Grange, and the twenty shops, which he preferred to call "establishments."

The elections were to take place at the beginning of the summer, and at Fairport the whole of the spring months, and indeed part of the preceding winter, had been devoted to canvassing and meetings.

No one could deny that Mr. Plumbley was a good business man. His great success in commerce had shown this. He was also a very rich man, not over liberal, but prepared to spend freely to attain an assured position, which was what he now desired for himself and his family.

The family had been living in London during the winter and had only returned to the Grange a month or two before the election was to take place.

Mr. Plumbley, though a self-made man, a fact of which he never ceased to boast, was, as so often happens in such cases, a violent and even prejudiced upholder of position and privilege in all its forms, defensible or indefensible.

He liked to describe himself as a "true blue," and his worship of titles and position was only second to his worship of money, which was already becoming a powerful factor in their acquisition.

Most of the dwellers in his own neighbourhood, though not Fairport voters, were his supporters. His chances of being returned were regarded as almost certain, especially when it became known that he was to be opposed by a stranger to the county, a young barrister from London without position or wealth.

Though an election contest after the year 1832 was much less expensive than before that time, there was, neither at this period nor for many years afterwards, any limit to the sum which might be expended, and though bribery was forbidden, the prohibition was very laxly enforced.

A petition against the return of a member to Parliament on the ground of bribery was heard by the committee of members of the House of Commons, who had mostly been guilty of the same kind of illegality themselves, in a more or less modified manner.

Resolved to secure the seat, the Tory candidate set about it in an effective and business-like manner. He secured the best known, and, as some said, most unprincipled election agent in the country, a gentleman named

Heelis, and at great expense took all the available rooms in the chief hotel in Fairport, appropriately called the Blue Dragon, a month before the election, and literally plastered the town with his colours. His colours were blue. Blue streamed in flags and banners from the hotel, and the houses and shops of his supporters. Blue in the form of ribbons and rosettes were seen on the horses and on the coats of everyone who could be induced to wear them. The children carried small blue flags, with an inset which was supposed to be a picture of the blue candidate himself, but the resemblance was not very striking.

Money was not to be spared. Mr. Plumbley was seized with a sudden fit of philanthropy, under the influence of which all the charitable institutions of Fairport became his special care.

Though never a member of a club before, he joined every club, sporting or otherwise, which offered him membership, subscribed largely to the hospital, and was so anxious for the comfort of the church-goers as to give the Vicar fifty pounds towards a heating apparatus for his church.

A blue band composed of voters was also engaged, who all wore tall hats with wide blue ribbons round them, and whose duty was to play constantly —no matter how unmelodiously—in the streets.

Another duty was assigned to them. This was to play their loudest outside any building in which it was known the rival candidate was holding a meeting.

It is fair to add that this last mentioned instruction emanated from the agent, Mr. Heelis, and was objected to both by Mr. Plumbley and his son Adolphus, as not quite fair fighting, but their scruples were dissolved when the agent protested that "all was fair in love and war," and that this was as truly warfare for the safety of the country as though it were invaded by a foreign army.

Against all these preparations for victory the Whig candidate—who was not paying his own expenses, but being financed by a rich Lancashire manufacturer—could only show a small unadorned committee room and prints of his election address plastered in public places, or shown in the shops of those to whom his rather advanced views were favourable.

Two small rooms in the Star Inn, one of the smaller inns of the town, were occupied by the Whig candidate, whose name was Alec Wiles. Here he and his election agent, a young gentleman without experience, a personal friend of his own, who had come down to assist him for what he called "the fun of the thing," carried on the battle. The name of this youthful and

inexperienced agent was Robert Gaily. His acquaintances and friends called him "Bob."

One asset, however, the Whig candidate and his agent possessed which in the opposing party was wanting. They were both of them excellent and persuasive speakers, whereas, as Mr. Plumbley so often truthfully said, he was no speaker.

If the residents in Fairport had all been voters the chances of the blue candidate would have been small. The town, decked out as it was, looked "blue" through and through. The meetings, however, showed a decidedly pink hue. Pink was the colour of the Whig candidate.

His meetings were always unanimous, and no element of disturbance ever showed itself, whilst in "the Plumbley meetings," as they were called, the pink element entered largely, the speakers were rarely allowed to proceed unmolested, and on several occasions scenes of disorder had resulted.

Mr. Plumbley's speaking force consisted of himself, his son Adolphus very occasionally, his agent Mr. Heelis, a good speaker, but whose public utterances were usually accompanied by sarcastic enquiries from the audience as to what he was paid for them, the Rector of Fairport (the clergy at this time took an active part in politics), and one or two landowners, whose oratory was of a poor and unconvincing description.

Alec Wiles simply talked these gentlemen down, drowned them in a flood of oratory which was always plausible and sometimes rather eloquent. He avoided all personalities most scrupulously.

His friend Bob Gaily lacerated the speeches of their opponents, ridiculed them in a rough but amusing style which always "caught on" and provoked much laughter.

It was hoped by the "Blue" party—though not by any means by the majority of them—that the election would have been uncontested, but at the last moment, all expenses being guaranteed, as before stated, Alec Wiles had been sent down to make a fight for it in the Whig interest.

He had only about a fortnight in which to deal a counterblast to the long-matured preparations of the other side, to stultify what Mr. Plumbley still called his "nursing" of the constituency.

In spite of all his clever speeches there was something odd in the way the Whig nominee seemed to regard the election. On his platform he would work himself up to some enthusiasm, but at all other times seemed to have

little heart for the fight, and showed a lack of interest which augured badly for success, and for which his friend and agent Bob Gaily often reproached him.

On one evening, a day or two only before the election day, the two friends were taking a rather meagre meal, consisting of chops and potatoes in their small sitting-room at the Star Inn. They had been busy all day, and the candidate appeared to be both tired and dissatisfied.

"Well, thank Heaven," he exclaimed, "it is nearly at an end, though in one way I have enjoyed it."

"I have enjoyed it greatly," said the ever good-humoured Bob, "and the best of it is, that it is all at the expense of the party."

"Hardly of the party," interposed Alec.

"Well, at the expense of a rich member of the party. It is the same thing. I think whether we win or not, the party must admit we have done well."

"We shall not win," said Alec.

"I don't know. Your chances are greatly better than they were a week ago."

"God forbid that I should be elected. It's the last thing I want."

"Alec, tell me why it is you don't want to get in? You have acted throughout as though you were running for a defeat."

"Because I am a briefless barrister without any means."

"Not quite briefless. I know you have had one brief since you were 'called' only a month or two ago," said his friend.

"Yes, and oddly enough it was to defend a woman who had stolen tea from one of Mr. Plumbley's shops—I mean his establishments! The fee was four guineas, but as I keep no clerk I got the clerk's fee in addition—seven and sixpence."

"Four guineas for one day's work. That is at the rate of over twelve hundred a year, if we omit Sundays."

"Oh, Bob, stow your chaff. I have only had this one case, and shall probably never have another."

"Let us have a bottle of fizz now, at all events. It will all go down as part of the expenses," said the vivacious agent.

“No, Bob, I don’t care to run up the personal expenses. Two small bottles of beer I think we may run to.”

“Right you are,” replied the volatile Bob.

After a time the candidate, who seemed to have been buried in thought, looked up and said:

“It’s a strange thing I should have been sent down to contest this seat against Mr. Plumbley.”

“Why, Alec?”

“I can’t tell you, but it is extraordinary, and indeed rather ridiculous. You would make great fun of it, Bob, if you knew. Still, I have not done the old fellow much harm, and he must confess I have fought him fairly.”

“You have only given him opportunities of advertising his ‘establishments,’ and, of course, of scattering his money right and left. You might, if you lose, unseat him for bribery.”

“I certainly shall not try. He has set his heart on becoming a Member of Parliament, and I hope he will not be disappointed.”

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the waiter, a tall thin man, with a perpetual stoop, and obsequious manner, and who when his hands were unencumbered seemed as though he was always occupied in washing them.

“I beg pardon, gentlemen—the letters.” He placed the letters before them.

“All right, Robert—I suppose your name is Robert—nearly all waiters are called Robert. Oh, and look here, you can bring a bottle of Pommery, and put it down to me. I can’t stand beer to-night,” said Bob.

“A bottle of Pommery? Yes, Sir.”

The waiter retired and returned in a few minutes with the wine, which he opened with a flourish, intended to indicate that the Blue Dragon was not the only hostel whose guests could afford the sparkling beverage.

“I think, gentlemen, you will find this as good as the Blue Dragon could supply.” And then, addressing Bob, “I beg pardon, Sir, but Mr. Plumbley has a grand dinner at the Blue Dragon to-night. Champagne *ad libĭtum*. The Star is not good enough for Mr. Plumbley, Sir, and after all he is only a grocer.”

“Mr. Plumbley is a very rich man, Robert.”

"Yes, Sir. I beg pardon. He bribes the people, Sir. It is not fair. I am told he has been throwing money right and left to anyone who could catch it. I beg pardon, Sir, I was not there."

The last words appeared to be added regretfully.

"Has the post office boy gone, Robert?"

"Yes, Sir, I beg pardon—girl, Sir!"

"Alec," said Bob, "I have a note to write about to-morrow's meeting. It will be our last meeting, as you let Plumbley have the night before the polling day. I wish him joy of it."

So saying he followed the waiter from the room.

Left alone, Alec commenced to soliloquise in a manner which would at once have disclosed the secret of his indifference to the issue if anyone had been present to hear him.

"It is all nearly over," he muttered, "and I am quite content, but what a curious position it is, and how Bob will enjoy it when he comes to know. To think that for the last fortnight I have been fighting and trying to thwart in the ambition of his life no other than—my father-in-law! Yes, I married Edwina Plumbley secretly in London just six weeks ago. My chance of reconciling the old man to the marriage was small before, I fear, now it will be impossible. He was angry at having an opponent. When he finds out who it is he will be furious. Never mind, a fig for all the profits of his shops! I have got Edwina, he can't deprive me of her. I think, however, I will call upon him and try to make friends before he knows who I am and——"

Here the soliloquy was interrupted by the re-entry of the waiter, with his invariable apologetic phrase and manners.

"I beg pardon, Sir! A lady, Sir!"

"A lady!" said Alec, rising suddenly from his seat evidently surprised.

A young lady entered the room hurriedly, and rushing up to Alec, kissed him repeatedly. It was his wife, formerly Edwina Plumbley, now Edwina Wiles. Robert left the room, covering his eyes with his hand, like a good waiter who never acknowledges that he sees what he is not supposed to see.

"Edwina, my love, is it really you? Oh, what have you done?" asked Alec.

"I have only escaped after Dad's dinner for a minute or two, and I ran all the way here."

"You dear one!" (kissing her).

"What have *you* done, Alec?" asked Edwina. "I fear you have mortally offended Dad, when he finds out."

"I could not help it, Edwina. I didn't know till I came down that your father was the candidate opposing me; but he will be elected all right. I have not tried to win," replied Alec.

"Oh, you dear!" And she kissed him again.

"Do you think we shall be forgiven, Edwina?"

"Oh, I am frightened. I fear not. Dad is dreadfully quick-tempered, though it usually does not last long, but I am quite ready, my darling, to starve with you."

"You shall never starve—there is always my professional income."

"You dear."

And they kissed once more.

"I mean to come and call on your father."

"Do, Alec; but how I shall tremble." Turning she caught sight of the part emptied bottle of champagne, and said in an arch and playful manner:

"I see you have been enjoying yourselves."

"The champagne was ordered to drink your father's health," he replied with questionable veracity.

"Oh, you dear!" and Edwina after a last salute took her leave, saying she could not stay a moment longer, or her absence would be noticed.

A few seconds afterwards Bob returned to the room.

"Who was that I met in the passage, Alec?"

"A lady."

"I know that, but who was it?"

"Well, a young lady," was all the reply.

Bob muttered to himself: "I am sure I heard kissing. Where in the world did Alec pick her up? But there, all men are alike. I will keep his secret."

"I think, Bob, that we ought to make a call on the Plumbleys together. It is the civil thing for one candidate to do to the other."

“Certainly, let us go together,” returned Bob, “it will at all events be good fun. We will beard the lion in his den, the Blue Dragon. He seems to have brought down his whole menagerie with him. They are a most impossibly vulgar lot!”

“Shut up, Bob, they are nothing of the sort.”

“I believe the females of the family irradiate diamonds.”

“They don’t. Edwina does not wear diamonds.”

“Edwina! How in the world do you know what Edwina wears?” was the very natural query.

“Well, I ought to know—I mean I have met Edwina several times in London of late. She always dresses quietly and like a lady.”

“Right, old boy, but you never told me you knew any of the family.”

The scene must now be shifted to the large dining-room of the Blue Dragon hotel, where a sumptuous dinner was being laid for the Plumbley family and to which to-night guests had been invited.

The table had just been set out and ornamented with flowers by a pretty young parlourmaid, who looked almost as attractive as the flowers.

Having finished her task, she looked at herself in the glass over the mantelpiece, and exclaimed:

“I wonder if I look nice. Yes! I think I do—quite nice. I have to wait at table to-night, as the head waiter is ill. I have seen Mr. Plumbley and his son, but I have not seen the daughter. They say she is a pretty girl. I like the old man better than the son; the son is a little too forward; but there, I believe all these young London swells are the same. If it is the fashion in London I don’t know that I ought to object.”

As she turned away from the glass the giver of the party entered the room and addressed the girl:

“Ah, my dear. And are you our waitress? I think I have seen you before. Let me look. Yes, you waited on us last week. Don’t you think you are a pretty girl?”

“Yes, Sir,” was the arch but truthful reply.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Sir; you are the old Mr. Plumbley.”

“Not so old, my dear, not so old. What is your name?”

“Mary, Sir.”

“A very pretty name. Have you got a sweetheart, Mary?”

“Oh, yes, Sir.”

“Are you going to marry soon, Mary?”

“He wants me to marry him next month.”

“And are you going to?”

“I expect he will worry me until I do,” was the reply.

“Now look here, Mary. You know I shall be Member of Parliament for this town in a day or two.”

“Yes, Sir, and will you sell better tea when you are a Member of Parliament?”

The enquiry was ingenuous, and certainly not intended for discourtesy.

“Better tea, Mary!” replied Mr. Plumbley. “Impossible, at the price, but I am going to make you a promise. You shall have as godfather to your first child a Member of Parliament.”

“Oh, thank you, Sir, that will be an honour.”

The party now arrived. It included besides the family, the agent, Mr. Heelis, the Vicar of the parish, Dr. Gregory and Doris, Geoffrey Frevile and one or two other of the chief supporters.

Mr. Plumbley was always in good spirits when presiding over a convivial party. It gave him full opportunity of talking under conditions where politeness required that he should be listened to.

“I have had a heavy day,” he began. “ ‘Shall I not take mine ease in my inn.’ Who said that, Adolphus?”

“Oh, Dad! There you are again, asking me ‘who said that?’ ”

“Well, my boy, your education cost me over three hundred pounds a year whilst at the same age I slept——”

“Yes, Dad, we know all about that. You brought it in as part of every speech you have made,” Edwina interposed.

"And I am proud of it, my dear; nor did I mind much when that young carpet-bagger, Wiles, twitted me with boasting of it."

"Oh, Papa, Alec never did that," Edwina exclaimed quickly.

"Alec!" said her father in an astonished tone.

Edwina changed colour.

"Everybody in Fairport seems to call him Alec. I seem to have caught the habit myself," then she could not resist adding:

"I think Mr. Wiles has conducted the election in a very gentlemanly way. He has never once said a rude thing of you."

"Either he, or that young clown they call Bob Gaily, has said many impertinent things," said her father.

"I must say," said Adolphus, "that we let Wiles have it pretty hot. He was 'a party hack,' a 'carpet-bagger,' and 'insolent intruder with no stake in the country,' and other choice things."

"I invented the expression 'carpet-bagger.' I think it rather choice and cutting," and Mr. Plumbley smiled in a self-satisfied manner. It was true this expression which has been made use of thousands of times since, owed its origin to the first Tory candidate for Fairport.

"Where is the champagne?" asked the host. "I want you all to drink my health as the future Member for Fairport. My dear" (to his wife) "you will be proud, will you not, to be the wife of a Member of Parliament?"

"I suppose I shall go to Court?" was the laconic reply.

"Of course, and soon you may be 'my lady.' You see, 'I have the dibs.' I won't ask you who said that, Adolphus, for I am sure you don't know. This election has cost me some thousands, but the result is worth it."

"Are we not a little premature, Dad?" Adolphus ventured to urge.

"Premature! Not at all. The result is certain. Mr. Heelis stakes his reputation that my majority will be almost exactly two hundred and fifty."

"Yes," said that gentleman, "I am never much out in my calculations."

"I wouldn't be so bally sure," Adolphus again interposed. "Wiles and Gaily made very good speeches, and carried the people along."

"He carried very few voters along. It is only the 'great unwashed,'" said the agent.

It is a strange tribute to the civilising effect of the franchise, that everyone on whom it is conferred becomes at once a reputable and cleanly member of the community, and the opprobrious expression henceforth ceases to be descriptive of him.

The glasses having been filled with the sparkling wine the Rector of Fairport at once rose to propose the toast. This gentleman, Tory among Tories, prejudiced and sycophantic, was very opposite in character to the Vicar of Longnor.

> "My friends," he began, "I rise to perform a very agreeable task. I propose for your acceptance the health and happiness of the gentleman who in the course of not many hours will be the first Member of Parliament for the Borough of Fairport—my old and respected friend, Mr. Plumbley."

Edwina could not resist the thought—'he has only known him about three months.'

The reverend gentleman continued:

> "Fairport is to be congratulated on having secured such a Member. In the present day, when Communism is beginning to show its hydra-headed form, special qualities are required in each one of our legislators.
>
> "What are these qualities? First and foremost he should be a member of the Church of England as by law established. Then he should be a man of wealth—the greater the wealth the greater the opportunities of helping both the Church and State. He ought also to have a stake in the country, and by 'stake' of course I mean, land in the country. Who forced a reluctant King to sign Magna Charta? Who have upheld the House of Lords and kept the Bishops there, to defend the Church? Who have been the opponents of this ridiculous Reform Act? I say in all these cases the answer is the landowners.
>
> "If in addition to land the lawmaker represents the great commercial interests of this great commercial country, then all the better. Does, or does not, our future Member possess all these qualifications? He possesses them all. He is an attached member and munificent supporter of the Church. I shall never forget the sensation I felt when I left my pulpit a few Sundays since, from

which responsible position I had been trying to impress on my parishioners their clear duty in the present crisis, and my dear friend as I may, I hope, call him, slipped into my hand a fifty-pound Bank of England note—not for myself—God forbid! but for the heating apparatus of the church.”

Mr. Heelis here coughed uneasily, but the Vicar taking no notice continued:

“Then our future member is a man of wealth. I have made enquiry as to this, and find he owns a very large number of shops ——”

“Establishments, if you please,” ejaculated Mr. Plumbley.

“I beg pardon, establishments. Then he has a stake in the country, some thousand acres in Essex, and a deer forest in Scotland, no doubt covered with fine timber. I ask you for all these reasons to drink his health with enthusiasm.”

The candidate hardly waited for the conclusion of this rather lengthy speech, before rising to reply as follows:

“My dear family and friends, I am about to secure that which has long been my ambition, by becoming the first Member for the newly-enfranchised Borough of Fairport. It is immaterial now, that, in my humble opinion Fairport never ought to have been enfranchised at all. It is now a *fait accompli*—Adolphus ought to know what that means. Yes, I am to be chosen by the free and independent electors of this Borough to represent it in the Mother of Parliaments. I, James Plumbley, who as a young man slept under——no, I won’t say that, as some of you object to it—shall now take part, and I hope not an inconspicuous part, in making the laws of the country.

“I confess I felt some annoyance when an impecunious young lawyer, a carpet-bagger, ventured to put himself forward to challenge my right. It certainly was a piece of presumption on his part, but I can afford to laugh at the folly of this youngster, for it is those who win who laugh. My next ambition will be to see my son Adolphus following in his father’s footsteps, and my dear

> daughter Edwina, happily married to a man of wealth and position, a member of our country's aristocracy— —"

Here Edwina shifted in her seat and showed signs of much uneasiness. Her father continued:

> "My son will succeed to my establishments, and if my daughter marries the man of my choice—or perhaps I should say—a man of whom I approve—I shall settle upon her two thousand a year. These are some of my ambitions for the future. I thank you all for the kind way you have received the toast, and promise to do my duty in the House of Commons."

As the cheering prompted by this speech was subsiding the maid Mary entered the room and handed to Mr. Plumbley two cards.

He stared at them for some time, then frowned, and an expression of annoyance, even of anger, spread over his usually good-natured face.

"Who do you think dares to call and send in his card?" he exclaimed. "No other than Alec Wiles, and his young mountebank friend. I shall not see them."

"I think I should," remarked the agent.

"Show them in," said Mr. Plumbley stiffly.

When Alec and Bob entered the room, the former held out his hand to Mr. Plumbley who refused it.

"Mr. Plumbley," said Alec, "I am sorry you refuse to greet me as a friend, for I assure you I have no feelings but friendly ones towards you."

Mr. Plumbley, however, was now worked up to a state of uncontrollable vexation. That this young man should oppose him at all was, in his view, an insult, but that he should at the same time offer him friendship seemed greatly to magnify the offence.

"I have no wish for your friendship or that of your friend. I must say I consider your conduct has been most dishonourable."

This was too much for Edwina. She had heard Alec reproached and insulted for the last fortnight, and said nothing, but, knowing what his conduct had been throughout the contest, to hear him described as "dishonourable" was more than she could bear. She burst out violently: "You

shall not insult Mr. Wiles, Father. He does not deserve it. He has done nothing dishonourable, besides (after a pause) he is my husband!"

Everybody stared—no one more violently than Bob Gaily. It came as such an unexpected thunderclap upon them all as to render them dumb. They looked at one another with blank faces.

At last Mr. Plumbley exclaimed angrily:

"Edwina, are you mad?"

Alec answered the enquiry.

"No, Sir, Edwina is not mad. She is my wedded wife. We are devotedly attached to one another. The only thing I have to ask your pardon for is keeping our marriage secret from you; but we were both afraid that, owing to my poverty, you would never give your consent. I had not the least notion, when sent down to fight Fairport only a few days ago, that you were the candidate on the other side. From the moment I heard, I never wanted to win, and, I may say, I have not tried to."

Here Bob Gaily speaking to himself exclaimed:

"I wondered how he knew so much about Edwina's clothes!" Then he added aloud: "I will answer for my own conduct, but Mr. Wiles has fought this contest in a most fair and gentlemanly manner, and I must add, Sir, that not only will you in all probability be the Member of Parliament for Fairport, but you have a prince of good fellows for a son-in-law. Though not rich now—only making at the rate of twelve hundred a year in his profession—he is a gentleman and member of an old and respected county family, the Wiles of Norfolk, and only three removes from succeeding to their baronetcy."

"Bob, I will not allow you to deceive my father-in-law. I am not making twelve hundred a year. I have only made four guineas in my life at my profession," said Alec.

"You forget the seven and sixpence, Alec," returned his friend.

"Mr. Plumbley," said Alec taking Edwina by the hand, and leading her towards him, "I ask your pardon sincerely. It is not too late even now, for me to retire from this contest and I will willingly do so if you wish it."

"Dad," added Edwina, "I love Alec."

Geoffrey Frevile now spoke for the first time:

"I think, Sir, you must forgive them. It will all come right. He has not behaved badly, and seems an excellent fellow."

Mr. Plumbley's anger never lasted long. His face gradually re-assumed its good-natured look. To tell the truth he was much influenced by Bob Gaily's statement about the baronetcy, and Alec was evidently a gentleman. Money had never been a consideration with him in his projects relative to his daughter's marriage.

He commenced to smile, and Edwina knew they were forgiven and kissed him affectionately. Then she kissed her husband.

"I have a strong suspicion that this has happened once before to-night," said Bob aside.

"Do you wish me to retire from the contest, Sir, I am entirely in your hands. I do not wish to be a Member of Parliament," said Alec.

"Retire! Certainly not. That would look as though I was afraid."

Then he took the hand of his son-in-law and exclaimed in the jocular way natural to him:

"Look here, young man, I am going to beat you by exactly two hundred and fifty votes, Mr. Heelis is certain of it, so you need not worry about the result, but I don't think I shall forgive your young friend Bob as you call him."

"Oh, you must forgive Bob. His speeches have given the fun to the show." This came from Adolphus.

"Well, I suppose I must, but I had intended to give Edwina two thousand a year when she married, and, I think, to mark my sense of her having deceived me, I shall only give her a thousand—at all events for the first year."

"That with Alec's earnings will make their first year's income exactly a thousand and four pounds seven and sixpence," said Bob.

"You young dog!" exclaimed Mr. Plumbley, and his good-nature thoroughly restored, he actually dug Bob Gaily in the ribs, as he added:

"Now, come, both of you, and join us in a glass of champagne."

CHAPTER VIII

THE POLLING

It was impossible that the relationship between the Tory candidate and his young Whig rival should be kept a secret. The day after its disclosure it was known throughout the borough, and furnished a very pretty subject of gossip.

The adherents of the "Blue" cause spoke of the conduct of Alec Wiles as "bad form," and wanting in respect, while the "Pinks" asserted that the Tory candidate was trying, by the weight of his money, to crush the natural ambition of his young relative.

That both parties had acted in ignorance was not so generally known; even where the true circumstances were explained they were largely discredited.

One thing at once became apparent. The astonishing disclosure, importing so unusual a personal element, gave increased zest to both sides and greatly added to the excitement as to what would be the result of such a singular contest.

The family breakfast party at the Blue Dragon next morning, at which Mr. Heelis was present, was quite a merry meeting.

With his accustomed quick change temperament, Mr. Plumbley now seemed, not only reconciled to, but rather pleased with the fact that his daughter should have become the wife of his young opponent. He prided himself upon his wit, and this furnished him with a good opportunity to exercise it. He addressed her as "My Lady Wiles," twitted her with the duty she owed to her husband even at the expense of her "poor old father."

"Your place, my dear, is with your husband. A wife should leave father and mother and cleave to her husband. I expect your sympathies are with him. You would like to be the wife of a Member of Parliament, Ah!"

"I really don't know what I want, Dad. You have been so good to us; but of course I should like it for Alec," replied Edwina.

"Well, I am sorry we can't oblige you on this occasion, but I promise if he puts up for any other place than Fairport I will pay the expenses of his election."

“He would have to put up as a Whig!” said Edwina, rather subtly.

“Ah, I had forgotten that. I shall have to think about that. Still, it would give us a claim on both parties,” he added, as an afterthought, and then: “Edwina, I have been thinking seriously whether you ought to be present at my great meeting to-morrow night.”

“Oh, Dad, I couldn’t. I could sometimes hardly restrain myself at your meetings when I heard Alec reviled.”

“I quite understand, my love. If you attend any meetings now they ought to be those of your husband.”

“Would you like me to do that, Dad?”

“Perhaps I should not object if your husband wished it, ‘my lady.’”

“I don’t think I could even do that,” Edwina replied.

Mr. Heelis here interposed with the remark that this would be most unwise.

It would make the young man more popular than he was at present.

“I don’t mind if it does make my son-in-law more popular. James Plumbley is a fair-minded man. Ask his managers or his assistants or anyone who knows him. He will take no unfair advantage of anyone.”

“It is my duty to see that your cause is not injured,” said the election agent.

“My election is all right. It is a foregone conclusion,” was the reply.

“Edwina, my dear,” said her mother, speaking for the first time, “perhaps it will be you who go to Court and not me.”

“I have no particular wish to go to Court, mother, and you have.”

“I think it might give me just as much pleasure to dress you in your Court dress as to go myself—perhaps more.”

Mrs. Plumbley, as before sketched, although an uninteresting woman, and to say the truth, a stupid woman, was not unaffectionate. She was very fond of Edwina, and her marriage with so very good-looking a man—as she at once pronounced Alec to be—gave her quite unalloyed satisfaction.

The last meeting held in the interest of the “Pink” candidate that evening came off triumphantly and was attended with boundless enthusiasm.

The Town Hall which was of no great size was crowded and could hold little more than half the people who wished to enter it.

An open-air overflow meeting was at once arranged, which it was announced the candidate would address as soon as the indoors meeting was finished. It was estimated that almost as many "Blue" as "Pink" adherents attended, or tried to attend the Town Hall meeting.

During the day Alec's popularity seemed to have received a considerable augmentation, evidenced, to outward appearance, by the sudden disappearance of a large part of the blue colours with which the borough had previously been flooded. Whether this resulted from a desire to go with the flowing tide—a natural wish in mankind, though as often as not an unconscious wish—or from a feeling of nervousness approaching fear, could not be said.

There were many objective signs that the "Pink" supporters were hourly becoming more bold and demonstrative, even in some cases assuming a threatening attitude. To wear a blue rosette or to carry a blue flag was now attended with some risk of personal violence.

Mr. Heelis, who had been parading the streets, and of course making enquiries began to feel uneasy, though as yet he had no anxiety as to who must win. Late in the afternoon he saw Mr. Plumbley and told him he was afraid that the unfortunate disclosure of the evening before had rather damped his cause, and that the majority he had vouched for would be reduced.

"It is not my fault," he added.

"I don't see why you should speak of it as an 'unfortunate disclosure.' That my daughter has married a gentleman of old county family, who is only *two* removes from becoming a baronet, is not a misfortune. How much do you think it will reduce my majority?"

"I think it may reduce it by a hundred," was the reply.

"Well, a hundred and fifty is as good as two hundred and fifty," said the easily gratified candidate.

"The truth is they are beginning to intimidate our voters," said the agent.

"Who is doing that? I will have the law of them. I will, if it costs me a thousand pounds," and the easily roused ire of the candidate showed itself in his flushed face and vigorous gestures.

“I don’t think this will do you any harm. It is largely on the part of the great unwashed. All the respectable voters will disapprove of it. I should not be surprised if you profited by their violence,” said the agent.

“If you think so it is all right,” and the candidate, as easily appeased as roused, became himself again.

When at eight o’clock Alec and his supporters took their seats on the platform the ardour of their reception was boundless.

Cries of “Well done, Alec”—“We’ll carry you in”—“Why haven’t you brought your wife?”—“We want to see her.”

This last cry became incessant and prolonged, and it was some time before Alec could obtain a partial hearing.

He began by expressing his strong desire that the election should be conducted fairly, a statement which was greeted by such interlocutory remarks as “Yes”—“No”—“How’s your father-in-law?”—“Send him home to his shops”—and then the roar of voices again, “We want to see your wife.”

“I have heard,” Alec continued, when the noise had somewhat abated, “during the last few hours that something like intimidation is being used by some, I hope a very few, of my friends. There must be nothing of this sort. I speak emphatically. I desire no vote unless it is given me from conviction, and willingly, indeed, if I could, I would reject any other vote. I would far rather lose than be elected by resort to intimidation or violence.”

The cries broke out again—“All right, Alec. We’ll carry you in properly.” “How’s your father-in-law feeling?” Then once again the overwhelming shouts of “Where’s your wife?”—“Let us see your wife.”

It was impossible for Alec any longer to affect to disregard these demands.

“My wife,” he said, “as you know, occupies a very difficult position. You are now all aware—though I admit I wished to hide the fact till the election was over—that my wife is the daughter of Mr. Plumbley, the candidate of the other side. You can hardly expect her under the circumstances to appear on either platform. I have never asked her what are her political views or if indeed she has any.”

But it was no use. The shouts broke out more noisily than ever. “We have seen her on the other platform.” “Come, Alec, produce your wife—we

must see her."

Alec began to feel irritated:

"Don't be unreasonable," he said. "She is not here, so you can't see her."

Nothing would appease them. It looked as though no speaking would be permitted when, from the back of the platform Edwina herself unexpectedly appeared, being led in by Bob Gaily. He had slipped out unnoticed when the uproar began and had gone to the Blue Dragon, which was only a few hundred yards from the town hall, and persuaded the young wife to come, and at all events to show herself.

On seeing the pretty blushing girl brought forward to her husband, and standing by him in the front of the platform, the enthusiasm broke out of all bounds, and the audience cried out as with one voice:

"A speech! A speech! A speech from the lady."

Edwina looked at her husband as though seeking his support and advice. A slight sign passed between them, unobserved by most of the audience, then Edwina took a short step forward, which brought her to the very forefront of the platform, and from this position delivered one of the most effective little election speeches ever heard, the force of which was much enhanced owing to the exceptional situation in which she stood towards both candidates. It was probably almost the first time a female had made an election speech. The entire speech occupied very few minutes, but two remarks she made seemed hugely to delight the hearers, and carry them almost out of themselves. The first was when she said:

"I come on this platform to-night with the full consent, indeed I may say, at the wish of my dear father."

The cheering was immense, and there were actually calls from all parts of the room for "three cheers for the old man," which were given with vigour. The other remark was when at the end of the speech she exclaimed with quite entrancing hesitation:

"I am sure you understand me when I say I feel as though I were being pulled in two directions. I shall be happy whichever of the candidates you choose to elect. I am very fond of my father," and after a long pause, "but I hope it will be Alec, for I love him."

The hearers shouted till they were hoarse. One and all rose from their seats, and the waving of pink flags—whence obtained was a mystery—

invested the dull room with the appearance of one decorated for some gay and festive scene.

The meeting was an unqualified success. The same night Mr. Heelis came to the candidate's sitting-room at the Blue Dragon and told him that his daughter's speech would probably deprive him of at least fifty votes.

"Nothing else is being talked of, and to-night Mrs. Wiles is unquestionably the most popular person in the Borough of Fairport. I warned you against giving her permission to appear on her husband's platform, for I felt pretty certain of what would happen if she did."

"Well, Mr. Heelis, will you tell me why my daughter should not be popular in the Borough her father will represent in Parliament? I am glad it should be so, and I regard a majority of a hundred as quite satisfactory, having regard to the unusual circumstances."

The agent shrugged his shoulders, a gesture which might have meant acquiescence or disagreement with the candidate's remark, and presently resumed:

"I am feeling a little uneasy about your meeting to-morrow night. I have gathered rumours that it is the intention of the roughs to allow no one to be heard, and to break up the meeting."

"Break up my meeting! They dare not!" and the quickly roused anger of the candidate showed itself once again in his flushed face and excited voice.

"Whether we hold the meeting or not I am confident that it will not affect the result one way or the other, so perhaps it would be as well to announce that it will not be held," said the agent.

It is but fair to Mr. Plumbley to state that he was no coward. He would not hear of any such proposal, and was indignant that it should have been made. He knew, he said, how to deal with disorderly persons. If they tried their tricks on him, he would give them something to remember. Besides, had not his dear daughter, Edwina told him not an hour ago that the "Pink" meeting had given three cheers for him, as the father-in-law of their own candidate.

Mr. Heelis argued the matter no further, but from an early hour next day many symptoms made it manifest that his fears were not without foundation. Rough crowds began to parade the streets, with the openly expressed intention of over-aweing the sympathisers with the Tory cause.

Later in the day these crowds were augmented by some of the roughest elements from the surrounding district and the Potteries, persons, who having heard of the unusual position of affairs existing in Fairport, had come to the town to participate in "the fun," a name always given by the mob to scenes of violence and disorder.

Even where they were residents in the borough, very few who composed the lawless crowds were voters, and of course of the self-imported roughs, none were.

The disorder at first was confined to shouting and horseplay, but the mobs were not long satisfied with such ebullitions of their feelings. They required something more exciting, and very soon commenced to resort to actual violence.

On the "Blue" band appearing in the streets and commencing their unmusical and very lugubrious efforts, the crowd at first chaffed them unmercifully and then called on them to stop playing. This demand not being obeyed, a violent attack was made upon them, to which they offered only a feeble resistance.

Many of their instruments were broken up, their hats, with the blue ribbons on, were knocked off and kicked about, and serious personal injuries would doubtless have ensued, had not the musicians one and all taken suddenly to their heels and run away, pursued by the laughter and shouts of the mob, which this ludicrous incident had restored to good humour.

The hats they left behind them were entirely spoilt and worthless, and the women (for the crowd contained women as well as men), all of whom had appeared to be almost frantic supporters of "Pink" principles, eagerly picked up and appropriated the blue ribbons.

In what manner crowds bent on disorder arrive at anything approaching concerted action has always been a puzzle. And yet it is common knowledge that in some way or ways which it is difficult to ascertain they generally manage to do so, and so it happened in the present case.

Several mobs were parading the streets. They were apparently unassociated, and seemed to have no leaders, and yet late in the afternoon they began to pursue a design in common, as though under one command.

This design was to delete the borough entirely of the colours of the Tory candidate.

Men, women and children were forced to take off any rosettes or ribbons they were wearing, all the blue bills and placards were torn down, and those

who had been displaying blue colours from their windows or elsewhere were compelled by threats to withdraw them.

By five o'clock in the afternoon no vestige of blue could be seen throughout the town.

It was now known by everyone within the borough, and by many outside it, that a determined attempt would be made to break up the evening meeting, and that in any event the meeting would be a very disorderly one.

So far as could be seen, this knowledge did not deter any of the leaders of the Tory party from appearing on the platform to support their candidate. It is a characteristic of the English, which even their detractors do not deny them, that, once they get into their heads that a particular line of conduct is a duty, they are never held back from following it by threats or fear of personal injury.

Enemies have sometimes asserted that our imaginative powers are too obtuse to realise in vivid colours what the consequences may be. Even if this is so, who would have it otherwise?

In addition to his local supporters a large contingent of his neighbours and well-wishers arrived from Longnor.

They had been organised by Geoffrey Frevile, who had spent much time in Fairport during the last few days, and knowing the state of things existing, could form a pretty accurate idea of what the evening meeting would be.

The contingent included, in addition to Geoffrey himself, Sir James Knebworthy, the young Huddlestone, the doctor, and his son Walter, the Vicar of Longnor and, of course, Sid, with a few others.

Doris was anxious to make one of the party, and seemed unpersuaded to relinquish her design by the weak remonstrances of her father, but as soon as Geoffrey backed up the objection, by remarking, "I think I should prefer that you were not there, Doris," she yielded at once.

Hilda Alton, having no one to forbid it, had insisted on making one of the party.

During the long drive to Fairport Geoffrey was in the highest spirits. He had no political views, but excitement of this kind he revelled in, and, to use Sid's expression, "enjoyed it as a cat does milk."

"Walter," he said, addressing Walter Gregory, "we shall have fun to-night. Let us keep together."

“Yes, and you can show us some of the courage you displayed in the encounter with the robbers on the Flash road,” added Hilda, rather maliciously, for she did not like Walter, and discredited his boasted valour.

It was evident from the first moment the Tory candidate and his friends came upon the platform, even before they could take their seats, that the vast majority of those who had obtained entrance were hostile to him and his cause, and were bent on showing it.

The Vicar of Fairport was the chairman, and when he rose to speak he was received with hisses and cries of: “What about the fifty pounds?” “Where is it?” “Have you got it with you?” “What about bribery?”

He tried to take no notice, but the shouts were incessant and became louder and more general.

At length the reverend gentleman, whether announcing a pre-determined resolve or a decision there and then arrived at, shouted out in an agitated voice:

“I accepted it under a misapprehension. I intend to return it.”

The audience was not appeased by this explanation. They did not mean to be appeased.

Resolved that the meeting should be a failure, that no one should be allowed to speak, it is doubtful whether at this time any actual violence was contemplated. Nevertheless, when a crowd is composed of such combustible material as the present audience was largely formed of, and which was quivering with overwrought excitement, very little provocation is required to fan it into a state of passion.

This provocation unfortunately was supplied by the candidate himself. He had been standing endeavouring to obtain some sort of a hearing for at least ten minutes. He had tried to treat the matter jocularly, and then without warning, he lost his temper suddenly and completely.

He shook his fists in their faces and challenged anyone who wished to insult him to come on the platform and “have it out” and then so far forgot himself as to scream out: “I consider you a lot of howling mongrels!”

This was the spark necessary to kindle the flame, and, it may be, furnished the opportunity many of them were waiting for. A furious attempt was immediately made to storm the platform. It was at first confined to ten or a dozen leading turbulents, and the first attempt was easily repelled. Geoffrey at once assumed the leadership of the defending party, and the

platform being some feet above the level of the room, to climb up on it was not very easy. Little more was necessary than for the repelling force to push off such of the intruders as succeeded, or partially succeeded, in mounting it.

This continued for a short time, but in a few minutes the rioting became more general, and another, and much more determined, attempt was made to rush the platform.

It looked as though the whole audience joined in this second attempt. Despite all efforts to prevent them, quite a number succeeded in their purpose, and fighting on the platform became general.

Geoffrey had taken up his position in the middle of the platform, and very few rioters succeeded in reaching him in the space he protected, and even when they did and got on to the platform they were at once seized and thrown back into the room, generally falling on the heads of their co-adventurers. At least fifteen to twenty were treated in this manner. Had the platform been protected by five or six men possessed of the pluck and amazing strength of Geoffrey Frevile the rioters would have been defeated.

Whilst the struggle was proceeding, Sid was ever by his side. He took no notice of anyone except of such as attacked his master, and at these he flew like a wild cat, his frantic appearance and savage fury being more efficacious than his strength, which was not great.

Of the other defenders of the position the candidate exhibited the most valour. He fought bravely and against heavy odds, and though his face was bleeding and his clothes torn, refused to give way.

No one can however, repel ten or a dozen men at the same time, and though the fighting had become general, the rioters in the end gained the upper hand. It may occur to the reader to ask, “Where were the police during all this time?”

The answer is that at this period, and indeed for years after, no organised body of police existed in either county or town in England with the exception of London, and the county of Chester. Staffordshire had no police force.

In most of the towns there existed the parish constable, generally an old and often infirm man. Fairport boasted one of these officials, but he was useless on such an occasion as the present, nor did he venture to present himself.

It was the military whose assistance was at this time called upon for the suppression of riots, but there was no military force nearer than Chester, and

military assistance had not been sought.

At length Geoffrey could not fail to perceive the violent attacks on the candidate and the perilous position in which he stood.

He shouted to him to retire. “We will keep them back while you escape,” he exclaimed in a loud voice.

Mr. Plumbley certainly heard this advice, but took no notice of it, and continued the fight. But it was no use. He was overpowered and being maltreated when Geoffrey, first sweeping his own opponents backwards, and calling to Sid to keep them off a minute, rushed to the rescue of the candidate and, lifting him, threw him across his shoulder like a sack of corn, and carried him out. The view of the soles of his boots being carried high in air, rapidly out of the back door of the platform, at once arrested everyone’s attention, and struck the audience as so comic, as indeed it was, that they burst into violent fits of laughter, and the uproar at once subsided.

Laugh and become harmless! This has been proved to be so true by repeated experience that it may almost be regarded as a proverb.

The meeting dispersed, if not in good temper, at all events with no further attempts at violence.

The polling next day was, of course, open voting. No Ballot Act was to supersede this custom for more than a generation afterwards.

It was feared that methods might be resorted to which would intimidate Mr. Plumbley’s voters from recording their votes, but the agent, in anticipation of this, had hired a number of stalwart men, and had stationed them outside each of the polling stations to protect the same and guarantee unmolested ingress and egress, a plan adopted at elections at this time and for many years after. Though there was much hooting and jeering, no one was actually prevented from voting. Crowds still showed in the streets, and blue colours were again conspicuous by their absence but there was no further rioting.

The hours of polling were from eight a.m. till four p.m., and the state of the poll was issued every two hours.

The excitement was intense, for it was now realised by both sides that it would be a very near thing indeed. Of course there was betting, and the odds at first were two to one on the Tory candidate, but when, at ten o’clock, the

first declaration was made, it was found that the Whig candidate was leading, though only by thirteen votes.

At twelve o'clock "Blue" was ahead by six votes, and the "Pink" supporters became depressed. At two, the "Pink" was in the ascendant by a majority of five.

The betting had become even, and some of the "Blue" supporters began to make attempts to "hedge."

At four the whole population were collected in front of the town hall, where the final result was to be declared. The fever of excitement was such that there was perfect silence. Everyone was too agitated to give expression to their feelings or even to speak, except in a half whisper.

At about a quarter past four a large placard was exhibited in the hall window, announcing as follows:

"Plumbley	1650
"Wiles	1650

"Final result in a few minutes."

When these figures were perceived the effect on the crowd was peculiar. Not a cheer was raised nor an exclamation heard. One and all seemed muzzled. Such a result had never been thought of for a moment on either side. What did it mean? And why say "Final result in a few minutes."

Presently it was whispered round by a member of the waiting body, better informed than the rest of them, that the returning officer would have to give a casting vote, and that as he chose to vote so the result of the election would be. It all now rested with him.

As soon as this was generally appreciated the crowd once more became clamorous and bawled out: "Vote for Alec"—"Send the grocer home"—"Pink for ever," etc.

Inside the hall the position of the returning officer was truly pitiable. He had always been known as a confirmed upholder of Tory principles, and had opposed the new Reform Act, but he was a timid man, nervous, and never desirous of putting himself forward in any position of responsibility. Now everything depended upon his decision. It would require courage to give his vote in accordance with his convictions, to defeat the popular candidate, and raise again the anger of the noisy party against himself. He thought of the consequences which might, and probably would happen to him if he gave the vote which conscience dictated. In the end his courage failed him.

With the remark that, occupying as he did a public position, he did not think he would be right to go counter to what was clearly the wish of the majority of his fellow townsmen, he registered his casting vote in favour of the Whig candidate. A minute after he himself declared the result of the election from the town hall steps.

The result was:

Wiles	1651
Plumbley	1650

So, despite his efforts, his money, and unbounded confidence in the result, James Plumbley, the self-made man, the owner of twenty "establishments" had failed in the ambition of his life, and Alec Wiles was now the member for Fairport.

The agent, Mr. Heelis, protested that he had never been so out in his reckoning before. He attributed the defeat to two things—the amazing popularity of the Whig candidate's wife, and the ludicrous scene of the night before, when the defeated candidate made his exodus in so undignified a manner from his own meeting. "Yes," he added, "it was ridicule that killed our cause."

When the news was brought to the Blue Dragon, Edwina was alone with her mother. Edwina had been highly nervous all day, and when the intelligence arrived her heart was beating very quickly, but nothing seemed to affect the imperturbability of Mrs. Plumbley.

On hearing the result she only said without change of expression or voice:

"Then I suppose I shall not go to Court." And Edwina added:

"Then I suppose I shall."

CHAPTER IX

THE NEW BUTLER

Sir James Knebworthy, baronet, had engaged a new butler. It was Miss Tritsy Turner who first vouched his credentials.

"Yes," she said, after the new butler left the store, "he is all right; we don't often get servants of his sort in this district. He is everything a gentleman's servant should be—dignified, good-looking and obliging."

"You think so," replied the woman who happened to be the only customer in the store at the moment Miss Tritsy pronounced this eulogium on the new arrival at the Manor House.

"I don't think so at all, Mrs. Watkins. I know," Miss Tritsy responded with acerbity. "Do you imagine I have been all this long time at this post office and can't read character. I have seen his handwriting. It exhibits character and determination. He has served in good families, of that I am positive."

Any newcomer in the lifeless little township of Longnor became at once an object of curiosity and discussion, no matter how humble the position he filled. They took slight interest in the happenings in the great world outside, but unquenchable interest in everything that touched upon their immediate surroundings.

It followed that when it became known that a new servant, filling the important post of butler, had arrived at the Manor, everyone was eager to catch sight of him and pronounce upon him his or her opinion.

Where did he come from? Was he likely to be sociable or haughty? What was he receiving as wages from Sir James Knebworthy?

It was known that Sir James had had a lot of trouble in getting suited on this occasion, but believed he had now secured "a treasure." The servant applying for the situation had enclosed one testimonial only, but, fortunately, for him, this came from an old friend of the baronet's, a gentleman who held a high office in the Government, and when Sir James read the words, "he has served me faithfully and efficiently," he desired no further reference.

The man was engaged at once, and made no objection to the terms offered. He said he was tired of London service, and had country tastes

which he now would be able to gratify.

There was no doubt as to his sociability. He soon knew everyone in the township, and most of the villages around. He was much taken with the Moorlands, and in his spare time was constantly wandering about them. He was interested in botany, and spent much time in searching for rare specimens of wild flowers, grasses, and leaves which are to be found in or near the district, all of which he dried, pressed, and placed in books. He was constantly met with in the wildest and most out of the way parts of the district, and, in spite of his sociable qualities, was almost invariably alone.

And now reference must be made to an event of a startling nature in which the man Sid was concerned, and which had an ultimate effect on more than one of the characters to whom the reader has been introduced.

Sid had been with his master during the whole of one evening at the studio at Flash and had been left behind to clear up when his master left.

It was late before he entered on his return journey to Longnor, and the night had become dark and rather wild.

He took the longer route. Unfortunately, when he reached the Royal Cottage Inn he could not resist entering, and, deprived of his master's restraining influence, took two or three glasses of brandy. He could never remember afterwards whether it was two or three, but it was probably the latter.

He was only in the house half an hour, and then resumed his walk, and turned from the high road in the direction of Longnor.

He had sometimes walked this road before at night, both with his master and alone, but somehow to-night it appeared to him there was something weird and uncanny about the road.

Unaccustomed and strange noises seemed to be present. He thought he heard the clank of chains, then faint bells in the far off distance. A bat flew against him and startled him. He was nervous and excited. He stopped abruptly and began to tremble so violently that his knees struck against one another.

His gaze became concentrated, he could not move, for, there, close in front of him and almost immediately in his path was—the Headless Rider! Yes, there was no mistaking. There he sat on the white horse, silhouetted in the black night. His body was encased in a sort of shining armour, which

appeared to glow as if it contained a hidden fire. From his neck a cloak hung which looked as though made of a golden material, and which entirely covered the haunches of the animal. In his right hand, which hung by his side, he held what looked like a short staff or baton.

The position of the horse was peculiar. It stood motionless, with both its fore and hind legs extended, exactly as though it had stopped or been stopped instantaneously, whilst in the act of galloping.

For fully a minute Sid remained with his eyes fixed on this terrible and unearthly spectre. He would have removed his eyes, but could not. He tried to move, but was powerless.

At the end of this time the ghost very slowly lifted the right arm and pointed the staff or baton directly at the trembling man. It remained pointed at him for about ten seconds, then was lowered as slowly as it had been raised.

When it had reached its wonted position the apparition vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. The Headless Rider did not ride away; there was no sound of horse's feet. Horse and man simply disappeared. One moment they were there, the next moment gone, and nothing remained before the eyes of the awe-stricken gazer but the dark moorland.

Poor Sid! He had courage sufficient for many things. In defence of his master he would have attacked a legion, but moral courage he had none, and he was more than commonly superstitious, even in a superstitious age. He believed in ghosts, banshees, pixies, haunted houses, and even in witches. Though he had never heard of astrology he always thought the stars influenced his fate in some inexplicable way.

After the sudden disappearance of the Headless Rider he managed to stumble up to a tree and to lean against it.

"I will never again come this road by myself," he muttered. "If my master had been with me it would not have dared to show itself; it must have found out I was alone. I wonder what it meant by pointing. I will ask Miss Tritsy. I am sure Miss Tritsy will tell me."

When he finally got home to the house of the Grindons blest with the large family and told what had occurred, no one doubted the truth of his story. The legend of the Headless Rider had been known to, and accepted by, the dwellers in the Moorlands for very many years.

To no one did it occur that Sid might possibly be the subject of an hallucination in which the brandy he had taken bore no small share.

When he sought out Miss Tritsy and told her of the remarkable happening that lady took the incident quite seriously. She said that, though few people knew it—indeed she implied that she was the only one who knew it—the phenomenon of pointing the staff or baton had happened before. She appeared to be as well acquainted with this mysterious staff as though she had seen and handled it. It was made, she said, of solid gold and studded with jewels of great value. The legend of the Headless Rider she declared to be this:

He was in his lifetime a noted warrior. Was in command of his followers in a great battle fought between the English and Scotch somewhere in Yorkshire. He had the studded staff in his hand at the moment of his decapitation. The same night the horse brought the headless body to his home near the moorlands of North Staffordshire, still holding the treasured staff in his hand. She could assign no reason why he should have continued ever after to ride over the moorlands carrying this emblem of authority, but she declared that when the staff was pointed at any person some calamity would certainly befall him, or someone near and dear to him, although within what time she could not say.

She said she knew of a case where the Headless Rider had met a shepherd on the moors and pointed his staff at him, and the man had died suddenly, less than five years after, but she added, "He was a heavy drinker."

Sid listened to this with open mouth, but he only said:

"I hope the bad luck, whatever it is, won't fall on master. I don't mind myself."

Of course the adventure furnished an endless subject of talk to all the township. There had never before been so well authenticated a case of the appearance of the apparition. One result was that no one of the cottagers could henceforth be persuaded to walk alone on the moorlands at night. It was generally believed that the Headless Rider either could not or would not appear to two or more persons together.

Geoffrey treated the whole affair as a splendid bit of fun. He was sorry he was not present at so interesting an event. He tried to pooh pooh it to Sid, who had confessed to his relapse at the inn.

"He pointed at you," he said, "because you had broken your promise—that is if he did point at you at all—but the truth is, Sid, it was all your imagination, excited by taking what you are not used to."

With Miss Tritsy he treated it in the same joking manner, and called down upon himself the reproof that he should not joke on serious subjects.

Sir James Knebworthy was high sheriff of the county this year.

He had not desired the office, but had to submit to the custom by which the retiring high sheriff always adds a name to the list of prospective sheriffs. No person whose name is on the list can refuse the office. He can only be relieved by an application to the Court of King's Bench on the occasion when the judges, presided over by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, go through the public ceremony of what is called "pricking the sheriffs."

The most usual ground of excuse pleaded on these occasions is poverty—that the gentleman whose name appears on the list cannot afford to bear the expenses which the position entails.

Though the duties of the high sheriff are not very onerous they involve expenses which are not inconsiderable, chiefly in connection with the duty of receiving and attending upon the judges when they come into the county for the purpose of holding the assizes.

No remuneration is attached to the office, as the obligation to accept it is looked on as a duty which persons of position—landowners—owe to the county in which they reside. The office is very ancient as well as dignified. It has existed from the Anglo-Saxon times. Even in times, much later than this the sheriff was the supreme ruler of the county to which he was appointed, and though many of the powers and duties which he exercised in these times more especially those connected with the control of the king's revenue, and military forces of the county, have been taken from him, he is still the official of the Central Courts of Law, and of the king's judges holding assizes. He often performs important social duties, sometimes entertaining the grand jury or the members of the Bar, or giving an assize dinner.

Sir James Knebworthy, on the third day of the assizes at Stafford, was giving a large and grand dinner at his own house, at which the two judges, contrary to their usual practice, had consented to be present.

The party included, in addition to these notables, Mr. and Lady Huddlestone, Mr. Plumbley—the would-be M.P.—and his wife, Doris Gregory, Geoffrey Frevile, as well as two eminent K.C.'s, some members of the junior Bar, and the judges' marshals, who by etiquette accompany the judges on every occasion.

The legal party from Stafford came in a procession, in considerable state, escorted by javelin men and outriders. A burning question had arisen between the sheriff and his wife as to the order in which the visitors should go in to dinner. Every host and hostess who invites guests of different rank is troubled by this problem. Neither can it be deemed a small matter; so many people, especially ladies, attach such punctilious regard to the precedence to which they are, or think themselves entitled, that an error or slip in such a matter is often looked upon as a slight to be bitterly resented.

Lady Knebworthy's first intention was that Lady Huddlestone, who was the daughter of an earl, should take in one of the judges and the other judge should be reserved for herself, but it was suggested to her that this would be a fatal breach of etiquette. The judges as direct representatives of the king must go in first, and by themselves.

The matter was solved by enquiry of the judges' marshals as soon as they arrived. They left no doubt as to the matter, boldly asserting not only that it was usual for the judges to go in together before anyone else, but that they would not enter the dining-room in any other order.

Fortified by this assurance, everything went well, though a *contretemps* was barely avoided, Mr. Plumbley having, as soon as dinner was announced, offered his arm to Lady Huddlestone, and commenced to walk with her first to the dining-room. He was captured and brought back.

The dinner was excellent and imposing, and included not only all the luxuries that could be desired, but all that could be conceived by the most fastidious epicure.

The dining-table was covered with silver plate and tastefully decorated with flowers. The servants looked very smart. The footmen had new liveries, and the distinguished looking butler had been offered a new suit of dinner dress clothes, which he had refused with the remark that he had a suit which had not yet been worn in his travelling trunk.

The conversation was incessant and cheerful. Someone mentioned the Headless Rider of the moors, and the judges showed much interest in and curiosity as to the foundation of this old Staffordshire legend. Some such superstition, one of them said, was to be met with in several of the English counties, and there was usually some story attached to it. Did anyone know the popular origin of this one, he asked. Miss Tritsy Turner's version of the story was told to them, but no one could vouch that this was the correct, or indeed the generally accepted tradition in the locality. It rested on the authority of the lady herself.

Though in the presence of such august personages—one of them being the Chief Justice of the King's Bench—Mr. Plumbley's talkativeness suffered no restraint. Before the fish had disappeared he had given their lordships a full account of his early life, more than once referring to his uncomfortable sleeping accommodation, his present position and means.

He told of his election contest and the victory won over him by his unknown son-in-law, not even suppressing the ignominious way in which he made his exit from the last meeting. This seemed to amuse the judges, and they both turned to look at Geoffrey Frevile as the hero of the incident.

They appeared to be struck by the good looks and powerful physique of this gentleman.

"Is it a difficult thing to throw a man over your shoulder and carry him out?" asked the Chief Justice.

"Oh, it is largely a question of knack," replied Geoffrey, smiling. "I have done it with two."

"Surely not at the same time?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I should not care to come within your clutches," said the other judge, Mr. Justice Bullen, who had himself been somewhat of an athlete at Oxford.

"Do you happen to know the Wiles, of Norfolk?" said Mr. Plumbley, breaking again into the conversation.

The Chief Justice knew them.

"My son-in-law is of their family. In fact, he succeeds to their baronetcy."

It must be left to Mr. Plumbley himself to reconcile this statement with his conscience when the chance that Alec would succeed to the title was altogether remote. Human nature so readily accepts what it wishes to accept, that a half truth, or even a falsehood, if repeated often enough, is at length accepted by the teller as truth.

Towards the close of the repast the conversation veered round to politics. It was an exciting period, and whenever two or more persons found themselves together the results of the recent elections and the effect of the Reform Act were subjects of discussion, and very generally of highly excited discussion.

The two judges were both Tories, and of the old school. They were proud to acknowledge it, and condemned the new legislation in no measured terms.

No one seemed disposed to controvert their views. Everyone had dined well, and was in good humour. Emerson had not then coined the saying, "Everyone is a conservative after dinner," but the modicum of truth the expression carries existed then as now.

After the ladies had left and the wine and cigars had been circulated, and the servants had quitted the room, Mr. Justice Bullen, who several times during dinner had been regarding with some attention the new butler, turning to the host exclaimed:

"What a fine and intelligent butler you appear to possess, Mr. High Sheriff."

"Yes, my lord, apart from his appearance, he is most obliging and competent. I look on myself as lucky in securing such a man."

"Surely he is not a native of the district?"

"No, my lord, I got him from London."

"Do you know, he has been intriguing me all dinner time, for I cannot but think I have seen him before."

"Possibly your lordship has, for I got him from a high Government official—Sir Adolphus Linden."

"Do you mean that he was in the service of Sir Adolphus Linden?" said the judge quickly. "I have known Sir Adolphus for many years, and I dine regularly at his house, but I have never seen your butler in service there."

"Well, my lord, he was in service there, and I got an excellent testimonial with him from Sir Adolphus."

The judge said nothing more at the time, but before he left he called Sir James aside and said:

"I am very much interested about your butler. Though I am sure I have never seen him at Sir Adolphus Linden's house, the impression haunts me that I have seen him somewhere. Would you have any objection to showing me the testimonial you received with him. I hope you will forgive me asking. My profession has brought many cases before me where situations and other things are obtained by means of testimonials which are not genuine; this case may possibly be one of them."

"Will you come into my smoking-room, and I will fetch it for you at once, my lord."

Sir James spoke hurriedly. He was a little disconcerted. The very possibility that his much-prized servant was not what he represented himself to be, that, in fact, he was an impostor, was a most uncomfortable thing to contemplate.

When the letter was produced and handed to the judge, he seemed merely to glance at it, certainly for not more than a few seconds. Then he handed it back with the remark:

"It is quite genuine. I could myself swear to the writing of Sir Adolphus Linden, for I know it so well."

Sir James was about to put the letter back into its envelope when the judge interposed.

"Would you mind my reading the letter?" he said.

The letter was handed back and the judge read it carefully from beginning to end. In fact, he read it twice, then he exclaimed:

"It is rather a curious thing, but Sir Adolphus does not say the man has ever been his butler."

"Surely, my lord——"

"No, the words are: 'he has served me faithfully and efficiently,' but he does not say as a butler."

"If he has served Sir Adolphus faithfully and efficiently and serves me in the same manner, this is all I care about," replied Sir James, who felt relieved.

"Assuredly, and I congratulate you on having secured him. Good servants are scarce." Then, after a pause, "It is strange I should feel so sure I have seen that man before, and something seems to suggest to me that I have seen him in connection with the Courts of Law, but in what connection I cannot for the life of me recall."

"Perhaps your lordship would like to speak to him. He would probably be able to clear up the mystery in a few moments."

Sir James used the word "mystery" in a light manner. He felt sure that no real mystery lay under that quiet and composed exterior.

“Thank you, with your permission I will. Even a little thing of this sort worries me if I cannot solve it.”

The bell was rung, and the footman in attendance told to ask the butler to step into Sir James’ study for a few moments.

At least five minutes elapsed, during which time neither the judge nor Sir James spoke. They both appeared to be a little nervous whilst awaiting the arrival of this respectable though somewhat imperturbable man-servant.

Then the footman returned and announced that the butler had apparently left the house, and could not be found.

CHAPTER X

A VISIT TO LONDON

Time had passed and summer had come again. Even in a quiet hamlet like Longnor changes must occur. Trivial as they may be, they all possess local interest and produce greater impression and are more observed than is the case in populous cities and towns, where few know what is happening next door to them.

The changes which had happened were of no great importance, though each had furnished to the rarely disturbed residents, a welcome subject for gossip and speculation.

Hilda Alton had given up her pretty cottage at Reapsmoor and had gone to London. Rumour—how and by what means carried was unknown—declared that she was having a very gay time there and spending a great deal of money.

Geoffrey had been away from the township on two occasions, and Sid several times, but neither of them had been absent more than a day or two at a time. They went and returned, but they never told, or gave a hint of where they had been, and the discovery, in which many were interested, beat even Miss Tritsy's patient investigation.

The new butler—his name had now been ascertained to be Abel Ramsay—had begged leave of absence for a week, and this had been granted. In this case Miss Tritsy was rather more successful. She had gathered, so she asserted, that he had driven to Manchester and there taken the night coach, "The Defiance," to London.

"He is going to see his former employer," she declared on no authority whatever.

The statement was made, as were most of the pronouncements of this lady, to increase her own reputation for discernment.

There was no change, however, in the Gregory family. Walter remained at home doing nothing. He had left Oxford without a degree, but with an abundance of debts, which his hard-worked father was struggling to pay.

As to Doris, her infatuation for the "handsome stranger," a name first conferred on him by Miss Tritsy, was as overpowering as ever. She had been

offered a visit to London by an aunt, but had refused it. Though she was not so much with Geoffrey as formerly, and no allusion had, since their mutual declaration of affection, been made to love affairs, she could not bear to be separated from him. To see him, to employ herself with waiting upon him, forestalling his wants in small matters which she seemed to divine, gave her the pleasure, the chief pleasure, she believed, which her life now held.

A very unusual incident had occurred in the life of the Vicar. Hilda had sent him a pressing invitation to visit her in London. She would take no refusal. It was all to be at her expense. If he refused to submit to this condition, which, she said, she feared he would regard as a humiliation, she would not only never forgive him, but refuse to believe he had ever cared for her. She wanted to show him her little house and to give him a good time, such as she was having herself. She had a chaperon living with her, so it would all be in accord with the strict rules of conventionality.

The reverend gentleman had seen London only once in his life, and then but for a couple of days.

He consented to accept the invitation, and even agreed to the condition that it should be at Hilda's expense, but he did it all with very mixed feelings. His desire to see Hilda again was almost overpowering, though the thought often occurred that to do so might be unwise. Would the old infatuation revive, and would he be strong enough to resist it?

Time and constant occupation had rendered his self-imposed disappointment less acute, but he knew only too well that his affection for the girl was still as strong as ever and that a little thing, possibly her presence alone, would destroy his self restraint and compel him to declare it.

Was he right to run the risk, to subject himself voluntarily to the temptation? Then deep down in his mind lay the idea, which he never consciously admitted, and the faintest glimmer of which he tried to banish, that perchance he would be disappointed in her, that she would no longer be the Hilda he had admired, for whom his affection had been so deep.

Bits of the village gossip relative to the life she was leading in London had reached his ears, and though he had contradicted such rumours whenever uttered in his presence, slander, as it always does, had left some impression.

He knew she had fashionable friends—she had often spoken of them in her letters to him—but what sort of characters they bore and how she spent her time in their company he had no idea.

Would she wish to make him acquainted with them? He had a secret dread of this. His desire was to see Hilda, Hilda only, and this was stronger than all the disturbing premonitions. There were other things which made the prospect of a visit to the great city very attractive to him.

He was a great reader, and had gathered so much about the places of interest which abound in London, had pictured them so often to himself, that such an opportunity of seeing them was hard to resist.

So he accepted with many expressions of thanks, and when the date of the visit was fixed upon he became as excited as a child.

The only stipulation he made was that the visit must not extend over a Sunday.

Hilda in her letter had said something about a fortnight, but this he had answered was impossible. He had never allowed anything to interfere with his Sunday services. Sunday, most persons in his situation would have found the hardest day of the week, but he never did. He enjoyed it all with a deep and unaffected joy. What though the physical and mental work of the day was severe, and continuous, there were compensations which far outweighed these inconveniences. In fact, the inconveniences were not felt: "The labour we delight in physics pain."

By Hilda, whose affection for her friend had continued unabated, notwithstanding the life of gaiety and excitement she was now leading, the visit was not looked forward to without some slight apprehension.

What would her fashionable friends think of her clerical friend, and above all, what would he think of them? Her conscience told her plainly that he could not approve of the life she was leading. It had become a life of constant pleasure and gaiety, led in the company of people most unsuitable as friends of a young woman who still deep down in her heart unacknowledged, had the desire to become the wife of a staid country parson.

She felt she would be introducing an incongruous element into this new circle of friends. Her time was always taken up with pleasure engagements from which she would not be able altogether to exclude him.

But on the other hand she was certain she could give him some pleasures during his visit which he would appreciate, and a casual association with a class of persons of whom he knew nothing might not be an altogether bad experience for him.

Then she found herself wondering if he would arrive in his shabby clothes, and whether it would be wise to make some kind of apology for him before his arrival. She was determined not to be ashamed of him. She often said to herself that the true nobility of the man was enhanced by the meanness of his attire. She knew his poor patched garments enclosed a gem of almost unique value, although she had contracted the habit of throwing away endless sums of money on her own dress and adornment.

She met her friend when the coach arrived at the old coaching inn, the Swan with Two Necks, in Lad Lane.

He had travelled up as an outside passenger on the Royal Mail coach, the night coach which started every night from the town of Leek at twelve p.m.

Though the weather was not very inclement, he looked to her terribly cold, and the first thing she noticed was that, as of yore, he wore no overcoat, and did not appear even to have had a travelling rug.

She saw as soon as he dismounted, which, in his semi-frozen condition, was not easy, that he was dressed in a new suit of clothes; of course black, and that he wore black gloves and the parson's white tie.

He looked rather like an undertaker practising his trade, and Hilda could not prevent the thought occurring to her what an irresistible subject of mirth he would certainly furnish to her associates.

The vicar's delight at seeing her again was unquestionable.

"Well, Hilda, my dear, how are you? And that I need hardly ask; you look as well as ever."

"I am all right, but as to you, you look petrified; why, you had not even a rug."

"Yes, I had. My young travelling companion gave me a share of his part of the way," was the reply.

"Oh, Vicar, can I never persuade you to take proper care of yourself?" asked Hilda.

Taking no notice of this enquiry, the Vicar continued:

"Do you know I have been looking forward to this visit so eagerly, I sometimes say to myself I have thought of nothing else. Do you think it is right of me to neglect my work for my own gratification? That is what I have repeatedly asked myself."

"It is quite right. It is your duty to enjoy some of the good gifts of this world, which you so often tell your people are God sent blessings; and besides, you are not neglecting your work if you insist on making your visit a parson's week."

"The Wednesday evening service had to be abandoned," the vicar responded, speaking as though to himself.

Hilda's house was situated in South Kensington, just beginning to be looked upon as a fashionable suburb. They took a hackney coach and were soon at home. It was a charming bijou residence, quite elegantly furnished. The chaperon proved to be an elderly lady, a Mrs. Hamilton-Smith (with a hyphen), a lady of pleasant manners and most accommodating disposition. Everything that Hilda said or did was right. She certainly exercised no restraint on the subject of her chaperonage.

A very appetising lunch had been prepared, to which the Vicar did full justice.

He began to talk of the delights of his coach journey.

"I did so enjoy every bit of it," he said.

"Well, I should not have thought so," Hilda responded drily.

"Oh, my dear, the only word to describe it is 'enchanting.' It was all like a beautiful dream. The ring of the horses' shoes on the hard road was a poem, the shadows of the hills, trees and houses as we seemed to be flying past were a panorama. As day broke I saw the most splendid sight I have ever seen—the sun rising and dispelling the clouds. I don't know how many colours the rainbow contains. At first it was all gold, then as the sun got higher one half of the heavens seemed to be composed of every colour imaginable, and not only the colours, but the most delicate blends of the colours, the whole one glowing mass. The contrast with the other part of the heavens where it was all dark and shadowy seemed only to add to the beauty. The words of Bishop Ken's morning hymn came to my mind:

'Awake my soul and with the sun
Thy daily stage of duty run.'

"I could not resist repeating it to my companion, a charming boy returning to Westminster school from Yorkshire, who told me his name was Brian Wroughton, and he was going to be a clergyman. He said he should learn the hymn, and was sure he would always think of it throughout his life whenever he saw the sun rise. Then the birds began to wake the world."

“My dear Vicar, how poetical you have become,” Hilda interposed.

The Vicar continued:

“And when later we stopped for breakfast at Woburn, you will laugh, but the poetry of the journey still held me. I have never in my life so enjoyed a breakfast. The blazing wood fire in the large fireplace, the steaming coffee, hot chops, delicious smelling bacon, it all seemed a fitting continuation of the picture I had been revelling in.

“The boy Brian had breakfast with me. I wanted to pay for him as well as myself—this of course would have been at my own expense, Hilda,” the vicar added in parenthesis—“but he would not let me, and pulled out and showed me a purse full of money.”

“What a nice boy,” Hilda could not resist saying.

“When we got near London every yard of the way was interesting. We seemed to fly past waggons drawn by sleepy horses, with sleepy drivers, all loaded with vegetables and fruit, on their way, I suppose, to Covent Garden market. Then finally all the bustle and excitement of the London streets, and best of all your welcome face to greet me at the end of it all.”

As soon as lunch was over Hilda wanted to hear of the doings in the Moorlands, in which she still maintained her interest.

“We go on as quietly as ever. The evening service at the church is, I think, better attended, but the Wednesday evening service I fear not quite so well. This worried me a good deal, for I think it must be my fault.”

“Tell me all about the people,” said Hilda, pushing a handsome silver box containing cigars towards him, of which mute invitation he took no notice.

“How is your sister, and Miss Tritsy, the Huddlestones, the Plumbleys, and especially Mr. Frevile?”

“My sister, Miss Tritsy and the Huddlestones are well. The Plumbleys are in London. I must try to call upon them. I have not seen Mr. Geoffrey Frevile for some time.”

“I need not ask if Doris Gregory is still in love with him. I hear from her often. Her letters are full of him. She thinks of nothing else. Does he come to church?”

“I have never seen him inside the church, but you know my views, Hilda, that we shall be judged by our acts, not by our professions, and I so

constantly hear of acts of kindness performed by Mr. Frevile that I, at all events, won't judge him harshly, or at all, and yet——"

"And yet, what?"

"There seems to be a mystery about him. He puzzles even Miss Tritsy Turner" (and the Vicar laughed). "She thinks he is some great man who for certain reasons wants to lead a concealed life. What those reasons are Miss Tritsy cannot fathom, and if Miss Tritsy cannot fathom them no one else can. Many of our people think he is secretly married and ashamed of his wife. There is no doubt that notwithstanding that he is an enigma, perhaps partly owing to this, he is the most popular man in the township."

"Then I suppose that is the reason he does not propose to Doris," said Hilda answering the remark about the suspected marriage.

At this moment the door opened, and, unannounced, a man of military appearance and bearing, entered the room.

Hilda rose and shook hands with him, and then:

"I want to introduce you Arthur," she said, "to my old friend the Reverend Mr. Adams. I have told you about him." And then, "Vicar, this is my friend, Captain Arthur Mickleford."

The captain was certainly very good-looking, and responded to the introduction in a pleasant and affable manner.

"I seem to know the Vicar quite well from your description of him, Hilda. I am pleased to make his personal acquaintance."

The vicar found himself wondering where and how Hilda had made this new acquaintance. His wonderment was not lessened when the new arrival poured himself out, without invitation, a glass of wine, in the glass which had evidently been laid for him, the Vicar, but which had not been used; and having drunk the wine and refilled the glass, took from the silver box a cigar, and lighted it, also without asking permission or making apology. All this seemed to show that the captain was on terms of considerable intimacy with the lady, for in those days to smoke in a sitting-room at all was unusual, and to do so without asking leave would generally have been looked upon as very rude.

But Hilda did not seem to notice. She turned to the Vicar and said:

"Now you must promise me not to give a thought to Longnor while you are my guest. Remember you have to enjoy yourself and do exactly as I bid you."

“Yes, I am sure I shall enjoy myself, and I will be very obedient; there are so many things I look forward to seeing in London.”

“Tell me what they are, and we will between us manage that you see them all.”

He was given no enlightenment as to who the “we” meant, but a momentary shade of disappointment crossed his mind. He had so looked forward to seeing the sights of London in the company of Hilda alone.

He replied, however, with enthusiasm.

“First and foremost there is Westminster Abbey. I have only been in the Abbey about ten minutes in my life, and this when I was too young to appreciate it. Then, of course, St. Paul’s and the British Museum.”

“Captain Mickleford would be a good cicerone for these places,” said Hilda with a laugh.

“I have never seen one of the d——d places in my life,” the captain replied.

The Vicar glanced towards Hilda, but she did not seem very shocked either by her martial friend’s ignorance of the places or by the adjective he applied to them.

“Is it only churches and museums that interest you?” she asked.

“Oh, no, of course these come first, but I want to see the parks, and all the grand people in their carriages that drive there. Then there is the Bank of England. I should like to get a peep into that and see the gold, and the house of the lord mayor. Perhaps I might even see the Lord Mayor?”

“I don’t know, but we will try,” said Hilda.

“There are lots of other places I know well by reading about them, and I should like to see the place where all the flowers are sold, and the river Thames of course, and the Tower, and I should like to have a look at Drury Lane Theatre.”

“You shall certainly go and see a play there,” said Hilda.

“Oh, I meant only the outside. I have often read about it, but I have never been inside a theatre,” was the quick reply.

“Your tastes are very primitive,” said the captain with a scarcely concealed sneer.

Hilda turned on him at once:

“And what if they are? They are none the worse for that; much better than some of ours,” she exclaimed hotly.

“I beg pardon,” replied the captain.

He spoke in more humble accents than he had yet done. He seemed desirous not to offend Hilda, and shortly afterwards took his departure.

Left in the company of one another, for the chaperon, always alive to what she thought would please, had quitted the room soon after the military gentleman, Hilda and her old friend had a long and intimate talk, lasting till tea time. Hilda was full of her new life. The attractions of London she admitted had taken a strong hold on her. How she could have lived in such a place as Longnor so long she would never understand. It was existence, not life. Now she never felt dull, all her time was occupied. She had still her little maid Marion with her, but she had become a little anxious about her. She had no relatives in London, and she (Hilda) feared the girl was making friends not altogether of the right sort.

The vicar had the uncomfortable feeling that the same thing might be true about her mistress, but he only said:

“Would it not be well that she returned to Longnor? I will gladly take her home with me on Saturday.”

“I really could not spare her. She is a capital maid, and a far more amusing companion than Mrs. Hamilton-Smith.”

Then Hilda began to talk of her former life and habits, and the Vicar felt the old fascination of the girl stealing over him and pervading him as of old. There was no doubt that when Hilda was her natural self she was very attractive. Despite her appearance of “fine lady” and the change in her manners and conversation, she was still the same Hilda to him—the only one who had ever enlisted his affections, the only girl he could love.

Notwithstanding this he felt no temptation to declare his feelings. He knew that under the changed conditions this would be unwise, and most likely hopeless. The Hilda of simple tastes, content with life in a quiet and dull Staffordshire hamlet, had appeared at one time a possible life partner for him. The present Hilda he could not for a single moment visualise as occupying such a position.

Tea was brought in by Mrs. Hamilton-Smith, who apologised for having to do this homely task herself, as it was Marion’s evening out and she was getting herself ready.

“Tell her to come in here before she goes, that she may see her old friend,” said Hilda.

When Marion presented herself she startled the Vicar by her changed manners as much as by her changed appearance. She was gaudily dressed, in imitation, as it seemed to him, of her mistress. Her lips were brilliant vermilion, and her eyebrows blackened, though how this change in her appearance was produced he was far too simple to know. He knew enough to understand that the state of things was dangerous, and before she left made a strong appeal to her to return with him to Longnor, promising that he would procure for her a good situation immediately.

The offer was refused with the contemptuous remark:

“I’d as soon you buried me alive as take me back to Longnor.”

No sight-seeing was attempted that day. Hilda seemed content with the society of her friend, whilst on his part no sight could have given him greater pleasure than he derived from sitting opposite to her, watching her often changing expression and listening to her talk.

The next day was spent together, and they were quite happy. They saw many of the sights the Vicar had so eagerly looked forward to—the cathedrals, churches, and museums. Though they could not get inside the Bank of England, they were lucky enough to obtain a momentary peep of the Lord Mayor entering his coach at the Mansion House. It all delighted the clergyman as it would a child. As they drove through the main thoroughfare in one of the comparatively newly introduced vehicles called “*cabriolets de place*,” or simply “cabs,” he asked constant questions as to the places and buildings they passed, in reply to which it is to be feared Hilda drew largely on her imagination.

The first shade on the day’s brilliant enjoyment occurred when, on getting home, he saw the dinner table was set for three persons, and in a short time Captain Mickleford walked in with an assurance as great as though the house had been his own.

Though his presence was disagreeable to the clergyman, the captain was studiously polite to him, and when Hilda told how they had spent the day merely remarked:

“It must have been very interesting.”

On the Thursday afternoon, when only two days of the visit remained, Hilda surprised her visitor not a little by saying she had taken tickets for the opera at Covent Garden that evening.

"Hilda, do you think it would be right of me to go to a theatre?" he said.

Hilda had no doubt on the point, and assured him that he would enjoy the singing.

"Perhaps so, but I feel I ought not to go to a place where I should not like any of my parishioners to see me, but I know nothing of what a theatre is like."

Hilda was determined he should go. He was too countrified. His ideas and tastes needed enlargement. It would be a useful experience for him. All country clergymen need to have their ideas enlarged, so she thought.

As usual her will prevailed. He enjoyed the music, as Hilda had foreseen, but when at the conclusion of the piece the ballet began and the stage was crowded with girls, all of them, as it seemed to him, insufficiently dressed, and whose gyrations bordered on the indecent, he showed immediate signs of uneasiness. He shifted nervously in his seat, and in a few minutes turned an agitated face towards his companion.

"Hilda," he said, "I would prefer not to stay here any longer. I will wait for you outside."

"I will come with you." This was all she replied, but they left the theatre together, and on the way home nothing was said as to the failure of this attempt to "enlarge the ideas of the country clergyman."

The next evening's attempt turned out still more unfortunate.

"Now, Vicar," she said, when they were having their last dinner together, "I am going to take you presently to Vauxhall Gardens."

"That will be delightful," was the reply, "but will it not be too dark to see the gardens properly?"

"Oh, they are not ordinary gardens. The gardens are illuminated, and to-night there is a display of fireworks."

"Fireworks! Delightful!" The Vicar showed a childish glee in the prospect.

They drove over Westminster Bridge to the gardens, which at this time were called the Royal Gardens, at Vauxhall.

The first view was exhilarating. Thousands of lamps of various colours adorned the buildings and were hung from the branches of the trees, and a band was playing under a gorgeous gilded covering.

The paid singers sang songs both comic and sentimental, in the former of which not infrequently a *double entente* of no very delicate type provoked laughter, which fortunately was not understood by the clergyman.

The whole scene at first fascinated him, and at Hilda's request he went so far as to have his fortune told by the invisible hermit in the dimly lighted hermitage which stood in the grounds.

"What did he tell you?" Hilda asked as soon as he emerged from the hermit's cell. They were walking in one of the dark walks, known as the "lovers' walks," which prevented Hilda from seeing the sudden colouring on her companion's face as he replied:

"I would rather not tell you, Hilda. It was all nonsense."

The hermit's prophecy had been that he would marry the lady who was with him in the gardens that night.

After watching the dancing and exploring the gardens Hilda remarked:

"It is about time for supper."

"I don't want any supper. But are you hungry, Hilda?"

"Famished," was the laughing reply. "Supper at Vauxhall is the event of the evening."

When they came to the private supper box which had been engaged, many other parties with similar object surrounded them, and the scene was one of noisy mirth and hilarity.

Great was the clergyman's surprise when he saw that the table was laid for six persons. He looked towards Hilda.

"Yes," she said, "we are to have a little party; Sir James Jones and Captain Mickleford are joining us, and they are bringing ladies."

"Their wives, I suppose?"

"No, I think not," was the only reply.

When the ladies came with their escorts it required but little penetration to see that if they were the wives of the gentlemen guests they had chosen very vulgar spouses.

They were introduced as Miss Betty Smithson, and the Countess Paloni, the latter lady by her voice and manners giving the lie to her suggested Italian birthplace, and suggesting as a more likely place of her "kindly engendure" the district within the sound of Bow Bells.

The Vicar was greatly surprised that these common women should address Hilda by her christian name, and appear to be on terms of intimacy with her. Hilda was evidently the hostess.

"Now, Hilda, order the fizz," said the captain as soon as they were seated at the table.

"Yes, and let it be a magnum," added Betty Smithson.

The supper was sufficiently appetising, but the guests appeared to eat little and drink much.

The clergyman felt as though living in a new world. The conversation was of a kind to which he was entirely unused, and a great part of which he did not fully understand. He could take no part in it himself. The jokes, which provoked laughter even from Hilda, were of coarse description and the point of the stories was generally a *double entente* which conveyed no meaning to him.

The whole scene was distasteful, and worse than distasteful to him, but what surprised and gave him pain was to observe that it apparently did not present itself to Hilda in the same light. She appeared to enjoy the boisterous fun, though when a particularly coarse joke was exchanged she glanced towards the Vicar with a look which might have been deemed apologetic.

He could not conceal from himself that Hilda was changed. On coming to London it had been her misfortune to have been engulfed at once in a pleasure-loving—indeed, a vicious set; and these companions had carried her away. Much excuse may be made for her. It is only necessary to picture a girl whose life had been monotonous and dull suddenly introduced into the vortex of London pleasures and excitements, with a keen desire to enjoy them and an abundance of money to enable her to do so, and the transformation in Hilda, though it may be lamented, ceases to be a matter of surprise.

"So, Parson, you have been seeing the sights of London," said Sir James Jones. "I hope you have been amused."

"Amused! I don't know that I have been amused, but I have certainly been instructed, and seen much that I wished to see."

"And one or two things he has not wished," interposed the captain.

"Tell me what you have seen," resumed Sir James, who was intent on drawing the clergyman out, with the object of amusing the party.

When the clergyman told of the sights to which he and Hilda had devoted themselves during the week it was received with a burst of laughter from the whole party, with the exception of Hilda, who for her part looked vexed.

"I don't think any one of us has ever seen any one of these things," said the supposed Italian lady.

Before the supper was over it was manifest that the champagne—fresh bottles of which had been ordered, not by the hostess but by Captain Mickleford, who seemed to take the management of the feast upon himself—had had an effect. To state the fact bluntly, several of the party were drunk, and Hilda herself much excited by the wine.

The Vicar now felt not only distressed, but greatly ashamed that he, a clergyman and in clerical costume, should find himself, however innocent in intention, a member of such a disreputable party. He had several times during the supper suggested that he wished to go, and now rose from his seat resolved to leave whether Hilda stayed on or not. He found himself pulled down by his coat tails by the captain, and the same thing happened when he attempted to rise again.

"We are not going to have our party broken up just as we are beginning to enjoy ourselves. You must see it out, Parson. Don't be a killjoy," exclaimed the captain. Hilda, however, had still sufficient wits left to see that the situation was risky, and might become dangerous, and to take up a determined attitude.

Rising from her seat, she spoke in an authoritative voice:

"I am going, and my friend the Vicar is going with me. The party is ended."

Then handing her purse to Captain Mickleford she asked him to pay the reckoning.

The captain bowed and left the box with staggering gait.

A minute afterwards the clergyman found himself walking through the gardens towards the exit with the Countess Paloni by his side.

Hilda was behind with the captain, who had rejoined the party and who always seemed to pay her much attention. She was too valuable an asset to risk losing.

The Countess Paloni nudged the reverend gentleman and made him understand by signs and whispers that she had something to communicate to

him which she did not desire should be overheard.

"Parson," she said in a half drunken whisper, "listen to me. I want to tell you the captain is getting Hilda's money from her, and will d——d soon have it all. You know he professes to be in love with her."

Startling and painful as this was to the hearer, he could at the moment think but of one reply:

"Is she in love with him?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know, but she is a fool, and is flattered by his attentions."

"Do you know anything about the captain?"

"I know he is a thorough bad 'un and I want you to save Hilda from him;" and giving the clergyman a dig in the ribs, she added with a coarse laugh: "You are the one to do it, for you are in love with her yourself."

The vicar's first thought was how she could have found this out.

Whether this warning of the Countess Paloni's was prompted by affection for Hilda or by jealousy of the captain is doubtful, though the character she gave to her military friend was true. He was a scamp of the first water. A man of good family, he had exhausted the patience of his relatives by his extravagance and unprincipled behaviour. The French phrase "*chevalier d'industrie*" best described into what at this time he had degenerated. He had been caught by Hilda's good looks and lively style, but her money was the real attraction. His only hope of retrieving his ruined fortunes lay in marriage. He had become a fortune-hunter pure and simple, and this at a time when the species was much more common than it is to-day.

At the date of this story the man who married a rich girl got her fortune. Now he does not, and this difference in the law, has in a great measure led to the almost entire extinction of this parasitic type of adventurer.

The next day was Saturday, the day on which the visit was to come to an end. The Vicar was to return by the day coach, leaving "The Necks," as The Swan with Two Necks was called, at eleven.

He would have liked to lengthen, if only for a few hours, his time with Hilda and have taken the night coach, but this would have meant an encroachment on the Sunday.

The last night he spent in Hilda's attractive little house sleep almost deserted him. He was anxious and excited. He reviewed the events of the

past five days with quickly alternating feelings of pleasure and pain. He knew he had enjoyed much of it; the recollection of what he had seen would remain with him for life; but under all this, quickly rising to submerge it, was a feeling of sad disappointment. This feeling, though conscious of its existence, he hardly dared to analyse.

He knew it was associated with Hilda. She had done and countenanced many things of which he could not approve, but he refused to acknowledge to himself that she had deteriorated, that she was not the same Hilda as formerly. She had been so good and kind to him, yielding to his wishes, perhaps his prejudices, even at the expense of her new friends. Her manners, when not influenced by others, were the old fascinating manners which had won his affection in the past, and which still held it. Yet something told him that the hope he had, without acknowledging it, never quite abandoned, could never be realised, that there was now a greater gap between them than there had been before.

And yet he would not condemn her. All manner of excuses came to his mind, and were welcomed. Her love of pleasure was natural. It was a phase of youth which must be satisfied. It would pass away with years.

Their environments were so infinitely dissimilar, no wonder their tastes were different. What would be wrong for him might, perchance, be right for her. What right had he to try to impose his own standard of life on a girl whose individuality was so strongly contrasted with his own? These and other thoughts of the same character invaded him in quick succession. No one has any difficulty in finding apologies for the object of his or her love. And yet despite all this reasoning, the pain remained. There was yet another thing which sorely troubled him. Ought he to warn Hilda against the captain? He was convinced from his own observation that this military friend of hers merited the character which had been given him. But did she care for him? That was a question which neither he nor his informant could reply to, and so much depended on it.

Could she be trusted, with her excellent good sense and quickness of perception, to take care of herself, or was she drifting unconsciously towards danger? He could not decide. He would work it out when he got home again, and perhaps write. He felt he could not at present speak about it to her.

Hilda met him at the breakfast table, looking fresh and attractive as ever. Dissipation, such as that of the night before, was exceptional, and her pleasure pursuing life had not yet left objective signs.

She was, as she had been throughout the visit, almost wistfully eager for his comfort and enjoyment.

One proof of this feeling was shown by the presence of a large parcel which lay on the breakfast table before him.

"That is my parting gift to you," she said.

On being opened the parcel was found to contain a very fine and large travelling rug.

"Oh, Hilda, you ought not to do this," was the only remark the recipient of the gift seemed able to utter.

"Well, I know I ought. I wish I were as sure of all I do as I am of this."

This rather involved reply was the only indication she had given during the visit that she was not quite satisfied with her own conduct.

Later she accompanied him in a cab to the coach office. Both of them were very silent, as is so often the case where parting is really painful.

It was not until the coach was almost ready to start that Hilda broke the silence by saying suddenly:

"Vicar, why do you not reproach me?"

The Vicar looked straight into her eyes. They appeared to rivet him. He made no reply, but, if ever it can be said of a man that "love in his eyes was beaming," it could be truly said at this moment of this poor clergyman.

Hilda altered her position, and stood directly in front of him, and in a demanding tone repeated the question:

"Why do you not reproach me?"

"My dear, what right have I to reproach you?"

This came slowly after a long pause.

"You have every right, and you ought to," replied Hilda in firm accents.

He was on the very verge of saying, "My love for you overwhelms everything; I can think of nothing else," but stayed himself in time.

He only said:

"Hilda, whatever you do, I don't think I could ever reproach you. It is past my power. May God bless you. Remember you are always first in my prayers. Goodbye."

The coach horn sounded, and, releasing Hilda's hand, which he had kept some time within his own, he mounted to his seat, and in a few moments the coach had started on its journey.

So long as Hilda was in sight he looked round and waved his adieu, then with a deep-drawn sigh settled himself and drew the travelling rug, which seemed the only thing left of her, over his knees.

It was a heavy-hearted man who was now returning to Longnor.

CHAPTER XI

THE COLLIERY ACCIDENT

A dinner party was being given by the Knebworthys at their home, the Manor. The guests were assembled, and included Mr. and Lady Huddlestone, Mr. and Mrs. Plumbley, Dr. and Mrs. Gregory, Doris Gregory, and one or two others.

Geoffrey Frevile had been invited, but at the time fixed for the dinner had not put in an appearance. Enquiry was made of Doris if she knew of any reason for his absence.

“I know he intended to come. He left home early this morning, and when we left he had not returned,” she answered.

The usual ten minutes’ grace allowed to a laggard guest having expired, the party proceeded to the dining-room, where in a short time in the buzz of conversation his absence seemed to be forgotten by everyone save Doris, who constantly cast anxious glances towards the door.

“Our missing guest does not seem to arrive,” said Lady Knebworthy when dinner was nearly half finished.

“Can anyone tell me what he, a man of such energy and ability, sees in this district to make him stay here so long?”

This remark fell from Mr. Plumbley, who had taken a great deal of interest in Geoffrey for some time past.

“He is an artist, and I have no doubt finds plenty of scope here for the exercise of his profession,” replied the hostess.

“I don’t think he can be a professional artist. I have offered him several commissions to paint pictures for me, and he always either refuses right out, or makes some excuse.”

“There may be some other reason which detains him in the neighbourhood,” remarked Lady Knebworthy quietly.

“What is that?” asked the inquisitive proprietor of the twenty grocery establishments.

His hostess did not reply in words, but she bent her head slightly towards Doris, a motion the girl indicated did not perceive.

The infatuation of Doris Gregory for the "handsome stranger" as he was still called, was generally known and often discussed throughout the township.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Mr. Plumbley answered.

"Well, I have a great admiration for Mr. Frevile, and I wish him every luck. There are very few eligible young men round here. My daughter carried off the most eligible, and he was not a native. Geoffrey Frevile is a handsome chap, good-tempered and kindly. Then he is so extraordinarily strong; I mean physically. You all know how he rescued me from the mob at the time of my election—I mean my son's election."

"How is your son-in-law?" inquired the host, more with the attempt of stopping his guest's incessant talk which always wearied him, than a desire to learn anything concerning the Whig Member of Parliament.

"Oh, he is getting on amazingly. I suppose you have all heard," continued Mr. Plumbley, turning half round to address the party generally, "that one of the lives between him and the baronetcy is gone, and another is well over seventy years old? He must be a baronet soon, and he is very popular in the House."

"I hear very good accounts of him in his profession," interposed Dr. Gregory.

"Oh, yes, he is sure to be a judge sooner or later. Perhaps, Sir James, you will some day have to attend upon him as high sheriff."

"I hope I shall never be called upon to serve as high sheriff again."

Such a feeling as this Mr. Plumbley confessed he could not understand. It appeared to him, if he might say so without offence, a little un-English. Then he went on to declare that he himself would not object to take the office, if some retiring high sheriff would only be so good as to nominate him.

No one took notice of this remark, for at this moment the door opened and the missing guest entered the room.

He came in smiling in his usual bright way. He seemed neither bashful nor disconcerted, and after bowing to the host and hostess took the seat at the table which had been reserved for him, and which, either by accident or arrangement, was next to that in which Doris was sitting.

"A thousand apologies to the whole company. I was quite unavoidably detained."

He gave no further explanation, and, turning to the immaculate butler, who had entered the room behind him, added:

"Let me pick up my dinner at the stage at which you have arrived. That will do for me."

"Oh, Sir," exclaimed that Admirable Crichton with feeling, "I have kept all the dishes hot for you, and can serve them in a minute."

"Right; I am hungry as a hunter, and don't doubt my powers of catching the rest of the company up."

"What have you been doing with yourself? I have been so anxious," said Doris.

"My dear, I hope it has not interfered with your appetite," was the laughing reply.

"Well, it has rather." And then in a low tone he alone could hear she continued, "I am always uncomfortable when I don't know what you are doing."

"You think I am up to some mischief?"

"No, I don't think that. I only fear you are doing something rash. Won't you tell me?"

"I have been doing nothing rash to-day, and I will certainly tell you. I have had to look after Sid."

"What, has he broken out again?" exclaimed Doris, who knew the one weakness of Geoffrey's devoted servant.

"Yes, he has, and prettily badly. I had to take him home and see him to bed and to stay with him some hours, for when he takes drink he goes mad, and it takes all my strength to master him. He is, however, all right again now."

"Are you not very angry with him?" asked Doris.

"Angry! No, I admire him immensely."

"Oh, Geoffrey, I don't believe you have ever been angry in your life. I shall never understand you," said Doris.

"It is quite easy to understand. The fact is Sid is a hero. If you knew what he was when I first took him. He was enslaved by his habit, and he has fought splendidly against it, and though it is still with him, he beats it down so often that even when it conquers him he is still heroic."

"And he does it all for you. I am sure of it," said Doris.

"I suppose so. Now he will be miserable for months, in spite of all I can do or say."

"You have never told me where you got him from or what he was when you selected him as your servant," said Doris.

"I don't think you would care to hear this, Doris."

"Shouldn't I! You know, or very likely you don't, how curious I am in everything that concerns you, and you now profess to tell me everything—except one thing, and that, I suppose you never will tell me—but at least you might tell me this."

"If you so much wish it, Doris, I will, but it must never go beyond you. I know I can trust you." Then dropping his words to a whisper, came the unexpected words: "He was a thief when I first took him."

"A thief!"

"Yes, but it was not his fault. His father and mother, in fact the whole family, were thieves. He was brought up to it. He never had a chance. He was, when I first met him, killing himself with drink. I thought it would be a sporting thing to give him a chance."

"I can't imagine Sid a thief. I have often thought I should like to see a real thief to see what he looks like," said Doris.

"My dear Doris, they look the same as other people; perhaps a little more intelligent," was the laughing reply.

"Sid is so abominably ugly," Doris muttered, as though to herself.

"That was one of the reasons I took him."

Doris felt prompted to reply, "On the theory of contrasts, I suppose," but she did not, for at this moment the butler handed a paper to Dr. Gregory who, as soon as he had read it, rose from the table quickly, exclaiming:

"I am sorry to have to leave this pleasant party, but I am wanted urgently. There has been an explosion at the Berington Collieries, Cheadle way. It is feared twenty to thirty miners are entombed. They want all the medical aid they can get."

The whole company rose from the table. They looked alarmed and frightened, with the one exception of Geoffrey Frevile. It seemed to Doris, whose eyes were fixed on him, that his countenance appeared to brighten up

at the distressing news. Whether this was her imagination, or fact, it was unquestionably true that this strange man always looked happy and light-hearted under circumstances which would occasion anxiety and fear in the ordinary man.

Not only could he treat danger with contempt, but its presence seemed to animate him. He placed his hand upon the doctor's shoulder as he exclaimed:

"Of course I am coming with you."

"I shall be very glad to have you."

"I shall come too," said Doris.

"My dear," replied her father, "it will be no place for you. You must stay here."

"I can't stay here. I am coming with you."

"I forbid you to do so, Doris."

Her father spoke in a more determined manner than he generally did.

Geoffrey interposed.

"Let her come, I am sure she will be of assistance," he said.

The doctor said nothing more. Like the rest of the Gregory household, he never opposed anything approved by Geoffrey.

All the other male members of the party proffered their assistance, but Geoffrey rather curtly replied that he feared they would be no use. They would only be in the way.

Turning to the butler he said:

"Bring me two bottles of brandy."

The doctor's chaise had been brought by his stable boy, and was now waiting at the door to convey them to the scene of the disaster.

When they were prepared to mount they were a little surprised to find a man already seated on the back seat. This was none other than the butler, Abel Ramsay.

"So you are coming with us!" said the doctor.

"Yes, Sir," was the laconic reply.

“I am going to drive. Doris get up by me,” exclaimed Geoffrey, taking the reins from the boy.

Without a word the doctor got up on the back seat.

The night was dark and chilly, and the drive, which was almost ten miles from Sir James Knebworthy’s home, seemed endless. They were all impatient to arrive at their destination, to be doing something, they knew not what to assist the imprisoned miners.

Geoffrey had insisted on taking off his overcoat and placing it round Doris, much against her will, but he always got his own way in the end.

Before they reached the pit they had to pass through the little mining village, almost all the residents in which were employed at the colliery.

It presented a sombre appearance.

Not a soul was visible. Though it was approaching midnight, every door was open, and through many windows could be seen the reflection of glimmering fires apparently banked up for the early morning, as is the custom in mining villages. Every man, woman and child had evidently left their houses and rushed from the village to the colliery on the first news of the accident, everything else forgotten in the overwhelming anxiety as to the fate of those near and dear to them.

A few minutes after the chaise was toiling up the rather steep ascent at the top of which the colliery was situated. Not a word had been spoken after they left the deserted village until they were within about two hundred yards of the pit.

Then Doris placed her hand on Geoffrey’s arm and whispered: “Promise me you will do nothing rash.”

She could only see him silhouetted in the darkness. She could not see the expression on his face. She heard a happy laugh, and then the words:

“I shall only do what is necessary.”

“But you are so venturesome,” the girl again whispered.

“Doris, you look on adventure with fear; I regard it as the salt of life. Sometimes I think it is the only thing that makes life endurable. At all events it is my life, and will be to the end, come what may. I can’t alter it even for you.”

Nothing more was said, and almost immediately after they reached the pit. There the scene was one of pathetic horror, almost indescribable to those

who have never witnessed such a sight. In the weird light of torches and a few sheltered candles were reflected the awe-stricken faces of a mass of men, women and children, clustering together in dangerous proximity to the shaft of the pit, a dark hole in which nothing was visible, and down which some of the workers were still imprisoned.

The women and children all appeared to be crying, some of them moaning piteously, and others, who had lost every bit of self-control, wildly screaming out the names of their entombed relatives, as though their very invocation could draw them out of the pit.

It must be remembered that coal mines were not in these times managed in the admirable way in which they are at present. They were subject to no statutory control, the hours of labour were terribly long, the mines and cuttings were narrow and cramped, impregnated with foul air, and with no proper ventilation or sanitation. Very young children, some of them incredibly young, were employed in them, and often treated with cruelty. In some cases pauper children were apprenticed by the guardians (!) of the poor to colliers, to serve in the mines without wages, from the age of six or seven years to the age of twenty-one.

The mode of letting down and drawing up the workers was very primitive and unsafe. Skips and corves, as they were called, were drawn up to the surface and let down by ropes passing over pulleys. Sometimes the mode of entry and exit was by means of perpendicular ladders, up and down which everyone had to travel. Children often had to mount the ladders, carrying heavy loads of coal fastened upon their backs.

They had no sooner arrived than Geoffrey took the control of the whole rescue proceedings into his own hands, taking little or no notice of the officials of the mine, who seemed quite willing to relinquish responsibility.

He shouted in a loud voice:

"Everyone stand back there six yards from the pit-head."

The vigorous and commanding tone in which this order was given had its effect. It was obeyed by some, but not by all.

"Two of you get a rope and keep them back," he ordered in the same masterful manner, then as he turned to see that his direction was obeyed he met the ugly squinting physiognomy of Sid looking into his face.

"Hallo! How did you get here?"

“We drove over together,” was the reply.

“Who is ‘we’?”

“The Vicar and I,” Sid replied.

Geoffrey now perceived the black-coated and white-tied Vicar of Longnor standing close to him.

Sid gave no signs of his recent intoxication. It was marvellous how quickly he recovered. The sudden news that the doctor had been sent for, and the knowledge that his master would surely accompany him to the scene of disaster and might need his help, had probably, more than anything else, conduced to restore him to a condition of sobriety.

Geoffrey now, taking off his overcoat and throwing it to Sid, began to walk towards the pit shaft.

“Now, Sid,” he said, “keep the people back. I look to you to do it.”

“What are you going to do?” was Sid’s reply, whose interest in the proceedings seemed limited to his master’s actions.

“I am going down the mine.”

“I’ll go with you,” Sid at once exclaimed.

“You won’t, Sid. I have given you your job. Mind you keep the people back.”

“I’ll keep ’em back if I kill ’em,” was the odd retort.

It was impossible for anyone at once to carry out the order and keep the people back, for the skip was just being wound up and had nearly reached the surface. The excitement was so overwhelming, and the pressure of those behind upon those in front so sudden, that it was only a merciful providence which prevented some of them being pushed down the shaft.

Everyone held their breath and every eye was strained to see who this primitive vehicle had brought up.

It would have been useless for any person who knew the miners only by sight to discover who were the begrimed and semi-asphyxiated human beings the lift contained, but the relatives recognised them in a moment.

In addition to the rescue party of three men who had descended with it, the skip now contained two other men and a boy, each one tightly held clasped in the arms of the rescuers.

They might have been dead for any signs of life they showed, but fortunately they were not.

They were taken possession of by the relatives and doctors, and the lift was ready to descend again.

"Who is coming down?" cried Geoffrey. Then, to Sid, "Give me one of those bottles of brandy out of my overcoat," and taking it, he jumped on to the small and dangerous platform. The members of the rescue party who had just come up all volunteered to go down again, but Geoffrey would not allow this.

"You have done your share; let others venture," he said.

Two other miners at once joined Geoffrey. He did not know until afterwards that one of them had been down in the mine at the time of the explosion and was amongst the first rescued.

The three men were about to be let down, when someone called, "Stop! I am coming with you." It was the Vicar of Longnor, the Reverend Anthony Adams.

As soon as Geoffrey saw who this last volunteer was he exclaimed quickly and excitedly:

"Oh, you will be of no use. Only in the way."

Though it was not so intended, the rebuff sounded very rude. The Vicar, however, took no notice and merely replied, quickly:

"If I can't rescue them, I can comfort them."

"Come!" said Geoffrey.

This was all, and the four men commenced to be wound down into the gas-infected, pestilential mine. Then followed the terrible period of waiting, when the watchers suffer the greatest agony of the agonising time. Watching with nothing possible to be done but to wait with throbbing hearts and strained eyes to see which of their dear ones a merciful fate would restore to them. Every eye was riveted on the rope, watching for the first movement which would indicate that the upward journey was about to begin.

At every motion or quiver of the rope, real or imagined, some voice would cry out, "They are coming, they are coming."

But half an hour passed, an hour, an hour and a half, and no real sign of movement of the rope. The suspense became more and more unbearable, not

only for those for whom the return of the skip meant so much, but for everyone of the crowd who were waiting for it.

Dr. Gregory with other medical men was busy restoring life to the half suffocated miners who had already been brought up from the pit, but the sufferings of Doris, watching for what seemed an eternity this motionless rope on which everything seemed to depend, were as acute as those endured by any one of the relatives of the imprisoned men.

"Oh," she kept saying to herself, "if only I had a little of Geoffrey's bravery, if I could keep myself from horrible thoughts and imaginings, and trust him more. If I could but see him and what he is doing down that horrible pit, I should be more content. I ought to think of the others, but I can only think of him. His peril is greater than that of anyone else. He will not spare himself. He will attempt any forlorn hope in his efforts for success. I know him so well."

Her lover was dearer to her at this time, when she believed she would never see him again, than he had ever been before.

She heard someone say, "If they could have rescued anyone they would have been up before," and this pessimist's exclamation seemed to extinguish her last hope.

She seemed to reply to it in thought:

"Yes, I shall never see him again. His tomb will be this black pit. I shall not even see his dear face, and I love him. Oh, how I love him."

Then, notwithstanding her agony, a faint smile passed over her features, and she muttered:

"And he loves me; I am sure he does, but he will never marry me now. He never would have married me, but some day he would have told me why. Now he will carry his great secret to the tomb with him."

Even while so deeply despondent Doris's attention had perforce been directed from time to time to the woman who stood next to her.

This poor woman seemed to have lost her reason, and her behaviour was more frantic than even that of the frenzied women who surrounded her.

She would alternately moan and call out that God had forsaken her. Then she would shriek out names over and over again, which were so indistinct that no one could understand them.

Once she seized Doris by the arm and shook her.

“Do you know that my children are down that accursed pit? Oh, my God, why did I ever let them go; their father took them down. He is saved, God forgive me, but I wish it had been them. They are dead and I will die too.”

Though she could not comfort herself, Doris tried to comfort this poor woman.

“You must not give up hope,” she said, “I believe they will all be saved yet.”

“God bless you for that. Yes, they will be saved yet,” replied the momentarily cheered creature, but the next minute she relapsed into her moaning and wildly despondent exclamations.

“No, they can’t be saved, they are not strong. They can never stand the ‘wild fire’ gas.”

“Try and control yourself a little. There is really a chance. A very brave man has gone down to rescue them. He succeeds in everything. He is never beaten,” said Doris.

It was now of little use. The woman was again in a paroxysm of frenzy which as time passed became more and more ungovernable.

Doris had herself derived more comfort from her well-meant encouragements than she had imparted.

Quite a number of clergymen and ministers of various denominations were now upon the scene. Some of them started singing a hymn: “Oh, God our help in ages past,” which was joined in by many of the crowd.

“I wish they would stop that noise,” screamed the woman standing by Doris, seizing her arm again, “I can’t hear the lift coming.”

The singing continued. They had just reached the end of the second verse:

> “Sufficient is Thine Arm alone,
> And our defence is sure,”

when the rope was seen to tremble visibly, and then to oscillate backwards and forwards. In a moment the singing ceased. Again came the cry: “They are coming—they are coming.”

It seemed certain that it was so, but in a few moments the oscillation ceased. The rope was again motionless.

Doris was trembling in every limb. Her heart was not beating, but giving wild spasmodic thumps. She could endure it no longer; she was going to faint. Then a voice which seemed quite unconcerned spoke by her side:

"Sip this, Miss Doris."

It was Sid offering the brandy, of which he was custodian, in a small tea cup which he had somehow procured.

Doris took about a teaspoonful of the neat spirit. It made her choke violently but warded off the faintness.

"Give some to this poor woman by me," she said.

Sid was a queer creature. He seemed as though he would refuse. What right had she to his precious brandy? There was nothing the matter with her, he thought.

On the request being repeated he handed the distracted woman the cup, who drank it eagerly.

Then Sid turned again to Doris and said words for which, as she afterwards declared, she could have kissed him, ugly as he was:

"Don't be downhearted, Miss Doris. The master will bring them all up safe. I am not a bit afraid—I am sure of it."

And now the rope began again to tremble. The watchers seemed afraid to shout now. But this time the sign was a true one. Little by little it was seen to be rising. How slowly it seemed to them all to move. Would it never reach the top? At last a faint cheer—excitement is too tense for vigorous cheers—and heads are seen rising above the surface.

"How many are there?" Different opinions are heard.

"It is five."

"It is six."

"No, it is seven."

The lift was certainly full—overcrowded.

Wonderful as was the recognising power of the relatives, Doris was the first to be certain of *his* identity; probably because Geoffrey's form towered above those of the stunted miners.

Yes, there were seven men—but what is this?

Doris saw in Geoffrey's arms a blackened and almost naked little figure, and another, slightly bigger, securely strapped to him by the straps which formed the harness of children employed in the mine. They looked about seven or eight years of age.

At this moment a wild scream came from the woman by her side.

"Oh, God, they are my children, my own little girls!"

What did it mean? Girls! Impossible!

No, only too true. At this time, and for years after the great Queen Victoria had ascended the throne, children of both sexes, from six or seven years of age, and even younger, were regularly employed in the coal mines. It was not until 1842 that the employment of females underground was forbidden.

Useless to attempt to keep the people back now. Despite Sid's pushes, and even blows, they rushed to the shaft to take to themselves their relatives.

Geoffrey was the last to leave the lift, the two little blackened girls still with him. One of them was insensible and the other crying bitterly.

He looked very pale, and was bleeding from a cut on the cheek, but his spirits were buoyant as ever.

"Well, Doris, here we are, right as a trivet you see. Just help me with these children."

But the mother had snatched one from Sid's arms, and Doris unfastened the straps and released the other and delivered her to her mother.

"A damned shame they should have these youngsters down there," was all Geoffrey said.

"Geoffrey, I thought I should never see you again," Doris whispered.

"Rubbish! It was not such a difficult job after all, but a lot of fallen roof to be removed. That took the time."

The Vicar had not come up in the lift, but no one seemed to notice this. There was no one watching for him, to whom his safety was dear as life itself.

"Now, then, who volunteers for the next party?" Geoffrey shouted.

"Oh, Geoffrey, you are not going down again!" cried Doris, all her fears returning upon her in a moment.

“Of course I am. Don’t fret, Doris; it will be the last time. There is only one man down now, and the Vicar.”

“Why one man, and why is the Vicar still down there?” asked Doris.

“The man is caught behind a big stone, and I fear badly injured. The Vicar can make him hear, encased as he is, and is staying down to talk to him and comfort him. It is good of him, but what I expected. Now I must be off.”

“Don’t go, Geoffrey; I know I am a coward, but I don’t think you can know what I suffer,” Doris whispered.

“I must go, Doris, but I shall be up again soon,” and he laughed merrily.

“Oh, your poor face,” she cried, trying to wipe the congealed blood from his cheek with her pocket handkerchief, and then pulling his head down towards her she whispered:

“Will you kiss me before you go down again?”

“Of course I will, and when I come up you shall kiss me again,” he replied gaily.

Geoffrey now called once more for volunteers.

“I want a couple of men, strong men, the stone will take some moving,” he shouted.

There were plenty of volunteers. Geoffrey looked at them critically, then selected two, one of whom was an unusually strong miner. The other was Sir James Knebworthy’s butler, whom Doris often called “the mysterious butler.” He was a fairly powerful man and had been desirous of descending with the first rescue party.

In a minute or two the lift was re-descending.

Again the period of anxious watching and waiting, though, of course, not so tense or general, but no one left the pit-head. Everyone waited to see the end of the gallant rescue.

In far less time than the last; indeed, in less than a quarter of an hour, the rope began to wind up again, and in a minute or two the lift appeared. It contained five men. The rescue party, the Vicar, and the injured man, whose injuries were severe, though he was fully conscious.

The whole of the entombed workers were safe. The crowd, their lungs no longer contracted, burst into wild cheering, giving three times three

cheers over and over again for the unknown hero.

Geoffrey took it all very calmly. He put his hand on Doris's shoulder and exclaimed:

"There, you see, I am as good as my word. Now let us get home. There is nothing more for me to do."

Sid came up to him, cool and unconcerned as ever, and handed to him the bottle with which he had been entrusted. A good part of it was gone.

"Sid," said his master looking at him a little reproachfully.

"I have not touched it, master. I swear I have not."

He offered his master no congratulations, nor did he seem in any way impressed by the extraordinarily brave acts he had witnessed. It was only what he expected. His confidence in Geoffrey was unlimited. He was only anxious that Geoffrey should be satisfied he had not broken out again.

In less than a quarter of an hour the chaise was again requisitioned and the party were on their return journey.

Very little was said. Geoffrey appeared in exultant spirits. Longnor was at length reached, and the Vicar, who seemed little the worse for his exertions, was put down at the vicarage.

"Good night," he exclaimed, "God bless you all."

"What a splendid fellow the Vicar is," said Geoffrey as soon as they had left him.

"Not the Vicar only," added the doctor at once.

"If you mean me, I only did what my rash and perhaps foolish temperament compels me to do. I enjoyed it all immensely, but with the Vicar it was different. His temperament is, I know, timid and he is not used to these enterprises."

The butler was the next to be put down as near as possible to the Manor House.

"Good night, you have done well," said Geoffrey to him as he got out of the chaise.

"I value that from you, Sir—I value it greatly from you," was the reply.

Though it was nearly three o'clock when they got home Mrs. Gregory was sitting up for them with a blazing fire in the hearth and supper prepared. They were all very cold and hungry, but before eating or even warming

herself, Doris insisted on bathing and strapping up the wounded cheek of her lover, which was now seen to be more deeply lacerated than had been thought.

She would not allow her father to do this.

"I suppose I shall have a scar for life?" Geoffrey asked unconcernedly.

"I fear you will," was the doctor's reply.

"It will interfere with my beauty," Geoffrey exclaimed jocularly.

"I think not," said Doris, and in presence of father and mother she kissed him.

CHAPTER XII

MISS TRITSY'S DILEMMA

On the afternoon of the colliery accident Miss Tritsy was sitting on her backless stool, behind the counter in her store.

It was not a post day, and custom was unusually slack. Whenever Miss Tritsy had what she called "free time," her thoughts often centred themselves around Geoffrey Frevile and his doings. He had always seemed to her an enigma. Now Miss Tritsy loved enigmas, largely because she believed she had an unusual capacity for solving them. Nothing did she enjoy so much. She often said to herself, and not infrequently to others, that there was no mystification which she could not unravel.

Yet, despite this, the secrecy which she believed attached to Geoffrey and his movements had beaten her.

It was a riddle she could not puzzle out.

At times she thought she had got it. She had reached a conclusion which was satisfactory to herself, explained to her own mind both the character of the man and his presence in the township, but on pondering it all over again her conclusion would appear unsatisfactory, if not absolutely wrong.

She was constantly asking herself—"What is the man? Why did he come to Longnor? Why does he stay here, and, above all, why does he not marry Doris Gregory, who has been setting her cap at him from the first?"

In her difficulty she had more than once or twice resorted to her crystal, but it always failed her.

She felt that if she could but get Geoffrey to attend a séance better results might be obtained. Once she had had the temerity to suggest it to him. He had only laughed, and said his fortune was known to himself, but would not interest her. She dared not go further and tell him it had become one of the dearest interests of her life. She knew he would turn it all to ridicule and laugh at her in his delightful fashion. The postmistress seemed to regard it as a grievance that he received so few letters. No matter how closely she inspected these, and she spared neither time nor pains in this respect, she had never learnt anything from them.

It was about three o'clock when her meditations were interrupted by the entrance of a man, who came into the shop with staggering gait, and almost fell against the counter.

It was Sid, and the storekeeper saw at once that he was "not himself," in other words, that he was intoxicated.

"Give me some tobacco," he mumbled.

Now, Miss Tritsy was never frightened by drunken men or women. Indeed, "the boot was on the other foot," and those among the villagers who occasionally overindulged and had sense enough left to know their condition, stood in considerable fear of Miss Tritsy. Her sharp tongue and the biting reproofs she administered to such as dared to enter her store in this condition were usually sufficient to prevent them from making the attempt; the more so as they knew they could not hold their own against the storekeeper's voluble, and indignant denunciations.

Sid, however, was too far gone to understand this, but it did not prevent Miss Tritsy from expressing her disgust in no measured terms.

"Sid, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You are a disgrace to the township. What would your master say if he saw you in this state?"

Sid glanced round with a frightened look to see if the only person he feared to offend was visible, and seeing no one, repeated his demand.

"Give me some tobacco."

"How much do you want?"

"I don't care. I wants a big packet."

Miss Tritsy threw at, rather than handed to the man a quarter of a pound packet of the soothing weed, and added:

"Now get out of my shop, or I will soon turn you out myself."

Sid commenced to roll towards the door, when the shrill voice of the storekeeper was heard again.

"You have not paid for your tobacco. Pay me for it at once."

The man evidently experienced difficulty in finding his pockets. When he succeeded he fumbled in them, one after the other, and in the end exclaimed:

"I've no money!"

"Then give me back the tobacco."

"I want it. I shan't."

"Sid, if you don't pay I'll tell your master."

This threat proved sufficient. Sid stumbled back to the counter, and began to fumble in his pockets once again.

After a time he produced from somewhere or other a worn old leather case, and took from it a one pound note which he threw on to the counter. He then proceeded in a drunken way towards the exit, when Miss Tritsy cried out:

"Stop, you have not got your change."

"Don't want no change," faltered the drunken man.

Miss Tritsy never wasted words or argument when action was needed. She had the change in her hand. Quickly she came round to Sid, took him by the shoulders and shook him violently. Having relieved her annoyance in this way, she thrust the change into one of his pockets, and assisted his exit by a push which almost threw him down on the pavement outside.

"Shall I ever discover why Mr. Frevile keeps such a disreputable drunken fellow in his service?" exclaimed the postmistress whilst putting up her hair which her exertion had caused to fall down, and fastening it with a huge comb.

Sid managed to stagger along the street about fifty yards, and was leaning against some wooden pailings for support. In that position and condition he was found later on by his master, with the result, as set out in the last chapter, that Geoffrey Frevile was late at Sir James Knebworthy's dinner party.

Having almost a monopoly of the trade of the township, Miss Tritsy was looked on by all the villagers as well to do, as indeed she was. She kept what the manager of the branch bank at Buxton called "quite a good balance" at the bank. He had suggested to her several times that she might place some part of this balance on deposit and earn interest on it, but Miss Tritsy always declined to do this. She was proud of the hundreds of pounds standing in her name in the Bank books, any part or the whole of which she could draw out at any moment "without any notice or bother of that sort," as she often expressed it. She had another reason which she kept to herself. Her confidence in Banks was not unlimited. She had often heard of them "bursting," and she was quite alive to the advantage it might be to be among the first to withdraw her money without notice, if even a rumour of unsoundness should arise respecting this establishment.

Miss Tritsy was undoubtedly astute.

The bank rested on foundations far too strong to admit of rumours of unsoundness, and the postmistress, instead of withdrawing any of her money from the bank, was constantly adding to it.

She always paid her moneys into the bank once a week. Her last payment had been made on the day after the accident at the coal mine.

What was her surprise to receive a few days afterwards a letter from the bank manager returning one of the notes in her last remittance, and much regretting to inform her that the note was a bad note—a good forgery, but nevertheless a forgery.

"It had escaped his own notice," he said, "and had been returned to him from the Liverpool Bank, one of whose notes it purported to be."

Miss Tritsy was greatly upset by this letter, and at first inclined to dispute the note having formed any part of her remittance. Such a thing had never happened to her before. Who could have so taken her in? She took another note from her till and compared the two. She could detect no difference between them, but then she remembered the manager had said it was "a good forgery and had deceived him. Then she began to interrogate herself:

"Who could have given me a bad note? I didn't think anyone in the township would have tried to cheat me."

Then the recollection of Sid, and the note given in payment for the tobacco occurred to her.

"Yes, it must be the note I got from Sid, but probably he did not know it was a bad note. He did not appear to know he had it on him until he came upon it in the leather case. I wonder where he got it from."

During the whole morning she could think of nothing but this. She often repeated that she would have given twenty pounds that the thing had not occurred. If known, she really believed it would lower the position in which she was held by the villagers, and also lessen the bank manager's opinion of her.

During the dinner time, when the store was in charge of her assistant, she made up her mind to send for Sid and to question him.

Her assistant—her only help in the store—was a boy now about fifteen years of age. She had taken him very young "to get him used to her odd ways," as she said. Her treatment of him varied with her humours.

When in bad humour she would snap him up short, and even box his ears soundly, but always after these exhibitions of petulance she gave him without a word of explanation or apology something from the store, to take home with him. The boy said that Miss Tritsy's bark was worse than her box —his own variant of the proverb.

When she re-entered the store she at once addressed the boy as follows:

"You know the man Sid, well; go and find him and bring him here, and don't show your face here without him."

In less than half-an-hour the boy returned with Sid, who sidled into the store in a sheepish way, and kept his eyes fixed—it was very hard to discover where he kept them fixed—but they seemed to avoid Miss Tritsy.

"Now you go and deliver the bread. There it is ready for you in the basket, and don't get playing about, or you and me will fall out."

This was said to the boy. No witnesses were to be present during her cross-examination of Sid. The first thing she did when alone with the man was to unlock her cash box, take from it the spurious bank note, and place it in front of him.

"Look at that," she said.

To judge from Sid's eyes alone, he did not look at it, but he evidently saw it for he rejoined:

"Well, I see it. What about it?"

"How did you dare to give that worthless piece of paper to me?"

Special emphasis was placed on the "me," as if to imply that to have given it to anyone else would not have been such a grave offence.

"I never gave you the paper at all," was Sid's startling reply.

"How dare you say that. Did you not come in about a week ago and buy tobacco and give me this wretched piece of paper in payment."

"No," was the curt answer.

"Sid, you are a liar. You gave it to me, and I put the change in silver into your pocket."

"I did wonder a bit where I got all the silver from, I could not make it out," said Sid after some consideration, really by his reply giving away the show.

"Well, I shall be sure to see what your master thinks about it."

"If you tell my master I'll kill you," said the man, his squinting eyes flashing angrily.

No threat of this kind ever alarmed Miss Tritsy.

"Well, I shall tell him, you may depend on that," she said.

Sid changed suddenly. From being morose and defiant he became in a moment nervous and supplicating.

"No, no, don't do that," he cried beseechingly. "Don't do it, Miss Tritsy. Give me the note. I have got most of the change. Take it, here it is," and so saying he pulled out a handful of silver.

"I shall not give it back to you."

Miss Tritsy spoke deliberately.

"Oh, do, Miss Tritsy. If I gave it to you I never intended to. It was an accident. I will give you two pounds for it, if you give me a little time to pay."

"Then tell me where you got it from," was the next question.

But the man had become defiant again.

"I never gave you a note at all. I hadn't got one. It is no use your saying I did. I will always swear I didn't."

"Very well—I have nothing more to say to you, and you can clear out of my shop," and the lady pointed commandingly at the door.

Miss Tritsy's vexation was increased by her interview with Sid. When she told him she should acquaint his master with the facts she meant what she said. Afterwards she hesitated. Sid's attitude had puzzled her. Of course she was certain he had given her a one pound bank note, but when she came to think it over once again she did not feel so positive that it was the identical note returned to her by the bank. If he chose to swear, as he said he would, that he had not given her this note, she certainly would not swear he had. She often received in payment the notes of the Liverpool Bank. Then she argued with herself again. "Even if he gave it me, he may not have known it was bad. He is a very ignorant youth. He was very drunk at the time," and she again recalled how he seemed to be unconscious that he had a note in his possession. "But why should he be so anxious to get it back?"

Miss Tritsy found an explanation even for this, in her knowledge that the man would make any sacrifice rather than give his master uneasiness. On the whole, she was not sure that she would speak of it to Mr. Frevile. She was

not ill-natured, and though at the first she had taken rather a dislike to Sid, she began to admire him for his loyalty to his master, and had no desire to harm him, still less to worry Mr. Frevile.

While the puzzle of Sid's behaviour was still occupying her attention she was pleased to see Doris enter the store one afternoon.

Of late she and Doris had become upon terms of considerable intimacy. Doris now often came to the store with no other object than to have a talk with the postmistress. Could the reason for this friendship be that they knew they had in Geoffrey Frevile a subject of conversation which interested them both? However that may be, the fact was that whatever they discussed, the talk sooner or later always drifted round to Geoffrey, his character and doings.

Of course the postmistress had heard of Geoffrey's gallant conduct at the colliery. Everyone was talking of it, but Doris was anxious to give her friend the thrilling details. She was full of it, and enjoyed telling the story to anyone, especially to one whom she knew shared her admiration for the hero of it.

She enlarged at length on Geoffrey's wonderful coolness as well as on his bravery during his dangerous efforts, contrasting it with the state of her own feelings, which she unreservedly revealed.

The listener clearly enjoyed the narration. She would from time to time intersperse such ejaculations as—"Good gracious!" "Ah yes, how like him!" "Wonderful!" "Just what I knew he would do," etc.

Miss Tritsy had before this resolved to keep the incident of the bank note locked up in her own bosom, but what woman who thinks she has a secret can resist imparting it, of course in confidence, to her special friend, especially in return for confidences given to her?

So it came to pass that she told Doris all about the bank note, and her moral certainty that she had received it from Sid. She said she had interviewed Sid, who had denied giving her the note, but something, she knew not what, withheld her from speaking of the man's strange behaviour, or his anxiety to get the note back into his possession.

She was surprised when Doris said, "Oh, yes, we knew you had a forged bank note given to you, but did not know who had given it. We were speaking about it at the breakfast table this morning. I think it was the butler at Sir James Knebworthy's who spoke to father about it yesterday."

“How in the world did Sir James Knebworthy’s butler know?” exclaimed Miss Tritsy.

“How is everything known in a small village or township like this?” said Doris.

“Do you think I ought to tell Mr. Frevile? Ought he to know? I am almost certain it came from Sid.”

Doris was some time before she answered. She seemed to be thinking deeply. Then she said:

“If you are only ‘almost certain,’ I think he had better not be told.”

Even as she said this she doubted the wisdom of the advice. The knowledge she possessed of Sid’s antecedents naturally led her to think it was not improbable that Sid’s criminal nature had overmastered him and that he was grossly deceiving Geoffrey. If she had but known of the man’s eagerness to get the note back into his possession on any terms her suspicions would probably have been strengthened.

Though she had no authority to say anything to Geoffrey which might put him on his guard, nevertheless she could not resist, when she found herself alone with him the next day, timidly enquiring whether Sid had altogether given up his wicked habits?

“Which of his wicked habits?” Geoffrey asked, laughing.

“The one you told me of in confidence at dinner at Sir James Knebworthy’s on that terrible night,” said Doris.

“Oh, you mean his habit of ‘picking up unconsidered trifles.’ I think he has little chance of that now.”

And Geoffrey smiled the fascinating smile she so loved to see. He seemed to treat all Sid’s failings very lightly. His sympathy and affection for the poor ill-favoured man was inexhaustible. It was one of the strange traits of his own character.

“Look here, Doris,” he said a minute or two after, “read this,” and he handed to her a newspaper.

The newspaper contained a description of the deeds of a much talked of highwayman, who had for several years past carried on his profession in the neighbourhood of Hounslow Heath. He always worked alone, and had—so it was narrated—held up at least twenty mail coaches, the conductors, and

many of the passengers in which were afterwards shown to have been armed.

He had never been known to shed a drop of blood or to fire the pistols which adorned his belt. His success was due in every case to his incredible daring and unlimited confidence in himself.

He had been at last captured in the small house he inhabited nearly twelve miles distant from the scene of his exploits. He had devoted his spare time to gardening, and had taken prizes at the local flower shows. His only attendant was a very old woman, and the only other living creatures on whom he bestowed attention were his two dogs, two cats and a canary.

"What a splendid time he must have had. Something to live for, that. A life of action, no time for the blood to freeze in the veins."

Geoffrey spoke as though carried away by enthusiasm.

"After all," said Doris as she handed back the newspaper, "for all his boldness he is captured in the end. I am sorry, for the man must have been astonishingly brave."

She seemed to have caught a little of the enthusiasm of her friend.

"Oh, that is one of the chances of war. Of course it could not go on for ever."

Geoffrey treated the capture very lightly. The dénouement which had at last overtaken the Hounslow Heath highwayman seemed not to affect him when viewed in comparison with the intoxicating excitements he believed this bold man must for so long have experienced.

"I don't think his deeds were a quarter so brave as yours at the colliery," said Doris in a whispering voice.

Once again the pleasant fascinating laugh was heard.

And now a strange thing occurred in Miss Tritsy's life, a thing which was to herald others still more startling, and to transform for a time this woman's easy and self-satisfied existence into one of suspense and agitation.

It was about a fortnight after the bank had returned the note, and she was engaged in sorting the post bag which had just arrived, when Mr. Abel Ramsay, Sir James Knebworthy's butler, entered the store.

He was the same immaculate superior servant as ever, well, though not showily dressed, and he carried his fine form with a military bearing.

He enquired for letters for the Manor House, and having received them, as well as one—a rather large package—for himself, fell into conversation with the postmistress.

This was nothing unusual. He often looked in for a chat, and always treated Miss Tritsy in such a courtly manner and with such extreme politeness that his visits were far from unpleasing to her. Though he had always shown himself reticent, she had long ago summed up his former life and doings with absolute assurance to herself.

"He had been," she was wont to proclaim, "a confidential servant in a family of the highest position—probably a duke's family." She went further, and said she would wager a pound—though not in the habit of betting—that he had had some association with royalty, though what particular association she could not exactly say.

"Many things about his style and manners," she said, "would carry this conviction to anyone capable of drawing a conclusion," implying, of course, that they had the means she possessed of judging of the style and manners of royalty.

In the course of conversation Miss Tritsy congratulated him on the part he had played in the rescue of the entombed miners.

"What I was able to do is not to be mentioned by the side of what Mr. Frevile did. His heroism ought to be publicly recognised, and I am sure if His Majesty the King heard of it he would be rewarded."

"This proves my conjecture is correct and that he has had some association with royalty," said the postmistress to herself.

The butler continued:

"Still he does not care to have it mentioned. 'It is over and done with, so let it rest.' He said those words to me the other day, but for my part, I can't forget it. I feel I quite love the man."

Miss Tritsy did not respond, *moi aussi*, the French language having formed no part of the curriculum of her education, but who can say what she thought?

Mr. Abel Ramsay now appeared to be about to leave the store, and had taken some steps towards the exit, when he suddenly returned, and placing both hands upon the counter, said in a sympathetic voice:

"I was sorry to hear of your loss."

"What loss?" was the reply.

"I refer to the forged bank note."

"Oh, well what of it? I suppose I can stand a bigger loss than that."

The postmistress seemed annoyed.

"Doubtless," replied the butler, bowing with politeness. "I hope you know where you got it from."

Miss Tritsy's manner became frigid. What right had this man to ask her questions? She never allowed anyone to interfere in matters which concerned her business.

"Well, I don't. That is, I am not sure," she said abruptly.

"Have you ever had such a thing happen to you before?"

"Never."

Her manner became colder.

The butler evidently noticed this, but seemed set on pursuing the topic.

"Miss Turner," he began.

The postmistress looked round to see who had entered the shop and who he was addressing. She had been so long "Miss Tritsy" to every inhabitant of the place, that she had for a moment forgotten her own surname.

"Miss Turner," he began again, when he had secured her attention, "would you grant me a favour? Would you let me see the forged note for a minute?"

"No."

The tone was freezing now, but the butler still persisted.

"I assure you it is not idle curiosity that makes me ask this favour."

"You will not see it. Dear, dear, there are some folks who can never take 'no' for an answer," said the now thoroughly angry postmistress.

Apparently the butler was one of these "folks," for he tried yet once again.

"Will you not be good enough to give me the reasons for your refusal?"

“And who are you who take to yourself a right to ask me for my reasons?”

Miss Tritsy was not only angry but indignant. The man was discourteous. She was beginning to feel that she had been mistaken in investing him with association with royal manners.

“Could you oblige me by the loan of a pencil?” asked Abel Ramsay coolly. This was so complete a *non sequitur* to the conversation in progress as to astound the postmistress.

She could make nothing of it, but she handed the man a pencil.

He took a piece of paper, which was lying on the counter, and wrote something upon it. He then handed it to the postmistress.

The effect was alarming. She started. She turned rather pale—a most unusual thing with Miss Tritsy—and the slight trembling of her hands revealed a state of some perturbation.

Whatever it was she had read on the paper it changed her attitude towards the butler.

“I am very sorry,” she began quite humbly, “but—”

“Don’t mention it,” said the ever polite butler; “I am sure you will not refuse me now.”

“I was trying to tell you,” said Miss Tritsy in a faltering voice, “that it is impossible for—I have destroyed the note.”

CHAPTER XIII

NIGHT ON THE MOORS

The summer, which had been unusually hot, was nearly over. It had been a perfect season on the moorlands. The heat, which in many parts of England had been oppressive, on the beautiful heights of North Staffordshire had been tempered by breezes, which, though they could not be described as "cool," had, by keeping the air constantly in motion, deprived it of all enervating properties.

No rider or pedestrian travelling on these favoured heights could possibly experience any feeling of lassitude, when *bouffées* of deliciously soft heated air, impregnated with the scent of thousands of acres of gorse and heather, met him at every step.

Immersion in so perfectly tempered an air bath seemed to result in an increase of vigour, as well as an intoxicating sense of exhilaration.

Then it had the additional charm of solitude. In the times of which we are speaking it was not only possible but probable that a visitor could traverse the district for a whole day, and not encounter a single human being. Even to-day, when in summer time railways disgorge floods of trippers within walking distance of almost every attractive scene in the kingdom, the moorlands are still in comparative solitude, for no railway stations exist near, and the roads, for which many are thankful, are rough and unsuitable for motor vehicles. A most enticing place for one who is satisfied with communion with nature and himself, equally, perhaps more ideal for such as desire solitude *à deux*. Geoffrey and Doris, certainly, had found it so, during the long days of this brilliant summer. They could often have been seen strolling about leisurely or sitting on camp stools with their easels before them making sketches of attractive bits of scenery, of which the moorlands furnished an inexhaustible store.

The reserve which had existed for a long while after Geoffrey had declared his feelings for the girl, and at the same time his inability to marry her, had gradually worn off, and for months now they had been on their former footing of complete good fellowship, and unreserved confidence, excluding only the one great secret which Geoffrey reserved to himself. Neither of them attempted to disguise the fact that they were in love with one another. It was never spoken of between them, but it could be seen in

their eyes, heard in their voices, and perceived in the contentment which each exhibited in the society of the other.

Under the guidance of Geoffrey, Doris had much improved in her painting. She had always had an unusually good eye for colour, but her drawing had in the past been so defective, that her pictures had been little more than school-girl efforts. She had taken infinite pains to imitate his style in drawing, and succeeded so well, that she had beaten him in what was supposed to be his strongest point.

It was hard on October, on a day to be for ever remembered by Doris, as the beginning of a period of uncertainty and anxiety.

The two lovers had been sketching near home. They had provided themselves as they usually did, with sandwiches in order to be able to spend the greater part of the day in the open. Doris who on all such occasions was generally in the highest spirits and chatted and laughed continually, on this day appeared unusually quiet and nervous.

In his usual light manner Geoffrey had joked her. Though she smiled whenever he spoke to her, in a very few minutes the smile always passed away and her expression of weariness returned.

"What is it, Doris? Does the painting go wrong?" Geoffrey asked.

"It goes all right. That is it goes all right for me. There is nothing the matter," but her manner contradicted her words. Geoffrey said no more. They continued to paint in silence for quite a long time.

Then Doris exclaimed: "Oh, Geoffrey, how I love these days. I don't know what would happen to me if anything should interrupt them."

"What should interrupt them, Doris?"

Instead of replying to this question Doris asked another.

"You are not thinking of going away are you?"

"Going away!" He looked at the girl and saw that tears were in her eyes.

"Doris, you are not yourself. I must cheer you up. We will put the painting away for to-day, and walk home. Afterwards, I have to take these sketches to the studio."

"I never come to the studio with you now, Geoffrey."

"Well, it is a long way. I must get a donkey for you."

Now the secret of Doris's depression was this.

She had the evening before paid a visit to Miss Tritsy for a second *séance* and the crystal had again been brought into requisition. This visit was at her own request. She had lately been pondering much over her future which always included the future of Geoffrey.

Though he did not assume the manner of an acknowledged lover, a number of small occurrences had persuaded her latterly that he was falling more and more deeply in love and that, whatever it was, that kept back his declaration, would soon give way. Then the idea which could not always be banished, that something might intervene to part them made her impatient for some assurance of the future. This it was which had led her to apply to the postmistress for another consultation with the crystal. She was not a believer in the occult science, but she knew Miss Tritsy was sincere. She had often declared lately that things she had seen dimly in the crystal had come to pass, and Doris felt that another consultation could do no harm, and might possibly bring her some comfort. Poor girl! The very reverse proved to be the case. The crystal being brought out again with the same care as before, disclosed nothing for a long time, or so Miss Tritsy, holding Doris firmly by the hand, said.

Suddenly the gazer started and squeezed Doris's hand so tightly that she must have hurt her and exclaimed: "I see a man. He is walking quickly over the hills—he is hurrying as though he was pursued. He has disappeared into a black cloud. A girl is watching him. She is crying—she trembles—she falls" and then after half a minute or so—"I can see nothing more," and Miss Tritsy released Doris's hand and threw the silk handkerchief over the precious crystal.

A very short enlightenment this, if an enlightenment at all.

"Oh, do look once again, the man may return," said Doris who was evidently excited.

Miss Tritsy however, was not to be moved. The *séance* had been sufficiently sensational, and Miss Tritsy loved sensation. Sensational situations, sensational news which she could impart, and so reap the glamour which falls on the imparter, were sweeter to her than honey in the honeycomb.

She wrapped up her prized treasure and restored it to its resting place with these words: "Perhaps another day."

Later she declared that she had not the least idea who the persons, so clearly shown in the crystal, were. She had not seen their features and could

not even make a guess. But Doris knew for whom they stood, and was morally certain Miss Tritsy had her suspicions also.

The friends separated, the one exultant in the success of her experiment, the other utterly miserable.

Whoever had passed into a dark cloud, Doris had now entered one. Geoffrey was going to leave her, and perhaps leave her for ever. The crystal said so. Still the crystal might be wrong. Had the postmistress invented all this out of spite? She knew she was jealous of her. This was a ray of solace, but it did not last long. Something carried conviction that the woman's belief in her occult science was genuine. Miss Tritsy was no fraud. If not with her eyes, with her subconscious mind, she had seen what she had told her friend.

All this was kept from Geoffrey next day. It would probably have been better if she could have told him. He might have laughed it away, probably would, but she would have found it difficult to tell him why she had sought out Miss Tritsy's magic, without at the same time telling him the reason for which she had sought it, and this she could not do.

She wished ardently that she had not visited Miss Tritsy. All she could do was to hope that the baneful impression the visit had caused would, after a time, pass away.

On the return walk home she became more lively and talkative. Geoffrey could always, seemingly without effort, raise her spirits and bring her pretty smile into evidence again. When within sight of home they encountered the Vicar waiting near the garden gate. He said he had been waiting for Doris, as he wished to consult her.

Geoffrey offered to leave them alone, but the Vicar said there was no necessity for this, in fact he would prefer that Mr. Frevile should hear what he had to say. He continued—he had just received a letter from Hilda in London, which was evidently written in a dispirited mood, and had alarmed him. She had said that she was far from well, and that many things were troubling her. The only one of her troubles she mentioned specifically was that Marion, her maid, had left her suddenly, and she did not know her whereabouts, and was very uneasy about her. She went on to say that her companion, Mrs. Hamilton-Smith was sympathetic and kind after her manner, but she now knew that she had no real friends around her, and was longing for a friend of her own sex with whom she could take counsel. She had ended her letter on a note of weary disillusionment. "London was not what she thought it was, nor were her friends here like her dear friends in Staffordshire."

The Vicar did not tell them all the contents of the letter; some parts of it he judged were private and meant for his eyes alone. He told all that was necessary to justify the favour he had decided to ask of Doris. This was, that she should go to Hilda in London at once, and give her the support of her society and advice.

He made this request timidly. He appeared greatly upset. He would have gone himself, he said, on the moment, had not Hilda said she wished to take counsel with a friend of her own sex.

Directly Doris understood what was asked of her, she showed evident reluctance. She felt she could not do it. She could not go to London by herself, and she said that even if she did, though she loved Hilda, she knew she would make a poor comforter.

Whether or not, had she been in a normal state, she would have made the effort, she herself could not have said. In her present unstrung condition she found it impossible. Even Geoffrey's encouraging enquiry, "Don't you think you might go if we saw you off?" could not elicit a different reply.

"I fear, indeed I have known for some time that Hilda is surrounded by a lot of most undesirable acquaintances," said the Vicar and then immediately, as though fearing these words might convey some subtle reproach on Hilda herself, he added: "It is not the poor girl's fault. It is the fault of circumstances, and her own unfamiliarity with London, which has thrown her amongst them. How I wish I could take her away from it all, or take away her so-called friends from her."

"Are the undesirable acquaintances male or female?" asked Geoffrey.

"I fear they are both," was the reply.

"I will soon rid her of the undesirable males if you commission me to do so. I should enjoy it," and Geoffrey laughed his bright and joyous laugh.

After a pause the Vicar resumed.

"If there is nothing else for it I must go to London myself, if only to try to get rid of some of the male acquaintances."

"I am afraid you would not be much good at that," and then thinking this sounded rude, Geoffrey added, "I mean you would not deal with them so summarily as I should."

It was now Doris who made the suggestion.

“Why should I not write and ask Edwina Plumbley—Edwina Wiles as she is now—to go to Hilda? She is a clever girl, and Hilda knows her well. Then her husband, the M.P. is a man of the world, and would know how to deal with the wretched lot of men who surround her, and who I believe from what Hilda has hinted in her letters to me, are getting her money away from her.”

Nothing better was suggested. In the end Doris’s idea was approved, and she promised to write that night to Edwina.

The Vicar was invited in to tea and accepted, and the party round the table, none of whom with the exception of Geoffrey, seemed to be in their usual spirits, was far less talkative than usual. Doris relapsed at once into a silent mood. Her harassed look was observed by her mother, as well as by Geoffrey, who made efforts to rouse her, with only intermittent success.

When the meal was over Geoffrey rose from his place and said:

“I have to go to the studio now. There is work for me to do there,” and turning to Mrs. Gregory, he added, “I fear I shall be late.”

Geoffrey and the Vicar left together.

“What is wrong with you, Doris?” Mrs. Gregory demanded in a petulant voice.

“Oh, nothing,” the reply came as usual. “I am going to my bedroom, and I have to write to Edwina; that may put me right.”

Mrs. Gregory said nothing more. She knew well the cause of Doris’s frequent fits of depression.

When Doris reached her bedroom she threw herself on the bed and had, what she called “a good cry.” This generally in some degree acted as a restorative and after a time she felt equal to writing, and did write, a long letter to Edwina Wiles.

Later in the evening the doctor, who had been far and wide on the moors the whole day, returned home, and found a message awaiting him to attend a serious case at Flash. He was dead tired, but he made no complaint, did not even utter an exclamation of impatience, and, having swallowed a hasty meal, prepared to set out again to do his duty, as did hundreds of heroic country doctors in England every night.

“To-night was not a bad night. Though rather dark, the drive itself would be pleasant after the heat of the day. He had often had worse calls on cold and stormy winter nights,” said the kindly doctor.

No well-appointed brougham, still less luxurious motor car, with power of almost annihilating time and distance, was available to country practitioners at the time to which our story relates, or for many a long day after. Their usual mode of travelling their districts was the uncovered gig, drawn by a hard-working but generally spiritless horse, and accompanied either by a dirty boy, or an old coachman whose livery showed exposure to a thousand storms, but whose patience was generally inexhaustible.

When Dr. Gregory was in the hall, putting on his overcoat and muffler, Doris was coming down the stairs from her room.

"Oh, papa, you are not going out again to-night," she cried.

"I must, my dear, I am sent for to Flash. It is a serious case."

"To Flash!" The name alone invariably carried with it thoughts of Geoffrey, and Doris recalled that to-night he would be there, finishing some work at the studio as he had said. She must go with her father. They might bring him back, or meet him returning.

"I want to go with you, papa," she said.

"My dear, it may be late before I return."

"Never mind. It is a fine night, I shall enjoy it."

Her father made no further objection. The gig was at the door. Doris did not keep it waiting long and in a few minutes she was seated beside her father on the road to Flash. Tom, the usually dirty boy was perched up behind.

The night was rather dark, but both driver and horse knew equally well every road or track on the moorlands. It was one of the nights when posts, shrubs or projecting pieces of rock take on strange appearances, and present endless variety of quaint forms, and only become recognizable for what they really are on very near inspection.

In the course of the drive the doctor for the first time questioned Doris as to the relationship between her and Geoffrey Frevile.

"I have never liked to speak to you about it before, and you need not reply now if you would prefer not, but are you engaged to Mr. Geoffrey Frevile?"

"No, papa, I am not. I don't think Geoffrey ever intends to marry."

"Why should he not marry?" asked the doctor.

Doris made no answer to this question for a time. Then she sighed heavily as she exclaimed: “Oh, papa, how I wish you could tell me that.”

“Then it would seem, my dearest, that you are in love with him.”

“Yes, I am,” said Doris boldly. “I don’t want to hide it from anyone. I am deeply in love with him, and what is more he is deeply in love with me.”

“My darling girl, there is nothing I wish for more than your happiness but, my dear, you must recollect that, though we all like Geoffrey very much, we know very little about him.”

It was too dark to see the pretty blush that encarmined Doris’s cheeks as she replied: “I think I know a great deal about him.”

After nearly an hour’s drive—for the much used old horse made his own pace, a kind of uniform jog-trot, and was never urged by his owner to vary it—they reached Flash.

The cottage of the doctor’s patient was situated at the commencement of the tiny village, and not far from the high road between Buxton and Leek. Here the doctor alighted, and Doris was left in the gig, with the boy.

“I will try not to be long, but I can’t be sure,” said the doctor as he entered the house.

Doris continued to sit on in the gig, holding the reins. This was a redundant task for the horse would have stood where he was the whole night. In all the doctor’s long waits his patient quadruped always seemed to settle down to a comfortable sleep, which demanded only an occasional flick or jerk of the reins to prevent him from falling down.

Time ran on, but the doctor did not make his reappearance. Both the boy and the horse now seemed comfortably asleep, and Doris was never impatient when she was undisturbed, and could concentrate her thoughts on her lover. How odd she thought that they had not met him on their road here. Something must have detained him at the studio. He might be there now, yes, quite close to her.

At this stage of her reflections her father came out of the cottage quickly only to say that he would still be detained for yet another hour.

With this second wait before her an irresistible desire took possession of Doris. She must walk to the other end of the village—it was little more than a quarter of a mile—and look at the outside of the studio.

She knew she would not dare to knock at the door at this hour of the night, even though the house showed lights. It was enough to be near the place occupied by her lover—perchance occupied by him at this very moment—to feel herself close to him, to know that in a moment she could, if she dared, be in his presence. The studio was the most remote cottage in the village and furthest removed from the high road.

It was a tiny building apparently consisting of one room downstairs, and one small room above.

There was no roadway, or made footpath leading to it. It was necessary, in order to reach it, to follow a track across a field, then to follow the track (if you could) across a succession of sand pits, and then to descend into a little valley, where the diminutive building was almost hidden amongst gorse bushes and deep heather. A more completely isolated position could not have been found, even upon these sparsely inhabited moorlands.

Doris left the boy and the horse sleeping peacefully, and walked past the little cluster of dwelling houses which formed the village proper. She intended to go only so far as she could catch a glimpse of the studio, and then return, but having got so far something seemed to draw her on.

She found the track across the field with difficulty, indeed had wandered from it several times. Then she had seen a lighter reflection ahead, which told her that she was near the sandpits.

The outline of the cottage was now in view, but she still went forward. In trying to cross the sand pits she fell rather heavily.

Common sense told her to return, that it was foolish to press forward to see a little hut which would be empty and locked up, but there was something stronger than common sense urging her forward. She would go to the cottage itself, see the cottage not merely its outline. She was bent upon it.

A few yards further and she was near the back of the building. She stopped and looked at it. There it stood, little more than a shanty. In a black background a small still blacker object, a picture of desertion and dreary seclusion.

No breath of wind was blowing, no sound came from any region round about. Shadows in the distance of huge masses of rocks seemed to pierce the very darkness and to stand around as sentinels guarding the otherwise unprotected plains.

Doris had her eyes fixed on the cottage for about a minute. She had made a partial circuit of it though at some distance, and was now nearly opposite the front. No signs of life were to be seen.

She was turning away, satisfied that Geoffrey had long ago left the place, when she fancied she saw the very smallest ray of light in the vicinity of the cottage. It then disappeared from her view. To investigate it, it was imperative to go a few steps nearer. Now it appeared again. Yes, there was no doubt it was a tiny gleam of light though from what part of the building it came was not clear. Certainly it did not come from a window. It looked as though it issued from the neighbourhood of the door either underneath the door, or just in front of it. Doris took a further step or two forward. The light seemed to draw her on. It had a weird attraction. It seemed to personify Geoffrey—Geoffrey close to her, almost by the light calling her to him. She must get as near this precious light as she could. She came still nearer, then she stopped again.

What was that high shadow which seemed to be leaning against the side of the wall? Could it be a tree or a plank? She could not recollect seeing a tree so near. It was only a shadow, but it disconcerted her, she was trying to remember if she had seen it before, when—oh! horror! the shadow moved. Yes moved, very slowly, but unmistakably, from the side to the front of the cottage.

It was now apparent that this object was a man. Doris's heart beat violently, but in a second the thought flashed through her mind—Geoffrey is in danger. Some evil is designed to him.

Though of a nervous disposition she did not hesitate for a moment in resolving that she would save him at any cost to herself. What value her life, if she could thwart any evil or danger which impended over him.

She even felt a quick glow of pleasure in the knowledge that she had an opportunity of being of service to him.

She was not more than ten or a dozen yards from the man, sheltered behind a gorse bush, which however allowed her to see what was happening.

At this moment the man's conduct became even more unaccountable.

He knelt down, and then stretched himself at full length on the ground, immediately in front of the thin streak of light. It looked as though he was trying to see something through it. That Geoffrey was inside, and that the man had designs against him, the girl was now fully convinced.

As the man rose again to his feet, after remaining in this strange position at least a minute, Doris left her concealment and boldly walked towards him.

"What are you doing here?" she said catching him by the sleeve, though her throat was contracted, and the words came with difficulty.

The man was undoubtedly as greatly surprised as she had been. He started visibly, then he looked intently at the young girl, and then came to her the greatest surprise of that eventful night, when he said quietly:

"Miss Doris Gregory! Can it be you?"

She looked at the man. Even in the partial darkness she knew him.

It was Sir James Knebworthy's new butler.

CHAPTER XIV

MALADE D'AMOUR

After their mutual recognition neither Doris nor the butler spoke for a time. They seemed dumbfounded by the awkward position in which each had encountered the other. Doris after a while broke the silence by repeating her former enquiry:

"Whatever are you doing here?"

She spoke in a peremptory and rather angry manner. Apart from her apprehensions, she felt amazed that a person of this class should show interference in Geoffrey's affairs.

The butler, however, chose to take the matter lightly.

"I was taking one of my evening walks on the moors, and I saw a ray of light from under the door, with no signs of light elsewhere. I must plead guilty to being prompted by curiosity," and then he added:

"But what about you, Miss Doris?"

"Oh, my father was called to the village. I came with him and strolled on to see if perchance we could take Mr. Frevile home with us. I suppose you know this is Mr. Frevile's studio?"

"I have heard so," was the reply.

Neither of them was satisfied with the explanation of the other, but nothing more was said as to the strange meeting, and they walked together back to the village. When they got to the cottage in which the doctor was still engaged, both the boy and horse were peacefully slumbering.

The butler said "good night," and at once started off at a rapid pace on his fully five mile walk, refusing Doris's invitation to give him a lift if he would sit with the boy on the back seat of the gig.

It was about ten-thirty when Doris and her father arrived home. The first thing she did was to run to Geoffrey's room and knock at his door, at first feebly, afterwards more boldly. There was no response, and this encouraged her to open the door and look into the room. The room was empty.

Then, she thought, Geoffrey was at the studio after all. What the butler had said about being prompted by curiosity was not true. He must have had

some other object. What could it be? She could think of no satisfactory explanation, or indeed of any explanation at all, and, dwelling on this theme, the inquietude which had distressed her in the past fell on her again. During the silent watches of the night she thought it over and over, and in the end determined at least upon one thing—she would tell Geoffrey of her experience.

"When mysterious men," she said to herself, "go prowling about his studio at night, and assume attitudes of a prairie hunter it was surely time he should be warned."

Perhaps he would be able to suggest a reason for it all. She credited him with the power of being able to brush away any of her fears, and buoyed up by this hope, was able at last to fall asleep.

When next morning she came down to a late breakfast it was only to find that Geoffrey had breakfasted at the usual time with her father and mother, and had gone away for a time.

"He would not be long before he was back again," her father told her; but as soon as Doris heard the news she knew that it would mean further days and nights of unrest and painful imaginings. Would she never be free from this wretched obsession which seemed to thicken around her? She could only dispel it intermittently when able to fix her thoughts intently and wholly on Geoffrey and his growing affection for her. Then happiness would come upon her as a flood, leaving no room for fear or dread. Secure in his love, she felt that no barrier was strong enough to interpose itself between them. He would bear it down with his astonishing determination and power, and she would try her best to help him. Their mutual love must in the end prove triumphant. Secure in this, she felt they could together make light of every difficulty.

The next day was Sunday and Doris went to church in the morning as usual. The sermon seemed designed to soothe her, for it was based on the story of Naomi and Ruth, the most beautiful story of devotion the world has ever been told.

Did not the impassioned expressions of Ruth express the feeling she now held towards Geoffrey?

Could she not say, "Where thou goest, I will go. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God." She felt she could, and, like Ruth, that she could rejoice in any sacrifice it might involve.

On the following Tuesday afternoon, this being the post day, she called at the post office for letters.

Miss Tritsy had just finished both the sorting and the inspection of the post-bag.

There were two letters for Doris—quite an unusual event. Miss Tritsy held them in her hand and delayed handing them over till she had told the girl what she thought she had found out as the result of her close examination.

"One of these letters, Doris," she said, "is in a writing I do not recognise. It is a man's handwriting, I am quite sure of that, and it comes from Derby, but I can't make out any more about it. Here it is."

She handed this letter over, but still kept the other in her hand while she added:

"This one, I know, you will be glad to receive. It is from Mr. Frevile. Oh, there is no doubt about it. I would swear before a bench of judges to the way he makes his capital 'D's.'"

A letter from Geoffrey. Oh, rapture! She had never had a letter from him before, and had often wished for one, though, as he lived with them, and was so rarely away, any necessity for writing could hardly be said to exist.

"Give it to me," she said quickly.

She took the letter into her hand and made as though she would open it then and there, but on second thoughts she paused. No, it was too precious to be opened before any eyes other than her own.

Miss Tritsy was longing to say, "Tell me what he says," but could not ask quite so boldly as that. She compromised by enquiring if he was keeping well, and when he was returning.

"Of course he is keeping well."

Doris answered the enquiry as far as she could, and then hastened from the shop with the unopened letter in her hand. She had put the other one into her pocket.

She would not go home. The letter, Geoffrey's first letter must be read in solitude where no person could possibly intrude.

She took the road out of the village towards Moneyash, a road even more quiet than the Flash road, and having walked about two miles, entered a small wood of fir trees. Here, away from human habitation and human

haunt, she resolved to read her first love letter. She had no doubt that it was a love letter. Her heart told her this, the heart so overjoyed, and which was now beating so fast. Yet she did not even then open it at once. She turned it over and over, subjecting the outside to as keen a scrutiny as Miss Tritsy had done. Of course she had seen Geoffrey's handwriting, but she had never seen her own name written by him. There it was, "Miss Doris Gregory," in the large and bold writing so typical of the man.

Of course the author of this work knows what the letter contained, though no one else in the world besides Doris ever did.

The letter commenced by an apology for going away without saying "good-bye" to her, but her mother had told him she was sleeping, and he felt she ought not to be disturbed. Then he plunged boldly into a declaration of his feelings in words sweeter to Doris than any she had ever read before. He was longing to see her again, and hoped to do so now in a couple of days. He was impatient for it, but he had this consolation that, whether he could see her or not, she was always with him. She engrossed his mind and thoughts when absent from her as entirely as when they were together. To him she was everything lovable a girl could be. Her sweet manners, her charming disposition and the goodness she had shown to him from the first day of their meeting, had conquered what he called his "hard and worldly nature." He felt he could not live without her. He asked her to believe this, to believe also that he had never been in love before. He knew she would believe him when he gave her his word as to this. To-day his love was entirely hers, and it would be to the end.

To every girl her first love letter is a thing of supreme value, often preserved by her as the most cherished document she possesses. In Doris's case her first love letter was something more than it is in most cases, for she had been sick with love for so long.

She read the letter over and over again. A beautiful smile of perfect contentment irradiated her flushed features. Every word of it was dear to her, but the part she found herself repeating more than once was where he had declared that "he could not live without her." This was what echoed her own feelings, this was the declaration she had longed for. At last it had come.

Presently it occurred to her that, full of love as it was, the letter did not in terms ask her to marry him, but this gave her no trouble. It recurred to her more than once, but she drove it away by repeating the words, "He cannot live without me." It was all summed up in this. She would be Geoffrey's wife—nothing could now interpose and prevent it.

It had come to that, she had quite forgotten the second letter until, happening to put her hand in her pocket, she touched it. She drew it out and looked at it with curiosity. The handwriting was strange to her. She felt sure she had never seen it before. It looked like a man's handwriting. Miss Tritsy appeared to be right about that. Then, her thoughts elsewhere, she opened and unfolded it, but at the first glance her heart gave a great jump, and she had to lean against one of the small fir trees for support. The letter, which was unsigned, was in the following terms:

> "To Miss Doris Gregory.
>
> "This comes to you from a true well-wisher for your happiness. The writer of it has a real contempt for anonymous communications, but circumstances prevent him communicating to you what he feels it is his duty to say in any other manner.
>
> "He wishes to warn you against a great danger which he fears is hanging over you, and to put this warning in as few words as possible. Natural as it is that you should be attracted by him, you must not marry Mr. Geoffrey Frevile. His character is such as to make it impossible that any innocent girl should accept him as her husband."

When Doris had read these words she crushed the letter in her hand and threw it on the ground. She would have liked to trample upon it.

Geoffrey! Her Geoffrey! To be so traduced by a wretched anonymous libeller. Absurd! She would take no notice of it. She would laugh at it. She even tried to do so, but her throat was dry, and she found that she was trembling. Of course it was all false, probably the work of some miscreant jealous of his valour and strength, someone who had very likely suffered from them.

Had she not Geoffrey's letter, which itself gave the lie to such wicked statements. She took his letter out again and looked at it. She seemed to derive strength and courage from it sufficient to enable her to pick up the other letter and read it to the end. It contained one other sentence, as follows:

> "I have no dislike towards Mr. Geoffrey Frevile. He has many manly and engaging qualities, but you must *not* marry him. A marriage with him could bring nothing but sorrow to you."

That was all. Doris stood quite still for a long time. The poor girl tried hard, terribly hard, to treat this "bolt from the blue" as of no consequence, but the smile had gone from her face, she felt as though she must fall, so she sat down on one of the low branches of a small tree.

She tried hard to think it all out clearly. Surely never before was a girl at the same time pulled in such opposite ways by such contradictory forces; the one drawing her towards a vision of inviting happiness, the other dragging her to the depths of apprehension and doubt.

Doris's character has been drawn inefficiently if the reader has not yet discovered that she is a girl of courage as well as constancy. Nervous, no doubt, but how many nervous persons show courage of a high quality when the occasion calls for it, who seem able to rise with circumstances to any height the circumstances demand.

Doris was one of these persons. After a time she had vanquished the force drawing her towards doubt and fear, and could fix her thoughts undisturbedly on the vision of happiness opened to her by Geoffrey's letter.

No mean achievement this, and she had done it by persuading herself that to entertain fear was to doubt Geoffrey, and that to doubt him would be to be disloyal to him. This she could never be.

With this feeling of relief she rose and left the wood, and walked slowly towards home. Her mind naturally was still occupied with the letters, but she could now think of the anonymous libel quite calmly. The phrase from this letter which most often occurred to her recollection was the one which declared that "a marriage with him could bring nothing but sorrow to you."

These words kept recurring to her memory. She seemed to have heard them before. Yes, she was sure of it; but where had she heard the words before? In a minute she came in sight of the small stunted oak tree, with its withered and leafless branches. The very tree leaning against which Geoffrey had first declared his love for her, and where she had allowed him to know that it was returned. What a long time ago it was. Now it all flashed upon her mind in a moment. The expression was Geoffrey's own expression. He it was who had first said, "A marriage with me could bring nothing but sorrow to you."

How curious that her lover, who could not now live without her, had used the same expression as the anonymous letter writer, that both should have foretold a future of sorrow necessarily following a marriage with the man she loved. She began to feel there must be truth in the words. With the double assurance how could she altogether doubt it?

“Well, let it come,” she said to herself, “I will welcome it for his sake.”

Yes, if it was joint sorrow they were to meet, she could help him to bear it. She knew she could. She had now reached the township again. The small church bell was tinkling its invitation to the evening service.

She entered the church. She might find consolation there.

CHAPTER XV

THE PROPOSAL

Thursday was the day to which all Doris's hopes turned. Geoffrey had promised in his letter that he would see her in a couple of days. It was not a long period to wait. What is a couple of days? Nothing. No sooner come than gone, certainly when spent in pleasure or congenial occupation. But how different when this same short period is a time of suspense, a period which must elapse before something on which life itself seems to depend can be known. Then, short as it is, it seems interminable, it appears to drag itself out—every minute an hour, every hour a day. To the person quivering with deferred suspense it is no longer a negligible fraction of life, but itself a very lifetime.

So at all events appeared to Doris the time which must intervene between the receipt of her letter and the Thursday—the day which was to change her whole life, the day when her hope of happiness so long indulged would be secured to her, when her beloved would be hers and hers alone.

How hard that she should have to wait even for forty-eight hours. Oh, these weary, weary hours, occupied in trying to chase away or forget the disquieting thoughts ever waiting in the confines of her mind prepared to rush in when unoccupied space was available.

A constant and hard struggle with herself, even in the hours of daylight, when her mind was much occupied by duties, often self imposed; almost an impossible fight in the wakeful hours of the night, when darkness so often banishes brightness from the mind as well as from the eyes.

How many times did Doris, tossing impatiently on her bed on the Tuesday and Wednesday nights, count the hours which must pass before the dawn of the day which was to herald for her a life of perpetual joy and contentment, and how often during the same nights was the delightful vision she strove to keep her mind fixed upon destroyed or injured by the demons of dread and fear.

Still, thank God, the longest nights end, the longest periods of suspense drag themselves through somehow or other, and the tortured soul emerges again into sunlight.

When Doris rose with the dawn on Thursday morning, she had recovered her spirits, and she could look forward to her prospects of happiness without the alloy of apprehension.

She dressed quickly. It wanted more than an hour to breakfast time. She could not remain in the house. She must be up and out of doors; she felt she must be on the moors. She walked through the little township, still apparently sleeping, and took the road towards Moneyash. A half conscious notion that Geoffrey might be waiting for her, even at this early hour, seemed to direct her steps in this direction.

She did not really expect to see him, though they had often met on the moors at unexpected and unappointed times and places.

He had not said in his letter where or at what time he looked forward to meeting her to-day. Well, at all events she would walk as far as the stunted oak tree, an object ever associated in her mind with the revelation of Geoffrey's affection for her.

As she approached the tree the sun broke through the morning mist and lighted up the lovely valley, and the rocks and hills surrounding it—in which not a breath of life seemed to exist—with a rich purple glow.

It threw a ray directly on this solitary decaying tree, and in the light of this ray Doris perceived the figure of a man standing beside it.

No need to strain her eyes. The tall commanding figure could never be mistaken by her for any other man in the world. She could not wait. She ran, ran quickly, and ran into Geoffrey's open arms.

"My own darling, I knew I should not be mistaken. I knew you would meet me here, here on this very spot," said Geoffrey, clasping the girl closely to him.

Doris could make no reply. She could only nestle in Geoffrey's arms, as a lost bird who has found its home at last, and look at him.

"Yes," he continued with a happy laugh, "and I felt sure you would come early."

"How could you feel sure of that, Geoffrey?"

They were the first words Doris could utter.

"Because I know you, my love," was the reply, and then in more serious tones than she had ever heard him use before, the long pined-for question came at last:

“Doris will you marry me? Marry me at once?”

Doris raised to his a supremely happy face and replied without hesitation:

“I think you have had my answer long ago.”

Doris had been kissed by Geoffrey before, once, on the eventful night of the coal mine explosion, at her own request, but now he drew her more closely to him and kissed her passionately over and over again—the first real lover’s kisses she had ever known.

Then he spoke again in a more serious voice than he had ever used to her before.

“Doris, we must go away from these parts; we must start a new life together in a new country. Are you prepared to do this?”

Again came the ready and unhesitating reply:

“I am prepared to go anywhere with you, Geoffrey.”

“I should not ask you, my darling, unless it were necessary, but it is. I will never look back on this old life. All my future shall be given to secure your happiness, to make the best reparation I can to you for your trustfulness and self sacrifice.”

Doris looked at him, a coquettish smile on her face—the most fascinating smile a girl can assume, a mixture of coyness and pertness quite irresistible to the other sex—as she replied almost in a whisper:

“I have never thought it was a sacrifice.”

“Doris, my dearest one. I have known almost from the first moment we met that, though I did not deserve you, life would be nothing to me without you.”

The coquettish smile was still on her face as she answered:

“You took some time to tell me so.”

“My difficulty has always been that though I love you more than life I don’t think you ought to sacrifice yourself to me.”

These words at once aroused in Doris’s mind the recollection of the anonymous letter. She must tell him of it. She could keep nothing from him now.

“Geoffrey, I ought to tell you. I have already been warned not to marry you,” she said.

His reply, so different from what she expected, caused her to start slightly and glance at him quickly. He was not looking at her, but was gazing at the ground, as he said, as though half speaking to himself:

"The warning was quite right."

"Oh, Geoffrey!" That was all she was able to say.

He continued, his looks still averted:

"Doris, if at any time you should discover that I am not worthy of your love, do you think you will be able to forgive me?"

The reply was couched in words dearer to her lover than a direct affirmative would have been.

"It is more difficult to love than to forgive."

Geoffrey was deeply moved. A sudden resolve came upon him to tell her everything he had reserved in the past. Whatever the consequence to himself it was her due. He took both her hands and held them in his own almost reverently, as he said:

"Doris, I will tell you, if you wish it why you ought not to marry me, and, though it will probably destroy all my hopes of happiness I cannot keep from myself that you have a right to know. Neither will I ask you, after you have heard what I say, to alter the decision at which I think you will arrive—at which I think you ought to arrive."

He stopped. He still held her hands in his, but his head was turned away as though he did not wish to influence her by looking at her.

The girl released her hands from his, and raised them to his face, which she gently turned towards her own until their eyes perforce met. She held them with her own as she answered him in a clear and unfaltering voice:

"Geoffrey, I do not wish to know what you would tell me. I love you. Nothing else matters."

The girl's attitude and expression as she uttered these few words, could they have been caught by an artist and transferred to canvas, would have made a beautiful picture of female constancy and the triumph of deep and passionate love, fit to be handed down the ages.

Geoffrey appeared at first as if he was going to speak again. The girl's implicit trustfulness so affected him that he felt an impulse, almost a desire, to press her to alter her decision, even to force upon her the confidence she

had refused, but he said nothing more. He only clasped her in his arms again and kissed her repeatedly.

"Doris, I can never repay your confidence in me. My life shall be spent in trying to deserve it," he said.

Neither joy nor grief can for long subdue the demands of appetite. It presently occurred to Doris that the home breakfast was waiting.

"Come, Geoffrey," she said, "though I could stay here all day I think we must get home. They will be wondering what has become of me."

They certainly did not hasten their steps homewards, engaged in the kind of talk which may be summed up as "lovers' talk," always the same, the oldest sort of talk in the world, coeval assuredly with the creation of mankind, possibly coeval with the creation of the animal world.

In reply to the very natural question from Doris whether she might tell her father and mother of her engagement Geoffrey at once asked her not to do so.

"They would only raise objections," he said.

"I am quite sure my mother would not raise any objection. Everything shall be as you wish, though I feel as though I must tell someone. I should like to tell the whole world."

Presently a solitary pedestrian was seen to be coming towards them. When he got near enough to be recognised, it was found to be Sid. The man stopped.

"Hulloa, Sid! you are out early," exclaimed Doris.

The man replied in very discourteous tones.

"Why should you be the only ones out early?"

Geoffrey burst out laughing. Sid could never vex him. A retort which might have vexed Doris at another time only amused her to-day. She whispered to her lover, "Geoffrey, may I tell Sid?"

"You may if you like. Sid is to be trusted."

"Sid," exclaimed Doris stepping before the man, "look at me. I am going to marry your master. You may be the first to congratulate me."

Sid's eyes as he faced Doris might have been looking anywhere, but wherever focused there was an unmistakable look of anger in them. He said nothing.

“Sid, do you not wish to congratulate me?” Doris asked.

“No,” was the curt reply.

Geoffrey burst out laughing once again; and Doris could not repress a smile.

The man said nothing more, and immediately shuffled on his way. Something had evidently greatly upset poor Sid.

“What is wrong with him?” Doris asked as soon as he was out of hearing.

“I fancy Sid is jealous of you. He doesn’t like anyone who professes to care for or take any interest in me.”

“I can quite sympathise with Sid in this feeling,” and Doris smiled at her lover in a pretty coquettish way.

“You see, Doris, for years he has served me, waited upon me, and devoted his time to looking after me. He really has a heart of gold, has Sid.”

“I believe he has, and now he thinks I shall take all these duties off his hands, as I certainly shall.”

“I hope you will not be too hard a task master,” Geoffrey replied in his pleasing way.

“Well, I will tell you one thing, my dear, I shall not let you do the rash and brave things you have done in the past.”

“I am not so certain about brave, Doris. I have done many wildly rash things, but then I am venturesome. It was born in me. Henceforth I am going to try to conquer it, but let me tell you, my own dearest one, that you are the bravest person I have ever known to dare to link your life with mine.”

“I have never been frightened at that prospect, Geoffrey, but I have been frightened, horribly frightened for you. Only a few nights ago something happened which alarmed me very much at the time, and has been a sort of nightmare ever since.”

“Tell me what it was, Doris.”

He did not appear very concerned to know, and as by this time they had almost reached home, Doris’s disclosure of the butler’s strange behaviour at Flash had to be for the time being postponed.

Anyone looking at the company seated at the breakfast table at the Hermitage on that morning would have seen an apparently very happy party.

Walter, after paying a series of visits to fellow Oxford students, had just returned home, to his mother's infinite delight. Walter had always been her favourite child. Doris she had regarded, since the girl had developed into a beauty, somewhat as an asset, likely to raise the family position and fortunes by a good marriage. The doctor's disposition was such that he could not be other than amiable, and was apparently always in good spirits. As to Doris, her animation and the glow of pleasurable excitement on her cheeks was so observable that her mother remarked:

"You look extraordinary well to-day, Doris."

Doris, who dared not look at Geoffrey, lest she should give away her secret, replied:

"I have been out on the moors, Mother. It always braces me up. It was simply lovely this morning."

By and by she asked:

"Are you going to Flash to-day, Geoffrey?"

"I thought of going this afternoon," was the reply.

"Well, I will walk with you," said Doris.

"It is much too far for you to go. There and back it is more than ten miles," said her mother.

"I might get the chaise from the Cheshire Cheese Inn. I think the old horse is about equal to the journey," said Geoffrey.

But Doris would not allow this. She preferred walking, and in the end it was arranged that she should walk two miles on the road, and that Walter should meet her returning. Of course she was anxious to be alone with Geoffrey again, and was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable till she had told him of her adventure at Flash, and received from him an assurance that there was nothing in it, that need cause her alarm.

Geoffrey was occupied the whole morning in repairing the summer house. He was what is called "a handy man" and enjoyed the domestic jobs which he was now often called upon to perform.

Doris stood by and watched him. It was the happiest morning she had ever known. Little did she imagine as they exchanged merry repartees, and laughed and joked over the progress of the work, what a terrible cloud was resting over them, and soon about to burst and overwhelm them.

In the afternoon when on the road to Flash she told him of her night adventure, and the extraordinary behaviour of Sir James Knebworthy's butler.

He took the news in a peculiar fashion, which even at the time intrigued Doris, and which she often recalled afterwards.

At first he laughed his usual careless laugh, then after a few seconds she saw a serious look on his face. He walked on at least a hundred yards without speaking, then he took her arm in his, stopped suddenly and looked into her eyes.

"Doris, I am going to make another appeal to your trust in me. You have been so good that it seems hard I should tax your affection still further. I would not do it if I could help it, but what you have told me now makes it necessary, or at all events advisable. Will you leave the place with me to-morrow night, without in the meantime saying a word to a soul? I will somehow get a conveyance to take us to Buxton, then we can take the London coach and be married in London the next day. Will you do this for me, Doris? It is the last demand I shall make on your fearless confidence in me."

"I will do as you wish, Geoffrey."

The girl's answer came at once and without the least hesitation.

"Then meet me at the old trysting place we know so well, by the stunted oak tree at eight o'clock to-morrow night. From there we will start into our new life."

He took her into his arms and held her tightly; then he kissed her eyes and her lips and let her go.

She felt supremely happy during her walk home. Poor Doris!

"Oh, blindness to the future, kindly given."

CHAPTER XVI

THE BUTLER'S REQUEST.

It was the morning after Doris's engagement to Geoffrey, when Sir James Knebworthy was sitting in his study. A magistrate for the county, and an active public man, he had a great quantity of correspondence to deal with daily, and usually devoted the mornings to this engrossing but purely voluntary work.

He was busy writing, when there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," Sir James called.

The door opened and his butler, Abel Ramsay, appeared.

He looked a little flushed, but spoke in his usual quiet and constrained manner.

"Could you spare me a few minutes, Sir James, on a matter of importance?" he asked.

"Yes, Ramsay," was the reply.

"Before I come, Sir James, to the affair on which I am going to ask for your assistance, I have a personal confession to make to you."

"A personal confession! Nothing wrong, is there; nothing wrong with the wines?"

A tendered confession by a butler is always associated by his employer with the wines.

A slight smile played on the butler's face.

"No, Sir James, the wines are all right. The personal confession I wish to make is more serious than the safety of the wines. It is this—I am not really a butler at all."

With unconscious humour Sir James replied:

"I always thought you were almost too competent to be one."

"And further, Sir James, my name is not Abel Ramsay. I am a Bow Street detective officer, and at present employed in investigating certain matters on behalf of the Bank of England."

Sir James was so thunderstruck by this unexpected disclosure that he rose from his seat and stood before his *soi-disant* butler with open mouth.

A detective officer, and employed by the great bank!

It was not possible to remain seated in the presence of such an august official. Since the assize dinner party at the Manor, when one of His Majesty's judges was puzzled by the appearance of the butler, Sir James had at times felt a little uneasy. It had occurred to him occasionally that perhaps the man had something to conceal, that he might be "a man with a past," which in common parlance means a bad past. That, in reality, he held a status above that of a domestic servant, that he was a trusted agent of so super-eminent a principal as the Bank of England had certainly never occurred to his mind.

Sir James' mouth had gradually closed. When he opened it next it was to ask the very natural question:

"What are you doing down here?"

"Well, Sir James, it is rather a long story and I——"

Sir James interposed:

"In that case you had better take a seat."

"I think I should prefer to stand, but if you will oblige me by being seated, I will make the story as short as I can. Would you mind my locking the door before I begin?"

Permission being given, the Bow Street officer, or runner (as he must hereafter be called) commenced to unfold the surprising reasons which had brought him to such an out of the world district as Longnor, and necessitated his assumption of the calling of a domestic servant:

"You must understand, Sir James, that for the last three years or more the officials of the Bank of England have been greatly harassed by the presentation of spurious bank notes. These notes have always been of the same face value—namely, five pound notes. The forging of these notes has been done with such wonderful skill as to deceive more than once the officials of the bank, notwithstanding their large experience, into believing that the notes were genuine. It is only by subjecting them to close scrutiny under a microscope that their spurious character can be seen. Lately they have been presented in such numbers as to convince the bank authorities, not only that there are a number of them in circulation, but that the manufacture is still continuing.

"The Bank of England, naturally, has spared neither trouble nor expense to find out where these false notes are made, and who are the ingenious fabricators of them. They have been sadly disappointed at their want of success.

"I have often been engaged by the Bank, and have been devoting myself entirely to this one matter for nearly two years, and I am not the only officer conducting investigations to the same end, but we have none of us been able to learn anything until recently. Now, I believe, I have discovered something which will astonish you, Sir James, as it has astonished me."

The look on Sir James' face showed that he was astonished even before he heard what the discovery was.

The detective officer continued:

"My early investigations were made in Scotland, in the small towns in the West, such as Oban, Inverary, Tarbert and others, for it was in these districts that most of the notes were in circulation.

"After long and expensive search and enquiry I became satisfied that the notes emanated from Glasgow, and in some way or other got transmitted to the western parts of the country. I went to Glasgow and continued my investigations there, but without any success. I could not find any of the forged notes in Glasgow, or evidence that any had ever been in circulation there.

"I felt myself absolutely beaten, and had made up my mind to return to London and wait for further clues."

"If that was so, whatever brought you into Staffordshire?" exclaimed Sir James.

"It was a very forlorn hope, and came about in what I must call a roundabout way. Just at the time when I was giving up the quest, the Bank of England got information from the Liverpool Bank that some forged notes purporting to be the notes of their bank were being presented to them for payment. They said the notes were cleverly forged, so much so that they had themselves cashed several before discovering that they were spurious.

"They were all one pound notes. As you, of course know, Sir James, the Bank of England issues no notes less in value than five pounds, though they formerly did, in fact, no bank issues notes for one pound at the present time.

"The Bank of England sent me one of the forged notes on the Liverpool Bank. They thought there might be some association between these notes

and their own spurious notes, and that investigation of one might lead to the discovery of those responsible for both.

"I compared the note sent me, which was evidently a copy of an old out of date note, with the other note. The points of resemblance were very minute, but they were sufficient to make me believe that they came from the same printing press, and were engraved by the same hand.

"After spending some time in Liverpool, I at last succeeded in tracing several of the Liverpool Bank notes to Buxton. These, on examination, were found to have come from the hands of people who had accepted them bona-fide and given full face value for them. Several tradesmen in possession of these notes could not say from whom they received them. In one case a tradesman, who was a shoemaker, recollected receiving one of the notes in payment for a pair of boots from a rather strange looking man. He thought this man when he left the shop entered the Fox and Grapes Inn opposite. I got into association with most of the habitués of this inn, and at length discovered one who thought he had seen some such man as the shoemaker described in the inn on a particular night—he could not say when. If this was the man, he had stayed in the inn for hours, and when he left had said he was going to walk to Longnor. My informant thought the man was intoxicated when he departed from the inn.

"Longnor! Where was Longnor? I had never heard of the place, and discovered it was a tiny township situated on the moorlands of Staffordshire.

"The very next morning I hired a conveyance and drove here."

Sir James Knebworthy, who was an old hunting man, now spoke in the language of the field:

"It was not a very strong scent to follow."

"It was a very weak scent indeed," replied the officer, "but somehow or other, when I arrived at this place and saw its wild character and solitary situation, a conviction seemed to come upon me that, weak as it was, I was on the right scent."

These last words, uttered in an impressive manner, caused Sir James to rise again from his chair and to stare at the detective officer.

"Do you then think you have discovered the criminals here?" he almost whispered.

Before the officer could return any answer to this momentous enquiry someone turned the handle of the door and found it fastened. Then the voice,

well known to them both, of Lady Knebworthy, asked:

"Please open. I want to come in."

"I am very much engaged just now," Sir James replied.

"But I must see you," came in agitated accents from outside.

Sir James looked at his former servant as though to ask advice.

"I think, Sir James, I should admit Lady Knebworthy. What I have told you cannot be kept secret long."

When Lady Knebworthy entered the room she was manifestly surprised to see her husband and his butler engaged in a conference which required locked doors. She was even more bewildered when she saw, what her husband in his flurry had scarce noticed, that her staid butler was dressed up something like a hunting squire with buckskin breeches and red waistcoat.

This was the dress of the Bow Street runners at this time.

"My dear, this gentleman, whom we have looked upon as our valued servant, turns out to be a detective police officer, engaged in making investigations here on behalf of the Bank of England," said Sir James.

"I don't understand at all. Oh, do tell me what you mean," was all Lady Knebworthy seemed able to say in response.

It took some time before the lady could realise the situation. It was told her in outline only. Little more than that the detective officer was making enquiries about some bad bank notes on behalf of the Bank of England, but the fact that he was a detective officer at all was stupefying.

Then it became her turn to surprise the other members of the party with the news which had led her to intrude upon them.

"There are a number of men downstairs asking for Detective Officer Mannering. They say they are police constables of the Cheshire constabulary. I have told them no such person as they enquire for is known here."

"I am sorry I have been compelled to deceive you, my lady, but I am Detective Officer Mannering; I expect the men downstairs are my helpers."

Lady Knebworthy could say nothing. She was thunderstruck by this intelligence, coming upon her without warning, and which in a moment transformed her respectful man-servant into a personage shrouded in authority and mystery.

The officer continued:

"The men who have disturbed you, my lady, ought not to have done so; I told them not to come to the house, but to wait for me outside. They have this excuse, that they are a new police force. They have only existed about two years."

"We have no organised county police force in Staffordshire," Sir James exclaimed.

"No, I believe Cheshire is the first county in England to establish a county police force, with the exception, perhaps, of the Metropolitan force, now in course of formation," replied the officer.

Lady Knebworthy interposed:

"My dear," she said, addressing her husband, "I feel a little faint. I think I will leave you."

When she had gone Detective Officer Mannering (his real name must now be used), again addressing Sir James, observed:

"I should like to finish telling you the discoveries I have made—or, at all events, believe I have made. There is not very much more to tell. As soon as I saw these wild moorlands I felt certain that, whoever the manufacturers of the spurious notes might be, they would select, if not this place, a place very like it, in which to carry on their secret malpractices. It was the ideal place, the place designed by nature for the carrying out of deeds which no eye must ever see and no mind ever suspect.

"I knew that I should defeat my object if I appeared in a small self-centred village like this in my true character, so, hearing at the time I resolved to take up my residence here that you required a new butler, it seemed to give me a capital chance of concealing both my identity and my objects. I applied for the situation, and you know how I obtained it."

"Yes, I know how you obtained it, and I can't say I approve of the manner," said Sir James.

"I think I must leave you, Sir James, to settle that with Sir Adolphus Linden. He it was who suggested my trying to get into a household as a servant, and he it was who volunteered his testimonial when he knew to whose house I was trying to get admission.

"For a time I had no more success than at Glasgow or Liverpool, but one day I met the man called Sid. I knew him at once; I had seen him more than once in the courts, and recognised him as a convicted thief."

“A convicted thief! I thought he was Mr. Frevile’s man-servant,” Sir James interposed.

“He was, and is; but pray listen to the end, Sir James. Still, partly for this reason I did not associate him in any way with the forgeries. I thought he had got into respectable service, and was glad to think so. I knew he was a man of low abilities, quite incapable of carrying out so ingenious a fraud as the manufacture of spurious bank notes.

“Later, when I heard that a forged one pound note had been presented by this man at Miss Tritsy Turner’s store, it occurred to me that perchance he might be a scapegoat employed by others more skilful than himself in the carrying out of their unlawful plans. I resolved immediately to see this note and to compare it with the one in my possession, and it was only when I found that the postmistress, to whom I had disclosed my identity, declared that she had destroyed the note that the whole situation flashed upon me in a moment.

“I did not believe her. I knew that she was lying to me, and I had heard from more than one person that she had conceived an extraordinary infatuation for Mr. Frevile; in fact, that she was in love with him.

“These two things it was which convinced me that, though the man Sid might be a humble instrument, there was behind him a master hand directing and controlling his actions, and at the same moment it occurred to me who this master hand was. I watched both by day and night the studio at the far end of Flash—Mr. Frevile’s studio—and there found out things which have turned my suspicions to certainties.”

If a bombshell had exploded in the room Sir James Knebworthy could not have started more violently than he did.

“Do you think, then, that Mr. Geoffrey Frevile is the originator of the forged notes?”

The question was asked in a frightened voice.

“I do, Sir James, and it is with full conviction that I am right in my suspicions that I now apply to you, as a magistrate, for a warrant to arrest Mr. Geoffrey Frevile.”

“Oh, impossible! There must be some mistake,” replied the magistrate.

“I hope there is, Sir, but I fear there is not. It is a very painful duty which I feel called upon to execute, for in many respects I admire Mr. Frevile’s

character greatly; indeed, there is no one I have met for years who has appeared such an attractive personality to me."

Sir James remained silent for a long time, then he said:

"I should much prefer that you applied to some other magistrate to issue the warrant you require."

"I would willingly do so, but there is no time to be lost. I have a number of assistants waiting below to accompany me at once to Flash, if necessary to force entrance into the studio, and to arrest Mr. Frevile if he should be there or can be found elsewhere."

"How many assistants have you got?"

"I have got five. You know, Sir James, Mr. Frevile is a very powerful man. It may be no easy matter to arrest him."

"This is one of the most painful things I have ever been called upon to do in the course of my twenty years experience as a magistrate. I had great admiration for Mr. Geoffrey Frevile, he has been a guest at my house, but I fear it is my duty, and duty must be performed at all costs. Officer, you shall have your warrant."

CHAPTER XVII

THE DISCLOSURE

Provided with the warrant which authorised him to arrest Geoffrey Frevile, and incidentally to search the premises he occupied, Detective Officer Mannering set out from Longnor accompanied by the members of the Cheshire police force. The officer thought the studio at Flash was the most likely place to meet with the man he was in search of. At present his only desire was to arrest Geoffrey Frevile. He did not mind much what became of Sid, regarding him as a mere tool in the hands of his master; he would not mind if he escaped altogether. At all events, he had not thought fit to ask for a warrant for the arrest of Sid. The studio he also believed was likely to prove the place where the spurious notes were made, and he had accordingly decided that, whether the man he wanted was there or not, he would enter it, break into it if necessary, and search it most carefully.

He was pretty certain that if Geoffrey should chance to be present they would be resisted, and if this happened he had no doubt it would be a stiff fight. They none of them had fire-arms, and he had heard that Mr. Frevile had a pistol, which he usually carried. Still, he was not very apprehensive on this score. Somehow he did not believe that Geoffrey would resort to fire-arms against adversaries who were unarmed and who he would know were only doing their duty. Sid would of course fight desperately in his master's defence, but he was not much to be feared. He was a man of poor physique and little strength, and should his master be overpowered, was not likely to make further resistance on his own account.

It was necessary to approach the studio with great caution. The plan of operations Detective Mannering decided upon was to encircle it at a little distance, then gradually to draw closer together—if allowed to do so without interruption—and when within a few yards of the building then to rush in and take up positions at the door and windows, thus barring any exit.

If there was an interruption occasioned by anyone attempting to escape from the studio, the instructions were to desert the building and one and all to join in the pursuit of this person and if possible to secure him.

The detective officer himself was a fairly powerful man. His courage was unconquerable. As for the members of the new Cheshire police, they were all well set up men and looked strong.

When the force was about half a mile from Flash they met the Vicar of Longnor taking one of his usual strolls on the moorlands.

He was evidently puzzled, and with good reason, to see the man whom he had hitherto known as a butler in a dress altogether strange to him, and seemingly in command of a body of fine uniformed police.

"My good friend, and what are you doing with such a formidable escort?" he asked, laughing.

The police officer had to decide at once what course he should take with the Vicar. Should he make some excuse, or tell him the truth. He decided on the latter course. The enterprise on which they were engaged could be kept secret no longer. It must be known to everyone in an hour or two, so, taking the reverend gentleman a little aside, he explained to him, the position he really filled and then the painful errand he was engaged upon.

It need hardly be stated that the Vicar was overwhelmed with surprise and grief. He was one of the many who had conceived a real affection as well as admiration for Geoffrey Frevile, and had always looked upon him as being governed in his conduct by the highest principles.

Like Sir James Knebworthy, and everyone else who was to hear the staggering news, his first feeling was that the whole thing must have arisen out of some shocking mistake.

This man, who during the whole time he had been in the district, had shown admirable qualities, such unvarying kindness and consideration for everyone with whom he had been brought into contact, could not be a criminal! As well believe that light is darkness as that.

"I must accompany you on your terrible errand. I may be of some help to someone," he said after a time.

The clergyman was true to his fine character. Wherever sorrow or suffering were to be met with, there was to be found the compassionate-hearted Vicar of Longnor. He was almost devoid of what is called "Knowledge of the world." His life and ministrations had been placed within narrow limits, but he would have been less intelligent than he was if his experience had not taught him that good and bad qualities exist in everyone. Those only who have had experience of life in all its diverse phases know in what a superlative degree these contradictory qualities may be present in the same person.

No objection was made to his company, and the party proceeded on towards the studio. When the cottage came into view no signs of life were

perceptible either in or around it. There it rested on the peaceful moorlands under the shadow of the encircling rocks. A place less likely to be the scene of startling tragedy could not be imagined.

The two small blinds in front were drawn. Not a sound within hearing, save the hushed footsteps of the approaching officers of the law.

The last few yards they quickened their steps—indeed ran—and took up the positions around the cottage assigned to them. Still no indication of any movement within. It seemed as though they had surrounded a deserted building.

The officer knocked violently with his stick on the door. Still no response.

He tried the door and found it locked. He knocked again.

"Open in the name of the law," he cried.

"I don't think there can be anyone within," said the Vicar.

He was greatly relieved to think that he had perhaps escaped witnessing a very painful scene.

"I must break open the door. I intend to search the house thoroughly," said the detective officer.

They had no hammers or battering rams with which to beat the door down, but it looked unsubstantial and the worse for wear. It would not take much force to demolish it.

A few steps away was a wall, constructed in the fashion of all moorland walls, of large stones laid upon one another, loose and unmortared.

One of these stones would do for a battering ram. The officer was returning with one of them, when one of the constabulary, who had been listening at the key hole of the door, exclaimed:

"I think I heard a footstep inside. I feel sure there is someone in the house." A pause. Everyone listened intently.

Not a step, not a breath came from within.

The detective officer raised the stone and struck the door with his full strength. It gave way at the first blow, and the whole fell inwards.

Without pausing a second the officer stepped across the threshold. He had no sooner done so than something flew upon him and attacked him

wildly. It might have been a wild animal, or a wild man. It was in reality the latter. It was Sid.

The attack was so unexpected and vigorous that it overpowered the police officer, and the two men struggling together fell to the ground. Several of the constables came to the assistance of their chief, and in attempting to overpower his assailant handled him somewhat roughly. Sid continued to fight like a wild cat, both with his feet and hands, screaming out, "I'll kill you. I'll kill you all!" But the struggle was too one-sided to last long. In a minute or two he was overpowered and helpless. He was badly injured. Bleeding from a blow on the head, and his left leg apparently useless.

He was thrown into a chair, where he reclined gasping, but still muttering of his intention to kill the whole party.

The Vicar came to him, and with his own handkerchief bandaged his wounded head. Then he sat down by the injured man, put his arm round him and tried to soothe him. Poor Sid, who was always responsive to kindness, was quieted immediately. He turned his head to see who it was that was treating him in so brotherly a manner, and recognised the clergyman. He looked at him wildly, then he took his hand in his own and held it tightly. His passion had gone at once, and in place of defiances he kept repeating: "I want to speak to you. Send them away. Send them all away; I must speak to you."

It was soon apparent that no one was on the premises with the exception of Sid, and the constables proceeded to search the place.

"Shall we bind him?" one of them asked, pointing to Sid.

"No matter; he is not the man I want," was the reply.

The premises appeared to consist of but two small rooms, one above the other. In the lower room the floor was covered with a large Persian rug. A small table, a few chairs and a couch was the only furniture, except that the walls were hung with pictures finished and unfinished. The upper room was evidently the studio. It contained easels, canvasses, boards and other painting materials.

All the sketches on the walls of this room were unfinished. They were the work of either Geoffrey or Doris.

It was exactly what might have been expected in a small painting studio—nothing suspicious, nothing incriminating, or even suggesting that the

place was used for any other purpose than the articles found in it proclaimed.

The detective officer was a little upset by the fruitlessness of the search, but he did not show it. He said to himself he ought not to have expected so clever a man as Mr. Frevile to leave indications which could be found by the first comer.

That there must be some secret concealed place he felt sure. The tiny ray of light he had seen on the night he had encountered Doris at the studio must have come from somewhere. At the time it seemed to have come from underneath the door, but not immediately underneath, or from just in front of the door.

He went outside and examined, but could find no trace of any orifice through which light could possibly have come. There was a step on which the door closed, but the step was imbedded deeply in the earth and there was no space there or around it through which light could proceed. Then it must have been a light from under the door, between the door and the doorstep, and yet his recollection was clear that it had not come from there, but from the level of the ground. Perhaps something had been done to alter the place since his former visit. It was possible there was some subterranean chamber. If so there must be some entrance to it. A secret entrance of course. The search must be continued. He re-entered the studio, and found the constables standing together doing nothing, and apparently satisfied that there was nothing to be found out.

"We must make further and more careful search," he said. "Take up the rug and examine the floor and walls to see if there is any sign of some hiding place." The floor was uncovered and the constables began a minute examination of the whole room, testing it inch by inch.

Detective Officer Mannering took no part in this. His attention was centred upon Sid. He watched his face and expression moment by moment, as children, in search of some hidden article in the game of "hide and seek," watch the face of the hider in order to see on it some expression indicative of coming success.

Presently, as one of the men was investigating the fire grate and the stones and bricks surrounding it, he saw Sid change colour, and start as though he was going to get up.

"Take that fire grate away. Get it out somehow," he commanded.

It was no easy matter. The grate seemed firmly fixed by large screws, fastened into the stone on both sides.

“Don’t pull the house down,” Sid shouted angrily.

“Go on. Get it out,” was the officer’s reply.

“If we could only undo these screws it would come at once,” said one of the men. They had no tools with which to undo the screws and they held firm.

Sid was sitting forward in his chair, restrained from rising by the Vicar’s almost embrace. His face was flushed, and in his eyes once more appeared the look of wild anger that had so recently been there.

The officer knew he was on the right track at last. It took the combined strength of five men to drag the fire grate away, and when at last it gave way, the stones to which it was secured came with it.

Beneath the grate, and completely concealed by it when in position, was a hole about two feet square. Looking down could be seen, with difficulty, a small iron ladder fixed perpendicularly, and evidently conducting to an underground room or cellar.

The detective officer was the first to descend the ladder, calling on the constables to follow him. The descent was not easy. There was no spare room—just sufficient to allow a person to squeeze through.

As the men descended they found themselves in a very small, almost completely dark chamber, not more than nine or ten feet square. It had evidently been at one time a cellar, and the entrance, wherever it was, had been cleverly done away with, and the concealed entrance substituted for it.

“Strike a light,” cried out the detective officer. The tone of voice seemed to indicate that, for once in his life, he was excited.

Matches—“lucifer matches” as they were long called—were only just coming into use, but one of the constables had a few in his possession, and lighted a candle, of which there were several in various parts of the room.

On the first show of light the mystery was revealed—the whole secret was up. The chamber contained one strong bench, but on and about it were seen copper engraving plates, gravers, or burins for cutting the lines on the plates, scrapers, burnishers, paper with watermarks, printers’ inks, and a small cylinder press—in fact the whole paraphernalia required for carrying on the art of engraving.

Further search revealed a small locked drawer under the bench, which, when burst open, was found to contain several hundred five pound notes representing those of the Bank of England, and a smaller number of one pound notes, purporting to be those of the Bank of Liverpool.

All these notes had been engraved with great skill, and would have imposed upon most persons, but a comparison with the genuine notes left no doubt that they were one and all spurious.

So Geoffrey Frevile, the handsome, jovial, light-hearted man, whose very presence inspired mirth and good humour, the hero of a hundred feats of strength and bravery, was a forger!—a felon, whose liberty, whose very life, might be forfeit to the outraged laws of his country.

Impossible, many would say, that such opposite characteristics could exist in the same person. No, amazing if one will, but not impossible; perhaps not even so rare as generally thought. Good and bad are in some degree present in us all, and as time passes this is more and more recognised and perhaps better understood. This truth will never again be so beautifully expressed as it is in the words of Shakespeare:

> "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn
> Good and ill together."

Yes, qualities noble and ignoble, so far removed from each other as to seem incapable of combination, will yet be found blended in one and the same individual.

It is merely a question of degree, admitted by everybody when the qualities do not appear too violently opposed; but when the bad qualities stand out gross and unusual, domineering, as it were, the whole personality, much scepticism is generally shown as to the possibility of a real intermixture of good.

We want to portray Geoffrey Frevile to our readers, not only as a not altogether bad man, but as a man of captivating character and possessing more than the usual virtues, whilst at the same time we must portray him as a criminal! And why should not this be so? Ask anyone who has had close association with this class, ask their relatives, or those who have management and control of them after conviction, and you will generally hear the same story.

Even if the crime of which they are guilty is of a cruel or revolting nature, engaging and even lovable traits of character are often found to co-

exist. It will be understood that we speak of the "criminal" as generally understood, not taking account of those who in the past, or the present, become law breakers from motives which may be praiseworthy.

Then there is another class of law breakers: those who are prompted to become so from improper and insufficient motives, but not from base or ignoble motives.

Such are those who are impelled by desire for notoriety, or love of excitement, or even romanticism, to break their country's laws.

It was to this class that Geoffrey Frevile belonged. It was almost entirely to excessive, overwhelming love of excitement and adventure that his present condition was due.

"Ah, but," the reader may exclaim, "the motive prompting Geoffrey Frevile was altogether an ignoble one—merely a desire to obtain money dishonestly."

He would be wrong.

Geoffrey's object at first was merely a desire to test his own skill. He had made several good engravings of pictures, and suddenly conceived a strong wish to find out if his skill was sufficient to enable him to engrave a bank note which would deceive. He had no intention of putting them into circulation. Then, unfortunately, being at the time in want of money, he yielded to the temptation, and allowed them to be tried on the Bank of England itself. Here again the dominant object was not to obtain money from the Bank of England, but the zest of excitement and adventure.

The ease with which they passed as genuine led him to continue the making of these notes, but the acquisition of money had never greatly influenced him.

This was shown later, when it was found that the woman in Glasgow who had been introduced by Sid and who from the first had circulated the notes, had received hundreds more than she had ever accounted for, or been asked to account for.

To return to the story.

Whilst the officers of the law were pursuing their investigations Sid and the Vicar were left alone.

Directly the entrance to the underground room was disclosed Sid knew that the game was up—that discovery had been made.

He made no further attempt to stay the search after his protest against pulling the house down. He realised that it was useless.

The Vicar was doing his best to comfort him—his pity for everyone who yielded to temptation was so profound that it might well have secured for him the title of "the sinners' friend."

Of course he could no longer assume incredulity to the fact that both Sid and his master had been engaged in nefarious and wicked practices. He was with infinite tenderness trying to make Sid understand that, however he may have broken human laws, he could, if penitent, always obtain forgiveness from a Higher Power.

Sid appeared to take little interest in the clergyman's exhortations, until he happened to say that he (Sid) could still count on friends desirous of helping him.

"I have no friends now," was the reply.

"Yes, you have, Sid. I will always be a friend to you, if you will have me."

The poor man's attention was aroused at once. He turned suddenly to the clergyman.

"Do you mean that?" he remarked.

"Yes indeed, Sid, I mean it."

"Then will you do what I want, and I will bless ye for ever. I can't go myself, so find my master and tell him to escape. You understand to escape now at once. Tell him not to bother about me. I am in for it, and I don't mind."

A most trying dilemma this for a clergyman to find himself placed in.

He had, as we have said a personal affection for Geoffrey. He knew also what the consequences were likely to be to him if he was caught and the terrible suffering which would fall upon others as well as himself.

The impulse was strong to grant Sid's request, to find Geoffrey and at least tell him what had taken place at the studio; but, on the other hand, would it be right to do so?

He knew that he would be acting against the law; that he would be compromising a felony and liable to severe punishment; but it was not this. He felt he could have risked violating man's law to effect such a desirable end, but would he not be breaking the law of God?

Did not the Divine law decree that sin should be expiated on earth, by enduring fit punishment? Could he reconcile it with his duty to violate not only the human but the Divine law?

He felt, strong as was the temptation, that he could not.

"Sid," he exclaimed, placing his arm again affectionately round him, "I am very sorry. I would do anything in my power for you or Mr. Frevile, but I cannot do what you ask. It would not be right."

Sid's eyes once again flashed angrily. He threw off the clergyman's arm roughly as he exclaimed:

"I knew you would not. You are like all the rest of them. There is only one man who would do anything for a friend. And you say you are his friend, and you are afraid. You are a coward. Curse you!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A LEGAL SLIP

It will be remembered that it was on the day the studio at Flash was raided by officers of the law that Geoffrey Frevile left Doris in the afternoon about two miles from Longnor and continued his walk alone towards the studio. What the girl had just told him about her night visit to the studio and the unaccountable behaviour of the so-called butler had confirmed a suspicion which had been in his mind for some time.

From his first meeting with this singular man wandering on the moors, it had appeared to him that he was assuming a rôle which did not belong to him; that he had some design in coming into the district other than a wish to serve as a domestic servant.

Later on the thought had more than once crossed his mind that he himself might be associated with the appearance in the district of the *soi-disant* butler.

Oddly enough this thought gave him no uneasiness. He took it in his usual optimistic and light-hearted manner. If he and this mysterious man were to be matched against one another, he had no doubt of his ability to outwit him, and the conflict would be one after his own heart; another adventure to add a thrill to the commonplace life he had recently been living.

Incredible as it may seem, Sid had never told him anything about passing a bad note at Miss Tritsy's store, but of course, like everyone else, he had heard of it, and, later on, had somehow discovered that the butler had been at the store making enquiries, and that Miss Tritsy had said it was not in her power to show him the note.

Putting these things together, Geoffrey felt reasonably sure that this so-called butler was a detective agent for the banks, which meant that he was upon his track.

What Doris had told him during their walk fully confirmed this. And yet, so abnormal was Geoffrey's mentality, so exceptional his idiosyncrasy, that even this probably would not have worried him. It certainly would not have frightened him. He would most likely have seen in it only the opportunity of one more exhilarating adventure; an exciting struggle between himself and

the officers of the law, in which—as had been the case in all his adventures—the possibility of being beaten never seemed to enter his mind.

But now things were changed. There was Doris to be considered. Everything must give place to her happiness, with which his own was so closely involved. He felt he could not afford to tempt fortune further. The results of failure now occurred to him for the first time. The daring escapades which had been food and drink to him were over. Adventure must give place to love. Love for Doris, a great and eternal love, under new conditions and in a new country.

He walked on until he came within sight of the studio. It was evident that something was amiss there. A small crowd, chiefly women and children were collected near the cottage, and seemed to be watching it intently.

"I expect my friend the butler is responsible for this aggression on my premises. I wonder if he has discovered anything?" said Geoffrey to himself. He had to decide at once whether he would enter the building, or watch it from a distance. A short time ago he would unhesitatingly have chosen the former course and tried his luck against the officers of the law, but now the newly born promptings of prudence prevailed. He decided to watch what was going on from a distance. It was well that he did so, for he had no idea that five stalwart constables, in addition to "my friend the butler," as he called him, were waiting within with a warrant granted by his acquaintance Sir James Knebworthy for his arrest. Presently there emerged from the building the well known figure of the Vicar of Longnor, looking greatly perturbed and unhappy.

Sid had literally driven him away, repulsing with oaths all his kindly attempts to minister to his comfort.

Geoffrey at once stepped into the open and beckoned. The Vicar gave a violent start when he recognised who it was that wanted him. He hesitated, but when Geoffrey gave a more impatient signal than before, commenced to walk slowly towards him.

The few seconds occupied in the walk the clergyman always looked upon as the supreme crisis of his life. He knew that the liberty, perhaps the life, of the man before him might depend on his decision. Could he, dare he neglect to warn him of what had taken place at the studio. The fates seemed to have placed in his hands the duty to comply with Sid's earnest request. He was trembling and walked on unconsciously until arrested by Geoffrey's well-known voice.

"Well, Vicar, what is up?"

It was a terrible moment for the Vicar. What should he do?

Any moment the police might emerge from the studio. They might even see Geoffrey from the windows of the cottage, standing out without any attempt at concealment. Surely the God he served so faithfully would come to his aid now and show him what he ought to do.

To the end of his life he never knew the words he uttered in response to the question asked him, but he must somehow have conveyed the idea that the police were in possession of the studio, and that Sid had been overcome, and was injured and helpless, for Geoffrey exclaimed: "Poor Sid! I know exactly how he fought before he was overpowered."

Sid's prowess and present condition, not his own imminent peril, was the first thing he thought of.

He commenced to walk away from the cottage, the clergyman still walking alongside him, who, unable to retain his pent up feelings, suddenly exclaimed: "Oh, Mr. Frevile, how could you?" He suddenly stopped, unable to say a word more.

"Well, Vicar," was the reply, "you see your character and mine were formed in altogether different moulds. You find your pleasure in good works, I find mine in perilous deeds. Your life is no doubt the better of the two, though I should esteem it somewhat monotonous."

"I dare not judge you, Mr. Frevile; but as this may be the last time we are together in this world I beg you to seek forgiveness where forgiveness may be found."

"Oh, I have plenty to seek forgiveness for," was the reply uttered lightly.

"Everyone of us has, but, for your part, you have done many kindly and noble deeds, which I am positive will be set off against your misdeeds at the great account."

"I fear the balance will still be much against me," Geoffrey replied, laughingly.

They had walked a considerable way out of the village, in a north-westerly direction, when noises were heard behind, and presently a sound of shouting. Geoffrey's rashness had led to his discovery. He had been seen by one of the village children, who gave the alarm. So great was his popularity in the village, that it is almost certain an adult villager would have kept the discovery to himself, despite chance of reward, and the small boy, who not

unnaturally gave his secret away, had for years afterwards to bear the taunts and reproaches of the villagers.

The hue and cry was up. He was being pursued by the whole police force. In a minute they came into view followed by such members of the crowd as could keep up with them.

Geoffrey turned and looked. He seemed to measure their distance from him. But the most unaccountable thing was that he did not quicken his steps.

The clergyman felt an almost irrepressible inclination to say, “run”; but this would have been to actively encourage a law-breaker; in fact to become an accessory in law to whatever offence he had committed.

When they reached the spot known as the “Three Shire Heads,” which is the junction of the three counties of Stafford, Derby, and Chester, the pursuing force was less than fifty yards away.

Then, to the immense surprise of the Vicar, Geoffrey turned and faced them. They came on at a fast pace, led by the Bow Street runner.

Geoffrey never moved.

In a voice half breathless from exertion the police officer cried out:

“Mr. Geoffrey Frevile, I call upon you to stop.”

“Well, my friend, can’t you see that I have stopped,” was the reply, delivered in a jaunty, almost jocular manner.

“It is my painful duty to arrest you, under the name of Geoffrey Frevile for felony.”

“I am sure that such a zealous officer of the law as you will never fail to attempt to do his duty.”

Some slight emphasis on the word “attempt” seemed to convince the officer that Geoffrey was prepared to resist arrest. The officer was anxious to avoid a struggle. It is but fair to him to say as much in the interest of Geoffrey as of his own men.

He motioned to his assistants to surround their would-be prisoner, and they at once formed a circle round him. Then he spoke again, in a persuasive, almost a pathetic tone of voice:

“Mr. Frevile, I wish you to understand that this is a very painful duty to me; a duty I would have given a good deal to avoid, for I have conceived a

great regard for you, and believe that whatever you have done has been done more from a spirit of bravado than anything else."

Geoffrey bowed.

"The regard seems to have been mutual," he said.

"It is partly for this reason that I beg you not to resist the law. It can do you no good now, for, as you see, I have force enough here to overcome any resistance you may attempt."

"I am not quite so sure of that." And Geoffrey smiled, the smile which everyone found so captivating. The officer advanced two steps, as though about to catch hold of him, when Geoffrey shouted, in a loud voice:

"Stop!"

It was so unexpected that the officer obeyed.

"Show me your authority for my arrest," he said.

The officer unfolded the warrant of arrest and handed it to him.

Geoffrey read it, apparently with care. Then he refolded it quietly and handed it back with the remark:

"This warrant is not worth the paper it is written on."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Frevile. The warrant is a warrant granted by Sir James Knebworthy, a Justice of the Peace for the county of Staffordshire."

"So I see; perhaps you do not know it, but I happen to be standing at the present moment in the county of Derby."

Geoffrey spoke with the utmost coolness and politeness.

The hearers, even the members of the Cheshire constabulary were perplexed, and looked at one another as people in perplexity do, as though craving mutual enlightenment, but the detective officer, as soon as he heard the words, knew what they meant.

He knew he had been outwitted; that, if what Mr. Frevile said was true, his warrant was worthless. Still there was just the chance that his quarry might not be standing outside the jurisdiction of the Staffordshire magistrate.

"How do I know that you are standing in Derby? I am not justified in taking your word for it."

"Ask the village residents," said Geoffrey.

Various voices cried at once, “Yes, it is Derby. He is in Derby. Do you think we don’t know the ‘Three Shire Heads?’ ”

The Bow Street officer knew he was defeated.

“I ought to have got the warrant backed by a Justice of the County of Derbyshire,” he exclaimed.

“Then I should have taken two steps and been in the county of Cheshire”; and Geoffrey laughed heartily.

The situation really was a comic one. At the “Three Shire Heads” it is only necessary to take a couple of steps in opposite directions and you are out of Staffordshire, and in either Derbyshire or Cheshire as you may desire.

Even up to recent years the dwellers in the moorlands have believed they could evade the law by taking up their position at the junction of the three counties.

Detective Officer Mannering felt rather inclined to test the question. To arrest on his own authority as a police officer, but the constables of Cheshire, as a newly-created body, were very doubtful of their powers, and were not prepared to act unless protected by the authority of a legally signed warrant.

So the pursuit for the time being had to be abandoned, and Geoffrey was still a free man. He wished the officers of justice good-day in a pleasant though somewhat disdainful manner, telling them he was thinking of walking to Buxton, and that they would have their chance again any time they could find him in Staffordshire.

The last thing he said when walking away was a request to the police to treat Sid tenderly. He was greatly pleased when the detective officer answered:

“Oh, it is not Sid we desire to secure.”

The astounding news of what had occurred at Flash was in a couple of hours known throughout the moorlands and all the surrounding districts. Everyone heard it at first with incredulity, then in open-mouthed wonder. It seemed impossible that the quiet, sleepy hamlet, unknown outside its own borders, should be the scene of action of a drama which would invest it with widespread notoriety, and make it for a time the most talked of place in the kingdom.

Unenviable notoriety certainly, and yet not so regarded by many of its residents. A kind of pride was found among them that Flash, their little Flash, was the stage where this extraordinarily clever fraud had been carried out, the place of manufacture of spurious bank notes, to which hereafter it was for ever to give its name.[1]

The view held by the villagers of Geoffrey himself was peculiar. Certainly no one wished him harm, for he had not an enemy amongst them.

If he had been captured there would have been genuine grief, but no one seemed shocked at the offence he was said to have committed, or, if they were, it was lost in the feeling of admiration for the man—his cleverness and daring.

They were all greatly delighted at the manner in which he had out-manœuvred the police. It seemed to confirm the general belief that "Three Shire Heads" would always prove itself a harbour of refuge to anyone desirous of avoiding the grip of the law.

Shouts of laughter resounded from all the ale-houses and inns where the story was told, and anyone who had been present at the scene and could tell it in all its details, was at once a person of mark, the effect of which was that his audience vied with one another in pressing refreshment upon him.

The better class residents, and Geoffrey's personal friends, were of course shocked at the startling intelligence.

They could no longer regard him as a gentleman, still less as a hero; nor were they moved to excuse his conduct by the notoriety it had conferred on the township. Moreover, even by them the news was received in various ways. Some heard of it with feelings of pure unadulterated sorrow, sorrow that a man with such splendid qualities should have descended to criminal practices. Among these was numbered Dr. Gregory, Sir James Knebworthy and all his real friends.

In the case of others regret was mixed with indignation that he should have imposed so grossly upon them and gained their friendship and admission to their family circles. To some, as is so frequently the case, the pain of the tragedy—for tragedy indeed it was—was tempered by the excitement it brought with it. They were surprised themselves, but they were in a position to surprise others, a position which always gives temporary pleasure.

Mrs. Gregory was loud in her ejaculations as to the catastrophe the family had so nearly been associated with and more than hinted that Doris'

escape, as she called it, was due to her own foresight and prudence.

Miss Tritsy acted and spoke as everyone who knew that lady's character could have foretold.

"She had," she said, "been certain from the first that there was something uncanny about Mr. Frevile; that his reason for coming to their township and remaining in it was involved in mystery. She had had opportunities of judging of his mode of life, and of what his future would be, that were not permitted to others" (probably in saying this she was referring to what she had learnt, or thought she had learnt, from her crystal gazing, though she never said so). Notwithstanding these overt declarations deep down in her heart was a sense of sore pain and disappointment that the hero she had so admired, and upon whom she had from the first bestowed her virgin affections, should have turned out as he had, a feeling slightly relieved by the thought that "that girl who had set her cap at him all along could not well get him now."

Walter Gregory, as usual a mere lounger at home, sponging upon his father and still admired by his mother, declared that had he known Geoffrey was trying to obtain his sister's affections, he would have "called him out," which he most certainly would not have done.

But it was Doris upon whom the whole force of the blow fell, crushing her to the ground like a beautiful flower crushed by a ruthless footstep.

She lay on her bed, white and inanimate. No relief came to her in the form of tears; only occasionally a slight convulsive shudder when some vague realisation of her position burst through her half-dormant senses.

And yet her thoughts, so far as she was able to think, were still all centred on Geoffrey. She tried to ponder on what he would be doing, what would happen to him in the future. These things engulfed her own position. His danger seemed to draw her closer to him. She could not understand, much less realise, that he had been guilty of serious crime. If this was so, as they said it was, then he had done it from the love of adventure, and nothing else. She was sure of it. Nor was her love for the man lessened by the changed character he now bore before the world. His peril only increased her feeling of devotion towards him.

Yet she had hardly felt surprise at the startling dénouement. For months past she had been looking forward to something happening. Premonitions of danger seemed to have been shrouding her very existence: danger to Geoffrey, danger to herself; something which must separate her and Geoffrey for ever.

After a time even these impressions were lost sight of, became absorbed in the one desire to be of help to Geoffrey in his trouble. This desire becoming more irresistible every minute, seemed to re-animate her, and even to give a measure of vigour to her weak body.

She must get to him; find him out wherever he was, and support and cheer him with her love.

Had they not agreed to meet to-morrow night, and to enter upon a new life together in some far-away country?

Would he keep the appointment now? She felt sure he would if it was in his power, but would he trust her to keep her pledge to him? Would he expect her to do so under present conditions?

Not a second's hesitation did the girl have in making up her own mind. She had given her life into his hands and would continue to do so. She must find him, or she must somehow communicate with him. She had heard that he had walked away from the police in the direction of Buxton. If she could not follow him herself, how could she get a message to him?

She remembered Miss Tritsy. Perhaps she could help her with her magic crystal. Many people went to Miss Tritsy in their difficulties, and she was generally able—so she said—to help them. She had no objection whatever to these requisitions for advice being made upon her.

"I will beg her to find out where he is, and to send a messenger to him with a message from me," she said to herself. "Oh, I must do something."

She rose with effort from her bed, seated herself at her small desk and wrote. The message was in the words following:

"I know everything. I will meet you to-morrow at the stunted oak tree as promised at eight o'clock. Ever your loving Doris."

Then she got away from the house unseen, and directed her steps towards the postmistress' store.

[1] The author has taken some liberties with the history of this delightful little Staffordshire hamlet, but, as is well known, it long ago had a reputation, an unenviable reputation, for the manufacture of spurious notes, perhaps not bank notes, but notes designed to obtain goods or money by fraud, and has ever since given the name "flash notes" to all kinds of spurious notes. (See any history of Staffordshire.)

CHAPTER XIX

DISAPPOINTMENT

Doris walked with trembling steps till she reached the post office. She looked to see if the shop was empty. She dared not enter if a customer or even a gossip was present. The post office was the favourite rendezvous of every gossip in the township. The postmistress may be said to have encouraged them, though when she had extracted their news to the very dregs she dismissed them very summarily.

The shop was empty, and Miss Tritsy standing erect behind the counter, looking as cold and unconcerned as usual.

“Good afternoon, Miss Tritsy.”

Doris could say no more. Her feelings overpowered her. She almost fell on to the shop counter and broke into violent sobbing. They were the first tears that had come to relieve her hard and burning sorrow since the thunderbolt had fallen upon her.

Miss Tritsy’s ways were peculiar, but always prompt and effective.

She came quickly round her counter, locked the door of the store and half led, half carried Doris to her little back parlour, where they were secure from interruption.

She was far from being an emotional woman—scarce even sympathetic—but either the girl’s bitter grief, or, perchance, the “fellow feeling which makes one wondrous kind,” had touched her compassion.

She spoke kindly, and even partially encircled the younger girl’s waist in a sort of embrace. Thus encouraged, Doris presently was able to speak.

“Oh, Miss Tritsy, will you help me? I don’t know who to turn to but you.”

Miss Tritsy no doubt guessed that the help required related in some way to Geoffrey, but she answered:

“I will help you if I can.”

Then Doris made her request. Did she think she (Miss Tritsy) could get a letter containing a message from her somehow to Geoffrey before to-

morrow afternoon at the very latest. Oh, it was so important, so much depended on it; at the same time she offered her the letter.

As Miss Tritsy listened she seemed to draw herself away. She certainly grew cooler.

"How should I be able to communicate with Mr. Frevile?" she exclaimed.

"I am sure you can find out if you try. Oh, Miss Tritsy, for God's sake help me. You know—I am sure you know, though I have never told you—that I love him."

This was probably the worst appeal that could have been made to the woman in direct terms. She drew herself up frigidly, and replied in a taunting voice:

"Do you think, then, I ought to have better means of knowing Mr. Frevile's movements than you should have?"

"You are so much cleverer than I am. You can do whatever you make up your mind to do," said poor Doris.

The weakest part of Miss Tritsy's entrenchments was pierced. Something like a smile spread over the face of this stern woman. She was evidently mollified, though it was right to keep up a show of modesty by replying:

"I am not sure I can find out everything, but the Township knows I can find out most things I wish to know."

"Then you will help me? Find out where he is, and get my letter to him somehow. It doesn't matter what it costs."

In place of direct reply came the rather inconsequent enquiry:

"Do you know where Sid is?"

"I heard he was at the vicarage. He is hurt, and I think the Vicar is taking care of him."

"Ah, he would be." Miss Tritsy's terse response was no small tribute to the clergyman's character.

She went on talking to herself:

"Poor Sid. I must see him. He knows, if anyone does, where his master will most likely be, and I know how to make him tell me. He is a miserable sort of man; not what I call a man at all, so small and weak, fit only to be

sent on errands" (here she unconsciously borrowed an idea from the Great Poet), "but I would pardon him anything for his loyalty to his master."

"May I call on you very early to-morrow?" And, on getting permission, "Thank you, Miss Tritsy, a thousand times," Doris spoke very gratefully.

"I really don't know why I should do anything for you."

Miss Tritsy had become frigid once again. Truly Miss Tritsy was a compound.

When Doris left the store she remembered she had not asked her friend to consult her crystal, but she felt sure she would do this, if she required enlightenment.

Soon after Doris had got back to her bedroom her mother entered the room. She came doubtless with the view of bringing comfort to her daughter; but what infinite tact does it require to comfort one in the early agonies of mental suffering, and how rarely is this quality possessed.

This not ill-natured, but silly woman was bound to aggravate her daughter's condition, "to rub the wound where she should apply the plaster."

She had been with Doris several times in the early afternoon, as soon as the news reached the Hermitage, and on each occasion had almost driven the girl mad, harping upon what she called "her good luck" and the narrow escape from degradation the family had avoided. Now she burst out at once:

"Your father has been sent for to the vicarage, to see the man they call Sid."

"Poor Sid!" Doris could not resist saying this.

"Poor Sid, indeed! He is as wicked as the other man."

Of course Doris knew who was referred to, though her mother seemed determined not to soil her lips by pronouncing his name. Perhaps it was difficult for her to designate him under present circumstances. To speak of him as "Geoffrey" was far too intimate, and to call him "Mr. Frevile" far too respectable.

"Mother, I would rather not speak about him."

"Speak of him! I should think not." And then once more: "How happy you ought to be that you have escaped the wretch."

"Mother, will you be quiet?" Doris cried out.

But Mrs. Gregory was wound up. She continued:

"A few months hence and you might have been married to him. Then what disgrace. What would the Huddlestones have said, and Sir James and Lady Knebworthy, with whom we are just getting intimate?"

Doris bit her lips to bleeding point to avoid reply.

True to her nature, her mother continued:

"What you could have seen in him I can't understand. He was good looking certainly, but as you have often heard me say, 'looks are not everything.'"

Doris could make no vigorous resistance even to this. She spoke very quietly, almost in a whisper, and sadly:

"Mother, you know you did everything to bring it about, from the first day we saw Geoffrey."

"I bring it about! Oh, Doris, how can you lie there and say such a thing. I may have thought just at first that he might prove an eligible *parti* for you, but I have long known that he was unsuitable."

These words were uttered with an air of conviction and in a decisive voice. Possibly the lady thought she was telling the truth.

What use was it to try and contradict a person whose mind ever functioned, even more than is usually the case, in accord with her wishes for the time being.

Doris knew her mother too well to attempt it. She made an impatient little gesture.

"You must forget him, Doris; forget that such a man has ever existed."

"Mother, it is too late."

This last reply seemed to startle Mrs. Gregory. She had never for a moment conceived the possibility that Doris would wish to remain faithful to her lover. "You don't mean to say that you care for him now; that you would marry him now?" she said.

The poor girl would not have replied as she did, assuredly not to her mother, had she not been previously harassed beyond control.

She turned quickly, started up on her bed and cried in passionate accents:

"I do care for him. I don't mind who knows it. I would marry him to-morrow if I could."

This bold and defiant declaration of her unchanged love for Geoffrey seemed to bring to her a measure of relief.

It was an avowal of her faith and constancy. When everyone else was deserting him she had refused to do so. She had now shown openly that she still remained true to him.

So the danger Mrs. Gregory thought they had escaped was still with them. Doris' words and manner left no doubt as to her feelings and designs.

Mrs. Gregory was thoroughly alarmed. She knew it was no use to say anything more to Doris in her present mood. She left the room, closed the door softly, and, with some vague presentiment as to future measures even looked to see if the key was outside, then she descended to her husband's surgery, where she was fortunate enough to find him.

"Father," she exclaimed as soon as she entered the room, "Doris is still infatuated by that man, and I feel sure she intends to follow him if she can."

The doctor was far more akin to Doris in character and temperament than to the other members of his family. He understood his daughter's fascination for Geoffrey, and felt some admiration for her constancy. Still, it was impossible to allow her to have further association with this man who had so flagrantly outraged the laws of society. He only asked one question of his wife:

"Has Doris said she intends to follow him?"

"Indeed she has. She insists that she will marry him to-morrow if possible."

"I will see Doris myself and talk to her," he said.

The doctor had a manner, only used on rare occasions, which convinced those who understood it that he intended to have his own way, and that argument with him would be useless. He assumed this manner now, and his wife retired before it. As he walked to Doris' room he tried to think out the line of conduct he had best adopt with her. He could not take up the stern position of the paterfamilias whose will is law. He had always been an indulgent, perhaps a too easy, parent, and had, like Sir Anthony Absolute, found both his children quite easily managed when he gave them their own way. He had, as we have seen, only spoken to Doris once as to her association with Geoffrey Frevile, and was at that period, quite willing to leave her fate in her own hands. Now it was different. He had his duty to perform as a parent, and must carry it out.

He talked with his daughter very differently from the way her mother had done. Offered her deep sympathy, acknowledged the naturalness of her affection where such a man as Geoffrey was concerned, and praised her constancy. Then he attempted to show that, though she might retain her affection, a marriage was quite impossible. It would do much harm to the family and most assuredly ruin her life.

Doris kept her eyes on her father's face, but she made no reply.

"Doris," he exclaimed more sternly, "I have never thwarted you, but it is my duty to do so now. I forbid you to think of this marriage. One day you will thank me for acting as I intend to do."

Then Doris spoke for the first time:

"I shall never marry Geoffrey——"

"That is right, my darling and what I expected of you."

Doris had apparently not finished her pronouncement when her father interrupted, for she continued: "for he has gone away and left me, and I don't know where he is."

"Of course he has gone away, my dear. He has probably fled to another country," said her father.

"Yes probably." There were tears in her voice, though not in her eyes, as she uttered these words.

"My dear, you can't mean to say you would marry him now?"

"What is the use of thinking about that, when I shall never see him again." And she sighed deeply.

This was all that could be got from the girl, but to some extent it satisfied her father. Not a word as to the assignation for the next night at eight o'clock at the stunted oak tree.

Consequently he was able to assure his wife afterwards that Doris had given up all idea of marriage with Geoffrey Frevile, as she knew that it was impossible.

When Doris heard that her father was going to the vicarage to see Sid she asked leave to accompany him and he not knowing well how to refuse, consented.

Sid had been brought to the vicarage in a milk cart with straw placed at the bottom. The Vicar had borrowed the cart, placed the straw in it, and

himself driven the injured man to his own house.

A difference had arisen between the clergyman and his sister as to Sid's reception. The lady thought it was wrong, an encouragement of wickedness to shelter a man of his character, but the Vicar had, for once in his life, been unbending. He had Sid placed on a small bed in his own study, and offered to attend on him himself; but this his sister would by no means allow. If he was to be in the house it was her duty (the word "duty" was always the word she was wedded to) as a woman to attend upon him, and she was prepared to do so.

The doctor, after examination, was not able to say with certainty whether or not there was a fracture of one of the small bones of the foot. The whole foot was too swollen at present to allow a definite diagnosis. He prescribed complete rest for the injured limb.

Before Doris left the house she seized the opportunity she had come for, when her father was talking to the clergyman, to have a talk with Sid alone.

He had heard of the way his master had outwitted the police at the "Three Shire Heads," and now seemed satisfied as to his safety.

"I knew he would do them, if he only had warning. I feared they might catch him unawares," he exclaimed.

"Sid, do you know where your master is?" Doris whispered.

"No," was the reply in a rough voice.

"Surely you wish to find out and join him again? I will assist you if I can."

Doris was proceeding craftily.

"I don't expect to see him again. They will hang me, and I don't care much if he gets off."

He spoke with the sincerity of a child. The thought struck her that surely this man's devotion exceeded her own. She had always pitied him, so unfairly handicapped from birth; now she felt herself drawn towards him by a feeling stronger than pity or admiration. "On the principle, I suppose," she said to herself, "of love me; love my dog"; and Sid's affection for his master was certainly of the canine sort.

"I shall come and see you again, Sid," she said to him as she left the room.

“I am not going to stay here. She does not want me,” and he motioned his hand towards the adjoining room, where the Vicar’s sister was engaged preparing a meal for him. With all his lack of education, the man was keen of perception, and susceptible to remaining where he was not wanted.

“Then where are you going?” Doris asked.

“I don’t know. I expect they will give me a free lodging soon,” and he tried to smile at his own repartee, and only succeeded in presenting a diabolical leer.

To the end of her life Doris could never account with any certainty for her doings during the next twenty-four hours. She could recollect that she had not closed her eyes during the night, but her mind’s inertness was such that she could neither plan the future nor recall in any detail the immediate past. Anyone who had watched her during the night—and her mother did look into her bedroom twice—would have seen an apparently inanimate form, with widely open eyes, gazing somewhat wildly at vacancy.

She got up and dressed very early. She knew the store did not open till eight o’clock. She had had some notion of knocking Miss Tritsy up at a much earlier hour, so impatient was she to find out if her message had reached its destination. She hardly dared hope, still less expect, that it had.

She felt a deep longing for a confidant; someone to talk to, and who would help her in her sore need. Her father had on some occasions filled this position; never her brother or her mother. Now her father was out of the question. She racked her brain to think of someone she could trust; someone who might advise and support her, and who would at the same time preserve her secret. If only Hilda were here now she would go to her for comfort. The only persons she could think of at all get-at-able were the Vicar and Miss Tritsy. It was really Geoffrey she was pining for. If she could but see him, if he would take her in his arms once again, she would want no other adviser, no other support. But this was impossible. She had to bear her horrible position of uncertainty alone.

She got out of the house unobserved, or as she thought unobserved, and reached the store just as the shutters were being taken down by the boy.

Miss Tritsy was at her breakfast, an appetising looking meal, which she invited Doris to share. Miss Tritsy cooked for herself, and liked to show her superiority in this as in other things.

On the first view of her friend’s face Doris knew that another disappointment was awaiting her.

When the postmistress failed in what she hoped to succeed in, and, worse still, had to acknowledge failure, her temper always suffered. She now gave back the envelope she had received, and which somehow or other she seemed to know the contents of, with the curt remark:

"I did my best for you, but the fates would not respond."

Quite impossible to say what she meant by the unwillingness of the fates to respond.

"I did not expect success," said Doris, very sadly, "but I thank you sincerely for your kindness."

"Well, you need not be too disappointed. If Mr. Frevile has made an appointment with you he will keep it, if it is humanly possible."

"He has made an appointment with me, an appointment for eight o'clock to-night, but I fear he can't keep it," responded Doris.

The postmistress suddenly put her hand on the girl's arm and asked:

"Are you going to run off with him?"

She might as well tell everything now. Miss Tritsy seemed to have divined it all.

"Yes, I am going away with him, for I am engaged to marry him."

Had Miss Tritsy not been sure of this before she might have taken the confession differently. She surprised Doris by saying:

"I think you are right. If I had been engaged to Geoffrey Frevile I should not hesitate a second to fly with him."

At another time the girl would have laughed at the idea of her Adonis flying with the one-eyed elderly postmistress. Now, to have won her help and sympathy was all that mattered.

Then came a purely feminine enquiry from the postmistress.

"What are you going to do about clothes?"

Incredible as it may seem, Doris had never given a thought to this, and said so.

"You may if you like leave a box here, and I can forward it to any place you like later on."

Doris thanked her, but after she had taken her leave she decided that this might not be advisable. She knew Geoffrey would not mind, probably would

prefer, that she should come to him just with what she stood up in. They were to disappear, to go far away and leave no trace behind, not even such a trace as a box might furnish.

After Doris returned home she remained in her bedroom the whole day. She was in a state of super-excitement. She tried to be quiet, fearing her nerves might give way altogether before the ordeal which she knew was before her. She could not eat, and said the truth when she told her mother she felt too unwell to appear at meals.

What harassed her as much as anything was that she was not left alone. Her mother visited her every few minutes. Her father twice in the afternoon. Even her brother Walter came to the room more than once, and enquired how she felt—quite unaccustomed solicitude on his part.

They brought her wine, which she drank readily, and later on some tea.

It appeared to Doris that she was being watched. Why she could not say, except that her family would not leave her alone. They were not generally so assiduous in their attentions when she was indisposed.

About seven o'clock she attired herself in a heavy dark cloak and dark hat, and slipped noiselessly down the back staircase and left the house by the back door. It was dark, but not intensely dark.

No one opposed her going, but when she got to the gate she turned for a moment or two and looked at the house and kissed her hand, a mute "good-bye" to all she loved within it, probably to the house itself in which she had spent the greater part of her life.

Then she hurried forward on the road towards Moneyash. One thing only now occupied her thoughts. Would he keep the appointment? Would she see him again? Nothing else mattered.

She passed through the township without meeting a soul. Strolling in the dark was not the fashion with the residents. When she got within about half a mile of the appointed place she came upon a man walking slowly in her direction. It was too dark to see his face, but she knew at once, by his form and gait, that it was not Geoffrey.

She walked on another few hundred yards and passed another man. The moon was emerging from the clouds for a few moments, and she got a better look at this man. He was rather a big man, and seemed to be wearing some sort of uniform, but he took no notice of her, did not even pass the salutation usual in the township.

Another two hundred yards and a third man appeared. She was sure now what it meant. He was in uniform like the last, and doubtless on the same errand.

Like lightning the conviction had flashed upon her—these men were waiting for Geoffrey. In some mysterious way her tryst with him had become known. Who could have betrayed her? The vision of the postmistress presented itself, but Doris could not believe that Miss Tritsy had so grossly deceived her.

However, there was only one thing to be done. She hurried on now, breathless, and with wildly beating heart, towards the stunted tree, the former scene of the happiest moments of her life.

Now her hope that Geoffrey would not come was as burning as had been her desire a minute or two since that he should. She must reach the appointed place. If he was there she could warn him—perhaps save him.

All her courage returned at once. She had no thought now for herself—only for him; all her hope was to be of service to him. In a minute or two she reached the little tree with which she was so familiar. No one was standing near it, but on looking round she thought she saw the figure of a man at a distance of about fifty yards on either side.

She felt it could not be more than half-past seven. A full half hour before he might come. She must wait.

Oh, if only she knew which way he would come, that she could run in that direction and intercept him before he fell into the snare. If she remained in sight of these wretched spies they would know at once that she was waiting for someone, and so guess who that someone was. So she left the roadway and concealed herself behind a bush, turning her eyes first one way and then the other, if perchance she might catch a glimpse of the form she knew so well.

Time passed very slowly. What would she not have given for Sid's confidence in his master's unlimited capacity to avoid danger. She tried to think that he was far too clever to be caught in such an ambush as this—that he could easily evade these wretches.

This gave her a little comfort, but what relieved her still more was the passing of the minutes. She counted them one by one. Surely it must be eight o'clock now. Thank God, no sign of his approach. Still she waited on until she felt sure she heard the church clock of Longnor strike the three quarters. It must be quarter to nine. She could breathe freely now. Geoffrey

had escaped again. She left the shelter of the bush and walked into the road. As she did so a voice greeted her:

"Hullo, Doris, what are you doing here?"

It was her brother Walter. He had been sent by his mother to follow and watch her. Her suspicion, then, was correct; she was being watched by those at home, who would have interfered to prevent her flight, even had she met Geoffrey, but it mattered little now.

"I have been taking an evening stroll," was all that occurred to Doris to say.

"I know what you have been doing. You have been trying to meet that scamp of a fellow," said Walter.

"I know no scamp of a fellow," rejoined Doris.

"It is fortunate for him he did not come. I intended to give him the soundest thrashing he ever had in his life."

"*You* give *him* a thrashing!" said Doris.

There was an immensity of contempt in the manner in which these words were uttered which seemed to make it impossible for this boastful young man to make any reply.

"Do you know it is nine o'clock?" said Walter after a long pause, during which neither of them spoke. "You will not see him to-night, and you may as well make up your mind that you will never see him again."

Doris made no reply, and they bent their steps back to the home the girl believed an hour or two ago she had left for ever.

They passed several men on the way. They all looked of similar build, and were apparently dressed in similar uniform.

Although Doris did not know it, they were all members of the Cheshire county police.

As they neared the houses a man passed them and gave them a friendly good-night. The voice seemed familiar to them both, and Doris was just able to see that he was wearing a red waistcoat.

CHAPTER XX

LONDON SOCIETY

It is now full time the reader should know what was happening to some of the other characters introduced into this history. We must therefore leave Geoffrey Frevile closely pursued by the police, under the leadership of the Bow Street runner, to continue their game of hide and seek on the widespread moorlands of North Staffordshire, whilst the scene of our story is shifted once again to London.

It will be recollected that the letters which Doris had latterly received from her friend Hilda Alton were written in a doleful strain, acknowledging that she was disappointed with her town life, and showing that her thoughts often reverted to the little hamlet of Longnor with affection and regret. She had also declared her need of a friend of her own sex in whom she could confide and trust.

As Doris felt unable to leave Longnor herself she had written to Edwina Plumbley—now Edwina Wiles—asking her to go to Hilda. Things had not been going well with Hilda. Fascinating and attractive, she unfortunately did not possess the firmness of character of her friend Doris, and, as has previously been shown, had fallen amongst a set of people most unfit to be companions of any innocent and trustful girl. Her tastes were entirely different from theirs, but they had acquired an influence over her, and, though she knew the influence was harmful, she had not strength enough to throw it off. She was not quite sure whether she wished to. At one time she was certain she did; at another time she imagined herself quite content with things as they were.

One afternoon when Hilda was lying in a listless mood on the sofa in her prettily furnished sitting-room a visitor was announced, and Edwina Wiles entered.

At sight of her old friend Hilda's face lighted up with an expression of real pleasure. She had always been fond of Edwina, and her unexpected appearance revived in her at once recollections of her former home and friends.

Mrs. Hamilton-Smith was present in the sitting-room, but with her usual tact withdrew and left the two girls alone.

“Edwina, you don’t know how glad I am to see you. But tell me at once how did you find me out?” exclaimed Hilda.

“I got your address from Doris Gregory.”

She did not add that she had come at Doris’ request.

“I am dying to hear all the particulars about Geoffrey Frevile. Poor Doris! What an awful blow it must be to her; she was over head and heels in love with him.”

“I know very little of the particulars, more than we have seen in the London papers. We have been all of us in London; the house at Longnor is closed. I wrote at once to Doris, but she has not replied—at all events, she has not satisfied my curiosity.”

“Do you think Doris would see me if I went down to Staffordshire?” Hilda then asked.

“I don’t know. I should not be surprised to hear she had gone off with Geoffrey,” was the reply.

Hilda wished to know something about all the dwellers in “the dear little township,” as she called it; no detail was too small, no person too humble to fail to interest her.

She had never visited her former home since she had come to reside in London, but her thoughts, especially of late, had often wandered there. Her face, which Edwina on her first entrance had thought looked pale and wearied, had during the telling of these homœopathic scraps of news, become radiant and animated. This caused Edwina to remark:

“Now you are looking yourself, Hilda.”

“Who was I looking like before?” was the laughing reply.

“Rather like a faded flower, my dear,” responded her friend. “It seems to me this town life does not suit you well.”

“Suit me! It is wearing me to death,” was the answer.

“Then why do you not throw it up?”

Before an answer could be given another visitor arrived—none other than Captain Mickleford.

Mrs. Hamilton-Smith brought him into the room and then remained. Though, as has already been suggested, this lady was a flatterer and a toady, she had much common sense, and whenever a male visitor presented himself

she never left him alone with Hilda. She did not always follow this practice when a female visitor was also present, except in the case of Captain Mickleford.

Here she acted on instructions from Hilda herself, who had told her more than once not to leave her alone with her military friend.

Edwina, being introduced to the captain, made him the coldest formal bow. She knew he was one of the undesirables—probably the most undesirable of them all. Still, she was greatly intrigued by the way Hilda treated him.

He appeared to have laid himself out to make all her plans and engagements, almost as though he had been an accepted lover, and Hilda, though she seemed to listen to him with languid interest, made no objections, and seemed tacitly to assent to whatever he proposed, but there was a dejection in her manner, and a want of curiosity in her apparent assents, which convinced Edwina that, though she did not oppose, her heart was not really in it.

It was certain the captain was trying his best to ingratiate himself with the girl. He seemed ready to devote all his time and energies to her service. He spoke more than once of business in which she was interested, of moneys which he had had the handling of, and which he had dealt with on her account.

The girl paid little attention to these matters; if, indeed, she understood them, which assuredly Edwina did not. The captain seemed also to be Hilda's betting agent. She paid more attention to what he said about this, but when told certain bets had been won and certain bets lost, asked for no particulars. Once or twice she shrugged her shoulders and said something about "our usual luck," but seemed content to leave it all in his hands.

About this time other visitors made their appearance—Sir James Jones and the Countess Paloni. They made a fuss over Hilda, and, though the Knight appeared to be a gentleman, Edwina, who since her marriage had moved in better society than she had been accustomed to before, could not believe that the so-called countess was a countess at all. She detected her Cockney accent, and her affectation of society manners.

After tea was over competition seemed to arise between the guests as to which of them should outstay the others. Sir James Jones was the first to give in and to take his leave. Then at least another hour dragged on. It was obvious the captain meant to outstay the rest. He spoke and acted more like a member of the household than a visitor, and it was the countess who after a

time announced that she could stay no longer to-day. She left, previously suggesting to Hilda several appointments for luncheons, dinners, etc.

Edwina, anxious as she was to talk with Hilda alone, knew it was useless to try to wear out Captain Mickleford's sojourn, and having an engagement at home, left with the Countess Paloni.

"When can I see you again, Hilda?" she asked, when saying good bye to her friend.

The reply came from the captain.

"Hilda is engaged all this week, and I think nearly the whole of next. She has many engagements," he said.

"You seem to be responsible for most of them," Edwina retorted. It was almost the only time she had spoken to him.

In the end Hilda took the matter into her own hands and fixed the following Monday for her friend's next visit.

Immediately Edwina got outside the front door with the countess that lady commenced to make her both a request and a confession.

"I speak to you, for I want you to do what you can for 'the heiress,' as we call her."

Though she had only been introduced to her, she seemed to know that Edwina was a trusted friend of Hilda's; not "one of the hangers on," as she afterwards spoke of the people, including herself, who surrounded Hilda.

"If you are a real friend of this girl's"—she coloured and spoke with energy—"you must get her out of the hands of that Captain Mickleford. He is ruining her in more ways than one. I am afraid he is making her rather fond of him. She thinks he is honest, but he is little better than a thief. Hilda gives him whatever money he asks for, to lend out for her—he pretends he lends money at high interest to officers in the Army and Navy, but I don't believe he lends it at all. Then, as to his betting, I know she is deceived and robbed. I do a little at the races myself; I know personally of at least two cases where the horse won and Hilda was told and believed it had lost."

"You speak very unreservedly," said Edwina.

"Yes, we are all 'hangers on' to her. She pays for what we call her amusements, and it is our own amusements we are planning and enjoying at her expense. Get her away home to the country as soon as you can."

The Countess Paloni, though one of the gang who got advantages from Hilda's money, was the only one among the set who had any real affection for the girl. Luncheons and theatres at her expense were all very well; she had plenty of money and could afford to give her friends entertainments, but when it came to obtaining from her considerable sums of money, which she (the countess) was positive were not duly accounted for, she rose in rebellion. She would prefer to lose Hilda rather than allow things to continue as they were, and in so far she was assuredly disinterested. Edwina thanked the countess, promised to do all in her power to get Hilda away from the bad influences surrounding her, and particularly to try to get rid of the captain.

Having seen the captain, and watched the influence he had acquired over her friend, she knew the task would not be an easy one. On her return home she told her husband what she had seen and heard, and asked him to accompany her on her visit next Monday, and to tackle the captain boldly and try to bring about his dismissal.

Alec had become a very much occupied Member of Parliament, in addition to being a busy barrister. He was now Sir Alec Wiles, having, to the huge delight of his father-in-law, succeeded to the title about six months before.

He was not able to give a definite promise to go with his wife on her next visit; indeed, when he heard of the circumstances existing, and what was required of him, he fought shy of the business, and suggested it would be certainly better to get their old friend Bob Gaily to accompany her. "He is capital at anything of this sort, and he enjoys it. He would be far more likely to succeed than I should be, even if it should come, as you seem to suggest, to kicking someone out of the house."

It occurred to Edwina that this suggestion was a good one, and she wrote at once to Bob, asking for his help, and telling him in what way she wanted him to assist her.

Unfortunately it turned out that Bob was in the country and did not get the letter in time, and when the next Monday arrived she found that neither her husband nor their volatile friend was available.

Nevertheless, she felt that she must keep the appointment. Perhaps Hilda would be alone on this occasion, and in this case she had made up her mind to speak to her very plainly.

On her way she called at her father's "town mansion" in Park Lane. Both her father and mother were at home, and conversation took place as follows:

“Well, my lady, and to what society function are you *en route* now?”

The proprietor of the hundred shops, or “establishments,” never tired of calling his daughter “my lady.” It was a dainty morsel in his mouth—a *bonne bouche*—the mere utterance of which gave him keen enjoyment.

“I am not going to any society function, I am going to see Hilda Alton,” Edwina replied.

“From what I have heard that girl is getting among a bad set.”

“She is among them.” And Edwina then told her father what she knew of the undesirable society in which Hilda was entangled.

“She will be ruined unless we can get that terrible captain away from her. I expected my husband or Bob Gaily to come with me to-day, but I can’t get either of them, and I feel very helpless by myself.”

“My dear, I will come with you,” her father exclaimed suddenly.

Edwina was taken by surprise.

“You!” she said. “I don’t think that would be of any use. You could not tackle Captain Mickleford as Bob Gaily could.”

“You seem to have a poor opinion of your old father, my lady. I can tell you I have got rid of many undesirable assistants in my establishments, and sometimes in a very summary manner.”

Though it occurred to Edwina that it would take more tactful handling to get rid of the captain than to turn away a grocery assistant, she could not tell him this, and accordingly agreed that he should accompany her.

As they were leaving the house her mother spoke for the first time since their greetings, and this was to inquire the date of the next Court, and whether Edwina proposed to attend it.

During their walk together Edwina told her father in detail all she suspected, as well as what she had been told of Captain Mickleford’s dealings with Hilda and her money.

He showed such great indignation, and expressed his intentions of himself dealing with “this scamp,” as he already summarised him, in such strong language, that Edwina became alarmed and began to hope they would not meet.

He was momentarily diverted from his righteous anger by the mention of the “countess.”

“The Countess Paloni, my dear. Evidently Italian. The Italians have some fine old titles. I congratulate you my lady, on your new friend.”

Edwina did not tell him the doubts she entertained both as to this lady’s family and nationality.

Presently he said: “Do you happen to know the names of the horses referred to by your friend the countess—the horses which won?”

“She told me that one of them which ran at Lingford was named ‘Dark Boy.’”

“ ‘Dark Boy!’ Why, I backed him myself, and won thirty pounds.”

“Father, if you see the captain you had better not speak of this. The countess may have been mistaken, or I may have been. I don’t want you to get into trouble with a captain.”

“You may leave it all in my hands, my lady. Though your father never had much education he knows how to deal with a rogue.”

The first thing that was seen on entering Hilda’s little drawing-room was Hilda herself, lying on her couch, and Captain Mickleford seated beside her. The chaperon was in attendance.

Hilda was undisguisedly pleased to see her old friend Mr. Plumbley, whom she had always found so quaintly amusing. She even neglected Edwina for some minutes to talk with him; their talk gravitating generally to the history and fortunes of the dwellers in the moorlands. After a time she seemed to recollect that the captain had not been introduced.

“This is an old and esteemed friend of mine, Mr. Plumbley of Longnor, Staffordshire, and Park Lane,” said Hilda.

The men bowed stiffly to one another.

The double address, which sounded so well, probably impressed the military adventurer more than the appearance of the owner of the many establishments.

“Do you reside in the upper or lower part of the Lane?” he asked.

“I reside in the middle. Do you live in the Lane also?”

The captain laughed.

“Oh, no. I reside in a much humbler part.”

“By the by,” interposed Hilda, “it is strange that all the while I have known you, I don’t know your private address, I write to you always at the Club.”

The captain looked confused, but he made the best of it by rejoining:

“A bachelor lives here, there and everywhere; rarely where he can entertain ladies.”

He was smoking a cigar and entirely at his ease, and there was brandy on the table, evidently for his use. Turning to Mr. Plumbley and touching the decanter, he asked: “Do you take this in the afternoons?”

“No, I do not, Sir, and perhaps you will excuse my saying it would be better if no one did.”

“It is a question of use,” was the reply.

Here another visitor was added to the party in the person of the Countess Paloni. She greeted Edwina warmly, and Edwina introduced her to her father, who was profuse in his bows and salaams to this distinguished member of the foreign aristocracy. Presently Edwina noticed that her father was leading Hilda to talk of racing matters. She knew what he was trying to lead up to, and could not but wonder at the skill he showed.

“I hear you sometimes attend the races,” he said, as though for the purpose of making conversation.

Hilda confessed she sometimes did. She enjoyed the excitement.

“Is it the racing you find exciting, or do you sometimes have what we call ‘a little flutter’ on the horses?”

“I must confess to ‘a flutter’ sometimes,” said Hilda laughing, “but I know nothing about it. Captain Mickleford does everything for me.”

“I hope he makes a success of it.”

“Well, I hardly know. I am shockingly casual. I never keep accounts, but I fear I have lost a good deal on the whole,” Hilda retorted.

The captain was certainly uneasy at the trend of the conversation, and tried to divert it, but Mr. Plumbley was tenacious.

“I suppose you know the names of the horses your friend backs for you?” he asked.

“I know some of them, but I leave it all to Arthur.”

"Arthur! Arthur! Is he a betting agent?" Mr. Plumbley enquired with assumed innocence.

"I am Arthur, whom this lady honours with her confidence," said the captain.

Without paying any attention to the interruption Mr. Plumbley blurted out:

"My best win lately was on 'Dark Boy,' who won the Lingford Stakes so cleverly. I won thirty pounds on him."

Very quickly and in annoyed tones Captain Mickleford remarked:

"I don't think Hilda takes interest in this talk," and turning to her he added, "I think the ladies would now like tea."

But it was too late. Hilda had caught the remark about 'Dark Boy' and exclaimed:

"What do you mean, Mr. Plumbley? I had ten pounds on this horse, and he did not even secure a place."

"Whoever told you that told you a lie," and Mr. Plumbley turned and looked straight into the captain's face.

The impeachment was so unmistakable that it could not be ignored. The captain rose from his seat, flushed and passionate and shouted:

"Sir, do you mean to accuse me of lying?"

He was clearly desirous of making a diversion by turning the matter into a personal quarrel.

But his accuser possessed a sang-froid which neither his daughter nor anyone else who knew him would have attributed to him. He had not removed his eyes from the captain since he first fixed them on him.

He answered quickly:

"The cap seems to fit very well. You had better wear it."

And now everything was confusion. The captain tried to get at his denouncer to assault him, but Hilda getting quickly from her couch, interposed herself between them. Mrs. Hamilton-Smith screamed, and Edwina turned giddy and felt as though she might faint.

Restrained from committing an assault, the captain stormed out:

"Sir, do you know who I am? I am an officer and a gentleman."

“And I,” said Mr. Plumbley quietly, “am a grocer and the proprietor of twenty grocery shops—pardon, I mean ‘establishments.’”

The captain tried to be sarcastic.

“I thought you were a gentleman, but I look on you now as a common tradesman quite beneath my notice.”

“And I regard you as a common swindler,” was the reply.

“I will have no quarrelling here,” cried Hilda. She was evidently in a state of great alarm; but despite this she faced Captain Mickleford boldly.

“I fear, Arthur, you have deceived me. I was told before to-day that ‘Dark Boy’ won, and could not help suspecting, though I have tried hard to think there must have been some mistake, but I would rather nothing more was said about it.”

Here the Countess Paloni rose from her seat and exclaimed:

“It is not the first time he has defrauded you, Hilda.”

Hilda, who now clearly recognised the situation spoke with spirit.

“I must ask you, Captain Mickleford, to leave my house.”

“Hilda, if I could only have a little time with you alone I could explain,” he replied.

“I require no explanation. I freely forgive you. It is largely my own fault, but I do not wish to see you again.”

Still the man lingered in the room. He believed, if he could secure Hilda to himself for a time, he would be able to obtain a reversal of his dismissal, but in this he was mistaken. He did not really know the girl. She had shut her eyes to many things which were distasteful to her, but now they were fully opened her resolve was strong, and he had no shadow of chance of altering it.

The owner of the twenty establishments was the coolest of the party.

He certainly had played his part extraordinarily well. Now he remarked:

“If you do not leave the house in one minute I shall call in some of those new police, called ‘Peelers’ and myself give you into their custody.”

The unmasked swindler knew it was all up with him, and after bestowing a look full of hate upon the man who had exposed him, and shouting out, “I will shoot you, grocer or no grocer,” left the room and the house.

It was half-past nine the same evening when a coach drove up to the lodgings occupied by the genial Bob Gaily, and Mr. Plumbley alighted from it. Ever since the time of the eventful election he and Bob had been very good friends. There was something in the gay and light-hearted youth which amused and attracted the elder man, and Bob was often to be found a visitor at his town mansion.

"My dear 'Universal Provider'" (he had invented this designation for his friend of the many establishments), "whatever has brought you here at this hour?"

The explanation being given amounted to this; an hour or two before a gentleman calling himself 'Lieutenant Snell' had brought him a challenge from Captain Mickleford to fight him at seven o'clock the next morning at the well-known duelling place at Chalk Farm.

"Whatever have you been quarrelling with a captain about?" Bob enquired. Full details of the scene at Hilda's rooms having been given, the volatile Bob burst out laughing. He actually patted the man—old enough to be his father—on the back.

"Bravo! Splendid!" he cried. "You showed the pluck of a game cock, but I did not think you were so bellicose as to venture on a duel."

"The challenge came from him, as I knew it would. I thought the situation over for some hours in my own room after I returned home, as I always have thought over every serious event in my life, and made up my mind to come and see you."

"And do you want me to act as your second?" said Bob, to whom the position presented itself in a ludicrous light.

"That is really what I have come for," was the answer.

"You don't seriously mean that you are going to fight this military man?"

"Indeed I do. I insulted him, and though he deserved it, I was the aggressor, and if he wishes satisfaction I don't see how I can refuse him."

Bob began to regard the matter as more serious than he at first thought. He was desirous to prevent his friend fighting if possible.

"If he is a swindler and a thief I don't think you are called upon to give him satisfaction," he remarked.

"Perhaps not; that is what occurred to me at first; but I can't—having deliberately made him quarrel with me, take shelter under his unworthiness;

besides, the world might think I was afraid, and I am not afraid."

"I am sure you are not," said Bob. And then he asked, "Have you taken the advice of your family?"

"No, my boy, they know nothing of it, and will know nothing. I know it would make Edwina uncomfortable." (He did not say a word about his unemotional wife.)

"Of course, if you are quite resolved, I will act for you. But I think you take the position too seriously," said Bob.

"Bob, as you know, I am not a gentleman by birth. Have I told you before that as a youth I slept under a counter?" (Bob turned away to hide a smile at hearing this oft-repeated boast), "and now I wish to be considered a gentleman. My daughter is a lady of title and my son-in-law represents one of the oldest titled families in the kingdom. I must act up to their status and position, as well as play the part of an honourable gentleman."

Bob felt that further argument was useless. His friend's prowess, and his anxiety to act as the dictates of honour demanded drew the younger man strongly towards him.

"The captain is likely to be skilled in pistol firing; are you?" Bob enquired.

"I have never let off any kind of fire-arm in my life," was the reply.

"Then you can't fight."

"Indeed I shall. It can't be very difficult. You have only to point straight," was the childlike reply.

"But you have no pistols, neither have I," said Bob, anxious now to raise every objection.

"That's all right. The lieutenant who called on me was very polite and said he would bring what he called 'a brace.'"

It was finally settled that Mr. Plumbley and his second, Bob, were to be at Chalk Farm at the foot of Hampstead Hill at seven-thirty the next morning.

Before they parted Bob produced a bottle of brandy and pressed some of it upon his friend, but it was refused.

"I recommend you to take a little, just a small glassful, it will uphold your courage," said Bob.

“My dear Bob, I want no courage of that kind. You see I am quite composed, and if my duty and my honour will not uphold me, then certainly brandy will not.”

When he was leaving the house he spoke for the first time in a serious vein.

“Bob, if I should fall, you will find I have not altogether forgotten you in my will. Keep friends with my family, especially Sir Alec and my lady, and help them if they ever need it—and now good-night.”

“Good-night,” replied the younger man, and then the crisis recurring to him, he added, “but I fear it will not be a good night.”

“Why not? I shall sleep well, though I have to get up early.”

Bob turning back into the house after seeing his friend depart in his coach, murmured to himself: “He is a dear old fellow.”

The next morning was dull and cold, but Mr. Plumbley and his second were on the historic duelling ground well before the appointed time. The other party soon arrived, and Bob arranged with the lieutenant, who showed all the politeness with which these encounters were always in past times surrounded. He brought the brace of pistols loaded, and offered Bob the choice of either for his principal.

It was agreed that only one shot was to be fired on either side, and that the seconds should each stand ten yards to the right hand of their principals. A tall man in a long coat had got out of the coach with Captain Mickleford and his second. He was introduced to Bob as a doctor, whose attendance was due to the foresight of Lieutenant Snell.

The parties being stationed in their places—twenty yards from each other—the signal to fire was given by the lieutenant dropping a handkerchief.

Captain Mickleford fired into the air.

Mr. Plumbley took the pistol in his hand so awkwardly that he nearly fired it before the signal was given, but he faced his adversary without a tremor. As soon as his adversary’s pistol was discharged Mr. Plumbley started violently. It was such an unaccustomed noise to him that his arm, and indeed his whole body jumped round to the right, with the result that his bullet, missing the captain by many yards, struck Lieutenant Snell in the right thigh.

As soon as the poor tradesman ascertained what he had done he threw the pistol away from him as though it was a viper, and ran quickly to express his sorrow to the lieutenant, almost prostrating himself before him.

The wound turned out to be a mere flesh wound, little more than a scratch, and the victim took it well, even jocularly.

“Oh, it is all right, old chap. Accidents will happen. One has heard of ‘shooting at the pigeon and killing the crow,’ but you were not quite as successful as that,” said the good-natured lieutenant.

“I never ought to have meddled with fire-arms. I beg a thousand pardons. I will never touch them again,” exclaimed Mr. Plumbley.

With so easy tempered a sufferer, and the other party only anxious to make reparation, everything was soon accommodated. Lieutenant Snell’s slight wound eventually proved a stroke of very good luck to him, for Mr. Plumbley bought the young man his captaincy in his regiment. Captain Snell often said he owed everything in life to Mr. Plumbley’s ignorance of fire-arms.

The combatants did not speak a word to each other, or even salute one another, and the parties left the field in different directions.

It transpired subsequently that the secret of the captain firing into the air was due to a letter which Hilda had somehow got conveyed to him, in which she forgave him for his conduct towards herself, and begged him, if he had any regard for their old friendship, and if a duel was to take place, not to shoot Mr. Plumbley.

Though he really felt murderously inclined toward the man who had baffled all his designs, chief among which was a hope of marrying the heiress, he felt that Hilda had a claim on his forbearance. He had treated her so badly. This he had not intended doing in the beginning, and probably would not have done but for Hilda’s blameworthy freedom in all money matters. Then she had forgiven him, and *roué* as he was, he was touched by this, and resolved to sacrifice his revenge at Hilda’s request.

So it will be seen there was some good even in Captain Mickleford.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The events told in the last chapter had had a singular effect on Hilda. Deceived and disappointed in the man who had been the purveyor of her pleasures, she conceived an absolute distaste for the pleasures themselves.

Although for nearly two years her life had been spent rather in following others in the pursuit of excitement than in pursuing it herself, she had done little beside this. She had never been very keen upon it, always followed rather than led, and had often tired of the whole life, and lately become a mere passive participant in plans for amusement framed by others.

In the world's metropolis, seething with demands on those possessing spare time and money, she had never found any useful work to do. She had not even a useful hobby to distract her, to deaden if not destroy, the feeling of ennui which she so often suffered from—the worst enemy of the idle rich.

She knew her real fault was a lack of resolution. She was greatly dissatisfied with her life, and yet had not sufficient strength of will to alter it.

How often had she said to herself that she was leading a life which she had no right to lead—a life useless to herself or others. That it had been all wrong from the beginning. That the butterfly existence she had adopted was selfish and foolish.

These feelings, however, had been merely passing moods. She had never seriously taken herself to task until after the dismissal of her friend and evil genius, Captain Mickleford. For three weeks after this trying scene she was seriously ill and confined to bed.

Opposite to her in the room in which she was lying was a small marble clock with the figure of Cupid in brass at the top. She had owned this little clock all her life. It was one of the first presents she had received as a very small child. It always accompanied her wherever she went.

Someone told her the little figure was a god—the god of love, and that he was called "Dan Cupid."

She early got into the habit of holding conversations with this little supposed deity, and became greatly attached to the small figure. So much so was this the case that on one occasion her nurse found her kneeling and

saying her prayers before it. The good woman was horrified, shook her charge roughly, and threatened that if it occurred again her little favourite should be taken from her.

"He is not a real god," she said; "just a bit of brass, that's all."

"But he speaks to me," the child responded.

"Oh, Miss Hilda, how can you say such a thing."

"But he does, he does indeed; and he smiles at me often; and do you know" (lowering her voice to a whisper) "he sometimes winks at me."

All this she said seriously, and with the imagination of childhood which knows no limits she implicitly believed it.

Later, when she had grown up, and had her own cottage at Reapsmoor she continued to commune with the little god.

She would ask him questions, or ask his advice, when in doubt; and though she both asked and replied herself—and of course knew it—the replies seemed somehow to be prompted by the little Dan Cupid.

She had questioned the little god very little during her life in London. Other things had diverted her attention.

During her illness, when she lay with him exactly facing her bed, she had time to think over the past and try to make resolves as to the future. She took Dan Cupid into conference, questioned him sternly, and had very little doubt as to his replies.

"Dan, I think I must give up my past life. What do you think?" she asked.

Then she watched the little figure.

"Yes, he agrees with me. I am sure of it, but the question is, Dan, what is to be put in the place of it?"

"Ah, that is the question," she replied on behalf of Dan.

"It must no longer be selfish. In some way I must try and brighten the lives of others whose lives are dark and cheerless. Don't you think so, Dan?"

"Yes, he agrees," she continued, "he seems to nod his head."

"I must give all my energies to my new life, Dan."

"He nods again."

“The new life must be a complete reversal of the old, my little Dan. Don’t you agree with me?”

“He is not quite sure that I shall have strength enough to carry out this resolve. I believe he winked at me,” she said.

And so the conversation between them continued for half an hour, Dan Cupid always approving her resolves, and only once intimating a doubt as to her ability to reverse her past life entirely. Her mind also during this period often turned to the quiet township where her old lover lived, and she found herself comparing the life she had lately been leading with his.

Whilst she had been employing herself in self-gratification, he had been living for others, doing his Master’s work, helping the poor and needy in their affliction, in the true spirit of love. How was it possible that two characters could be more unlike? He was right not to have married her. She knew now she was not good enough for him.

And yet she always returned to this—he had loved her, loved her tenderly, and for herself alone. Aye, but this was before she showed her real character. What a pity she ever fell in for this money. It had proved a curse instead of a blessing. It was this and this alone which had separated them, this and this alone which had made her unworthy to be his wife.

She continued: “But in this he made a mistake, I am sure of it. He should have taken me to himself, and shielded me from the temptations of wealth, and made me understand how to use it properly. Then when he paid me his visit—the last time I saw him—how good and gentle he was with me. But he made a mistake again. He ought to have upbraided me, pointed out the way I was walking and what it would lead to. I believe he cared for me even then, but it is impossible now. Besides, he would never marry a rich woman.”

Having declared it impossible, she proceeded at once, feminine like, to envisage the sort of life she would lead as his wife; and this with the attraction of things believed to be out of reach, now appeared a most enchanting existence. To give herself up entirely to the little parish as he had done, to work with him in the dear old church, to enjoy the peaceful services, and listen to his words of exhortation which, though not eloquent, rang so true. As she thought it over and over again the picture grew brighter and brighter, till it seemed to lose itself in a vision of sunshine and happiness. Descending to earth again, she resolved that if this vision of happiness was out of her reach she could at all events so mould her life henceforth that he should approve it, and be satisfied with her.

Among many things with which she reproached herself was her carelessness over her money affairs.

She had determined now to devote a whole afternoon to a thorough investigation and find out how she stood in this respect, and with this object had invited Edwina Wiles to come and help her as assistant accountant.

The two girls might have been seen surrounded with books and papers, often knitting their brows, and then bursting into laughter at their ignorance, but trying vainly to find out from all this mass of litter the past expenditure and present pecuniary position of Hilda.

The only thing they could trace out with some certainty was that a large sum of money had disappeared, spent, or somehow lost; but where it had gone there was no trace whatever.

They certainly did their best to bring order out of this chaos, but it was all in vain, and after several hours Hilda pushed the books and papers away, remarking, "We shall never do it. I have a plan. I will ask the manager of my bank, Messrs. Hoares, of Charing Cross, to send me one of their clerks. He will be able to find out my position, for they are all so quick at figures that they confuse me whenever I go into the bank. So now let us have tea."

It took the bank clerk many weeks to find out the amount of money which had been lost, and what remained. Even then the figures were found only approximately, but it seemed clear that, of the thirty-one to thirty-two thousand pounds which she had inherited, there was almost exactly twenty thousand left. This and no more. This made Hilda's expenditure during the London life something over six thousand a year. Though she personally had spent but a small part of this huge sum, she was bitterly ashamed of the casual way she had thrown the money about and entrusted it to others.

Her small private fortune, which she possessed before she succeeded her great-uncle, still remained intact, and had not been touched. It amounted now to about two hundred and fifty a year.

The twenty thousand was now put into safe securities, but even the rents and profits accruing from it Hilda seemed loth to touch.

She had effectually got rid of her former friends, with the exception of the countess, who followed her up closely. This snatcher of a foreign title was kind-hearted, and really fond of Hilda. She had shown it in many little ways, and the girl could not, did not even wish to, repulse her.

Edwina had never had cause to regret her deception of her good papa, and this gentleman was, if possible, even more satisfied than his daughter

with her clandestine marriage.

One night, after dining with Sir Alec and Lady Wiles at their own home, Edwina took her to the House of Commons. Her husband, she said, intended to speak that evening, if only he could be lucky enough to "catch the Speaker's eye." This expression amused Hilda, and she asked in all innocence why he could not wave his handkerchief, or call out, "Hi, there!" if the Speaker was so slack as to allow his attention to wander.

Sir Alec arrested the Speaker's eye without resort to any such devices, and made a sensible speech which won a word of praise from the great Robert Peel.

Hilda enjoyed it immensely. It was more exciting than dinners or theatres, she said. On her way home her friend imparted an item of news which she knew would interest her, this being that the Vicar of Longnor was in London. She could not say what had brought him, or where he was staying, but her father had met him in the street and invited him home. The invitation had been declined, but no reason given.

Hilda now took to worrying about the large sum of money at her disposal. It lay like an obsession upon her. She felt that she could not be happy again, nor enjoy the light-heartedness of her former life, till something was decided as to the future of this money.

Time hanging heavily on her hands, she had taken to wandering round London, and visiting places of interest she ought to have seen before. Besides cathedrals there were the museums, the bridges, the beautiful city churches and numberless things of interest of which up to this time she was ignorant.

She visited some of the hospitals, and one afternoon with Edwina, when they were at Guy's Hospital an event occurred which, as it turned out, was to influence her future tremendously.

A pale-faced little girl of about ten years of age was brought by her mother for examination and treatment. The child was examined, medicine prescribed, and then the mother and child, who were evidently desperately poor, were dismissed.

Hilda was interested.

"Where do they come from?" she asked the young doctor who was showing them round the institution.

"I think they come from Limehouse—a shocking poor place," he said.

"Ought not the child to be kept in and doctored and have nourishing food given to her?" she asked.

"Unquestionably," was the reply. "It would be about the only chance of saving her."

"Then why don't you do it?" Hilda demanded quickly.

"For one reason, and one reason only. We have no beds for children; indeed, no accommodation at all for them."

"Why not provide accommodation?" Hilda spoke in petulant tones.

"Oh, my dear lady," said the doctor, laughing, "it is entirely a question of pounds, shillings and pence. It would mean a large sum to provide accommodation for children as in-patients here. We considered it some time ago, and had to abandon it."

Hilda stood still for some time; her look was fixed. She seemed gazing into vacancy; then she asked:

"What would be the cost of it?"

"I think we came to the conclusion that it would cost twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand pounds! Twenty thousand pounds!"

Hilda repeated these words to herself more than once, but nothing further was said.

When they were leaving the hospital Hilda spoke to Edwina.

"Would you ask your father to come and see me to-morrow? I want to see him on business."

"Do you want his advice?"

"Yes—well, I don't want his advice; I want his assistance. He has often helped me lately."

She did not say he had risked his life for her, for she knew this had been kept from his family.

The next afternoon Mr. Plumbley arrived, spruce and happy as ever. He had latterly taken to dressing very youthfully. His waistcoats were a sight to gaze and wonder at, and this even at the period when male dress was far more picturesque than it is now, and when gentlemen were not afraid to wear colours.

He had relinquished business, never went near "the establishments"; avoided if possible speaking of them and had given up "the whole show," as he styled it—with the single exception of the profits. He had been spending a week in Boulogne and had come back with a great admiration for the French language, something less for the French people, and no admiration at all for their boasted cookery.

"Well, 'ilda, comment vous portez-vous?" It was his one French phrase up to the present, and he had got it correctly. It is to be feared he addressed his friend as " 'ilda," but he had walked fast and was short of breath.

"It is so kind of you to give up your time to me, but you have done so much more than this for me lately," exclaimed Hilda.

He saw glimpses of reference to the unfortunate duel coming, a subject he always shunted away from and wished to forget.

To get on to another line he asked:

"Have you seen Lady Wiles lately?"

If he had thought he would have known she had seen her friend, whom she never for the moment recognised by her title, only yesterday. The titles of his children were flaunted now more conspicuously than ever. They seemed to have taken the place of his "establishments."

"Why, I sent a message by her to you yesterday."

"Of course you did. Now tell me how do you think I am looking?"

She turned her face and looked at this ridiculous and fascinating man, who, in spite of the keen warfare of business and corrupting influences of wealth, had managed to preserve the ingenuous and happy disposition of a child. She smiled.

"You are looking splendid, and so young. You look but a little older than Adolphus," said Hilda.

"My dear, I could kiss you for saying that."

"You may if you like." Even Hilda was a coquette sometimes. The invitation was not accepted, but Adolphus' name having come up, his father said:

"You know of course that Adolphus has joined the army. He is now a lieutenant in the eighteenth Hussars. Nothing would please the boy but to become a soldier, and I was not unwilling, for it is a gentlemanly calling—a

calling of which his relatives need not be ashamed—and I was willing to pay whatever sum was necessary to purchase a commission."

"So you had to buy it for him."

"Yes, there is no other way. I did not know how to go about it, but my friend Lieutenant Snell managed it for me."

"Who is Lieutenant Snell?" Hilda asked.

"He is an officer in the same regiment, whom I met—well—well—when I was out shooting, and I have been able to do something for him."

"I hope Adolphus in his new profession will show as much courage as his father did on a great occasion," then turning the conversation, she asked:

"Did you see the Vicar of Longnor yesterday?"

"Yes, I met him in Fleet Street."

"Did you not enquire where he was staying?"

"I thought he was staying with you. He told me he had come up on a matter which was now happily settled and was returning the same night."

Now the delayed question was asked:

"What is the business you wish to talk with me about?"

"I want you to tell me how I can convey money to Guy's Hospital?"

She had heard the word "convey" used in some such connection, and liked the sound of it.

"Convey money to Guy's Hospital! Why, carry it of course."

"I am afraid it would be rather a large sum to carry," she answered.

"One can carry quite a lot of bullion. I have carried five thousand pounds of gold," Mr. Plumbley answered.

"I fear I could not possibly carry what I want to convey to this great institution."

"What do you want to convey?" came as a natural enquiry.

Then she told him, told him of a resolve she had come to, a well thought out resolve, the resolution of her life, which had been in her mind indefinitely night and day for many weeks, and only yesterday taken definite settlement. This resolve was to give—convey as she called it—the whole of what remained of the fortune she had inherited, amounting to about twenty

thousand pounds, to the Trustees of Guy's Hospital to provide beds and accommodation for invalid children needing care and attention.

The good-hearted former tradesman was greatly touched. It was a splendid resolution he said, worthy of the character of the woman who made it.

He took Hilda's hand and asked the question he was bound to ask.

"Have you taken anyone's advice about this?"

"No one, with the exception of Dan Cupid's. He is sure I am doing right."

"Dan Cupid! Have I ever met him?"

"No, I don't think you have. I don't think you have ever been in my bedroom."

"Your bedroom, Hilda, what do you mean?"

"Yes, he resides in my bedroom, but I shouldn't tease you. The fact is Dan Cupid is a little statuette of the god Cupid, that I got into the habit of talking to when a child, and have, perhaps foolishly, kept up since."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Then after a long hesitation:

"This is a very noble idea of yours, Hilda."

"No, it is not noble, but it is right. Remember this one thing, you are not to try to dissuade me. I have still about two hundred and fifty a year—enough for me to live on as I mean to live in future."

"I would not say a word to dissuade you for the world," said the gentleman.

"Then you would be prepared to make a greater sacrifice than I have done," and Hilda laughed.

"Now tell me how I am to go to work?" she said.

"You must have a proper deed drawn up, declaring the trusts on which you give the money. It is a lawyer's work."

"The only lawyers I know are Leith and Marshall of fourteen Lincoln's Inn Fields, but I have never been there alone. Will you come with me?"

"Certainly. When?"

"Now, at once. I want so much to get it settled," said Hilda.

"Are you afraid you may change your mind? Would it not be better to wait? But I will do exactly as you wish."

"I could not endure to wait now. I shall be much happier when it is all done," exclaimed the girl.

So it was settled, and, although it was nearly three miles, they started to walk to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Hilda's companion appeared to possess a peculiar knowledge of every house *en route* occupied by persons of title, and knew so many details concerning the occupants that she concluded he now spent his days hunting out these particulars.

Mr. Leith, the senior member of the firm was a lawyer of an old-fashioned type—the Mr. Tulkinghorn type, rare even in these times, and which has now almost entirely disappeared.

On learning the business which was required of him, he held up his hands in horror, and expostulated strongly against it.

"To give away such a sum as twenty thousand pounds, when it was practically all the lady possessed, was madness. She ought not to be allowed to do it." Hilda could only reply that she had thought it over most seriously, and had quite made up her mind.

The lawyer was so incensed that he became positively rude.

"Girls have no right to make up their minds. They should have them made up for them," he said bluntly.

(This opinion did not sound so odd nearly a hundred years ago as it would to-day.)

"I am able to judge at all events of one thing. The money has not brought me happiness, but quite the reverse," said Hilda.

The lawyer now turned upon Mr. Plumbley.

"Are you a relative of Miss Hilda Alton?"

"No," was the reply, "but I am a sincere friend, and I approve her decision."

"You have no business to encourage the girl to renounce her fortune; I don't know if you are a business man."

"Sir, my name is Peter Plumbley, and I have controlled very large businesses."

The lawyer rose from his seat.

"Well," he said, "I will take no part in stripping the young lady of her fortune."

"Do you mean to say that you will not draw the necessary papers?" asked Mr. Plumbley.

"Yes, I do mean that," was the answer.

"Then we must go elsewhere. There are other lawyers to be found, and without going outside the Square."

Mr. Leith, as we have said, was an honest man. He was genuinely vexed that a client of his should act in what he considered so foolish a manner, but very few lawyers can regard the loss of a good client with equanimity, more especially when the client may be handed over to a rival practitioner.

The threat was sufficient. He surrendered at discretion.

"If Miss Alton is unchangeably fixed in her determination, I should not like any other firm than mine to act for her."

Less than a week later, full particulars of the fortune having been obtained, Hilda again attended at the lawyer's office with Mr. Plumbley and signed the deeds, by which she for ever divested herself of her fortune.

On the way back to Mr. Plumbley's mansion Hilda declared that she felt happier now than she had done since she succeeded to the money.

She said it had been, especially of late, a heavy weight resting upon her, and now it was removed and could never weigh upon her again.

"It must always be a great gladness to you to know the purpose for which the money is being used," said her companion, whose admiration for the girl and her unselfish behaviour knew no bounds.

Yes, she knew this and acknowledged it, but there was also another thing she knew, and which she told to no one.

She knew what it was which had really influenced her to make this great renunciation, influenced her more than the dissatisfaction she felt with her life, more than her desire to benefit destitute and sick children—the motive power lying behind it all was the unselfish life of the man whom she had loved, whom she still loved.

This, and the wish to be more like him, which had always lain dormant within her and had lately become a burning desire, were the forces which

had impelled her to act as she had done.

Before she left her good friend she imparted to him another resolution, which really arose out of and could almost be said to be a corollary to the other. This was nothing more than a determination to leave London at once, and to return to the country.

“I have written Doris to-day to prepare my cottage at Reapsmoor for me, and I shall go as soon as it is ready.”

“And if you will permit me, I will take you down in my coach,” responded Mr. Plumbley. “I shall be proud to do it.”

When she had made up her mind to any course of action she never allowed the grass to grow under her feet, and within a week she, with Edwina and Mr. Plumbley, were being driven once again to the little village in the moorlands.

On arriving at the cottage Doris and the Vicar were waiting to receive her.

The cottage had been refurnished, and it is unnecessary to say her reception by both her good friends who were awaiting her, was of the most cordial character.

Doris looked pale and ill, but there was no apparent change in the Vicar. He looked as heretofore, save that his features bore an expression of supreme contentment and happiness.

They arrived in the late afternoon, and naturally very tired.

The usual recipe for female weariness, even at this period, was tea.

Tea was accordingly brought in, but before it arrived the Vicar said quietly:

“Hilda, I have a surprise for you, which I am sure will be a pleasant one.”

He had no time to say more, for the door of the sitting-room opened, and the tray was brought in by Marion—Marion, her maid, whom she had not seen for many months. For a moment Hilda could not believe her eyes.

“Marion, can it indeed be you? Oh, how delighted I am to see you.”

Marion appeared little changed from her old self.

“Well,” she said, “here I am, and here I intend to remain, but I should never have had the courage to come back if the Vicar had not come to

London and found me and brought me back."

Very shortly after this Mr. Plumbley and Edwina left the house. Edwina, as she was saying good-bye to Hilda, whispered:

"I am sure it is all coming right."

So it was the Vicar who had rescued Marion and brought her home again. How entirely in accord with his character was everything he did.

Hilda looked at him. Their eyes met, and in his she saw once again the look she had seen on the last occasion, now so long ago, when they were in this same little sitting-room together.

She felt as she had felt then, that his love was hers, and that it had overpowered him, that he was about to declare it.

But now the hesitation should be on her side; at all events until he knew what had happened. She rose from her seat and stood before him.

"Vicar," she said calmly, "I also have a surprise for you. My fortune is gone—gone for ever. I am once again a poor girl."

A look of inexpressible happiness came into the clergyman's eyes. He took both her hands, and, quite simply, asked the question she had been waiting for so long.

"Hilda, will you marry me?"

The reply came directly. No necessity for hesitation or conditions.

In words hallowed through centuries, words which have consecrated the lives of millions of couples in the past and present, came the reply:

"I will."

CHAPTER XXII

HOT PURSUIT

The Bow Street officer had become an object of ridicule in the district of North Staffordshire.

The manner in which he had been befooled by Geoffrey Frevile at the Three Shire Heads was in everybody's mouth, and many were the jokes made at his expense.

The newspapers also in giving their accounts of the occurrences at Flash had not neglected to push fun at the detective officer, who had in so simple a manner allowed his would-be prisoner to slip through his fingers.

Up to this time it may have been truly said of Detective Mannering that his heart was not in the business. His personal predilection for Geoffrey was so great that he could contemplate his escape with some degree of indifference, whilst as for Sid, he had not thought him worthy of his attention.

Now he followed the track of both these delinquents more urgently, influenced by the knowledge that his reputation for skill and forethought must suffer from the way Geoffrey had eluded him.

His employers also, he was sure, were not very satisfied with him. He resolved henceforth to redouble his efforts; not to rest until he had succeeded in capturing both the master and man.

To this end he procured a warrant for the arrest of Sid, and took good care to get this, together with the warrant he held for the arrest of Geoffrey, backed by a justice for the county of Cheshire and a justice for the county of Derby. He believed Sid to be at the vicarage, recovering from his injuries under the nursing of the Vicar and his sister. He was almost positive that while Sid remained in the locality Geoffrey would not be far away. His surprise was great, when he went with two of his assistants to the vicarage to effect the arrest, to discover that Sid had disappeared.

Neither the clergyman nor his sister had any idea what had become of him. He had left the house at night in a manner they could not explain. They could not believe he had walked away. He was not well enough, they thought, for this, and no sound of a vehicle had been heard. All they knew was that he had gone. This was another blow to the Bow Street runner's self-

confidence. It seemed he had blundered again in allowing this man to remain at large after once having him in his hands. He consoled himself with the idea—rather of the ex post-facto description—that he had done this intentionally, that the servant was to be the bait to secure the master, the minnow with which the salmon would probably be captured.

Now there appeared to be a good chance that both men had got away; perhaps by this time had left the country.

Seeking further instructions from the Bank of England authorities, he told them that though the servant had disappeared there was some reason to think that Geoffrey Frevile would remain for a time in the neighbourhood. He was in love with a Miss Doris Gregory, daughter of the village doctor, and as his affection was known to be reciprocated, it was not improbable they would secure opportunities of meeting. At all events Miss Gregory was still in the locality.

He was instructed to continue to employ the Cheshire constables and to secure any other assistance he might think advisable, and to watch the district zealously and also to follow the movements of Miss Doris Gregory.

The Bank was determined to effect a capture. No expense was to be spared. Unremitting search must be continued throughout the county and wherever else it was possible that Geoffrey Frevile and his servant were concealing themselves.

It must not be forgotten that to conduct a search of this description was a very different thing in the reign of King William IV from what it is at the present day.

All transport was slow, whilst modes of communication, except by means of messengers, was non-existent—no railways, no telegraphs, no bodies of police with immediate facilities for inter-communication. There were a thousand retreats which could be used as hiding places, all of which would now be known to our highly trained and skilled police. There was no other way of effecting the capture of criminals except by raising the "hue and cry," as it was called, in the neighbourhood where they were supposed to be hiding, persuading the public to join in the pursuit, and sometimes obtaining help from the soldiery quartered in or near the locality.

The Bow Street officer was satisfied that it was useless to rely upon the "hue and cry." In the moorlands the sympathy of the inhabitants was largely with Geoffrey, and any body of searchers raised there was more likely to assist him to escape than to capture him.

The nearest soldiers were at Buxton. About a dozen of these were requisitioned and employed together with the constables, in the hunt.

And now a search thorough and unremitting in character commenced, and was continued daily, often lasting well into the night. Throughout the whole of north Staffordshire soldiers and police could be met with, intent on the arrest of Geoffrey Frevile and his man.

Still nothing seemed to be discovered.

The great difficulty was to obtain a clue—something which it was possible to follow up.

The doctor's house was watched, and Doris was shadowed perpetually, although she did not know it. The Postmaster General and Home Secretary had given permission to open letters addressed to Geoffrey Frevile or his servant called Sid (though poor Sid had never been known to receive a letter in his life); indeed, to open all letters which might be thought suspicious. Notwithstanding this several weeks passed, and not a trace of the fugitives whose arrest was being so eagerly sought, could be found. Soldiers and police were getting tired and discouraged. Then something encouraging happened. One of the soldiers reported that in broad daylight he had seen a man who answered to the description of Geoffrey Frevile walking openly in the neighbourhood of Flash. He had watched him and seen him enter the studio there, enter it quite boldly and close the door after him. The instructions to all the men engaged in the hunt was not to attempt to capture Geoffrey Frevile single-handed. He was known to be far more than a match for any one man. The man hastened for assistance. He had not far to go before he met with another engaged on the same work. Not more than five minutes elapsed before they returned and together entered the studio. It was empty, and showed no signs of having been recently disturbed.

Still, if the man had not been mistaken, and he was very positive that he had not been, this was certain proof that Geoffrey was still in the neighbourhood. This seemed confirmation of what they knew before, namely, that directly after the abortive attempt to arrest Geoffrey, Doris had left her home and walked a considerable way on the Moneyash road, and taken up a station by a small oak tree, and there waited, waited for a long time. Being by herself and waiting in so lonely a spot, there could be no doubt she had an appointment with someone, and if someone, then little doubt it was her lover whom she expected, at all events hoped, to meet.

The fact that no one came, and that, after a long wait, she returned home alone, hardly weakened this conviction.

But it was weary searching. The soldiers generally paraded the moors and surrounding hills in parties of two or three, and continued the patrol often till after dark, while the police were usually stationed in or close to Longnor to watch the township, and particularly the doctor's house.

Winter had now set in, and snow had fallen on several occasions; not the heavy snow which yearly rendered the moorlands impassable, but slight falls, harbingers of what was to come.

One evening when snow was falling lightly the doctor left his house after the evening meal at five o'clock—the usual dining hour at this time—and with his stable boy proceeded to drive to Sheen.

The distance is only about two and a half miles, but the case was a difficult one, and he was not able to start on his return journey until about ten o'clock. The snow clouds had for the moment disappeared, and the moon was shining. The snow lay to the depth of an inch or two over moorland and rocks, a vista of undefiled whiteness, glistening in the pure moonbeams.

A superbly grand sight. Even the doctor, accustomed to the beautiful views of the district both by day and night, was struck by the picture it now presented, and stopped his horse at the top of the steep hill a mile from Longnor to gaze upon it. Intensely lovely it was, lying before him so calm and silent, a sight which beggared all description. Nevertheless, an oppressive feeling of sadness, so often interwoven with intense appreciation of exquisite beauty, seemed to come upon him. He kept his gaze centred upon the wonderful view for fully a minute; then he sighed deeply as he jogged the reins and commenced the steep descent. Whether it was that the trusty old horse had not yet fully awakened from the protracted sleep he had enjoyed during the long wait, or the unusual slipperiness of the road, certain it is that at the steepest part of the hill the horse stumbled and fell, and both doctor and boy were thrown out of the gig.

The boy was thrown over the horse's head into the snow, whilst the doctor alighted upon his favourite quadruped.

The boy was crying, not so much hurt as frightened. The doctor was not hurt at all, but found himself quite unable to get the animal on to his feet again. The ground was very slippery, and every time the animal struggled to rise, and the poor beast made attempt after attempt, his feet slipped from under him and he fell again panting and helpless.

"Don't stand crying there, but come and hold his bit and try to help him to rise whilst I lift the shaft," said the doctor to his boy.

Then followed a succession of struggles. Every now and then success was nearly won, but never quite, and the animal would end by falling back to the ground more heavily than ever. They could do nothing more. The usual way of getting up a fallen horse attached to a vehicle would, of course, have been by undoing the harness and drawing the vehicle backwards away from the animal, thus giving it freedom of movement, but here the steepness of the hill prevented this course being adopted. The vehicle, owing to the incline, had overrun the horse, and was almost on the top of the animal, and the doctor and boy together could not pull it backwards. The situation was a harassing one. The moon had again become obscured by thick clouds, and snow was again falling.

Master and boy, entirely helpless, looked at one another, then at the animal lying quietly on its side, its attitude saying as plainly as words could have done, "I have done my best and I now give up the struggle."

"You must run on to Longnor," said the doctor; "run as fast as you can and go to the Cheshire Cheese Inn and get help. If everyone is in bed, knock up Miss Tritsy and tell her how we are placed. She will soon get us help."

The boy had no time to obey, for even as the words were spoken the shadow of a man emerged from the side of the road. It was too dark to see his face; besides, he seemed to have a scarf or shawl wound around the lower part of it. What could be seen was that he was of more than ordinary height and size. Whoever he was, he seized the situation in a moment. He came and stood in front of the horse, and taking the two shafts of the gig in his hands, encouraged the animal to a fresh attempt, and seemed by exercising unusual strength almost to lift it from the earth. The effort this time was successful and in two or three seconds the horse stood upright again.

Leading it two or three steps to the side of the road, the friend in need there left it, and walked quickly to a little spinney of young trees which bordered the road on the right hand side, and disappeared.

He had done his work quickly, but had never spoken a single word. He must have heard the doctor's cry of "Many thanks," but there was no response.

Certainly less than a minute afterwards, before they had mounted the gig, they were accosted by two soldiers who hastened towards them.

"Did we not see a man with you just now?" they asked.

The doctor looked at them, but did not answer. Even when the question was repeated he seemed unwilling to reply. He looked round several times, then speaking very slowly, as if anxious to take as long as possible in his reply, he acknowledged that their surmise was correct. He began to question the soldiers on his own account.

"Why do you want to know if we had a man with us some time ago?" he asked. Instead of answering came another enquiry.

"Which way did he go? We missed him suddenly."

"I can't tell you. I was occupied with the horse," said the doctor, lying boldly.

"We must get on," said the men, and they walked quickly forward in the direction of Sheen.

In a few minutes the doctor was at home again. He let himself in with his latchkey, for the family had all retired for the night, and took the boy into his surgery, where a cheerful fire was still burning. When making an examination of the boy to see if he had suffered any injury, he was surprised to find that he was trembling violently and without any apparent cause.

"What is the matter with you?" his master demanded.

The boy replied in a trembling voice:

"Oh, master, did ye no see who he were?"

"Who did you think it was?" the doctor asked.

"It were Mr. Frevile, sure as my name be Bill Evans; 'im as the red coats be arter."

"Oh, nonsense, Bill, you must be quite mistaken; besides, you could not see."

"But I know'd his walk, and no one but he c'uld have lifted the old hoss as 'e did. Lifted 'un right up to his legs agen."

The boy was quite confident. It was useless to try to shake his belief; and what was more, the doctor, however he tried to disguise the fact, knew that he was right.

"Whatever you think you must never say a word of this to anyone. It would lead to great mischief, so be a good boy and promise me."

The boy assented readily, and for the time meant it, but within three or four days it was known to everybody that Geoffrey Frevile was still about

Longnor, and that he had lifted the doctor's horse and gig when the horse had fallen on Sheen Hill. Good and easygoing as Dr. Gregory was, he could not fail to be much disturbed by the discovery that Geoffrey was to be met with so near his home. Of course he knew that he was still being hunted for by soldiers and police, but he had looked on these efforts as useless, and indeed foolish, and had more than once said to his wife that they were wasting their energies on the air, for Geoffrey Frevile had assuredly long ago got safely out of the country. The question presented itself in an acute form: "Why was he staying here?"

There seemed to be but one answer to it. Doris was the attraction; he was staying in order to be near her; and her father could not fail to suspect that she knew of it and was a consenting party to his conduct.

Still, there was nothing to be done, except to watch Doris carefully. Walter had been given this duty, but it looked as though it would prove a light one, for Doris was rapidly becoming ill. No definite illness; the symptoms were extreme languor and absence of all interest in persons or things. She seemed to have no wish to leave the house. The hope which had buoyed her up for so long was now dead, and with its disappearance had carried away all her desires and energies.

The Bank authorities had become very dissatisfied with their agent's want of success. They could not understand, as the wanted man seemed to haunt the district, why he could not be caught. Great want of method or skill was evident. They had almost resolved to supersede Detective Officer Mannering and to send down another of the staff drawn from the Bow Street runners and place him in authority. Then it was suggested that in place of doing this they should associate with him the most famous police officer of the day—a man named Nadin—Joe Nadin as he was always called; a man of rough manners, but of great astuteness, whose watchword was "thorough," and who was known to have been more successful than any other man in England in the pursuit and capture of criminals. He was located in Manchester, always employed by the Government in the spying out of political offenders of the radical type, and known to be harsh and rather brutal in the methods he adopted.

Whether the Bow Street runner liked to have his authority shared by the Manchester man or not, he had to submit. He could not but acknowledge that he had not succeeded where perhaps he ought to have succeeded.

Nadin was received by Detective Mannering at the Cheshire Cheese Inn, where he now resided, and where the two officers were to be quartered

together.

Nadin had heard something of Geoffrey's exploits, and when he was satisfied that he was still in the district had little doubt of his own ability to effect a capture. He thought the reward offered by the Bank was as good as his own already.

The two men dined together at the inn on the night of Nadin's arrival, and nothing was spoken of but the means of detection recommended by the Manchester detective.

"Do you think his man Sid is still about here?" he asked.

"We can find no trace of him. He was injured in the scrap we had at Frevile's studio, but may be right again by this time."

"There must be someone hereabouts who knows where Frevile is hiding," said Nadin.

"I think there is possibly one person, and one person only. That person is Miss Doris Gregory, of whom I have spoken to you; the doctor's daughter who is in love with him."

"We will see her and make her tell," replied Nadin roughly.

"She would never tell, even if she knows," said Mannering.

"Won't she! I'll see to that. I will have her up before a magistrate and question her. If she is obstinate a few days in Manchester gaol will bring her to reason."

Such brutal measures as these were quite obnoxious to the kindly hearted Bow Street runner, but, knowing his companion to become more violent whenever he was thwarted, he said nothing.

The next day they paraded the moorlands together. Though Nadin had been used to prosecute his searches over the greater part of the North of England, he did not know North Staffordshire. He was surprised to find such an extensive and solitary region.

"A good place for hiding," he remarked more than once. He had determined to take the locality district by district. The whole of his first day was spent in and about Flash, and between that village and Longnor.

The system adopted by Nadin might well be spoken of as "thorough." He left no place unvisited, whether cottage, stable, barn, or even cave, where a possibility of obtaining shelter existed.

He entered all the cottages without permission, searched them himself from roof to cellar, and generally ended by threatening the occupants, declaring that if he should discover they had hidden the man Frevile or his servant he would assuredly get them transported. Even should any of them see the wanted men, or know where they were to be found, and not at once give him information, they would get severely punished.

Despite all this, the day proved a blank, as so many had done before.

It was after ten o'clock in the evening when the two men were walking to Longnor, returning home after the day's search, that an incident occurred that was not in any way included in their programme.

They had stopped at the Royal Cottage Inn to take refreshments, as almost everyone did on the journey between Flash and Longnor, and had stayed there longer than was altogether agreeable to the Bow Street officer, but it happened that his new partner was a man of convivial habits, and somewhat addicted to drink, though he apparently never suffered from it. As they left the public-house the clock struck ten. They had nearly five miles to walk. For the first part of the way Detective Nadin talked in a boasting manner of how he would sweep every hole and corner of the neighbourhood where even a rat could conceal itself, and finally offered to bet his colleague five pounds that he would have laid the man Frevile by the heels within a week.

Presently he ceased to talk. The long, rough road was telling upon him. They had completed a good part of the journey when the Manchester man suddenly gave a violent start and then stopped, for there standing out clearly in the semi-darkness was

The Headless Rider!

Yes, there he was sitting on his white horse, a gigantic looking figure, in the same position and almost exactly in the same place as he had appeared to Sid. He wore the cloak, made of some golden coloured material, which fell over the horse's haunches, and carried the staff or baton as heretofore.

Difficult, if not impossible, to call this a vision—to attribute it to imagination—for the Headless Rider was seen clearly by both men. All their nerve deserted them at once. Both of them, bold men where natural conditions were concerned, were, like everyone else at this period, superstitious to a high degree, and had implicit belief in supernatural manifestations.

The Headless Rider raised his baton and seemed to point in the direction of Longnor. He did this twice, and both men regarding it as a hint that they were expected to depart, took to their heels and ran like frightened hares until they arrived at the township.

The odd part of the incident has yet to be told.

As soon as the two detective officers had disappeared, the sound of a hearty laugh echoed through the valley. Incredible, but it seemed to come from the Headless Rider, and the laugh was uncommonly like Geoffrey Frevile's laugh.

CHAPTER XXIII

MISS TRITSY DEFIES THE LAW

The post bag had been delivered at the post office shortly before, and Miss Tritsy was engaged in the same way as she was when the reader first made her acquaintance, this being the sorting of the letters, and by careful scrutiny learning what was possible concerning them.

A few days before she had received an official letter from the Secretary of State for the Home Department, one of the most imposing and formidable letters Miss Tritsy had ever set her eyes upon. It was directed to:

Miss Tryphena Turner,
Postmistress,
Longnor,
Staffordshire.

for this was her name as registered at the chief office.

The letter authorised and commanded the said Tryphena Turner to allow and permit His Majesty's liege subject, Joseph Nadin, Deputy Chief Constable of Manchester, to inspect all letters arriving at or being despatched from the post office of Longnor in the county of Staffordshire. The letter also gave authority to the said Joseph Nadin to open any of such letters as in his discretion he should think likely to advance the business on which he was engaged.

The post bag had not been received more than a couple of hours and Miss Tritsy had just cleared her own post box, when the Manchester detective to whom her letter referred entered the store and demanded, in his usual overbearing manner, to see the letters that had arrived that day.

"And who may you be who wish to make so free with my letters?" the postmistress responded tartly.

She knew the man well. He had been pointed out to her on the first day he came to Longnor. No one could be a day in Longnor without Miss Tritsy knowing it.

"My name is Joseph Nadin, and I have authority from the Government to examine all the letters at this office."

“And where might be your authority?” Miss Tritsy demanded.

The man had neglected to bring it with him. He could only resort to his bullying ways, which usually served his purpose sufficiently.

“Woman,” he shouted, “do you dare question my right to see the letters?”

“How do I know you are Joseph Nadin?” she asked.

“I tell you I am. You will repent it if you oppose me.”

But he was up against one as pugnacious as himself, and even more obstinate.

“Indeed that is just what I am going to do. You shall not see one of the letters till I see your authority.”

The postmistress drew herself up, and compressed her lips tightly as she made this reply.

“Show them to me at once!”

The man was greatly angered, and made a move as though he would come behind the counter and invade Miss Tritsy’s jurisdiction.

The lady, however, was never at a loss in dealing with a situation such as this. She seized a long metal spoon resting in a huge treacle jar, and used as a ladle, and drawing this out, in its conglutinate condition, presented this formidable and disagreeable weapon before the man, remarking at the same time: “If you come a step nearer I’ll lay this about your lugs.”

Very few men are resolute enough to tackle a violent woman, especially when she happens to be armed with such an unpleasant implement of offence as Miss Tritsy had possessed herself of. The detective officer was daunted; he knew, moreover, that the postmistress was within her rights in demanding to see his authority, and that the reverse he had suffered was his own fault.

He left the store, growling out something about reporting the woman to the authorities; a threat she treated with great contempt. When he had gone Miss Tritsy’s face took on a grim smile—a sort of self-congratulatory smile—and being now alone she muttered to herself:

“He might have brought his authority with him. It is lucky I had put that letter away, but, Home Secretary or no Home Secretary, I should like to see the man who would examine a letter directed to me at my own office before I had read it myself,” and then after a pause she added, “or even after.”

She opened her cash box and took from it a letter which was part of the afternoon post. She knew the handwriting well, having for so long made a study of it. It was from Geoffrey Frevile. Remarking "I must give it a safer resting place than this," she put it in a pocket in one of her under petticoats, adding, "It is secure enough now."

As she anticipated, in a very few minutes Nadin returned and produced to her his authority.

"Ah, now you are in order. I had my own instructions also," she said, "but what would the Postmaster General have said if you had been the wrong man?"

"I believe you knew all through who I was," he retorted.

"And what if I did," was the reply.

However, now she produced for his inspection a very moderate sized bundle of letters. The man appeared to be in better humour. Something about the postmistress seemed to amuse him.

"Would you really have attacked me with that very sticky spoon?" he asked.

"If you had come a step nearer me you would have found out."

"Could you not see that I was a person with authority?" he asked.

"I saw no signs of it either in your face or your manners."

The postmistress spoke in a sarcastic manner.

Naturally nothing was learnt from the examination of the letters. What Nadin was after was reposing in Miss Tritsy's petticoat pocket. One letter he thought suspicious, it being addressed to Doris Gregory. He would have opened this but for the interposition of the postmistress.

"I know the writing well. It is from Mr. Plumbley, the Universal Provider. They are friends of the Gregorys."

"I know Mr. Plumbley, but I don't know his handwriting," said Nadin.

"Well, I tell you it is his. Isn't that enough?"

The detective was hesitating what to reply, but looking at the lady, who had come up to him with her hands placed on her hips and in a menacing manner, he weakly answered:

"Yes, if you say so I am satisfied."

Wonderful the power of a determined woman on the opposite sex.

Notwithstanding that the evening was the busiest time for the store, the proprietress to-day was desirous of closing early. She routed up the boy to some purpose, told him to be quick and put up the shutters and then to be off home for an idle young rascal.

The house being "close tiled," she turned out the lamps in the store, and retired to the darkness of her little sitting-room. Lighting a rushlight, she then passed out of the door on the other side, which gave access to some back steps, little more than a ladder, which led up to a tiny attic.

Standing at the bottom of these steps she called out in a hissing whisper: "Sid! Sid!"

"Hulloa" came a gruff voice from the bedroom.

"It is all safe now. Come down to your supper."

Sid hobbled down the stairs with difficulty. His foot was far from well, and in the last few steps he required assistance. Supper was set out on a small table, but only for one. This was a precaution in case of interruption, so that no traces of two-fold occupancy should be seen.

Sid had to take his supper somewhat in the fashion of a dog. It was handed to him without dish or plate and he ate it from his hands.

"Now, Sid," said Miss Tritsy, when the meal was over, "I have here a letter which I am going to read to you. It is from your master."

The postmistress produced the concealed letter, and having first read it herself, apparently more than once, proceeded to give him the substance of it.

"Your master expects that by now you are able to travel."

"How did he know where I was?" Sid interrupted.

"Never you mind about that. Enough for you that he does know.

"He says you must both get away from here quickly. Things are getting rather too hot even for him."

Sid suddenly burst out in a violent fit of anger.

"My master is mad. What does he mean by staying here all this time? He might have got away easy many days ago."

"He will not go until he can get you safely away with him," she said.

"I guessed it were that; but he is a fool. What do it matter about me?"

Miss Tritsy now spoke, for her, softly and appealingly. She knew and appreciated the marvellous constancy of character of this destitute, uneducated man, and the love almost surpassing the love of woman, that he bore to his master.

"Sid, is this the thanks you give Mr. Frevile for risking his life for you?" she asked.

"He had no business to risk it," was the dogged reply.

"But, Sid, you can never get away safely if he leaves you."

"That don't count at all. I am no good to no one" (meaning anyone) "and he be good to many."

"Well, he wants me to tell you that if you feel you are able, you are to meet him where the Sheen road branches from the Moneyash road, the day after to-morrow near nine o'clock. It will be dark, and it is not far for you to travel. What do you say?"

"If he wants me I must go." He spoke in an extremely sulky voice. The prospect of his own escape gave him no exhilaration.

"Well, then, it is settled."

"How will you let him know I shall be there?" Sid asked after a time.

The postmistress stamped her foot. "I wish, Sid, you would mind your own business and not interfere with mine," was her reply.

And so it seems Miss Tritsy had been concealing Sid. Concealing him from the officers of justice, defying the commands of the Secretary of State, and making herself an "accessory after the fact" to any offence of which he might be found guilty. How had it come about?

The truth is that Sid had escaped from the vicarage by night some fortnight since. Knowing that the Vicar's sister objected to having him there, this man with a tender sensibility few possess, had found continuance under her brother's roof intolerable. He had hobbled with pain and difficulty to the store, and Miss Tritsy had admitted him at once. Why had she done this?

Sid had no attraction for her, though his fidelity to his master appealed to her rough but honest character. No, it was the strange penchant for Geoffrey which had seized her so suddenly, and which time had only augmented,

which led the woman to act in a manner she felt would be pleasing to him. She had never consciously nourished any idea that Geoffrey could ever be anything to her but a friend. Subconsciously she nursed her feelings, and felt pleasure in adopting a course of conduct, even at personal risk to herself, which would demonstrate her affection for him.

To this must be added her infatuation for every kind of esoteric knowledge, which, like many other people, she regarded as aggrandizing her position in the locality, and to achieve at which she was always willing to take some risk. How she came to know something of Geoffrey's whereabouts, and was able to communicate with him she never disclosed. It was known to no one but themselves.

And what had Geoffrey been doing since he slipped through the hands of his would-be captors at the Three Shire Heads?

After walking to Buxton on that eventful afternoon he had got himself conveyed to Manchester. There he stayed until he judged Sid had probably recovered from his injuries. His feelings with regard to Doris were mixed. He cared for her as much as ever, but now felt it would be wrong to ask her to join him at once or until he and his servant had got into a position of comparative safety.

Then he meant to communicate with her, through Miss Tritsy, leaving it to her to decide whether she would come to him and share his uncertain fortune in some other country, if he should succeed in getting away from England.

Sid he was determined not to abandon. He knew the man's unselfishness where he was concerned, and this made him quite determined, in some way or other, to achieve his safety with his own. Thinking it all over, an odd but ingenious device occurred to him.

"The Headless Rider" was shunned by everyone in the moorlands. They would as soon approach him as they would his Satanic majesty himself. This would apply to the soldiers and police, who somehow he knew were now engaged in his pursuit, as well as to everyone else. Of this he felt positive. Why should he not become the hunter and they the hunted? The idea amused him immensely. It would be a new excitement, an excitement after his own heart. To shift the position and to make himself the object to be avoided instead of the object to be followed. It really was too good an opportunity to be missed. If he could sufficiently disguise himself, he would be as safe in the moorlands as if he were thousands of miles beyond the sea.

He constructed for himself a wooden frame, the exact width of his shoulders, which could be fastened to his head. He then purchased a large cloak of the most shining material he could procure and stuck upon it great patches of tinselled paper, so that in the dark it would present a glittering appearance. It was large enough to cover the frame and fall down straight on either side, in addition to covering the haunches of the horse on which he would be mounted. In the cloak were cut two small eyeholes which would be sufficient to enable him to see his course, but would not be perceived in the darkness or semi-darkness.

A short staff or baton covered with silver paper, which as he had often heard Miss Tritsy describe as the appendage of the true and original Headless Rider, was also procured. He tried to purchase a white horse, but was unable to do so, and had to be content with one of very light bay colour. The disguise would not be a good one, in fact a poor disguise, but he was certain what the first impression of seeing him so mounted would convey to anyone, and equally sure that having received this impression no one would stop to criticise the details of his dress.

He would be the Headless Rider! Everyone should give him wide berth. He had returned to the neighbourhood some days ago on his newly bought bay horse and had resolved to experiment with his new disguise.

The first experiment—of which the reader is aware—had been completely successful, and satisfied him that he could in this character, traverse the district in complete safety.

Still, he had considerable difficulty in deciding where to find the best hiding place until a favourable opportunity of rescuing Sid should present itself. He knew the districts around Longnor and Flash were being closely watched. He guessed the safest part of the neighbourhood, probably the least watched, would be the part lying south of Longnor. At the same time this was the wildest and least inhabited part of the whole of the moorlands. The road to be followed in this direction led towards Cheadle.

Taking this road led him first in the direction of the small hamlet of Warslow, merely a collection of a handful of cottages. Here again, what he was so fond of calling his “diabolical good luck” favoured him.

Arriving there on his horse about eight o’clock on the evening upon which he returned to the dangerous locality, he encountered a man trudging along heavily and showing by speech and gait signs that he had made a prolonged stay at the village inn. Geoffrey had ridden many miles, and the

night was bitterly cold, he had seen no human being until he met this semi-intoxicated man.

“Hi, my friend,” he cried out, “do you think you could find me and my horse shelter for the night? I can pay for it.”

“I dunno,” was the thick reply.

“Is your cottage near by?”

“Yes, he be.”

“I will give you five shillings if you will give me a bed and find a shed for the horse.”

“You must come and see the Missis. We ha’e only two beds, and we ha’e four childer.”

This was not encouraging, but if he could not get a bed he might at least get shelter. That would be something.

“I will come with you and take my luck,” he said.

The man seemed entirely willing that his new acquaintance should accompany him.

The fact was, that, knowing his condition, he was fearing the sort of reception he would get from his better half, of whom he stood in some fear; and had still sense enough to know that the introduction of a stranger would create a diversion.

Presently they came to a small cottage, little more than a hovel, and standing away from the other cottages on higher ground and near the foot of a precipitous piece of projecting rock. An unprepossessing dwelling house, and evidently with scant accommodation, but it was stone built and the walls looked substantial, as indeed they needed to be, to withstand the winter hurricanes to which they were exposed.

Geoffrey dismounted, carrying the wicker basket which contained his disguise, and allowed the nominal master of the house to enter alone. This he seemed unwilling to do, having little doubt what view his, in every respect better half, would take of his condition.

There was no delay. As soon as the man entered Geoffrey heard a female voice scolding and upbraiding in violent tones. Then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. It was clear the man had told his wife that he was not alone, and the information acted as a spell. Geoffrey pushed the unfastened door and entered unbidden. The room was small and smoky, but a comfortable

peat fire was burning. One or two large chairs stood in front of this. The brick floor was uncovered, and a bedstead stood against the wall.

"Is there any chance of a shakedown for a tired man to-night?" Geoffrey asked in his usual cheerful manner.

The woman looked at him—then she started, but did not speak.

The man interposed, "I told 'e we had no but two beds and four childer."

"Never mind a bed. If I may sit in this big chair by the fire, that is all I want," said Geoffrey.

"I think ye might do that, but the childer would not like to be turned out o' their bed," the man replied.

He looked at his wife to confirm his words. The woman spoke for the first time, and in a voice which defied contradiction.

"You shall ha'e the bed. The childer shall sleep on the floor."

"Oh, but I won't take the children's bed," Geoffrey protested.

"Indeed you will. They be used sometimes to sleep in blankets on the floor," and taking a step or two across the room she brought two of the children—two little girls—up to Geoffrey.

"Do you no remember them?" she said.

"I am afraid I don't," was the reply.

"They wud no be here to-night at all but for you."

A light broke upon Geoffrey. They were the children he had rescued from the coal mine.

"You saved them; the least they can do is to give up to you their bed," said the woman.

"Hardly that," responded Geoffrey, ever ready to belittle his own deeds. "Someone would have brought them up if I had not."

The woman's will in the household was law. Geoffrey was provided with the bed in the living-room. A plain but plentiful meal was set before him, and the horse was given some kind of shelter under an open shed.

After a time, the children and the man having retired, or, rather, been sent to bed in the upstairs room, the woman seated herself in the chair opposite Geoffrey and addressed him:

"Mr. Frevile, is it that you want me to hide you?"

“So you think my name is Frevile?” Geoffrey replied in a noncommital style.

“I know it is. Do you think I did not find out the name of the gentleman that saved my childer. They have never been down the pit again, but I have always wished to repay you, and I will do it now.”

The woman was intensely in earnest. There could be no possible doubt as to this. Her voice and her manner convinced him that the opportunity to satisfy the burden of gratitude which had weighed upon her ever since the time of the colliery accident was eagerly welcomed. Surely he thought, it would be better to trust her. He must trust someone. Independent as he had always been, it would now be difficult, if not impossible, to play the part before him without some assistance. It would be very useful to have this cottage where he could put on and off the costume of the Headless Rider, and to which, if he got possession of Sid he could bring him.

To have come on such a place, and that it should be inhabited by one so anxious to serve him, was surely part of his usual good luck. The woman must be aware that he was being hunted for throughout the whole district. She might as well know everything. Accordingly he explained to her his plans. He told her that his only object in returning to the moorlands was to rescue and to save his servant, and finished by asking her assistance in carrying out the strange plot he had formed to effect this end.

One thing only he kept to himself, and this was the present hiding place of Sid. The woman entered into the plot with avidity. It not only interested but amused her greatly. She would help him in every possible way, would keep his secret and see that her husband and children kept it also, or “she’d know the reason why.”

She would receive Sid in her house and conceal them both till they could get away safely.

“My good woman, it is very good of you,” said Geoffrey, “but it is fair that I should tell you that in sheltering me and my servant you will run some risk yourself.”

“You were not afeared to run a risk for me,” was the only reply.

For several days after this Geoffrey remained at the cottage. He never quitted it once by day, and only once at night, on the occasion when, with the woman’s help, he donned his startling make-up by way of experiment and deliberately went out to encounter some of those on watch for him, with the result which has already been described. This was the night on which,

passing on purpose through Longnor towards Flash, he posted the letter to Miss Tritsy in her own letter-box. With this exception he remained in the cottage night and day. He gave the woman money to purchase necessaries, including some food for the horse, and not overlooking sweetmeats for the children, which it was only after a long argument he induced her to accept. He spent the days playing with the children, amusing them and himself equally. He had the power of attracting children to him, possessed only by those who love them, and can show it by sharing their pleasures, and, above all, by entering into their endless imaginings.

Besides the two little girls whom Geoffrey had rescued from the mine there were two younger children—boys of six and four respectively. He told them stories which they heard with open mouths and of which they never tired.

He carved quaint figures for them out of turnips, and, to their wonderment and delight, illuminated them by putting small pieces of candle inside. More than all, he drew on pages torn out of his notebook, pictures of the children themselves—quite recognisable portraits—which he presented to them, and which, it may here be added, they preserved as treasures all their lives.

They were upon his knees or being carried on his shoulders from the time of rising to the time of going to bed, and he was never weary of their companionship.

To use the mother's expression, "They were all over him all day."

Probably he had never spent happier days than these few since his first arrival in the moorlands.

A casual observer, seeing him with the children at this time, would have refused to believe that this man, this fine specimen of humanity who seemed to revel in childish games, and whose laughter was as natural and merry as that of the youngsters themselves, was a fugitive from justice, was being hunted as a wild beast, and about to engage in an adventure on which his liberty, possibly his life, depended.

CHAPTER XXIV

SID JOINS HIS MASTER

The evening had arrived when Sid, on instructions, was to make the attempt to join his master on the outskirts of the township of Longnor.

Miss Tritsy had kept him in close confinement, had not permitted him to leave his garret chamber save occasionally to descend to the little sitting room and receive a meal from her hands and eat it in her presence. She had nursed him well; had attended morning and evening to the injured foot, bound and rebound it, and applied her own simple remedies to it.

Still he walked with much difficulty. With the support of a stick on one side and the lady's arm on the other, he could get along fairly well, but the double support was necessary.

Unfortunately he had caught a severe cold, which at present looked as if it was developing into bronchitis. This was the more disturbing as Sid had no reserves of strength. The day had not been an auspicious one for the evening attempt. Snow had fallen several times, and it was cold and gusty. Everything showed that winter had set in—the moorlands winter, unequalled for severity in any other part of England.

Sid ought to have been in bed. His custodian would have kept him there had the occasion not been so urgent. She knew that everything must now give place to the chance of getting him away. Once in a situation of safety, his ailments could be dealt with, possibly successfully. Sid's own state of mind, ever since he knew his master's plans for his escape, was peculiar. He would obey his master's directions because they were his master's, but he showed no trace of excitement or interest. If the plans had related to someone else, he could not have exhibited less concern.

He asked more than once why they could not let him alone, and when Miss Tritsy pointed out how necessary it was that he should be got away if possible out of the country, the only reply was a dissatisfied grunt.

When the hour came that he should be leaving his temporary hiding place, he submitted to be equipped in overcoat and scarf by Miss Tritsy in a passive manner, as though it was really no business of his, as though he was a tool in the hands of others to be used as they chose.

Miss Tritsy suddenly exclaimed:

“I am going to walk with you to the meeting place.”

“You needn’t do that. It isn’t far,” Sid replied.

“Oh, I know, but it is too far for you to walk alone. Besides, if he is not there I shall have to bring you back.”

“He will be there.”

Truly Sid’s confidence in his master could never be shaken. It was about twenty minutes to nine when the two left the house stealthily by the side door. Not a soul was about. The weather favoured the enterprise. No sign of soldiers or police on the watch. Perhaps their failure up to the present had slackened their zeal. There would be great excuse for seeking shelter on a night like this. So Miss Tritsy thought, but, notwithstanding this, did not abandon her precautions, for some of the watchers might appear at any point.

The two walked very slowly, not on the road, but on the moorland, an uneven and trying path. They had to stop every fifty yards or so because either Sid’s foot gave way, or he had a fit of coughing. His companion was very patient with him. She had brought with her a bottle of what she sold in her store under the name of “The Adam and Eve Mixture,” the name implying either that this mixture was coeval with the garden of Eden, or that it was actually the medicine habitually used by our first parents; the purchaser could take his choice. Some part of this ancient medicine she from time to time administered to Sid, and if it had no more beneficial effect on the parents of mankind than it appeared to have upon him, it is remarkable that the recipe should have been preserved through so many ages.

Sid apparently wished to thank her for all the kindness she had shown him, and to apologise for the trouble he had given. He began several times, but failed. Poor Sid had no gift of speech, and his voice was naturally harsh and grating. Miss Tritsy divined what he intended.

“Yes, yes, Sid,” she said. “I know what you mean, you want to say ‘thank you’ to me. I will take the will for the deed.”

Then Sid found his voice and blurted out:

“I think you did it for my master’s sake more than mine.”

If it had not been dark, anyone present who took an interest in physiognomy would have seen that the postmistress blushed.

“I don’t think you need come further with me, we are almost there,” Sid presently remarked.

But Miss Tritsy was adamant, she even seemed a little ruffled.

"Don't be foolish, Sid, of course I shall come."

Who but herself knew if she had any object in coming with Sid other than to render him assistance?

She had never said to herself "I shall see Geoffrey Frevile once again." Perhaps she had never thought it, so often is action prompted by subconscious desire. When they reached the rendezvous the snow was falling so thickly that nothing could be seen at a greater distance than ten or a dozen yards. They stood now on the spot where the Longnor road diverged in one direction towards Sheen and in the other direction towards Moneyash. No one about, certainly no one observable. They strained their eyes to pierce the semi-opaque atmosphere. Sid now seemed for the first time to show some interest in the exploit which was being attempted on his behalf.

"It is odd he doesn't come," he said, "but he will."

It was certainly past nine o'clock. If the snow continued to fall as it was falling now, the moorlands would soon be impassable.

"I ought to have brought a lantern, we can hardly see one another," Miss Tritsy remarked.

"Well, we couldn't have fixed on a worse night," Sid responded.

"I have seen much worse nights than this on the moorlands."

Miss Tritsy was always prepared to cap an opinion expressed by anyone else. They were standing about six yards from one another, when Miss Tritsy suddenly cried: "Hark, what is that?"

They both held their breaths and listened. Not a sound.

After a few seconds she spoke again. She was not easily frightened, but this time her voice appeared to be somewhat uneasy.

"I believe I hear it again, hush!"

Almost at the same moment a strange noise came from Sid, a noise so wild and unnatural that it is hard to describe. It was something between a scream and a groan, and the cause was this—he had turned his head and perceived, not further from him than three yards, the Headless Rider!

There had been no signs of his approach, unless it were the sounds Miss Tritsy believed she had heard. The thickness of the atmosphere had rendered him invisible till he was seen beside them.

The beholders could have no doubt of him now. There he sat, on horseback, immovable, almost near enough to touch them. The apparition was certainly awe-inspiring. Miss Tritsy, with all her determination of character, was stricken dumb, though she kept her eyes fixed on this phantom manifestation, and even in her fright the thought flashed through her mind that this would be something to boast of and likely to increase her fame in the township. As to Sid, he was not only deprived of the power of speech and trembling in every limb, but was just about to fall to the ground when suddenly, in a loud clear voice, came the single word: “Sid!”

Sid was far too affrighted to recognise the well-known voice, nor when it again called out loudly: “Sid, don’t you know me?” was he any nearer associating the voice with that of his master. The effect it presently produced in his mind was peculiar. It seemed to him that he was in a dream, a horrid dream in which his master was calling to him to come to him and assist him, and yet he was unable to move hand or foot to obey him. Fortunately, after the second call, Miss Tritsy had no doubt to whom the voice belonged, but it did not seem to her to have come from the Headless Rider.

They were in the presence of two persons, the one corporeal, the other incorporeal. The corporeal one was Geoffrey Frevile, the incorporeal, the Headless Rider, and it was the former who, though invisible, was speaking to them.

But when this terrifying apparition suddenly threw his right leg over the horse’s shoulder and dismounted with a laugh which there was no mistaking, it was impossible to doubt that these corporeal and incorporeal beings were one and the same person.

“Oh, Mr. Frevile, how you have frightened us,” cried Miss Tritsy.

“It could not be helped. I was bound to come disguised,” he replied.

“But why such a disguise as this? You have nearly frightened poor Sid to death.”

Geoffrey only laughed.

It was some time before Sid could understand that this ghostly looking figure was not really the Headless Rider, but his own beloved master in disguise. When at length he took this in he gave vent to a series of inward chuckles, which ended in a fit of coughing so violent that it seemed likely to choke him. Geoffrey held him as one would hold a child suffering from a paroxysm of coughing. He repeated several times: “Poor Sid! Poor Sid! you ought not to be out on such a night as this.”

Miss Tritsy offered the medicine bottle.

"Give him this. It never fails, all my customers say so."

Sid, who had experienced its effect on himself, refused to take it.

"I don't want that stuff," he said gruffly.

It seemed sacrilege to speak of our first parents' medicine as "stuff."

The bottle was given to Geoffrey with instructions to administer it every two hours and to stand no nonsense from the patient.

Sid's condition had become serious. Between each fit of coughing he gasped for breath, and would probably have fallen but for Geoffrey's strong hold.

"We must get him under shelter as soon as possible." Then, turning to Miss Tritsy, "Hold him while I mount again, then I will get him up behind me."

When he had remounted the horse, the reins of which he had kept throughout, he leant down, took the helpless man in his arms, and lifted him on to the animal as though he had been a child.

"Do you think you can hold on to me, or shall I tie you to me?" he asked, producing from his pocket a scarf.

"I can manage it, Master. I will never quit my hold of you."

Whether the man spoke literally or unconsciously used a metaphor to express the strength of the tie which bound him to Geoffrey, can only be guessed. It unquestionably pleased him to find himself once again near the one person he worshipped and under his protection.

The two men sitting together on the one horse—Sid with his arms round his master's waist, and Geoffrey arrayed in all the paraphernalia of the chimerical inhabitant of the moorlands—presented a sight more quaint and startling than had ever before, or ever would again be visible on the moorlands of Staffordshire. Before taking leave of the postmistress Geoffrey thanked her warmly for all the kindness and attention she had shown to his servant.

"I don't know what would have become of Sid without you. He is quite incapable of looking after himself. I hope you will not get into trouble over it."

"I know how to take care of myself, if Sid does not," was the reply.

Geoffrey had shaken hands with Miss Tritsy, and had wished her good-bye. He had actually started the horse a step or two when he reined up.

"Miss Tritsy, I should like you to have some little remembrance of me. Probably we shall never meet again."

"I should like to have it." This was all the reply.

"I don't know that I have anything I can offer you except this," and he drew from his necktie the pin which he always wore, and stooping towards the woman, handed it to her.

"It is a gentleman's breast pin," he added, "but you may get the stones re-set to suit yourself, or if you like, you may sell the stones."

"I shall always wear it as it is," said Miss Tritsy abruptly, as she took the gift.

It was a valuable pin, an opal surrounded by diamonds, but its value to the recipient had little reference to the precious stones.

When the horse with the two riders had disappeared—and this occurred in two or three seconds—Miss Tritsy placed her hand upon her heart, either to allay its quick beating, or for some other reason. She sighed deeply several times, then muttered to herself:

"I shall never see his likes again."

Then she turned home.

It was a miserable road, the road which led directly from Longnor to Warslow, and this—little more than a cart-track—was covered to a depth of nearly a foot with snow. There were no snow-stones to serve as a guide to the traveller. Geoffrey knew the way to Reapsmoor well, but this was not quite in the direct line. However, he thought it the best plan to make for this hamlet and then to bear off to the left, in the hope of striking the Warslow track or objects which would show the direction of the village.

It was a difficult task. Twice or thrice they lost their way absolutely.

It was impossible to enquire at the one or two scattered cottages they saw, even had it been easy to arouse the inmates, who at this hour were abed and asleep. It was midnight before Geoffrey succeeded in recognising first the hamlet, and then the cottage which he had left some hours before.

Sid had not volunteered a word. He coughed occasionally, but not so often as he had earlier in the night, and when his master spoke of the difficulties of the road, or his fear that they had lost their way, he only responded with “Aye! Aye!” in an unconcerned tone of voice.

The woman of the house was waiting up for them, but the rest of the family were in bed upstairs. A cheerful fire was burning with a kettle boiling upon it, and a meal of bread and cheese set out on the table.

The change from the hard, cold night to this warm shelter was very grateful. “I must get this young man into bed the first thing I do,” said Geoffrey to the woman of the house, after he had made Sid known to her and called attention to his condition.

“You are not going to give him your own bed,” said the woman.

“Of course I am. I shall be quite happy in this chair, and can look after him during the night.”

Sid had unfortunately heard this question and answer. He flew out at once.

“I am not going to have the master’s bed. I shall lie on a mat in front of the fire. I did it for years when I was a boy.”

“Sid, do you want to vex me?” exclaimed Geoffrey.

“I don’t care if I vex you or not, but I won’t have your bed.”

Fortunately the woman was able to suggest a compromise. There was an old sofa in the back kitchen. Together they could bring it in and place it before the fire, and she had plenty of blankets to put upon it. Even then Sid only consented to occupy the bed when his master declared that he preferred the warmth of the improvised bedstead before the fire.

During the night and early morning the bronchitis became worse. Geoffrey had no alleviations to prescribe, Sid definitely refusing to take the “Adam and Eve” mixture, but he waited upon the sick man with infinite patience, held him in his arms whilst the fits of coughing lasted, and sat with his hand in his own hour after hour.

The next day they remained quietly in the house. Sid appeared rather better, and Geoffrey determined that, if possible, he should rest there for several days.

“You shall have a few days here to recover in, but you must do it in that time. I can’t give you more.”

“All right, Master,” Sid responded. “I’m ready to start with you whenever you like, but I think you had better go yourself, and at once.”

“No, Sid, I shall not go without you, so don’t say another word about it.”

As to the woman of the house—whose name it appeared was Coley—it seemed as though she could not do enough for them. She was taken with Sid, for she at once discovered that he adored his master, and this gave him a claim to her regard.

On the second night after Sid’s arrival, the master of the house came home again in an intoxicated condition. Geoffrey had not set eyes upon him since the evening of his first coming, though the children had been much in evidence every day and all day.

This weakness on the part of Mr. Coley was his one blameworthy characteristic. For some time after his marriage he had tried to conquer it. It succeeded in conquering him, though only intermittently. Barring this failing he was a good husband and father, and generally liked by his fellows.

His wife had for nearly fifteen years been used to these occasional surrenders to Bacchus, and they had come now to be expected, and were a part of her life. Notwithstanding this, she never took his outbursts quietly.

When he returned home obviously worse for drink, she upbraided him violently, but the degree of her violence was always proportionate to the time that had elapsed since the last outburst. On this occasion the interval had been only about a week, consequently the upbraiding was more than usually prolonged and severe.

“I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself,” his wife exclaimed, after exhausting a few previous epithets, “but there, you have got no shame in you.”

The man rarely made answer to her scolding tirades unless it occurred, as it sometimes did, to his muddled mind that she was going somewhat too far. His wife continued: “And now to come home in such a state that you are ashamed to see the nice gentleman you yourself brought here. I know what it will come to. I shall run away and take the childer with me.”

In spite of such a threat the man was not yet enough goaded to reply.

“You had better get off to bed at once. I am sorry the childer should see you again turned into a beast.”

Apparently the woman had now reached the limit of her husband’s acquiescence in his own chastisement, for he replied: “Then if ye did no

want the childer to see their father, ye should no ha'e taken their bed from them."

"You know well why I did that; besides he is the best and kindest gentleman in the world."

"Do you think I dunno know who he is?"

"Of course you know, for I told you. He is the gentleman as saved the lives of our girls."

"Oh, I do know that," replied the man, "and I know summat else. I know he is the man as the perlice and soldier men are looking for," and the man laughed a drunken and half-meaningless laugh.

"Reuben," exclaimed his wife, addressing him in her excitement by his Christian name, "Reuben, if you do know who the gentleman is, you must not e'en whisper it to a soul."

"I be sure I do no wish to do the gentleman no harm, but the folks at 'Dog and Partridge' will gossip."

The 'Dog and Partridge' was the inn the man mostly patronised, and which bore some responsibility for his condition that evening.

"Were the idle loons at the 'Dog and Partridge' talking at all about our gentleman?" asked his wife.

"Well, yes, I may say they did ask me some questions about him."

"You don't mean to tell me as you let 'em know as he were staying here," said the woman, now thoroughly alarmed.

But the man had become dumb again. He made no answer.

"Can't you answer?" his wife cried passionately.

"Well, I may ha' said something o' that nature," came, after an interval, the answer, delivered in a sheepish manner.

His wife now lost control of her temper. She was also much frightened.

"Oh, you fool. You might as well a' gone to the perlice and told them at once."

"If I told any of 'em, I told it as a secret," was the man's response.

His wife answered with biting sarcasm: "A secret! A nice secret! Why 'twill be all over the pits at Cheadle first thing to-morrow morn."

The man now seemed to realise that his simple minded confidences might be attended by consequences he never intended, and that he had done wrong, for making no further attempts to justify or excuse his behaviour, he shuffled upstairs to bed.

The woman continued in the back kitchen, where the conversation, if it may be so called, had taken place, and sat down on a large piece of wood used as a chopping block, and resting her head between her hands, commenced to talk with herself, in a low voice.

What might be the outcome of her husband's weakness came vividly to her mind. She was terribly upset. Mr. Frevile might be taken, and taken at her house—probably would be. Her anxiety was for him, she thought nothing of Sid. What a return for the risk he had run for them!

The fact that she had been loyal, and her husband had not intended the mischief only too likely to arise, did not comfort her. She could not reason in this manner. The one fact stood out, a ghastly fact, making her blood run cold, as she thought of it. The man who had willingly risked his life for them would, through them, be delivered to the merciless hands of justice.

Her agitation was so great that she could not remain seated. She rose from the low seat, exclaiming—

"It shall not be. I could not live if he were taken here."

She was a woman of resource, and at once began to think of plans whereby such a catastrophe could be averted.

She did not wish to alarm Mr. Frevile, but ought she not to warn him of the new danger impending? It was almost certain his hiding place would be known in a few hours. Above all, it was necessary that the two men should be ready to leave the house at any moment. This, at all events, she must see to.

She entered the kitchen bedroom without knocking. Sid was in bed, and asleep, and Geoffrey was busy mending a broken toy belonging to one of the children. "Well, Mrs. Coley" (he had only just learnt the woman's name), "and what is it now?" he asked.

" 'Tis this, Mr. Frevile, I think you should both of you be ready to get away from here at a moment's notice."

"Have you heard anything then?"

He asked this question quite lightly, and in his usual manner. He did not even look up from the work on which he was engaged.

“Well, Sir, the folk at the ‘Dog and Partridge’ somehow know we have a stranger here, and they took to questioning my husband about him, and will be sure to gossip.”

With true feminine loyalty, though she had upbraided her husband so violently, she wished to spare him before others.

“Very well, we will be ready on the first signal. Sid must sleep in his boots, that’s all,” and he laughed merrily.

The woman felt, notwithstanding the manner in which it was received, that she had done right in giving this warning, but more than this was necessary. She must obviate the chance of a sudden surprise. To effect this a constant watch must be maintained. There was no one to do this but herself.

Consequently as soon as light showed upon the moorlands next morning she rose and stationed herself at the window of the upper room which looked towards Longnor.

There she watched and waited.

CHAPTER XXV

THE COTTAGE ON THE MOORS

The vigil the woman had imposed upon herself in her desire to frustrate the consequences of her husband's foolishness was a long and weary one, but she never relaxed it for a moment.

The upstairs window at which she was watching commanded wide views of the moorlands in a north and north-easterly direction. She occasionally left it to visit the little window on the landing which looked in the other direction, though this was not so likely a direction for the search party to approach from.

Her husband, as usual after a "break out," had remained in bed, and on this occasion his wife made no objection. Whilst there he could not further endanger Mr. Frevile's safety. Though they were hiding two men, all her thoughts were fixed on Mr. Frevile. Sid was a cipher in her calculations. The necessary household work, including the care of the younger children, she entrusted to the eldest girl, who, young as she was, showed all the competency to do her mother's work which the children of the working class possess. It was because the woman felt sure that a raid would be made on her cottage, probably in the course of the day, that she kept up such an unremitting watch.

She reasoned in this manner. The habitués of the "Dog and Partridge"—mostly miners—would gossip about the mysterious lodger at Coley's house, and as the miner never keeps anything from his wife, who is not only his confident and advisor, but in most cases his director, the women would share their husband's knowledge and spread it quickly throughout their districts. Then, unfortunately it was one of the fair days at Longnor—the township, small as it was, had six fairs yearly, and they were largely attended from all the surrounding villages.

The news would be retailed at the fair from an early hour. Though, as before stated, Geoffrey Frevile was generally popular, and no one would willingly have hurt him, the knowledge of what was possibly his hiding place was too tit a bit of news to be kept secret by all of them. Someone among them, not desirous to do any hurt to him and yet to gain prominence, would probably console himself with the possibility that the man at Coley's

house might not after all be the man who was being sought for. This would make him the more ready to repeat what he had heard.

Although the woman did not know it, her husband in his cups had given away the secret far more fully than he acknowledged. He had admitted not only the presence of one stranger in his house, but of two, and had more than hinted that they were hiding. It is true that when someone had suggested these strangers might be Mr. Frevile and his servant, he had gone as far as to say he thought not. Still, news such as this, once circulated in a district where news is scarce, cannot be concealed. The woman's premonitions turned out to be correct to the very letter.

Before ten o'clock the affair was discussed in the market stalls and public bars of Longnor, and less than an hour later it had come to the knowledge of Joe Nadin that two men had taken up quarters at Coley's cottage at Warslow, and that one of them was middle aged and the other younger.

Nothing more was disclosed to him. There appeared to be great reluctance on the part of the gossipers to give vent to their suspicions. The information they gathered, however, was quite enough for Joe Nadin and the Bow Street runner. They had little doubt as to who this middle aged man and the younger man were. Success was coming to them at last. They felt sure of it. The reward was almost within their grasp. Without a moment's delay they laid their plans for the capture of both the same afternoon.

Though the day was wretched, snow had for an hour or two ceased to fall, but the atmosphere was dark and heavy with thick clouds which looked snow laden, and a strong cold wind was blowing. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, by midday a body of mixed soldiers and police, under the direction of Joe Nadin and his fellow detective officer, were traversing the road towards Warslow as rapidly as the state of the road permitted, for it was indiscernible except very occasionally.

They wandered from the way many times. Only one of them had ever been to Warslow, and no one knew which among the cottages was Coley's cottage. Nadin had tried to induce several of the men at the fair who knew the cottage to accompany them and act as guide to the party, but they one and all refused, to the great indignation of the police officer, who heaped abuse upon them. He knew that not being acquainted with the locality or knowing the cottage, would make his task more difficult. It would likely prevent his approaching the house where "his criminals," as he always

called them, were concealed from several directions at the same time, thus cutting off any opportunity of escape.

Though the direct road between Longnor and Warslow is only four miles, it was three hours from the time of the starting ere they reached the outskirts of the village. Snow was now falling very heavily again. In an hour or two the moorlands would be entirely impassable. It was some time before they could find out which cottage was Coley's cottage. They got the information in the end from a small boy who was given the choice by Nadin of gaining sixpence or to have his ears soundly boxed, and who chose the first alternative, and pointed out to them a cottage on the hillside really outside the village.

And what were the dwellers in the cottage doing during this time? Were there no plans of escape being devised by them?

Geoffrey seemed to take it all in the easy unconcerned manner in which he took everything, and Sid had never initiated anything. Mrs. Coley, on the other hand, during her trying watch had thought it all out carefully. She had satisfied herself as to what was likely to be the course of events and the times at which they would occur. Her reasoning was extraordinarily correct in both cases. She believed that the news her husband had divulged was sure to be discussed among the attendants at the fair quite early, and that it would almost certainly be known by everyone not later than midday. If this should be the case, then the raid upon their cottage might be expected not later than about three o'clock, or a little earlier. The more she thought it over, the more certain she became that it would come about in this way. As the dreaded time approached she became agitated and nervous to a degree that made impassivity impossible. Some plans she must decide upon immediately for the two men who appeared to be so unconcerned about their own safety.

She had already told them they must be ready to leave the house at any moment, and she believed they were, but the real difficulty was how were they to avoid being traced and ultimately caught?

The snow was falling, and the moors were covered to a depth of over a foot, and the dry snow was being drifted in clouds. How were her men to get away? If they left the cottage on foot, their footsteps would be easily traceable. The bay horse was available. Perhaps they could escape together in the same manner in which they had arrived, but they would, if mounted together on the horse have to travel slowly, and the horse's footprints would be more easily followed than their own.

It was at this moment a thought crossed her mind which she at once accepted as the best solution of the difficulty. If she could get the horse ridden away by someone else, this would create a false scent, which the pursuing party might be induced to follow. It would not be difficult if the horse's footprints could be made the only track observable.

Who could ride the horse and take it in a direction opposite to that which the fugitives would follow? She could think of no one except her husband. It would not be a pleasant or particularly easy task, but she resolved that he should attempt it. The risk would be a kind of penance for the perilous situation his stupidity had created. She roused her husband from his sleepy lethargy, told him what she required him to do and the necessity that he should act at once.

"You must do it," she said. "It is the only chance of deceiving these men, who will be pursuing him like bloodhounds in less than an hour. You owe it to Mr. Frevile to take some risk on yourself."

The man rarely opposed his wife or questioned what she had decided on. He said nothing, but proceeded to get up from his bed and dress himself. In this tacit manner he acquiesced in his wife's commands.

She told him to put the saddle on the horse at once and to remain prepared to start at the time when, and in the direction she would presently point out.

Once again she entered the room which Geoffrey and Sid occupied.

"What is the latest, Mrs. Coley?" Geoffrey asked in an undisturbed voice.

The woman was terribly perturbed. Her voice trembled.

"Mr. Frevile, you are not safe here. I am sure they know where you are, and will be after you this very afternoon. Yes, and before long, too."

"Why do you feel so sure of that?" asked Geoffrey.

"Oh, I have worked it all out in my mind. 'Twill be all over the fair at Longnor that a gent and his servant are with us. They will be sure to hear, and will come on us this afternoon."

Unnecessary to say who "they" meant.

"Well, Mrs. Coley," Geoffrey replied, "of course you may be right or wrong. I think the chances are you are right. However, we will leave your house whenever you think fit."

"I shall be easier in my mind when you ha'e gone," was the reply.

She then explained her scheme for sending the pursuers on a false scent, and told of her husband's consent to ride the horse away in a course opposite to that which they would decide on, and finished by urging him to get away at least a quarter of an hour before her husband left.

Geoffrey was amused at the ingenious device she had hit upon. He patted her on the shoulder.

"Well done, Mrs. Coley," he said. "It is very clever of you to think out such a design. We may owe our safety to your plan; at all events we will adopt it. When shall we start?"

"I think at once. I am trembling every moment you remain here."

"Very well," was the response.

The woman continued:

"And I will come with you the first part of the way, and rake out your footsteps as I return. I shall be ready in five minutes."

When she had left the room Geoffrey turned to Sid, who was fully dressed and sitting on a chair, apparently once again in a sulky humour and said:

"In less than ten minutes, Sid, we leave here."

"I shan't go." Sid spoke quickly and angrily.

"Indeed you will, Sid."

"But I can't. Don't you know I can't walk through this snow."

"If you can't walk, then I must carry you, and I will, so that settles the question," Geoffrey replied.

Sid made one more attempt to alter his master's resolve:

"You will get away easier without me. I shall keep you back a lot, and no matter if I am caught, if you get away."

It took a great deal to make Geoffrey show his feelings, but he did so now.

His voice showed that he was deeply moved:

"My poor Sid, the kindest and most devoted friend man ever had. I have long known that you would give up your life for me, but I should not be a

man if I allowed it. You must obey me in this. Whatever our fate may be we will share it together."

Sid made no further resistance. He remained seated with his head turned away. In a few minutes Mrs. Coley returned to the room. She was dressed for out of doors and had a small rake in her hand. From the pocket of her cloak she drew a bottle.

"Take this; it is a little brandy, you will need it."

Then taking from the table the remains of a loaf of bread, she stuffed it in pieces into Sid's various pockets.

"Now tell me which way you think of going, and my husband shall take the opposite way."

"Well, I have been thinking," Geoffrey replied, "and I have come to the conclusion that we should get over the hills if possible towards Flash. The studio is empty and I think we should be safe there for one night at least. What do you say, Sid?"

As usual Sid had nothing to say. Geoffrey's reasoning was sound. Certainly the detective officers would not expect to find him in his own cottage. It was the last place in which they would look for him.

"Of course, you must not go near Longnor. I have often walked to the Buxton road across the moors by Sandy Knowle, Blakes' Mere, and Folly, but it will be no easy to find. Every road is covered now," said the woman.

"We will try and follow your directions. 'Folly' seems a fitting place for us to make for"; and Geoffrey, whose spirits nothing seemed to depress, laughed once again.

"Then I shall send my husband in the direction of Hulme End and Hartington. If they follow that track that will lead them as far from you as they can go."

She walked with them several hundred yards from the cottage and pointed out as well as she could the course they should take, then she wished them good-bye and God speed, but on turning to leave them asked:

"What shall we do with the horse and saddle, Mr. Frevile, when my husband gets back?"

"I give them to you. It will be a small return for the great kindness you have shown us."

"And the clothes, what about them?"

"Oh, keep them also; they will do to amuse the children or to frighten the birds."

The woman without saying a word more left them. In the course of her return she obliterated with the rake so effectually the footmarks they had made that not a sign remained.

When she got back the old grandfather clock in the kitchen was striking three. She wasted no time. The deceptive track must be prepared without further delay. She saw her husband mount the bay horse and gave him strict directions to get to Hartington if he could without once stopping. He was to put up there, then to dispose of the animal for the best price he could get, and return as soon as the roads were passable. If he was overtaken on the road by the police, he was to know nothing except that he had been sent by his wife to sell the horse.

She then sent all the children to bed, early as it was, in order that they should not be questioned. She had timed the movements of the police authorities with marvellous accuracy, and had resolved that on their arrival she would meet them alone and do her best to deceive or at all events, delay them. It had not struck the quarter past when from the upper room she saw several men approaching the house from the lower part of the village. She ran to the window looking out in the other direction. There were men posted at various points at a little distance from the cottage. Yes, there was no doubt they were surrounded.

Her first feeling was one of intense thankfulness that the fugitives had got away without being seen, and that her husband had had a good start in the opposite direction. Having visited the bedroom and told the children to pretend to be asleep, and, even if obliged to speak, to know nothing, she descended the stairs and stood near the door.

A loud knocking on the outside told her that her questioning was about to begin, and she was well aware that something would depend upon how she bore it.

Joe Nadin, adopting his usual rough procedure, did not wait for the door to be answered. He knocked at, and opened the door at one and the same time. He entered with the Bow Street runner, and accosted Mrs. Coley on the threshold.

"I suppose, woman, your name is Coley," he said.

"And who may have told you that?" It was her object to waste as much time as possible.

"Never mind who told me. Where are the two men who are lodging with you?"

"We don't take in lodgers. We have no room for such like."

"Don't talk rubbish, woman. Where are the two men who have been stopping here?"

The woman was astute enough to know that it would do more harm than good to deny that anyone had been staying with them. She tried to answer in an unconcerned manner—"Oh, you mean the men with the old horse, who begged a shakedown for a night or two because they had lost their way on the moors."

"I believe you know as well as I do, that these men are criminals, that one of them is the man Frevile the police have been hunting for many weeks?" said Nadin fiercely.

"Whatever they are they have left some time since," said the woman.

"Which way did they go?"

"That I cannot tell you. You must find that out for yourself."

"They had a horse here. Did they take it away with them?"

"I reckon they'd not leave it behind them," she replied.

"Woman, you are lying. I believe you are hiding them now."

Mrs. Coley was not easily frightened. Her husband, when she first married him was a violent and ill-tempered man, but she had effectually tamed him.

"There's nothing to stop you thinking what you will," she answered.

"We will search the house from top to bottom."

"Ah, it will not take you long to do that, but don't rouse the children. I think one of them be sickening for the scarlet fever."

"No, we won't disturb the children." It was Detective Mannering who spoke.

"We will do what we think necessary." This came from Nadin who was altogether of a coarser disposition than the other man.

The woman accompanied them to the upstairs room. The children were either sleeping or feigning well.

“Perhaps you would like to lift them out o’ their beds and see if you can find two men hid in ’em,” she said.

This invitation was not accepted, but they looked under the beds, and Nadin drew attention to a covered manhole in the ceiling.

“What is above that?” he enquired.

“I ha’e never been through it myself,” the woman answered.

“Is there hiding room above?” he then asked.

“Oh, plenty of room to hide half a dozen men.”

“I don’t suppose they are there, or you wouldn’t be so ready to admit it,” the Officer replied angrily.

Perhaps not, but the woman was playing for time, and in some degree out-manoeuvring the detectives. Still, as in duty bound they left no nook or corner of the cottage uninvestigated. Detective Mannering was satisfied sooner than his brother officer that the search was fruitless.

It was almost at this time that one of the men stationed as outposts entered the house to say that they had found a horse’s footprints leading directly from the cottage in the direction of Hartington.

Here was a new clue which must be followed. Mannering regarded it as corroboration of the woman’s suggestion that the men had escaped on the horse, but Nadin, suspicious of everything and everybody, believed that in some way or other the woman was deceiving them.

His last words to her as they quitted the cottage were a threat.

“I will make you suffer for this, or my name is not Joe Nadin.”

“What have I done that I should suffer for?” the woman asked in a supremely innocent manner.

Apparently it was not easy to answer this question.

Nadin did not reply, and walked away with a dissatisfied grunt.

Mrs. Coley watched the party as they left the cottage, and proceeded to follow the course indicated by the horse’s tracks. When they got out of sight she re-entered her cottage, smiling to herself as she said:

“I have at all events delayed them an hour.”

CHAPTER XXVI

THE END CROWNS ALL

Beyond knowing that the route to be taken was in a north-westerly direction from Warslow, and his general knowledge of the moorlands, there was nothing to guide Geoffrey towards the destination he was bent on reaching. Every road and track, in fact the whole moorlands were snow covered to a depth of over a foot, and in some parts where drifts had already taken place, to a much greater depth. On the moors, in fine weather, outstanding eminences of hill or rock were sufficient to indicate to the traveller, who knew the locality even slightly, the general direction which he would be right to follow, but at this time all these bold indications were useless. Owing to the density of the falling snow nothing was visible at a greater distance than twenty to thirty yards.

Mrs. Coley before she parted from the two men had pointed out to them the route she thought they should take, and Geoffrey had tried to follow it, but in less than half an hour they could not be sure they were keeping to it. It was difficult to determine whether they were even proceeding in a north-westerly direction.

"If only I had a compass," he said, "one wants it here in winter, as much as at sea. How foolish of me to overlook this when I knew I might have a chase over these moors."

It was a peculiarity of Sid's, not only that he would allow no one to criticise or find fault with his master, but could never listen to him with patience when he took blame to himself.

" 'Tis no good to talk like that, how can you expect to think of everything?" he responded immediately.

Sid certainly had a most unfortunate delivery. If he had intended to find fault with Geoffrey he could not have spoken in a more curt style. His discourteous manner always amused his master, though what the rough speeches stood for, he understood so well that the laughter with which he met them was often merely a disguise of much deeper feelings. He knew the man through and through, and his unprepossessing exterior in his eyes enhanced his value. He knew the rough casing enclosed a gem, the worth of which could not be exaggerated.

They had walked on another mile or so when Geoffrey stopped and looked around. Snow! Snow! everywhere. Nothing else. A white world, and, as it seemed a white heaven, for the large flakes were falling quickly and being driven along by the wind in blinding gusts, and piling themselves against every object which hindered their progress. The men themselves had presented a hindrance to the driven snow, and were now as white as their surroundings.

Sid had a fit of coughing and could not conceal some signs of fatigue, though he tried hard to do so.

"My poor Sid, this is hard travelling for you," Geoffrey remarked.

"You think I can't do anything. I can walk as well as you can," was the rejoinder, which would have been rude from anyone but Sid.

"Well, I fear we are in for a rough time. If we can't get to Flash before seven, then Flash becomes impossible to-night."

"You'll get us there." Nothing could shake Sid's trust in Geoffrey.

"I am not even sure we are taking the right course. We may be walking away from it," was Geoffrey's next remark.

"Aye! Aye!" Sid's reply showed perfect unconcern.

"We must get along in some direction—it doesn't seem to matter which—till we see some farm or cottage. If they can't shelter us they will be able to put us on the right road."

"Aye! Aye!" Sid again made no other reply, but the most lengthy speech could not have conveyed more perfect confidence, than these two little words. After looking at Sid and observing his tired appearance Geoffrey spoke again: "I think, Sid, you had better stay here, and I will walk round and investigate a bit. That tree seems the only bit of shelter hereabouts. Get to the lee-side of it, it will keep the snow off you a little."

"How long are you going to be?" Sid enquired.

"I will not be away, whether I succeed or not, more than half an hour."

"You'll succeed," Sid half muttered.

"Now, Sid get against the tree, and be sure you don't move till I return. It would be a nice thing if we missed one another at such a time as this, and with night drawing on. I shall know the place again, but to make sure I will tie my handkerchief to the tree."

As soon as Geoffrey had disappeared a strange thought entered Sid's mind. Strange, but not new, revived by Geoffrey's injunction not to move from the spot, but an idea cherished consciously or unconsciously ever since his first discovery that his master was in danger.

Geoffrey could escape alone. He had never doubted this, nor had he ever doubted that hampered by his companionship the task would be far more difficult, and that he might fail.

This thought occurred to him now with increased intensity. His own strength he knew was almost exhausted. He was weaker than his master guessed. During the last mile of their walk, though the pace had been exceedingly slow, it was only his master's presence that had upheld him from falling—and this more than once. He reasoned thus:

"We can't both escape, and my master will never desert me, so the only thing for me to do is to desert him. I will give him the slip now, while he is away. He will never find me again, but he will escape, and I shall have helped him." Yes, this was the resolve made by this member of the criminal class, by this ignorant and untrained man, a man whom everyone with a claim to respectability would disdain and avoid. He never hesitated an instant after the idea took possession of him. He left the shelter of the small tree, and dragged himself away step by step in the direction in which he believed it was least likely he would be found. He had no fear. Perfect love is incompatible with fear. He was not only content, he was happy. The smile which to the outward observer made his face so unprepossessing was on it now, but, if the smile was forbidding, the thought which prompted it was surely sublime. He had no illusion that he might perchance secure his own safety as well as that of his master. He knew that was impossible, and yet he experienced pleasure, yes, actual pleasure in surrendering his life for the sake of the one person in the world who had protected him, and shown him affection.

He struggled along as well as he could, falling several times, owing to the difficulties of the way or his own weakness, or both. His one conscious wish was to put as great a space as possible between himself and the man he knew would spare no effort to find him again.

Meanwhile Geoffrey wandered round and round so far as he could in a circle treating the tree as the centre of this circle, and gradually extending his distance from it. This answered well at first, when he could keep the tree in view, but before he had gone far the thickness of the snow laden

atmosphere was such that he lost sight of it. To see a house or building now it would be necessary to be near enough almost to touch it.

Before the agreed half-hour was passed, Geoffrey knew his attempt was useless. It would be also dangerous to delay getting back to Sid. Though he had never been at a greater distance than a hundred yards from the tree it was difficult to find it again. He came on several small trees that looked like the one he was seeking. He could not have told he was wrong, but for the absence of the handkerchief. But in time he succeeded. Yes, there was the tree and here was the handkerchief, being blown in all directions like a small flag. Where was Sid?

Geoffrey looked in every direction and scoured the region around for a distance of twenty to thirty yards, but Sid was not to be seen.

He called for him loudly:

"Sid! Sid! Where are you?"

No reply.

What had happened? Sid seemed to have disappeared as suddenly and completely as though the earth had swallowed him up.

The first possible explanation which occurred to Geoffrey's mind was that during his absence Sid had been captured, but in a moment he knew this was not likely, indeed hardly possible. If Mrs. Coley's design had been successful their pursuers would be near to Hartington by this time, and not likely, even if they discovered how they had been duped, to attempt to cross the moorlands again that day.

Had he become worse and fallen? If this had happened he would scarcely have deserted the tree, and standing or fallen he was nowhere near it. Then of a sudden the true explanation occurred to him and the moment it did so, he knew he was right. Sid had gone off voluntarily, and because he thought it would give him—Geoffrey—a better chance of escape. He had so often begged him to escape alone. The belief, that he was sure to be a serious drag upon his master's movements had been fixed firmly in his mind ever since the secret of the studio at Flash had been discovered. Sid had voluntarily abandoned him. In doing so he must have known that without his master's strong support he had no chance of securing his own safety.

"Yes, yes, I understand it now," Geoffrey said to himself. "Poor Sid. Did ever man possess a more affectionate and unselfish friend? And this is the last proof he has given, the last he will ever be able to give. He is seeking almost certain death that I may live. He has been far more than a servant to

me. He has been a faithful friend. And why? Because he has loved me, and lived for me. Yes, 'love' is the only word that can express such a wonderful devotion. And what have I done for him?"

He now seemed to recollect Sid's claims upon himself—

"I have done nothing and worse than nothing for the poor fellow," Geoffrey muttered, and as he said the words, for the first time their truth was vividly revealed to his mind. Odd that he, good-natured and kind and always ready to do anyone a good turn should never have asked himself, where all this time he had been leading Sid. Had he not, by making him the confidant and thus an accomplice in his secret exploits led him forward on the very road he was travelling on before, a road of crime, to end inevitably in detection and disgrace?

True, he had helped the man to conquer to a great extent his obsession for drink, but he knew now how wrong he had been to embark him in the criminal enterprise he himself had so lightly entered upon. All this passed through Geoffrey's mind very rapidly. It did not delay his search. By stooping down and careful examination he had been able to discover footprints, which were evidently Sid's leading away from the tree. These he followed, losing them occasionally, then finding the again.

Snow! Snow! Falling faster than ever; nothing visible now more than two to three yards away; the footprints themselves would soon be covered. He called many times but there was no response.

He came to a standstill. "Has he succeeded in getting away after all?" he asked himself. "No, he shall not make such a return as this to me, for the injury that I have done him. I will give my own life first."

But what was to be done?

The wind was raging, but on this part of the moorlands it makes little noise. It rushes by unopposed. There are so few objects to oppose it. He listened.

Surely that was a cough at a little distance from him?

After a time it recurred. It seemed close on his left hand side. Walking but a few steps in this direction, he stumbled over something in his way. It was Sid. His strength had given way before he had got two hundred yards from the tree, and he now lay on the ground half covered by the snow. Geoffrey for a moment thought he was dead, but Sid recognised his master. He uttered a weak and unemotional "Aye! aye!" words he was fond of using

to Geoffrey, now possibly intended as a sign of his acquiescence in fate, or an acknowledgment that his last effort had miscarried.

Geoffrey fortunately remembered the brandy which the good woman Coley had given him, and was able to administer a little to Sid. Then he stooped and took the man in his arms. Sid was too weak to resist. A murmured "No, no," was the only protest he could now make.

Carrying his burden with apparent ease, he tried to return the way he had come. He succeeded, for they were soon again by the little tree on which the handkerchief was yet waving. He untied it—he had forgotten it before—and continued to walk in the direction he believed they were proceeding when the halt had been made, but he was by no means sure of it. They must somehow or other get to the Buxton high road. It was their one hope, though surely there never was a more forlorn hope presented to any one.

Night had fallen, the darkness was almost complete, the snow everywhere over two feet in depth, and in places much deeper. Over and over again Geoffrey found it impossible to advance another step, and had to turn back and try another way. Still he struggled on. Sid had not spoken for some time, then he said: "Let me walk a bit now."

The request was granted, for Geoffrey's immense strength was beginning to fail. They had been for some time mounting a steep hillside. The effort had been overwhelming.

He placed Sid on the ground and continued to hold him. It was soon apparent that he could not stand alone, much less walk.

"I think we must be mounting the Moorridge. If we could get to the top we might strike a road which would be passable, and lead us to the Royal Cottage Inn," Geoffrey remarked to encourage his companion.

"Aye! aye!" The reply was in a very feeble voice.

The truth was that Geoffrey was partly right and partly wrong in his view of their position. They were trying to mount the Moorridge, that wonderful ridge of the Moorlands which runs from near the high road between Leek and Ashbourne and continues to the Leek and Buxton road, near the Royal Cottage Inn, but they had got much too far south and were making more towards Leek than in the other direction.

Although they did not know it, they were trying to mount the highest part of the Moorridge, a part the summit of which is over fifteen hundred feet above sea level, a part where the moorland storms are wildest, and the snow drifts deepest and more dangerous than anywhere else.

They had got about a third of the way up, but the steepest part was still before them. Had they been able to see they would have known at once that it was useless to try and reach the top. The way was impossible. But they did not know, and once again Geoffrey took Sid in his arms in an attempt to mount the unconquerable hill. Suddenly they half fell over one of those strange misshapen masses of rock, which exist in such numbers in the district. A thought occurred to Geoffrey.

"We can go no further. We must stop here till morning, but this great piece of rock must furnish some sort of shelter on one side," he said. The great piece of stone, which, many centuries before had become dislodged probably from near the crest of the hill and precipitated itself down the greater part of it, was about ten feet in height and over fifteen in breadth. They got to the leeward side of it. There they found a resting place comparatively calm. On this side the top of the rock overhung to an extent of several feet. This furnished a sort of canopy, or roof, sheltering them from the falling snow, and in some degree from the wind.

"We shall not find a better shelter than this till morning," said Geoffrey. There was not so much snow lying on the sheltered side, and this they were partially able to brush away. The place was hardly entitled to be called a shelter. It was terribly cold, but the snow was not driving directly at them as before. Geoffrey pulled out his watch. It was near nine o'clock. No chance of moving for ten or eleven hours.

"Do you think you can weather this till to-morrow morning?" He asked this in as unconcerned a way as possible.

"What matters what I can do."

Sid had resumed his curt voice and manner.

The prospect before them was appalling. To pass a whole night on the wildest part of the wildest moorlands in England, during a storm of unusual violence even for this district, and exposed without covering, other than their clothes, to merciless and killing winds.

Both men had in the past gone through what are called "rough times."

Geoffrey when abroad, had often been forced to spend nights in the open air, but this was in hot climates. As to Sid, as often as not in his boyhood he had had to be content with sleeping under a hay-stack or a barn in the country, in London on one of the seats in the Parks or in the shelter of a cart in Covent Garden Market.

They had never experienced anything like this.

“Could human nature suffer it and survive?”

This question Geoffrey kept asking himself, but always with his thought fixed on Sid. His own peril as usual was forgotten. Violent fits of coughing had again seized on Sid, and seemed as each one succeeded the other, entirely to exhaust the small vitality he yet possessed. They sat in silence for a long time. Sid in a reclining posture. His eyes were closed. He looked asleep. His hands were cold as marble. Then in this dark and awe-inspiring place occurred a scene the world never saw, would never hear of, which was obscured even from the pale “Queen of the night.”

Geoffrey quietly took off his own overcoat—it was a good deal thicker than Sid’s—and spread it over the seemingly sleeping man. In an instant Sid seemed to recover consciousness. He threw off the coat with a quickness and vigour which astonished his master.

“Sid, you foolish fellow, you must have it. I am much stronger than you.”

“I won’t!” The voice was louder than it had been for hours. He almost screamed the words. Geoffrey knew Sid was dying from exhaustion, as indeed he was. He felt he must exert his authority, an authority which had always been bowed to.

“Sid,” he said trying to speak sternly, and partly failing—“I order you to let me put this coat over you.”

“I won’t. If you put it on twenty times I’ll throw it off.”

“I insist.”

“I don’t care.”

“Sid, you are a fool.” Geoffrey was really angry.

“I knows I have always been a fool, but you be a fool as well to part with your coat.”

Such was the quarrel. A quarrel! nay, one more sublime instance of the nobility to which poor human nature can rise. If the Recording Angel in Heaven’s Chancery had at this moment pierced the gloom surrounding this lower planet, and witnessed the disagreement between these two men, surely he would have blotted out the record of every offence previously recorded against them, and in place would have written in words never to be erased, the story of this incident, called on earth “a quarrel,” regarded it may be in Heaven as an “imitatio Christi.”

It was no use Geoffrey keeping it up. Sid was immovable. The one occasion in his life when he had disobeyed him. He said no more, but waited for the opportunity which he knew would soon present itself.

Conscious of Sid's critical condition, he now seemed unconscious, he resolved to make one more effort to secure something which might be called shelter. He left the rock, and plunged again into the surrounding snow. He tried first in one direction then in another. It was all useless. They were surrounded now by an impenetrable wall of snow at least five feet in depth. The wind was raging more wildly than ever, carrying clouds of snow first in one direction, then in another. Geoffrey thought it just possible that, as the wind appeared to be shifting every few minutes, it might perchance carry away some of the drifts which it had formed, and open a way out. He waited more than an hour to see if this happened, but all in vain. Their prison walls were getting thicker every minute.

He returned to the rock with the conviction that there was no hope of escape for either of them. The wind seemed to have shifted. It was blowing the snow directly on to Sid. He was almost covered. Geoffrey tried to scrape it away with his hands, but with little success.

"Sid," he said, "I fear it is all over with us, but we shall go out together, my boy."

There was nothing in voice or manner to show that he was not regarding the crisis in the same light-hearted way in which throughout his life he had met every danger.

If Sid understood he showed no concern, though presently in a low and broken voice he asked a question:

"Master, can you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive, my poor Sid—my dear friend."

Never had his master called him "his friend" before. For a few seconds his blood seemed to course a little quicker through his veins, but he made no remark as to this and continued:

"Aye, but there be something to forgive," he said.

"What is it, Sid?"

"You'd never have been hunted like this but for me giving that note to Miss Tritsy when I was drunk."

"Oh, yes I should, Sid. It was bound to come out sooner or later. I ought not to have risked it for your sake. If there is anything to forgive it is on the other side."

"And you knew I had done it, and never said a word to me about it. 'Twas that as near killed me." The last words were scarcely audible.

Sid was rapidly giving out. He had hardly strength enough to cough, and the continual effort choked him. He lay against the rock, and his master held the apparently lifeless hand, but could impart no warmth to it.

He seemed entirely unconscious. Geoffrey's overcoat was over him now. He was too weak to resist this last proof of his master's affection, yet he spoke once again:

"Master," he murmured, "would ye do one thing for me? But no ye wouldn't."

"I will do anything, my dear friend, anything for you."

There was a long silence. Sid was summoning his last strength and courage. Then the request came: "Would ye kiss me?"

Geoffrey bent and kissed both the cold cheeks.

That Sid appreciated it, was evident. The unattractive smile showed on his face for a few seconds, then it gave place to a look of perfect content. It was finished.

The happiest moment of poor Sid's life was that immediately before his death.

Geoffrey had said to Sid that they would "go out together," and he was not greatly mistaken. Owing to his wonderful power of resistance and unique vitality he survived his companion and friend almost exactly twelve hours. Human nature could no longer fight with chance of success against the killing conditions which encompassed him.

Ever since his last effort to discover some way of escape from the icy prison in which they had been entombed, Geoffrey had been certain that nothing but a miracle, in the shape of a thaw, unprecedented in its rapidity—could possibly save them, or either of them, and no sign of such a miracle presented itself.

On the contrary he saw the snow falling as thickly as heretofore and building walls higher and more impenetrable than ever.

It was under these circumstances he abandoned hope for himself as well as for his companion. He spoke from conviction when he said on his return to Sid, "we shall go out together, my boy," but he knew at the same time that this declaration would bring a measure of heart comfort to the poor man who throughout life had clung to him so closely.

From this time not only did he give up all hope of preserving his own life, he seemed to have abandoned also the desire of living. It appeared to him that he had made a compact with his faithful friend not to desert him, but to bear him company into the unknown world.

So strong was this feeling after Sid had passed away, that he seemed as though jealous of his long hours of survival. He was discontented and showed impatience. He regarded himself as a laggard on the stage here, lingering behind his friend when he had promised to keep alongside him.

Fear, to which he had always been a stranger, had no place in his mind. He was content that his life should end as he knew it was about to. He said to himself more than once, "It is quite fitting the end should come like this, or in some such way as this. I don't think I would wish it otherwise. I have enjoyed it all, probably more than most people enjoy life. Mine has been full of fun, and never monotonous. Who was it said 'Life is a joke?' It has been for me for I have never taken it seriously, but how I have enjoyed all the perils and dangers with which it has been studded!

"Now there is one more only before me."

Strangely enough the knowledge that he was so near the last adventure, the great adventure of passing into the unknown, seemed to produce in him the same buoyancy of spirits—quite unconnected with anything morbid or fearful—which adventure of every description had brought with it throughout his life. During the long hours of solitude, until he became too weak for connected thought, he reviewed his life in broad outline. There was little that occurred to him to regret. He knew that, had he the chance, he would lead the same life again.

It was only when he thought of Sid that some twinges of uneasiness occurred. He had rescued him from terrible conditions only to plunge him into new perils. He had allowed him to become an accessory in the plot he designed to carry out at the studio. He felt now he should have kept him out of this in some way or other.

"Yes," he said to himself, "I did Sid an injury, and how nobly he has repaid it." With this exception no shadow of regret for his past deeds troubled him, or found a place in his mind. Though he knew that more than

one of his adventurous exploits had involved the breaking of the law, he had never been able to look upon these things as moral offences. They were gambles of a highly exhilarating description, with authority on the one side, pitted against his own skill and daring on the other.

If he won it was a feather in his cap, enjoyed, but never boasted of. If he was vanquished he would—as he was prepared to do now—bear the penalty without complaint.

Had he inflicted a conscious injury upon anyone, or omitted to assist friend or stranger in danger or distress, then would he indeed have condemned himself, but he was not conscious of having failed in these respects. To set himself up against authority and to defy it, had always seemed a legitimate if rather boyish escapade. If he had been asked bluntly whether he should be numbered among the good or the wicked in the world, he would at once have admitted that he was, in the words of the Church service, a sinner, though he could not possibly have declared, with truth, that he was a "miserable sinner."

Never did it occur to him as it does to so many, to set off good deeds he was entitled to credit for, against other deeds of more doubtful character, to strike a balance between them, and thus, to produce a credit balance on his own side.

Hero of almost countless deeds of bravery as he was, he never seemed to realise that these redounded in any way to his credit, or could be taken into account when summing up his life.

The question will without doubt be asked:

"What about Doris all this time?"

Surely at such a time as this Geoffrey's thoughts would be dwelling upon her. How could he forget her love and devotion to him?

No, he did not forget her—far from it. In a way she was never absent from his mind, but here again the singular diversity of the man's character showed itself. He appreciated how he had made the girl suffer in the past and how she would still suffer, and regretted having been the unconscious cause of it, but his thoughts at the present time about Doris were mixed with a strong sense of relief. A feeling of relief for himself as well as for her. He had just escaped associating her life with his own, and she had escaped the sorrow and misery which, he had more than once told her, must have accompanied such an association. He had been too weak to resist the offer of

the girl’s love. Fate had stepped in and prevented him doing her so ill a service.

Therefore his dominant feeling with regard to Doris was that everything had happened for the best.

He said to himself several times “She is young, and will recover the shock of my death. After a time her life is sure to be happier than I could have made it.”

Such was his reasoning so long as he could consciously control it.

When he became weaker, and was only partially conscious, the girl’s individuality flitted occasionally across his mind in a vague way, bringing the old fascinating smile to his face, and occasional mutterings of her name.

Assuredly she was with him and comforted him to the end, for when he had fallen into a comatose condition the same smile played on his face, and his lips continued to move from time to time.

A lip-reader alone could have told that he was repeating the word “Doris! Doris!” over and over again.

So without complaint, without fear, without regret, this strong heroic soul passed away.

With a rapidity for which the moorlands are remarkable an intense thaw had set in just too late to release the imprisoned men.

Their bodies were found two days afterwards. Though in a semi-frozen condition they looked calm and peaceful. Geoffrey’s overcoat was still on Sid. Perhaps he had forgotten to take it off, perhaps he did not wish to.

When the tragic intelligence was reported it was received at first with incredulity, as too startling to be true, then, when the truth could not be disputed, the wonderment was beyond expression in words.

Not alone the township, but the whole district around for many miles could talk or think of nothing else. Such a thing had never happened in North Staffordshire before. The Moorlands in winter had for many years taken their toll of human life, but never under such appalling circumstances. Small wonder that it continued the subject of discourse for months, indeed for years. The circumstances of the death, the characters of the men who played the leading part in the great event, was an inexhaustible source of discussion and argument, not infrequently of a heated description.

The majority of those who could have been called Geoffrey's personal friends had deserted him on the first rumour of the purpose for which the studio at Flash had been used. They at once threw over both master and man. Their respectability was shocked when they found these men were law breakers. They could not admit that any good could have been present in their lives and characters. Their criminal exploit had put them beyond the bounds of consideration. Even now, when they had passed from the stage, the custom of not speaking ill of the dead was not strong enough to induce them to admit that they had possessed some redeeming traits.

But there were a few who remained loyal to their memory, who knew that their characters were a blend in which the good largely predominated over the evil, and who could not withdraw their admiration and affection. First and foremost among these were the Vicar, the doctor, Mr. Plumbley, Miss Tritsy, Detective Mannering, quite a number of the cottagers, and of course beyond and above all, Doris.

The manner in which Doris received the news of Geoffrey's tragic death surprised those who knew how entirely the girl's heart had been surrendered to him.

When her father called her into his surgery and, with all the sympathy at his command, told how Geoffrey had come to his end, Doris turned pale as death, and leant against the little table for some minutes without uttering a single word. Her father thought she was going to faint. Then at the end of this period of waiting she said in a far more composed manner than he expected, "My darling is now at rest. They can harass him no more."

"He was a man possessed of many fine qualities," said her father, anxious to bring what comfort he could to his daughter's stricken heart.

"I know what he was. No one knew him as I did. He will always be mine now," and without adding anything more she turned and left the little room.

In less than an hour she was on her way to the vicarage. She must see the Vicar at once. Nothing could be allowed to intervene. The Vicar was now happily married to Hilda and they had only a day or two before returned, abandoning their wedding tour as soon as they had heard the appalling news. It came as a heavy cloud on what was otherwise the sunniest period of their lives.

Hilda, her eyes full of tears, met Doris in the hall and at once took her into her arms:

“My darling, my heart bleeds for you. I know how you are suffering,” she said.

Doris was not weeping. Grief such as hers finds no vent in tears. She was far more composed than Hilda had expected her to be.

The knowledge that nothing could now happen to affright their lives, that he could never be called on in this world to bear indignity and disgrace, that he would always be the same happy memory to her, that indeed their love had become immortal, had induced a feeling in the girl, if not of comfort, at least of partial resignation.

“Oh, Doris, I feel ashamed of my own happiness when I look at you,” said Hilda.

“I don’t envy you your happiness, Hilda,” was the quiet reply, and then:

“I want to talk to the Vicar.”

“Can’t you speak before Hilda? We have no secrets from one another,” the clergyman replied.

“Yes, I can. I want Geoffrey to be buried in the churchyard in the place I shall select.”

“We had already decided on this.” It was Hilda who spoke.

“You shall select the place. I have been trying to find out if there are any persons who should be invited to be present, any relations or connections, but I have not been able to discover anyone,” said the Vicar.

“I am glad of that,” Doris replied quickly, and then she added, “I wish to buy the land for the graves of both and, of course desire that you should conduct the service.”

“Certainly, I hope to conduct the service. We came home on purpose.”

Doris did not seem even yet to be entirely satisfied. She had been standing some yards distant from the clergyman. Now she went up to him and placing her hand upon his arm spoke in low tones and with intense emotion: “Vicar,” she said, “you will make no omissions—you will read the whole service?”

“I shall read the full service over both men. I have thought it all out. I have never seen my duty more clearly than I do now,” he answered.

“Thank you! thank you!” exclaimed the poor girl, and then she added, in such poignant tones as again brought tears into Hilda’s eyes:

"I have no trouble left now."

The small church at Longnor could not contain a quarter of the people who wished to attend the funeral of Geoffrey Frevile and Sid. A large crowd had collected from all parts of Staffordshire, and more remote districts. Doubtless a good number of these were mere sight-seers, drawn by the feeling of curiosity which prompts so many people to attend the obsequies of any celebrated or notorious personage.

Every niche of standing room inside the church was occupied. Hundreds had to wait in the churchyard.

A small proportion among the large crowd, were true mourners, people who had admired and loved Geoffrey, and felt real compassion for his devoted servant. That two such men should have come to such a terrible end was almost unbelieveable, and a subject of unmitigated grief and regret.

When the procession left the church for the churchyard, Doris walked immediately behind the Vicar with her father. Everyone crowded around the graves, which were situated side by side at the highest point of the churchyard. Doris had chosen this spot. She had given no reason for selecting the position. It was one which commanded a view over those parts of the moorlands where she and Geoffrey were accustomed to walk and paint together, the parts they both loved so well.

When the vicar came to that part of the committal service which speaks of the "sure and certain hope" held by the survivors, he seemed to raise his voice and spoke the words in a clear and confident tone, a tone and manner which seemed designed to indicate that, whatever may have been their transgressions he, at all events felt no hesitation in pronouncing over both these men, these comforting words.

Quite a number of wreaths and emblems of affection or regard were on Geoffrey's coffin; a few had been placed upon Sid's.

Doris had made her wreath of leaves, gathered with difficulty from the shrubs and trees of the surrounding parts, many of them at this season of the year in a fading condition, but the leaves he delighted to see as well as to paint.

A smaller wreath she also placed on the smaller coffin. Most of the other tributes were of a humbler character, evidently home-made. They came mostly from the villagers who knew both men well. Detective Mannering placed a cross of holly, bearing early berries on Geoffrey's grave. This good-

hearted officer, now that the object of his pursuit had passed beyond human judgment, not only bore him no ill-will but wished in this manner to testify to the admiration he had always felt for his character.

Miss Tritsy placed her tribute upon both graves.

Mrs. Coley at the last minute had, with evident bashfulness, led forward her two little girls to place small bunches of leaves and scarlet berries on Geoffrey's last resting place. They mourned the man who had been so good a friend to them rather as a playfellow, than as one to whom they owed their lives.

In a few minutes it was all over. The crowd dispersed. No one was left but Doris with the Vicar and his wife. Doris stood at the grave side, her eyes fixed on the last resting place of him, whom she had loved so truly in his lifetime, a love which death now had only cemented.

She seemed to be unconscious that anyone was waiting for her until Hilda in a quiet voice said, "Come." Then she turned and walked between the Vicar and Hilda towards the vicarage.

They turned once to take a last look of the scene they had just quitted. Sid's grave was hidden by a tree, but Geoffrey's was still in view. At this moment there occurred to the Vicar's mind the wonderful lines in which the immortal poet makes Anthony portray the character of Brutus. He knew them so well. He must repeat them before Doris.

"Doris," he exclaimed, "listen to this. This seems to me to sum up truly the character of the man you loved, the man we all loved—the character of Geoffrey Frevile:

" 'His life was gentle and the elements so mixed in him, that nature might stand up and say to all the world, "This was a man." ' "

Then they entered the vicarage.

L'ENVOI

A word or two concerning the persons we have been travelling with so long. More than ten years have passed since the incident last related, but the township has long ago settled down once more to a quiet and uneventful monotony. Dr. Gregory still practises the healing art throughout the moorlands, but he is now assisted by his son Walter who has taken his degrees and submitted to the hum-drum life of the locality.

The firm is known as "Gregory & Son," but the services of the senior partner are more often requested than those of the junior.

Mrs. Gregory is still endeavouring to obtain admission, on terms of equality to the houses of the 'Notables.' She never tires of speaking of Doris' narrow escape, and her own inability to understand in what manner she had become so obsessed by "that man."

The Huddlestones and Knebworthys still reside in the neighbourhood. The Vicar and Hilda lead a supremely happy life and the voices of children at play may now be heard in the vicarage garden.

Ever since their marriage Marion has been their one domestic; she is greatly attached to both her master and mistress, though in her forward way she seems to control the little household, the Vicar certainly stands in awe of her sharp tongue, and never remonstrates or contradicts her. Hilda sometimes confides in her, but not so often as before.

A frequent visitor at the vicarage is the lady whom Hilda always calls "the former Countess Paloni." She is now known by her baptismal name of "Polly Brown."

With her title she has discarded her former companions. She has become a somewhat commonplace but extremely kind-hearted and genuine friend, very sincerely attached both to Hilda and her husband.

Detective Officer Mannering—who by the way is no longer a detective officer—has taken up his permanent residence in the moorlands, and spends his time in collecting the various species of flower and fern with which these wild districts abound.

Mr. Plumbley still brings his household to the Grange near Longnor during the summer season. He has not yet succeeded in inducing anyone to nominate him as High Sheriff of the county, indeed he has given up all

personal ambition, and revels in the successes of his son-in-law, Sir Alec Wiles, Bart.

Mrs. Plumbley has never attended Court, but she has on several occasions taken a leading part in dressing her daughter Edwina for these functions.

Doris has never married and it is almost certain she never will. Her love is buried in the little churchyard.

She has had a plain stone erected over each of the two graves with the names and date of their death.

Underneath, on both stones the same three words: “Faithful to death.” Doris often visits the churchyard, and occasionally meets Miss Tritsy there, but her favourite resting place is the “stunted oak” on the Moneyash road, the place where Geoffrey first declared his love, and where the happiest hours of her life had been passed. She had carved on the trunk of this small tree the letters “G. F. and D. G.”

Miss Tritsy is still postmistress of Longnor. She habitually wears in her necktie a man’s breastpin, and she inspects every letter which arrives at the post office, with the same curiosity as formerly.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *Flash* by Alfred Henry Ruegg]