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Title: Bulldog And Butterfly

Author: David Christie Murray

Release date: August 8, 2007 [eBook #22273]
Most recently updated: January 25, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger

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BULLDOG AND BUTTERFLY

By David Christie Murray

Author Of 'Aunt Rachel,' 'The Weaker Vessel,' Etc.

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I

Castle Barfield, Heydon Hey, and Beacon Hargate form the three points of a triangle. Barfield is a parish of some pretensions; Heydon Hey is a village; Beacon Hargate is no more than a hamlet. There is not much that is picturesque in Beacon Hargate, or its neighbourhood. The Beacon Hill itself is as little like a hill as it well can be, and acquires what prominence it has by virtue of the extreme flatness of the surrounding country. A tuft of Scotch firs upon its crest is visible from a distance of twenty miles in some directions. A clear but sluggish stream winds among its sedges and water-lilies round the western side of the Beacon Hill, and washes the edge of a garden which belongs to the one survival of the picturesque old times Beacon Hargate has to show.

The Oak House was built for a mansion in the days of Queen Elizabeth, but who built it nobody knows at this time of day, or, excepting perhaps a hungry-minded antiquary or two, greatly cares to know. The place had been partly pulled down, and a good deal altered here and there. Stables, barns, cow-sheds, and such other outhouses as are needful to a farm had been tacked on to it, or built near it; and all these appurtenances, under the mellowing hand of time and weather, had grown congruous, insomuch that the Oak House if stripped of them would have looked as bare even to the unaccustomed eye as a bird plucked of its feathers.

The house faced the stream, and turned its back upon the Beacon with its clump of fir-trees. It had chimneys enough for a village—an extraordinary wealth of chimneys—'twisted, fluted, castellated, stacked together in conclave or poised singly about the gables. The front of the house was crossed laterally and diagonally by great beams of black-painted oak. The windows, which are full of diamonded panes, were lowbrowed, deep-sunken, long, and shallow. The door had a porch, and this porch was covered with creepers. In summer time climbing roses and honeysuckle bloomed there. The garden ran right up to the house, and touched it all round. The fragrant sweet-william, nestling against the walls, looked as though it were a natural fringe. Without the faintest sense of primness, or even of orderliness, everything had an air of being precisely where it ought to be, and conveyed somehow a suggestion of having been there always. The house looked less as if it had been built than as if it had grown, and this feeling was heightened by the vegetable growth about it and upon it—the clinging ivy, the green house-leek, the purple and golden moss on the roofs and walls. In the course of its three hundred years the Oak House had stood long enough to be altogether reconciled to nature, and half absorbed by it.

In 1850—which, though it seem a long while ago, is well within human memory—and for many years before, the Oak House was tenanted by a farmer who bore the name of Fellowes, a sturdy and dogmatic personage, who was loud at the table of the market ordinary once a week, and for the most part silent for the rest of his life at home. The gray mare was the better horse. Excepting within doors at the Oak House, Fellowes ruled the hamlet. There were no resident gentry; the clergyman was an absentee; the tiny church was used only as a chapel-of-ease; and Fellowes was the wealthiest and most important personage for a mile or two. He was a little disposed to be noisy, and to bluster in his show of authority, and therefore fell all the more easily captive to his wife, who had a gift for the tranquil saying of unpleasant things which was reckoned quite phenomenal in Beacon Hargate. This formidable woman was ruled in turn by her daughter Bertha.

Bertha, unless looked at through the eyes of susceptible young manhood, would by no means be pronounced formidable. She was country-bred and quite rustic; but there are refinements of rusticity; and for Beacon Hargate, Bertha was a lady. She would have been a lady anywhere according to her chances; for she was naturally sensitive to refining influences, and of a nature which, remembering how strong it was, was curiously tender.

It was May, in the year 1850—mid-May—and the weather was precisely what mid-May weather ought to be, perfumed and softly fresh, with opposing hints of gaiety and languor in it. The birds were singing everywhere—a vocal storm, and the sheep—who can never express themselves as being satisfied in any weather—bleated disconsolately from the meadows. The clucking of fowls, the quacking of ducks, the very occasional grunt of some contented porker in the backward regions of the place, the stamp of a horse's foot, and the rattle of a chain in a manger-ring—sounds quite unmusical in themselves—blended with the birds' singing, and the thick humming of the bees, into an actual music in which no note was discordant. The day was without a cloud, and the soft light was diffused everywhere on a skyey haze of whitish blue.

In this positively delightful weather, Bertha stood with folded hands in the porch of the Oak House (the floor and the far wall of the kitchen behind her patched with gleams of red and brown light), like the central figure of a picture framed in live green. She was pretty enough to be pleasant to look at; but her charms were mainly the growth of tranquil good temper and sound sense. Broad brow, gray eyes, resolute little chin, the mouth the best feature of the face, her expression thoughtful, serene, and self-possessed, the gray eyes a trifle inclined to dream wide-awake, hair of no particular colour, but golden in the sunlight. She stood leaning sideways, with one shoulder touching the trellis-work of the porch, and one pretty little foot crossed over the other, her head poised sideways and nestled into the ivy. She was looking far away, seeing nothing, and her folded hands drooped before her. A bridge, with a hand-rail on either side of it, crossed the stream and led from a meadow path to the garden. This meadow path was hidden—partly by the garden wall, and partly by the growth of alder and pollard at the side of the stream—and a man came marching along it, unobserved. Before he reached the bridge he brought his footsteps to a sudden halt, and sent a glance towards the porch. Seeing the girl there, sunk in day dreams, he slipped back into the shelter of the withies and took a good long look at her. Twice or thrice, though his feet did not quit the ground, he made a faint movement to go on again, and at length, after two or three minutes of indecision, he walked briskly to the foot of the bridge, threw open the little gate at the end of it, and, suffering it to fall with a clanking noise behind him, tramped across the hollow-resounding boards.

At this sudden break upon the rural stillness—for, in spite of the chorus of the birds and the farmyard noises which mingled with it, the general effect was somehow of stillness and solitude—the girl looked round at the new-comer, drew herself up from her lounging attitude, placed her hands behind her and there re-folded them, and stood waiting, with an added flush of colour on her cheek. The new-comer strode along in a kind of awkward resoluteness, looking straight at the girl with a glance which appeared to embarrass her a little, though she returned it frankly enough.

'Here I am, you see,' said the new-comer, halting before her.

He was tallish, well-made, and of middle age. His expression was a trifle dogged, and for a man who came love-making he looked less prepossessing than he himself might have wished.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Thistlewood,' said the girl, in a tone which a sensitive man might have thought purposely defensive.

'Is it yes or no to-day, Bertha?' asked Mr. Thistlewood.

'It has always been no,' she answered, looking down.

'Oh,' he answered, 'I'm perfectly well aware of that. It always has been no up till now, but that's no reason why it should be no to-day. And if it's no to-day that's no reason why it should be no again this day three months. Maids change their minds, my dear.'

'It is a pity you should waste your time, Mr. Thistlewood,' said Bertha, still looking down.

'As for wasting my time,' returned John Thistle-wood, 'that's a thing as few can charge me with as a general rule. And in this particular case, you see, I can't help myself. The day I see you married I shall make up my mind to leave you alone until such time as you might happen to be a widow, and if that should come to pass I

should reckon myself free to come again.'

'It has always been no,' said Bertha. 'It is no to-day. It will always be no.'

The words in themselves were sufficiently decisive, and the voice, though it had something soft and regretful in it, sounded almost as final as the words.

'Let's look at it a bit, my dear,' said John Thistlewood, grasping in both hands the thick walking-stick he carried, and pressing it firmly against his thighs as he leaned a little forward and looked down upon her. 'Why is it no? And if it's no again to-day, why is it always going to be no?'

'I like you very well, Mr. Thistlewood,' she answered, looking up at him, 'but I don't like you in a marrying way, and I never shall.'

'As for never shall,' said he, 'that remains to be seen.'

He straightened himself as he spoke, and releasing the walking-stick with his left hand put the point of it softly, slowly, and strongly down upon the gravel, dinting the ground pretty deeply with the pressure.

'Let's look at it a little further,' he added.

'It is of no use,' the girl answered pleadingly. 'It hurts us both, and it can do no good at all.'

'Let's look at it a bit further,' he said again. 'This day month you said there was nobody you'd seen you liked better than me. Is that true still?'

'It is quite true,' she answered, 'but it makes no difference.'

'That remains to be seen,' said John Thistlewood again. 'And as for not liking me in a marrying way, that's a thing a maid can't be supposed to know much of.' He waited doggedly as if to hear her deny this, but she made no answer. 'You've known me all your life, Bertha, and you never knew anything again me.'

'Never,' she said, almost eagerly.

'I'm well-to-do,' he went on stolidly, but with all his force, as if he were pushing against a wall too heavy to be moved by any pressure he could bring to bear against it, and yet was resolute to have it down. 'I'm not too old to be a reasonable match for a maid of your years. You've had my heart this five years I waited two afore I spoke at all There's a many—not that I speak it in a bragging way—as would be willing enough to have me.'

'It's a pity you can't take a fancy to one of them,' she said, with perfect simplicity and good faith.

'Perhaps it is,' answered Thistlewood, with a dogged sigh; 'but be that as it may, I can't and shan't. Where my fancy lies it stays. I didn't give my heart away to take it back again. You'll wed me yet, Bertha, and when you do you'll be surprised to think you didn't do it long before.'

At this point the voice of a third person broke in upon the colloquy.

'That caps all!' said the voice. 'There's Mr. Forbes, the Scotch gardener at my Lord Barfield's, tells me of a lad in his parts as prayed the Lord for a good consate of himself. That's a prayer as you'll never find occasion t'offer, John Thistlewood.'

'Maybe not, Mrs. Fellowes,' answered Thistlewood, addressing the owner of the voice, who remained invisible; 'but I wasn't speaking in a braggart way.'

'No—no,' returned the still invisible intruder. 'Wast humble enough about it, doubtless. You'm bound to tek a man's own word about his own feelings. Who is to know 'em if he doesn't?'

'Just so,' said Thistlewood, with great dryness. He appeared to be little if at all disturbed by the interruption, but Bertha was blushing like a peony.

'I sat quiet,' said the girl's mother, leisurely walking round the door with a half-finished gray worsted stocking depending from the knitting-needles she carried in both hands,—' I sat quiet so as not to be a disturbance. It's you for making love to a maid, I must allow, John.'

The girl ran into the house and disappeared from view.

'It's me for speaking my mind, at least, ma'am,' returned John, with unaltered tranquil doggedness.

'Ah!' responded the farmer's wife; 'you're like a good many more of 'em; you'd sooner not have what you want than go the right way to get it.'

Thistlewood digested this in silence, and Mrs. Fellowes set the knitting-needles flashing.

'I've always fancied,' he said in a little while, 'as I had your goodwill in the matter.'

'You've got my goodwill, in a way to be sure,' said the old woman. 'You'd mek the gell a goodish husband if her could find a fancy for you—but the fancy's everything—don't you see, John?'

'I'm not above taking advice, Mrs. Fellowes,' said Thistlewood, digging at the gravel with his walking-stick. 'Will you be so good as to tell me where I'm wrong?'

'There's one particular as you're wrong in,' returned Mrs. Fellowes, knitting away with a determinedly uninteresting air, 'and, I misdoubt me, you can't alter it.'

'What's that?' asked Thistlewood, looking up at her suddenly.

'You're the wrong man, John.'

'That remains to be seen,' he answered, with the same dogged patience as before.

'You can't win a maid's heart by going at her as solemn as a funeral,' pursued the old woman. 'If you'd ha' begun sprightly with the gell, you might ha' had a chance with her. "La!" says you, "what a pretty frock you're a-wearing to-day;" or "How nice you do do up your hair for a certainty."'

'I don't look on marriage as a thing to be approached i' that fashion,' said Thistlewood.

'Well,' returned the old woman, clicking her needles with added rapidity, 'I've always said there's no end to the folly o' men. D'ye hear that there cuckoo? Go and catch him wi' shoutin' at him. An' when next you're in want of toast at tay-time, soak your bread in a pan o' cold water.'

Thistlewood stood for a time in a rather dogged-looking silence, sometimes glancing at the notable woman and glancing away again. Her eye expressed a triumph which, though purely dialectic, was hard for a disappointed lover to endure, even whilst he refused to recognise his disappointment.

'I should regard any such means of gettin' into a maid's good graces as being despicable,' he said, after a while.

'Very well, my Christian friend,' the farmer's wife retorted, with a laugh. 'Them as mek bread without barm must look to spoil the batch.'

'I was niver of a flatterin' turn of mind,' said Thistlewood.

'You niver was, John,' responded Mrs. Fellowes, with an accent which implied something beyond assent.

He flushed a little, and began to tap at his corduroyed leg with the stick he carried, at first with a look of shamefaced discomfiture, and then with resolution. He finished with a resounding slap, and looked up with a light in his eyes.

'I'm pretty hard to beat, ma'am,' he said, 'though I say it as should not. I'm not going to be conquered here if I can help it. And I look to have you and Mr. Fellowes on my side, as far as may be asked in reason. Her'll find no better husband than I should be to her, I am sure. There's more than a wheedlin' tongue required to mek a married woman happy. I've pretty well proved as I'm not changeable. There's a strong arm to tek care of her. There's a homely house with plenty in it. There's a goodish lump at the bank, and there's nothing heart can desire as her might not have by asking for it.'

'Well, John,' said the farmer's wife, clicking her needles cheerfully, 'I've not a word to say again the match. Win the wench and welcome. My dancin' days is pretty nigh over, but I'll tek the floor once more with pleasure, if you won't be too long in mekin' ready for me.'

'There's nothing more to be done at present, I suppose,' the lover said presently, 'and so I'll say good-bye for this afternoon, Mrs. Fellowes.'

With this he turned upon his heel, and marching sturdily down the path and across the little bridge, disappeared behind the withies and pollards.

The farmer's wife waited a while until he was out of hearing, and then, without turning her head, shrilled out 'Bertha!' The girl came silently downstairs and joined her in the doorway. The mother pursued her knitting in silence, a faint flicker of a humorous smile touching her face and eyes now and again. At length she spoke, looking straight before her.

'Why woot'ent marry the man?'

'Mr. Thistlewood?' asked Bertha, making the feeblest possible defence against this direct attack.

'Ay,' said her mother, 'Mr. Thistlewood to be sure. Why woot'ent marry him?'

'I like him well enough in a way,' the girl answered 'But I don't like him that way!

'What way?'

'Why—in a marrying way,' said Bertha.

'Pooh!' answered the notable woman. 'What's a maid know how she'd like a man?'

'I should have the greatest respect for him,' Bertha answered, wisely avoiding the discussion of this question, 'if he wouldn't come bothering me to marry him.'

'Ay!' said her mother, assenting with a philosophic air. 'That's a wench's way. When a man wants nothing her'll give him as much as her can spare. But look hither, my gell! You listen to the words of a old experienced woman. There's a better love comes after the weddin', if a gell marries a worthy solid man, than ever her knows before it. If a gell averts from a man that's another matter. But if her can abide him to begin with, and if he's a good man, her'll be fond of him before her knows it.'

'I should never be fond of Mr. Thistlewood, mother,' the girl answered, flushing hotly. 'It's of no use to speak about him.'

'Did the man ever mek love to you at all,' the mother asked, 'beyond comin' here and barkin', "Wool't marry me?"'

'I wish you wouldn't talk of him, mother,' Bertha answered in a troubled voice. 'I respect him very highly, but as for marrying him, it's out of the question. I can't do it.'

'Well, well,' returned her mother, 'nobody's askin' you to do anything o' the sort. I'm trying to find your mind about him. It's high time 'twas made up one way or other. You've come to a marriageable age.'

'I'm very well as I am,' said Bertha, rather hastily. 'I'm not in a hurry to be married.'

'You've never been much like other gells,' said her mother, with a dry humorous twinkle which looked more masculine than feminine. 'But I reckon you'll be in about as much of a hurry as the rest on 'em be when the right man comes.'

At this moment a whistle of peculiar volume, mellowness, and flexibility was heard. The whistler was trilling 'Come lasses and lads' in tones as delightful as a blackbird's.

'Is this him?' said the old woman, turning upon her daughter.

Bertha blushed, and turned away. The mother laughed. A light footstep sounded on the echoing boards of the little bridge, and the human blackbird, marching gaily in time to his tune, flourished a walking-stick in salutation as he approached.

'Good-afternoon, Mrs. Fellowes,' cried the newcomer. 'Good-afternoon, *Miss* Fellowes.'

They both returned his salutation, and he stood before them smilingly, holding his stick lightly by the middle, and swinging it hither and thither, as if keeping time to an inward silent tune. His feet were planted a little apart, he carried his head well back, and his figure was very alert and lithe. He made great use of his lips in talking, and whatever he said seemed a little overdone in emphasis. His expression was eager, amiable, and sensitive, and it changed like the complexion of water in variable weather. He was a bit of a dandy in his way, too. His clothes showed his slim and elastic figure to the best advantage, and a bright-coloured neckerchief with loose flying ends helped out a certain air of festal rural opera which belonged to him.

'I passed Thistlewood on my way here,' he said, laughing brightly. 'He looked as cheerful as a frog. Did y'

ever notice what a cheerful-looking thing a frog is?’

He made a face ludicrously like the creature he mentioned. The old woman laughed outright, and Bertha smiled, though somewhat unwillingly.

‘I don’t like to hear Mr. Thistlewood made game of, Mr. Protheroe,’ she said a moment later.

‘Don’t you, Miss Fellowes?’ asked Mr. Protheroe. ‘Then it shan’t be done in your presence again.’

‘That means it may be done out of my presence, I suppose,’ the girl said coldly.

‘No, nor out of it,’ said the young fellow, bowing with something of a flourish, ‘if it displeases you.’

‘Come in, Lane, my lad,’ said the mother, genially. ‘I’ve got the poultry to look after at this hour. Bertha’ll tek care of you till I come back again.’

Lane Protheroe bowed again with the same gay flourish, and recovering himself from the bow with an upward swing of the head, followed the women-folk into the wide kitchen as if he had been crossing the floor in a minuet. If these airs of his had been assumed they would have touched the ridiculous, but they were altogether natural to him; and what with them and his smiling, changeful, sympathetic ways, he was a prime favourite, and seemed to carry sunshine into all sorts of company.

When the mother had left the kitchen the girl seated herself considerably apart from the visitor, and taking up a book from a dresser beside her, began to turn over its pages, stopping now and again to read a line or two, and rather ostentatiously disregarding her companion. He sat in silence, regarding her with a grave face for a minute or thereabouts, and then, rising, crossed the room and placed himself beside her, bending over her, with one hand resting on the dresser. She did not look up in answer to this movement, but bent her head even a little more than before above the book.

‘I’m glad to be left alone with you for a minute, Miss Fellowes,’ he began gently, and with a faint tremor and hesitation in his voice, ‘because I’ve something very special and particular to say to you.’

There he paused, and Bertha with a slight cough, which was a trifle too casual and unembarrassed to be real, said, ‘Indeed, Mr. Protheroe?’ and kept her eyes upon the book.

‘They say a girl always knows,’ he went on, ‘and if that’s true you know already what I want to say.’

He paused, but if he expected any help from her in the way either of assent or denial, he was disappointed. He stooped a little lower and touched her hand with a gentle timidity, but she at once withdrew it.

‘You know I love you, Bertha? You know you’re dearer to me than all the whole wide world beside?’

Still Bertha said nothing, but the hand that turned the leaves of the book trembled perceptibly.

‘I’ve come to ask you if you’ll be my wife, dear! if you’ll let me make you my lifelong care and joy, my darling! You don’t guess how much I love you. You don’t know how much your answer means to me.’

The girl rose, and, carrying the book with her, walked to the kitchen window and looked out upon the garden, the river, and the fields, without seeing anything. She was evidently agitated, and did not find an answer easily. Lane followed her, and when for a moment she dared to look up at him she encountered a look so tender, anxious, and ardent that she lowered her eyes in quick confusion. He seized her hand, and for a brief instant she let it rest in his.

‘Speak to me,’ he murmured, caressingly and pleadingly. ‘Tell me.’

‘I don’t understand you, Mr. Protheroe,’ the girl said pantingly.

‘Not understand me, dear?’ he whispered; ‘I am asking you to be my wife.’

‘I understand that,’ she answered, drawing herself away from him, and speaking with difficulty. ‘It is *you* I don’t understand. You—yourself.’

‘Tell me how, darling,’ he said softly.

‘You tell me,’ she said, lifting a pale and agitated face, ‘that I can’t guess how much my answer means to you. But you come here whistling and dancing, as you always come, as if you hadn’t a care upon your mind.’

‘Don’t make that a reproach against me, dear,’ said he. ‘Why it was just the thought of you made me so happy.’

She looked up at him with an expression of doubt and pain, and as their eyes met he caught one of her hands in both his, and held it.

‘Dear Bertha!’ he said, with a sudden moisture in his eyes. ‘There is nobody so good. There is nobody so lovely.’

She drew away from him again, though some sort of electric influence seemed to come out of him, and draw her strongly to him.

‘I must wait,’ she said. ‘I—I don’t know you well enough. I don’t understand you. You are too light. You are too careless. I don’t know how far I can believe you.’

‘Oh!’ he cried, ‘believe me altogether, dear. I love you with all my heart and soul!’

She moved to the middle of the room, and sheltered herself behind a table which stood there.

‘I hardly know whether you have a heart,’ she answered then. ‘You fancy you feel all you say,’ she added quickly. ‘You feel it for the minute.’

He stood at the other side of the table with brows suddenly grown gloomy.

‘I shall feel it all my life,’ he said. ‘It’s the one thing I’ve ever been in earnest about. I never thought I should feel as I do. If you like to wait, dear, before answering me, I’ll wait just as long as ever you please.’ His gloom was gone, and he was all eagerness and vivacity again. ‘There’s nothing I won’t do for your asking. I’ll cure every fault I’ve got. I’ll be everything you’d like to have me. Try me, darling. Wait and see. But give me only just a little bit of hope. Don’t send me away quite hungry. Tell me you care for me just a little—not as I care for you—I don’t expect that. It doesn’t stand to reason yet awhile you should.’

There she shot one swift glance at him, averting her gaze at once.

‘I won’t say I don’t like you,’ she answered with a candour half rustic, half characteristic of herself ‘But I

won't answer yes or no just yet.'

'Very well, dear,' he answered tenderly. 'You shall have time to know if I'm in earnest, or if I've taken nothing more than a passing fancy. Shall I ask you again this day six months?'

'I won't promise you an answer then,' she said. 'I will answer you when I am certain.'

'You could care for me, then,' he urged her, 'if you were only quite sure I loved you, and always would love you? Why, Bertha, I'd put my hand in that fire to save you from a finger-ache. I'd jump into the Weale there if I thought I could make you happy by doing it. I'd live my whole life your servant for a smile a year.'

His eyes flashed or moistened with every phrase, his gestures were superabundant and intense, and his voice was genuinely tender and impassioned.

His ardent eyes and voice thrilled the girl, and yet she doubted him. There was a fear in her mind which she could not shake away.

People in Beacon Hargate were not rich in opportunities for the study of the acted drama, but Bertha had seen a play or two in the great town hard by, and Lane looked and talked rather too much like a stage lover to her mind. In the unreal life behind the footlights lovers talked with just such a fluency, just such a tender fiery emphasis. In real life John Thistlewood came doggedly a-wooing with a shoulder propped against a doorpost, and had hard work to find a word for himself. If only that one absent element of faith could be imported into the business, Lane Protheroe's fashion of courting was certain to be infinitely more delightful than John Thistlewood's, but then the absent element was almost everything. And for poor Bertha the worst part of it seemed that she loved the man she doubted, and could not love the man in whose affection she held the profoundest faith. That the rough, clumsy, and persistent courtier loved her was one of the indisputable facts of life to her. She knew it just as surely as she knew that she was alive. She knew it, and the knowledge hurt her, for she could fancy nothing less hopeful than Thistlewood's wooing, and she was without a spark of mere vanity.

'I think it is because you say so much that I don't feel quite able to believe it all,' she said. 'You feel it when you talk about it, but it seems to me as if you *had* to talk before you get to feel it.'

His brows bent down over gloomy eyes again, and he folded his arms as he looked at her. Once more poor Bertha thought of the stage lover she had seen, and a long-drawn sigh escaped her.

'I can't think it's all quite real,' she said, almost desperately.

'You think I say too much?' he retorted. 'It seems to me as if I said too little. It seems to me as if there weren't any words to speak such thoughts and feelings.'

'Is that because you don't value the words?' she asked him. 'Don't you think that if you felt what the words do mean that they'd seem enough for you?'

'I know I'm a good-for-nothing beggar,' he answered, with a sudden air of weary self-loathing and disdain. 'I know. I've got a way of taking everything in deadly earnest for an hour or two. But,' with a sudden swerve into the track of self-justification, 'if that makes you think I'm fickle and weak-willed, you're all wrong, darling. There are some fellows—I know plenty—who go through life like a lot of oysters. They don't feel anything—they don't care about anything, or anybody. But, bless your heart, my dear, they never get doubted.'

Bertha took this for a satiric dig at the absent Thistlewood, and spoke up for him, needlessly, as it happened.

'Still waters run deep, Mr. Protheroe.'

'Some of 'em do,' responded Mr. Protheroe, with profoundest gloom, which lightened suddenly into a smile as bright as sunshine. 'But some of 'em don't run at all. And some of 'em are as shallow as any puddle you'll find along the road, only they're so bemuddled you can't see to the bottom of 'em. You can plumb 'em with your little finger, though, if you don't mind soiling it.'

Now this innocent generalisation seemed gratuitously offensive to the absent Thistlewood, and chilled Bertha greatly.

'That may be very true of some people,' she responded; 'but it isn't true of all the quiet people in the world.. And I don't think, Mr. Protheroe, that the people who make the greatest parade of their feelings are the people who really have the most to speak of.'

'Why, that's true, too, of some people,' returned Protheroe; 'but there are all sorts in the world, dear. Some say a lot and feel a lot Some feel a lot and say nothing. Some say nothing and feel nothing. It may be a fault with me—I don't know—but when I start to say a thing I want to say all of it. But surely a feeling isn't less real because you don't seem able to express it whatever words you choose.'

'Where the feeling's sacred the words are sacred,' Bertha objected.

'Tell me what it is you fear about me,' he besought her, leaning across the table, and searching her face with his eyes. 'You don't believe I should have a wandering mind if you said yes, and we should once be married?'

She had laid the book upon the table, and now betook herself to fingering the leaves again.

'I've no right to pick faults in you, or give you lessons, Mr. Protheroe.'

'Oh yes, you have,' he answered. 'All the right in the world. If you'll take in hand to show me my faults, I'll take in hand to cure 'em so far as a man may.'

'I don't think you're fickle,' said the girl hesitatingly; 'but I do think you're shallow, Mr. Protheroe.'

'Not a bit of it, dear,' he protested. 'I'm as deep as Gamck. As for your still waters running deep, it'd be a better proverb to my mind to say deep waters run still—at times. Niagara's deepish, folks say that have seen it. That's not to say that I even myself with Niagara, you'll understand, though 'tis in my nature to splash about a good deal. But all that apart, Bertha dear, try to make up your mind to take me as I am, and help me to make a man o' myself.'

At this point back came the farmer's wife with a clatter of pails in the back kitchen to indicate her arrival in

advance. Lane took his leave with a reluctant air, going away much more gravely than he had arrived.

'Well,' said Mrs. Fellowes, drawing her knitting from a capacious pocket and falling to work upon it at once, 'hast sent Number Two about his business?'

Bertha cast an embarrassed look at her and blushed.

'Mother,' she said, 'you seem to find out everything.'

'Can find my way to the parish church by daylight,' the elder woman answered with complacency. 'But you tek care, my wench, whilst thee beest throwin' all the straight sticks aside, as thee doesn't pick up a crooked 'un at the last. Thee hast a fancy for the lad, too, that's as plain to be seen as the Beacon.'

'Oh!' cried Bertha, reddening again. 'I hope not.'

'For me, my gell,' said her mother. 'For me. And it's outside my thinkin' why a maid shouldn't tek a fancy to him. A lad as is stiddy an' handsome, and as blithe as sunshine! He's as fond as a calf into the bargain.'

She liked to hear him praised, and, woman-like, began to depreciate him faintly.

'I don't think he's very solid, mother,' she said.

The elder woman smiled at the transparent artifice, and refused to be entrapped by it.

'No,' she answered. 'Lane's a bit of a butterfly, I will say. And Jack Thistlewood's a bulldog. Mek your ch'ice betwixt 'em while they'm there to be chose from. Which is it to be? Butterfly or bulldog?'

But Bertha answered nothing.

II

Things may have changed of late years, but in those days the parish churchyard was the great meeting-place for lovers who as yet were undeclared or unaccepted. The youth and the maid were both there for a purpose altogether removed from love-making—the meeting had the advantage of being accidental and certain. It was a tacit assignation which was almost certain to be kept, and even the shyest of sweethearts would dare to walk homewards together a little of the way even in the lightest of summer evenings.

When Sunday morning came, and the one musical bell began to tinkle, Bertha stood before her open bedroom window, tying her bonnet-ribbons at the glass, in the embarrassing certainty that both her lovers would be waiting outside the church to meet her. This certainty was the less to be endured, because Bertha had the sincerest desire to close with heavenly rather than with earthly meditations on a Sunday, but she could no more help being flustered by the thought of Lane Protheroe, and being chilled by the anticipation of Thistlewood's look of bulldog fidelity, than she could help breathing. The girl's trouble was that she could not give her heart to the man who commanded her respect, whilst it was drawn fluttering with all manner of electric palpitations towards another whom she thought infinitely less worthy.

There was nothing in the world against Lane Protheroe in any serious sense. Nobody spoke or thought ill of him, or had ground for ill speaking or thinking. But it was generally conceded that he *was* a butterfly kind of young fellow, and there was a general opinion that he wanted ballast. Rural human nature is full of candour of a sort, and Lane was accustomed to criticism. He took it with a bright carelessness, and in respect to the charge of wanting ballast was apt to answer that ballast was a necessary thing for boats that carried no cargo. Thistlewood was generally admitted to be a well-ballasted personage—a man steady, resolved, serious, entirely trustworthy.

'John Thistlewood's word is as good as his bond,' said one of his admirers one day in his presence.

'John Thistlewood's word *is* his bond,' said John Thistlewood, 'as any man's ought to be.'

People remembered the saying, and quoted it as being characteristic of the man,—a man cut roughly out of the very granite of fidelity.

Surely, thought Bertha, a girl ought to esteem herself happy in being singled out by such a man. The cold surface covered so steady, so lasting a glow. And as for Lane—well, Lane's heats seemed the merest flashes, intense enough to heat what was near them, but by no means enduring. There was danger that anything which was of a nature to keep on burning might catch fire at him, and when well lit might find that the creating heat had gone out, or had withdrawn itself. She knew herself, by instinct, faithful to the core, and if once she consented to love the man, she would have to go on doing it. That looked likely to be terrible, and she fought against herself continually. And she not only tried not to love the butterfly, but had tried her loyal hardest to love the bulldog. The last chance of success in the second enterprise went out finally when Thistlewood had once so far conquered his clumsy reticence of manner as actually to put his arm about her waist. Then every fibre of her body cried out against him, and she escaped him, shivering and thrilling with a repulsion so strong that it seemed like a crime to her. How dared she feel the touch of so estimable a man to be so hateful? But from that moment the thing was settled beyond a doubt. She could respect John Thistlewood, she could admire the solidity and faithfulness of his character—but, marry him? That was asking for more than nature could agree to.

If Lane had only resembled John a little—ah! there was a glow of certainty called up by that fancy which might have been altogether delicious had the fancy been well grounded. If John had only been a little more like Lane? She was hardly so sure. Obviously, John was not the man for this girl to warm her heart at.

The worst of it was that he would never find or look for another girl, and his long courtship, though it could never endear him, or even make him tolerable as a lover, served at least to have established a sort of claim upon her. The great faithful heart might break if she should throw herself away. The depth of his affection, as she realised it for herself, could only be understood by one capable of an equal passion. She never guessed, or came near to guessing, that her conception of him was the realisation of herself; but it is only great hearts

which truly know what great hearts can be, and her profound conception of Thistlewood's fidelity was her own best certificate to faithfulness.

The little musical bell went on tinkling as she walked across the fields. It had various rates of movement to indicate to distant worshippers the progress of the time, and she gave a careful ear to its warnings, so regulating her steps as only to enter the churchyard at the last minute.

There sure enough were both John and Lane waiting to pay their morning salutation. Happily, to her own mind, there was time for no more than a mere hand-shaking and a good-morning, and she walked into the church, beautifully tranquil to look at, though she could hardly believe that all the congregation could not guess with what a startled feeling her heart had begun to beat. By and by the influences of the place and the service began to soothe her, though she only succeeded in excluding her lovers by a conscious process of forgetfulness which was not so far removed from memory as it might have been.

The Thistlewood pew was a little to the front on her right, and the Protheroe pew a little to her front on the left, but she kept her eyes so studiously downcast that she got no glimpse of either, until a strange and altogether remarkable feeling of something missing surprised her into looking up. Her eyes went first to the Protheroe pew, and Lane was not there. Then in spite of herself she listened for Thistlewood's voice in the Responses, and not detecting it, was impelled to look for him. He also was absent, and she began to quake a little. Was it possible they had stayed outside to quarrel? This fear would have been sufficiently serious at any time, but on a Sunday, during church hours, it magnified itself, which fact is in itself enough to prove that though the idea perturbed her she foresaw no very terrible consequences. It would be hateful to be quarrelled over, but both the combatants—if combatants they were to be—would respect her too much to proceed to extremities, and thereby make the quarrel public, and her a target for all tongues.

John and Lane had met in the churchyard pretty early, and whilst there were friends to greet, and to pass the time of day with, things went smoothly enough. But as the churchgoers filed by ones and twos into the building, each began to be aware of a solitude which was peopled only by the disagreeable presence of the other. John, ostentatiously disregarding of his adversary, planted himself at the gate, so as to be before him in his greeting. Lane, rather unusually erect and martial in his walk, marched past him into the village roadway, and there loitered for the same intent. Thistlewood, recognising the meaning of this manœuvre, strolled into the roadway, and doggedly planted himself a yard or two beyond the spot where his rival had halted. Lane, with an air to the full as ostentatiously and offensively dis-regarding as the other's, marched past Thistlewood with half a dozen soldierly-looking strides, and bringing himself to an abrupt halt made a disdainful back at him. Again Thistlewood advanced, but this time he drew himself up a trifle behind his rival, and laid a finger on his shoulder.

'Well?' said Protheroe, without turning his head.

'I shall want a word with thee by and by, my lad,' Thistlewood said quietly.

'Have it now,' replied Lane, settling his shoulders jauntily.

'There's time in plenty afore us,' Thistlewood answered, regarding him with supreme disfavour.

The younger man looked straight before him with an exasperating aspect of indifference.

'When you like,' he said.

'Very well,' replied Thistlewood. 'In five minutes' time from now.'

'Church time,' said Lane smilingly, surveying the landscape.

'Beest that keen set on the sermon?' John inquired.

'Don't know that I am,' replied the enemy, rising a little on his toes, and then settling his shoulders anew.

'Five minutes' time from now.'

The jauntily airs and scornful disregard began to warm Thistlewood's blood a little.

'Canst look a man i' the face when thee talk'st to him?' he asked.

'Yes, bless your heart and soul alive!' cried Lane, swaggering round and beaming on him.

For half a minute they looked at each other, the one angry, resolute, and lowering, with head bent a little forward, his glance directed upward past his down-drawn brows, the other smiling with seeming sweetness and gaiety.

Thistlewood seemed to restrain himself with something of an effort.

'We'll talk together by and by,' he said, and turning, deliberately walked back into the churchyard.

For a few seconds Lane stood glorying, but on a sudden it occurred to him that his rival was behaving in a more dignified manner than himself, and this was a reflection not to be endured without instant action. So he marched back into the churchyard also, and left John in the foreground. When Bertha appeared her elder lover paid his respects first, and Lane came up afterwards, looking, as she remembered later on, prodigiously gloomy and resolved.

The bell had been silent for a minute, and the curate's voice had begun to drone within the building. The rivals were alone, and nobody was within sight or earshot.

'Shall we walk a pace or two, Mr. Protheroe?' asked John.

Mr. Protheroe, without speaking, sauntered out at the gate, vaulted a stile opposite, and paused in a field pathway. Thistlewood followed, throwing first one leg and then the other over the rail with a sort of laboured deliberation.

'Now,' said Lane.

'We'll walk on a little bit,' answered Thistlewood, and there was silence for a minute or two as they strode along the grass. Then when they had reached the shelter of a little copse which hid them from the whole landscape on the church side, John said, 'Now,' in turn, and the two halted. Each was paler than common by this time, and Lane's eyes sparkled, whilst the other's burned steady with resentment.

'Twixt man and man as is willing to come to understand one another, Mr. Protheroe,' said Thistlewood, 'a very few words suffices. I'll have thee nor no man else poaching on my manor.'

'Well,' Lane answered, 'if ever I should arrive at owning a manor, I'd say the same. But I'd be sure of my title-deeds afore I took to warning other men off the ground.'

'Let's talk plain English,' said John, apparently quite untouched by this rejoinder.

'With all my heart,' said his rival, 'the plainer the better.'

'I find you very much i' my way,' Thistlewood began ponderously.

'I don't find you a little bit in mine,' Lane answered.

'You talk to sting,' said Thistlewood, with dull dignity. 'I want to talk so as to be understood. I find you very much i' my way, as I was saying, and I won't have you theer.'

'No?'

'No!'

'And how do you mean to set about getting rid of me?'

'I've set about harder jobs than that i' *my* time, lad.'

'Like enough. But how do you mean to set about this one?'

'All in good time,' said Thistlewood. 'Sha'st find out speedily.'

'Show me now,' said Lane.

A breach of the peace seemed imminent, but, 'Afore thee and me comes to that,' the elder answered, 'I want thee to have fair warnin'. It's unbecomin' in a man to brawl over the maid he wants to marry— I'm a man as never changed nor halted nor turned aside from anything he set his mind upon. I've been courtin' Miss Fellowes now this three year. It stands to reason as a frivolous young chap like you can mek no count of how a man feels, or of what a man 'ud do in a like case.'

'That stands to reason, does it?' 'It stands to reason,' answered Thistlewood. 'I suppose it stands to reason likewise that I am to stand to one side, and leave the road clear after this?'

'It'd be the wisest thing you ever did.' 'Well, now, Thistlewood, you'll please understand that, for all so frivolous as I may be, I'm hardly that easy to be swayed. As for who has a right on the ground, it's a mere piece of impudence to talk about it. That's neither for me nor you to choose. If ever I get straight "No" I'll go, but I'll have it before I go, for that's a man's bounden duty to himself.'

'Understand thyself as bein' warned away,' said Thistlewood.

'Understand thy warning as being laughed at,' answered Lane. 'You talk plain English? So will I. You've got the wrong pig by the ear. You're no better than a dog in the manger. You've always been spoken of up till now as a man to play fair, but now it strikes me you play very far from fair, and cut a poor figure. As for threats—a man who won't take a hiding when it's offered to him—what's *he* good for, I should like to know?'

Here, as elsewhere, Mr. Protheroe was true to nature, and spoke with striking emphasis. He was quite red-hot with scorn at the imaginary fellow who would not take the proffered hiding, though a minute earlier, when he had told Thistlewood that he had the wrong pig by the ear, his manner had been marked by a cold and lofty superiority.

'Beest warned! 'said Thistlewood, 'that's enough.'

'Not half enough, nor yet a quarter,' cried Lane, with a bellicose air, not unmixed with swagger. 'I've taught my hands to take care of my head, sir, and they'll be ready to do it whenever the time occurs. But it always seemed a bit ridiculous to me to talk about fighting beforehand. When the fight's over there *is* something to talk about.'

'You seem to be in a hurry for that there hiding,' said Thistlewood.

'Hurry's no word for it,' the younger man responded, with cheerful alacrity.

'Very well,' said the elder, taking off his hat and bestowing it carefully upon the grass, 'sha'st have it.'

Lane, for his part, threw down his hat, flourished his coat off, dropped it behind him, rolled up his sleeves, and waited whilst Thistlewood made his preparations more slowly. Protheroe set that mellow whistle of his to work on 'The British Grenadiers,' and his enemy smiled grimly to think how soon he would silence the music.

Half a minute later they were standing foot to foot and eye to eye, the music already silenced. It would have been difficult from the mere aspect of the men to say on which side the advantage lay. In height and reach they were nearly equal, and, if Thistlewood's weight and muscle were in his favour, Protheroe was as active as a cat.

And here might have been recorded a bit of history to warm the blood of such as love and remember the old-fashioned manhood of England. We are grown too refined and civilised nowadays for the old rude arbitrament, and so fair play has ceased to be the Englishman's motto in fighting, and the English rustic shoots and stabs like the rustic of other lands. All fighting is foolish, more or less, but we had the manliest, friendliest, most honourable, and least harmful way of doing it amongst all the sons of men, and so our Legislature killed out the 'noble art' from amongst us, and brought us to the general ugly level.

It was in the reign of the Tipton Slasher—which, as people learned in the history of manners will remember, was a longish time ago—when these two Britons stood up to arrange their differences after the fashion then in vogue. There was nobody to see fair play, and so they saw it for themselves, as all fighting Englishmen did when there was a code of honour to go by. It was not a mere affair of hammer and tongs, but very fair scientific fighting, the science vivified by enjoyment, and full of energy, but never forgotten for a second. The pleasure was keen on both sides, for from the beginning of their knowledge of each other these two had been in antagonism, and at the last it was a real treat to let all go and have at it.

'I was always a bit frivolous, as you said just now, Mr. Thistlewood,' Lane remarked in the first enforced pause of the combat, 'but I'd like you to bear me witness that I stick to what I'm at while I'm at it.'

This address was delivered pantingly, whilst the speaker lay flat upon his back on the grass, with his arms thrown out crosswise. Thistlewood disdained response, and sat with one great shoulder propped against a dwarf oak, breathing fast and hard. When this sign of distress had a little abated, he arose, and said 'Time' as

if he had been a mere cornerman in the affair, and rather bored by it than otherwise. Lane rolled over on to his face, rose to his hands and knees, smiled at his adversary for a little while, as if to give him an appetite for the business in hand, and then got to his feet and made ready.

Now for a man to hold his own at this particular form of fighting against an equal adversary for a bare five minutes argues five grand things for him, and these are chastity, temperance, hardihood, strength, and courage. It speaks well for these admirable qualities in both of them that Messrs. Thistlewood and Protheroe made a good hour of it. The advantages and disadvantages had been so equally distributed that by this time they were pretty nearly harmless to each other, but each was sustained by the hope of victory, and each would have died, and, for the matter of that, would have gone on dying, rather than yield the precious palm to the other.

Now the clergyman who ministered to the spiritual wants of Beacon Hargate was never disposed to gorge his flock with too much doctrine at a time, and on this Sabbath had an invitation to luncheon at a great house some four or five miles away, and so treated his parishioners—to the scandal of some and the joy of others—to the shortest discourse they had ever heard from the pulpit. By this mischance it happened that the combatants were discovered by a silent male advance-guard of the home-returning congregation, who ran back—his footsteps soundless on the grass—to spread the splendid news. Sunday or week-day there was no more welcome break in the monotony of life in Beacon Hargate than that afforded by a fight. The time being church-time, and the combatants men of respectable position, lent piquancy to the event, of course, as who shall say me nay? The churchgoers, two or three farmers, Mr. Drake, the manager of Lord Barfield's estates at Heydon Hey, and a handful of labourers came up, at first stealthily, and then more boldly, and looked on at the finish.

It was plain that the fight had been severe, but it was equally plain that the best of it was over; and when Farmer Fellowes interposed as *amicus curio*, nobody but the two most concerned had any especial resentment against him.

Even for them Farmer Fellowes had a crumb of comfort.

'Finish it another time, lads,' he said. 'Where's the good o' goin' on wi' it i' this manner? Why a child might homber the pair on you. Get fresh an' have another turn to-morrow, if the 'casion's worth it.'

So the fight was left undecided after all, and the adversaries were led off to the neighbouring brook, where they made themselves as respectable to look at as they could before they took their several ways. They were unsightly for a week or two, and were close watched by their women folk lest they should renew the strife.

Beacon Hargate knew perfectly well the reason of the battle, and Bertha was mightily disdainful and indignant over both her lovers, who, to her fancy, had disgraced themselves and her. Six days after the fight John Thistlewood's business for once in a way, as well as his inclination, took him to Fellowes's farm, and there Bertha (who for very shame had not quitted the house since Sunday) first saw the result of the fray. The stalwart farmer's face was discoloured, and, in places, still swollen. She saw the wicked handiwork of Lane Protheroe, and vowed within herself that she would see that dreadful young man no more. She could have cried for pity of poor Mr. Thistlewood, who had been thus shamefully treated for the crime of being faithful in love.

If John had known it, he had at this instant the best chance of being taken as Bertha's husband he had ever had, or was like to find. But he was shamefaced about the matter, as heroes not uncommonly are with regard to their achievements, and was disposed to think himself at an even unusual disadvantage.

Bertha stifled in her heart whatever tender sentiments Protheroe had inspired, and was prepared to pass him whenever she might meet him with such a manner as should indicate her new opinion of him beyond chance of mistake. Thistlewood had appeared on the Saturday, and on the Monday the fates threw her younger lover in her way. She discerned him from a distance, herself unseen. His figure dipped down into the hollow, and she could not see him again until they met at some turning or other of the tortuous lane. If pride had not forbidden it she could have turned to fly homewards, but she hardened her heart and went on until his footsteps sounded clearly on the stony road.

Then he turned the corner, and she lifted one glance of superb disdain which melted suddenly under a terror-stricken pity. For this hero was worse battered than Number One had been, and one of those eyes, which had used to be so expressive and eloquent, was decorated by a shade.

'Oh, Lane!' cried the girl, clasping her hands, and turning white with pity.

'Did I frighten you, my dear?' said Lane. 'It's nothing. It'll all be right in a day or two.'

'I hope so,' she answered, recovering herself, and seizing on principle before it made away for ever. 'I wish you to know that I think you have behaved very disgracefully, and I hope you will never speak to me again.'

'Why,' said Lane, 'that's hard measure, Bertha; and as for behaving disgracefully—if a man threatens to punch your head you must give him the chance to punch it. That's man's law, anyhow, whether it's woman's or not.'

'I am sure Mr. Thistlewood is no quarreller,' said Bertha, with great dignity and severity of demeanour. 'It takes no great penetration to guess who began it.'

'There's one thing I will say for him,' returned Lane; 'he's a truth-telling fellow, to the best of my belief. Ask him who began it. He'll tell you. Not that I should take any particular blame or shame for having begun it myself, but since that's how you look at it, dear—why, I should like you to be satisfied.'

'Do you think, Mr. Protheroe,' demanded Bertha, 'that it's the way to win a girl's esteem to brawl about her in public on a Sunday?'

'That's what Thistlewood said,' Lane answered, with cunning simplicity. "'It's unbecoming,'" said he, "in a man to brawl over the maid he wants to marry."

'I was certain he would say so, and think so,' returned Bertha, with a sinking of the heart. She wanted grounds for pardoning Lane.

'Well,' said Lane, with a retrospective air, 'we talked for a while, and he was good enough to promise me a

hiding if I didn't keep out of his way—meaning, of course, at your father's house. I didn't seem to take it quite so meekly as he thought I ought to, and by and by says he, "You seem to be in a hurry for that hiding." So I just made answer that hurry was no word for it, and then, the pair of us being keen set, we got to it. The day was an accident, and I daresay a piece of forgetfulness on both our sides. But you see, my dear, a man's just as bound to guard his self-respect on a Sunday as on a week-day.'

'I have been very deeply wounded,' said Bertha. 'I wished to respect you both, and now I can respect neither of you. Good-morning, Mr. Protheroe.'

Mr. Protheroe stood discomfited, and looked mournfully after her as she walked away. When she had disappeared round the bend of the road he sat down upon the bank and plucked grasses with mechanical fingers, turning the thing up and down in his mind for an hour or thereabouts. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and resumed his walk, smiling with head erect, and that mellow whistle of his rose on the air with jollity in every note of it, for it had broken upon his mind like sunshine to remember her first exclamation on seeing him. He was a young man who was in the habit of making sure of things, and he had never in his life been surer of anything than he felt about this. The name, the tone, the look, meant more than a common interest in him. She had called him 'Lane' for the first time in his life. She had clasped her hands, and turned pale at the sight of him. All this meant victory for his dearest hopes, and so he leapt to his feet, and marched off whistling like the thristle.

III

Bertha pursued her way along the tortuous bridlepath with thoughts which resembled the way she travelled. Like the road, her fancy seemed to turn back upon itself pretty often and yet in the main it held in the same direction. Of course, fighting was a brutal business to a girl's way of thinking, but then, when she came really to think of it; men were strange creatures altogether, half terribly glorious and half contemptible. Lane had endured all these injuries simply and merely because he loved her! She could have no conception of the possibilities of masculine joy in a fight for its own sake, or of the masculine sense of honour which compelled the meeting of a challenge half-way. Of course it was mightily unpleasant to be talked about, as the heroine of such a business. The village tongues had been busy, and would never altogether stop wagging for the remainder of her lifetime.

The influence of long years of respect for Thistle-wood seemed to turn her mental steps backward now and then. That so quiet and retired a man, and so little given to proclaiming himself should have made the most sacred wishes of his heart a matter of common gossip was understandable only on one hypothesis. His love and his despair carried him out of himself. That, of course, was a daring thing for any girl to think, but then Bertha was bound to find reasons.

Mainly, her mind was occupied in the reconstruction of her previous belief about Lane Protheroe. He also, it would seem, had manly qualities in him—could stand up to be beaten in the cause of the woman he loved. The blows hurt her so, in the mere fancy of them, that she more than once put up her hands to her face to guard it. By the time she had accomplished her errand, and was on the way back to her father's farmhouse, she was all tenderness and forgiveness and admiration for the newly-revealed Lane, but then, as the fates would have it, just as she began to think of her cruelty to him, and of the terribly low spirits into which she must have thrown him, the familiar jocund whistle broke upon her ears, and when she stood still in a dreary amaze at this, she could hear the steps of the lover, who ought to have been altogether love-lorn, marching along in something very like a dance in time to his own music. What was one to think of such a man? She was back in a moment to her old opinion of him. No rooted feeling in him—no solidity—nothing to be sure of!

She made haste home, and there shut herself in her own room and cried. Her mother walked upstairs, and finding the girl thus mournfully engaged, sat down tranquilly beside her and produced her knitting. The click of the needles had an effect of commonplace which helped to restore Bertha to her self-possession, and in a little time her tears ceased, and moving to the window she stood there looking out upon the landscape. The monotonous click of the needles ceased, and she knew that her mother had laid down her work in her lap and was regarding her. She turned, with a ghost of a smile.

'You're thinkin', no doubt, as you're full o' trouble, my wench,' began the mother, 'and it's no manner o' use in talkin' to young folks to try an' mek out as a thing as pains don't hurt. But if you can only bring 'em t' understand as it won't hurt much by and by, you've done summat for 'em, may be. What's the trouble, wench? Come an' tell thy mother.'

'It's all over now, mother,' said Bertha

'Not it,' returned Mrs. Fellowes, 'nor won't be yet a while. Beesn't one as cries for nothing, like most gells. I was niver o' that kind myself.'

Bertha would not, perhaps could not, make a confidante even of her mother in this matter, but Mrs. Fellowes had a remarkable faculty for striking human averages, and she got near the truth in her guesses.

'There's one thing fixed and sure, my dear,' she said, 'and that is as follows: ayther you must find a mind to wed one of 'em, or you must pluck up a spirit and tell 'em you'll wed nayther.'

'I have told Mr. Thistlewood that I can never marry him,' said Bertha.

'And what about Lane?' her mother asked her.

'I can never marry him either,' the girl answered steadily. She had her voice under perfect control, but her averted face and the very lines of her figure enlightened the shrewd old mother.

'Hast told him so?' she asked.

'I have told him,' Bertha answered, 'never to speak to me again.'

'Hoity, toity, deary me!' cried the old woman. 'And what says he to that?'

'He didn't greatly seem to care,' said Bertha, with a beautifully assumed air of indifference.

'Maybe he didn't set such store by what you told him as to tek it in earnest?'

'Oh,' said the girl, languidly and indifferently, 'he knew I meant it.'

'And didn't seem to care? My dear, you're talkin' of Lane Protheroe!'

'He cared for a minute, perhaps,' Bertha said, her assumed indifference and languor tinged with bitterness by this time. 'He cared for a minute, perhaps; just as he does about everything. I heard him whistling an hour afterwards.'

The disguise was excellent, and might have deceived a woman who had known her less intimately and watched her less closely, but it was transparent to the mother.

'That's the trouble, is it?' said Mrs. Fellowes, gravely betaking herself once more to her knitting. Bertha had been crying already, and had hard work to restrain herself. 'Look here, my darlin',' the mother said, with unwonted tenderness of tone and manner, 'if you can't read your own mind, you must let a old experienced woman read it for you. The lad's as the Lord made him. What we see in any o' the men to mek a fuss about, the Lord in His mercy only knows; but, to my mind, Lane's 'the pick o' ten thousand. He's alive, and that's more than *can* be said of many on 'em. He's a clever lad, he's well to look at, and he's well-to-do.'

'Mother,' cried the girl, almost passionately, her own pain wrung her so, 'he has no heart. He cares for a thing one minute, and doesn't care for it the next. He pretends—no, he doesn't pretend—but he thinks he cares, and while he thinks it I suppose he does care. But out of sight is out of mind with him.'

'Makeest most o' thine own troubles, like the rest on us,' said Mrs. Fellowes philosophically. But, in a moment, philosophy made way for motherly kindness, and, rising from her seat, she bestowed her knitting in a roomy pocket and put her arms about her daughter's waist. 'Art fond of the lad all the same,' she said. 'Ah, my dear, there's nothin' likely to be sorer than the natur as picks flies in the things it's fond on. There's a deal o' laughin' at them as thinks all their geese is swans, but they're better off in the long run than them as teks all their swans to be geese.'

Bertha said nothing, but she trembled a little under the caress, and her mother, observing this, released her, went back to her chair, and once more drew forth her knitting.

'I reckon,' she said, after a pause, 'as John Thistlewood's had the spoiling of thee. Thee'st got to think so much o' them bulldog ways of his'n, that nothin' less 'll be of use to any man as comes a-courtin'.'

'Don't talk about it any more, mother,' said Bertha, with an air of weary want of interest. 'I have said good-bye to both of them.'

And there the interview ended.

IV

It became evident that Bertha was likely to have a troublesome time before her. First of all came John Thistlewood, dogged and resolute as ever, propping himself against the chimney-piece, flogging his gaitered legs with the switch he carried, and demanding Ay or No before his time. Bertha determined to treat him with some spirit.

'You don't need me to tell you that I respect you very highly, Mr. Thistlewood. But you oughtn't to need me to answer your question any more. I shall be obliged if you will be so good as not to ask it again.'

'I shall ask it,' said the dogged John, 'till it comes to be answered one way or another.'

'It has been answered almost often enough to my way of thinking,' said Bertha.

She had never been tart with Thistlewood until that moment, but he manifested no surprise or emotion of any kind.

'It never has been answered, an' never will be till I see thee married, whether to me or another. When that day come to pass you've heard the last of my question.'

Thus the dogged John; and he being disposed of for a while, came Lane. To him the persecuted maid was a little less severe than she had been, but she was inexorable.

'If you like to come here as a friend, Mr. Protheroe, in a few months' time, I daresay we shall all be very glad to see you.'

'Well,' said Lane, with fine irrelevance, 'as an enemy this is a house I shall never make a call at. But look at the matter for a minute, my darling—'

'You must not talk to me like that, Mr. Protheroe,' Bertha said, with great coldness.

'Like what, my dear?' asked the ingenious Lane.

'Like that, Mr. Protheroe,' replied Bertha.

'I think it so often, that I'm afraid I'm bound to say it sometimes; but, if it offends, I hope you'll forgive me. You know you *are* my darling, don't you? You know there isn't a queen in the world I'd even with you if every hair of her head was hung with Koh-i-noors. "Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh," the Wise Man says. So, if I do let slip "my dear" or "my darling" now and then, you'll know it's accident, and you won't take offence at it—will you?'

This was agile but unsatisfactory.

'Please understand me, Mr. Protheroe,' said Bertha, with rural dignity; 'you must not come here again until you can come merely as a friend.'

'Bertha! You can't mean it! What have I done? What has changed you?'

'Mr Protheroe!'—the rural dignity made an insulted goddess of her to Lane's fancy—'what right have you to say that I have changed?'

'Why, Bertha,' he said, meekly and strickenly, 'wasn't I to come in six months' time and get an answer?'

'Will you oblige me by coming for your answer in six months' time,' answered Bertha. 'Good-afternoon, Mr. Protheroe.'

Bertha thought herself more cruel to herself than to him. She knew how infinitely more cruel she was to Thistlewood, but that was not a thing to be avoided. She and he alike must suffer—she in giving pain and he in bearing it. Bertha's heart ached over Lane, and the bitterness of it was to know that in a week or two the butterfly nature would have ceased to care. He was hotly in love to-day, no doubt, but he would be out of love to-morrow, may be, and in a month or two hotly in love again elsewhere.

On the Sunday following these interviews dogged John was at church, and the butterfly Protheroe also. Thistlewood looked as he always looked, rudely healthy, and a masterpiece of masterfulness and sullen perseverance and resolve. Lane was pallid and miserable, and Bertha remarking him was compelled to fall back on the bitter consolation of her former thoughts. He would take it heavily for a day or two, and would then forget all about it. He cast a glance or two in Bertha's direction, and his eyes were full of melancholy appeal. But for her certainty he would have moved her, for she was predisposed to be moved, and she had hardly expected to have had so much effect upon him. He walked dejectedly out of church at the close of the service, and Thistlewood half by accident shouldered him. He took it meekly, and made no sign.

Two or three days later came a piece of news of the sort Bertha had expected. Mr. Protheroe was heard of as having made one of a picnic party in the neighbourhood of Heydon Hey, and of this party he was said to have been the life and soul. He was reported to have paid marked attentions to Miss Badger, daughter of a wealthy cheesemonger in Castle Barfield High Street. The young lady was rumoured to be possessed of great personal attractions, and a pretty penny, present and prospective.

Foreseen as it was, the news stung a little when it came. Even the most butterfly-like of lovers might have waited a little longer!

And yet next Sunday, when Bertha went to church, quite resolved not to waste so much as a glance upon him, he looked paler and more dejected than he had done a week ago. She looked in spite of herself—she must needs look at him,—and it was evident that as yet the cheesemonger's daughter had found no way to cheer him. Thistlewood never altered. Those strong self-contained natures have a power upon themselves as they have on other people. He could last for years in solid and complete devotion—he could apparently wait for ever—and could yet hide from the eyes of the outer world the steady fires which burned within him. That butterfly nature of poor Lane's forced Thistlewood's virtues into prominence by contrast, and the girl had them almost constantly in her thoughts. There was nothing—she told herself remorsefully—that this typical piece of solidity and devotion would not do for her. Her faith in his attachment transcended bounds, and she felt it to be a thousand pities that she could not love him.

It does not happen in every life-history that this sort of profound feeling finds an opportunity of proof, but in the story of the lives of John Thistlewood and Lane Protheroe this thing came to pass in such wise that he who ran might read the natures of the men, and know them once for all.

Bulldog John had gone on doggedly courting, and butterfly Lane had taken to seeing too much convivial company in Heydon Hey and Castle Barfield, and there was a fear in Bertha's mind that if her influence had not been permanent, it had at least started the young man on a track likely to prove disastrous. These emotional people, quick to feel and quick to forget, are hardly to be dealt with without danger.

Lane's dissipations must have been graver than even rumour gave them discredit for being. His midnight junketings had made a ghost of him, and to see him at any moment when he thought himself unobserved was to wonder how long such a mournful and broken young gentleman could possibly rouse himself to fill the part of King even in a rustic Bohemia.

Autumn was on the land. The corn-shocks were standing in the stubbled fields, and the night air was full of gossamer, which twined itself about the faces of all wayfarers. Rural work had gone on merrily all day, and when the sun set silence fell, and darkness like a warm shroud. Lights flickered a while in the village and the farmhouse, and then went out one by one. The moon stole over the Beacon Hill, and looked mildly across the valley.

There was not a breath of air stirring, and not a sound upon the night except for the placid and continual gurgle of the stream which had no voice at all by day. Yes. One other sound there was, a sound as of some one moving uneasily in a creaking chair. Creak, creak, creak It grew momentarily. Crackle, crackle, crackle. Still it grew. A tongue like the tongue of a snake—so light and fine and swift was it—flashed out of a crevice, and flew back again, flashed out again, and again withdrew. Then the snake's body flashed out after it, and melted on the moonlit air. Another, and another, and another. Then a low roaring noise, and all the windows of the basement shone out ruby-coloured, and the moon looked bleared by contrast.

A distant voice from the village called out 'Fire!' There was a crash of opening windows, a tumult of clapping doors, a storm of barking dogs, excited voices, hurrying feet.

Old and young, male and female, robed anyhow, ran hard towards the farmhouse, and poured in a thunderous stream across the echoing wooden bridge which spanned the river. The farmhouse was a tower of flame, fantastic turrets springing here and there. The dry timbers, centuries old, made the best of food for fire, and the place flamed like a tar-barrel. The screams of doomed horses came with hideous uproar from the stables in the rear.

The farmer and his wife, the men servants and the maid servants, were in the garden, all pale with fear and helpless; but the mother tore the night with calling on her daughter's name.

Bulldog John and his rival came last of all, though they ran like hounds, and they crossed the bridge and dashed through the crowd together.

'Oh, John,' cried the agonised mother, clutching at him as though he were an ark of safety. 'You'll save her

—won't you? God help her! You'll save her—won't you, John?'

One figure, black as night against the fierce glow of the flame, dashed across the space between the crowd and the farmhouse. It was hardly seen, and scarce believed in by those who thought they saw.

'John,' cried the wretched mother, 'you'll save her! You as loved her so! You'll save her!'

There is no manhood in the world that needs to be ashamed to hang back from an enterprise so hopeless and so terrible. The woman shrieked and prayed—the man stood motionless with white face and staring eyes.

Then came one wild cry from half a dozen throats at once, and next upleapt a roar that struck the noise of the fire out of being for an instant. For the figure, black against the fiery glow, was back again, by some such stupendous chance, or heaven-wrought miracle, as only desperate valour ever wins. A figure huddled in a blanket lay in his arms, and as he came racing towards the crowd they fell together. They were lifted and borne out of the circle of fierce heat and flying sparks.

The house was left to burn, and every thought was centred on the rescuer and the rescued. The fresh air roused Bertha from her swoon, and at the first opening of her eyes and the first words she spoke the mother went as mad with joy as she had been with terror.

'Alive!—alive! Safe!—safe! And oh, my God! my Christian friends, it was the Butterfly as did it!'

But it was a full month later when Lane Protheroe asked his first question,

'Where's Bertha?'

'Hush! my dear, dear darlin',' said Mrs. Fellowes, her eyes brimful of tears. 'Lie quiet, there's a dear.'

'Where's Bertha?'

'Safe and well, love; safe and well.'

'I'm thirsty,' said the Butterfly.

He was supplied with a cooling drink, and fell to sleep smiling, with unchanged posture. In half a dozen hours he woke again.

'Where's Bertha?'

'Here, dearest.'

And we leave them hand in hand, yearning on each other through their blissful tears.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BULLDOG AND BUTTERFLY ***

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