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BARFIELD ***

JULIA AND HER ROMEO: A CHRONICLE OF CASTLE BARFIELD

By David Christie Murray

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

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I

In the year eighteen hundred and twenty, and for many years before and after, Abel Reddy farmed his own land at Perry Hall End, on the western boundaries of Castle Barfield. He lived at Perry Hall, a ripe-coloured old tenement of Elizabethan design, which crowned a gentle eminence and looked out picturesquely on all sides from amongst its neighbouring trees. It had a sturdier aspect in its age than it could have worn when younger, for its strength had the sign-manual of time upon it, and even its hoary lichens looked as much like a prophecy as a record.

A mile away, but also within the boundaries of Castle Barfield parish, there stood another house upon

another eminence: a house of older date than Perry Hall, though of less pleasing and picturesque an air. The long low building was of a darkish stone, and had been altered and added to so often that it had at last arrived at a complex ugliness which was not altogether displeasing. The materials for its structure had all been drawn at different periods from the same stone quarry, and the chequered look of new bits and old bits had a hint of the chess-board. Here Samson Mountain dwelt on his own land in the midst of his own people.

The Mountain Farm, as it was called, and had been called time out of mind, was separated from the Perry Hall Farm by a very shallow and narrow brook. The two houses were built as far apart from each other as they could be, whilst remaining in their own boundaries, as if the builder of the later one had determined to set as great a distance as he could between his neighbour and himself. And as a matter of fact the Reddys and the Mountains were a sort of Capulets and Montagues, and had hated each other for generations. Samson and Abel kept up the ancient grudge in all its ancient force. They were of the same age within a week or two, had studied at the same school, and had fought there; had at one time courted the same girl, had sat within sight of each other Sunday after Sunday and year after year in the parish church, had each buried father and mother in the parish churchyard, and in the mind of each the thought of the other rankled like a sore.

The manner of their surrendering their common courtship was characteristic of their common hatred. Somewhere about the beginning of this century a certain Miss Jenny Rusker, of Castle Barfield, was surrounded by quite a swarm of lovers. She was pretty, she was well-to-do, for her time and station, she was accomplished—playing the harp (execrably), working samplers in silk and wool with great diligence and exactitude, and having read a prodigious number of plays, poems, and romances. What this lady's heart forged that her mouth did vent, but no pretty young woman ever looked or sounded foolish to the eyes or ears of her lovers. Mountain and Eddy were among her solicitors. She liked them both, and had not quite made up her mind as to which, if either of them, she would choose, when suddenly the knowledge of the other's occasional presence in her sitting-room made the house odious to each, and they surrendered the chase almost at the same hour. Miss Jenny satisfied herself with a cousin of her own, married without changing her name, had children, was passably happy, as the world goes, and lived to be a profoundly sentimental but inveterate widow. Mountain and Eddy married girls they would not otherwise have chosen, and were passably happy also, except when the sore of ancient hatred was inflamed by a chance meeting on the corn exchange or an accidental passage of the eyes at church. They had no better authority for hating each other than that their fathers had hated each other before them. The fathers had the authority of the grandfathers, and they, that of the greatgrandfathers.

It was Saturday afternoon. There was a bleak frost abroad, and even the waters of the brook which divided the two farms were hard frozen. The sun hung low in the western sky, lustreless as a wafer, but ruddy. The fields were powdered with thin snow, and the earth was black by contrast with it. Now and then a shot sounded far away, but clear and sharp, from where the guests of my lord of Barfield were killing time in the warren.

A labouring man, smock-frocked, billy-cocked, gaitered, and hob-nailed, was clamping down the frozen lane, the earth ringing like iron under iron as he walked. By his side was a fair-haired lad of nine or ten years of age, a boy of frank and engaging countenance, carefully and even daintily dressed, and holding up his head as if he were a lord of the soil and knew it. The boy and the labourer were talking, and on the frosty silence of the fields the clear treble of the boy's speech rang out clearly and carried far. A burly man, with a surly red face, who had stooped to button a gaiter, in a meadow just beyond the brook, and had laid down his gun beside him the while, heard both voice and words whilst the speaker was a hundred yards away.

'But don't you think it's very wicked, Ichabod?'

The labourer's voice only reached the listener in the meadow. He spoke with the Barfield drawl, and his features, which were stiffened by the frozen wind, were twisted into a look of habitual waggery.

'Well,' said he, in answer to his young companion, 'maybe, Master Richard, it might be wicked, but it's main like natur.'

'I shan't hate Joe Mountain when I'm a man,' said the boy.

The surly man in the field, hearing these words, looked on a sudden surlier still, and throwing up his head with a listening air, and holding his ankle with both hands, crouched and craned his neck to listen.

'May'st have to change thy mind, Master Richard,' said the labourer.

'Why should I change my mind, Ichabod?' asked the boy, looking up at him.

'Why?' answered Ichabod, 'thee'lt niver have it said as thee wast afraid of any o' the Mountain lot.'

'I'm not afraid of him,' piped the engaging young cockerel 'We had a fight in the coppice last holidays, and I beat him. The squire caught us, and we were going to stop, but he made us go on, and he saw fair. Then he made us shake hands after. Joe Mountain wouldn't say he'd had enough, but the squire threw up the sponge for him. And he gave us two half-crowns apiece, and said we were both good plucked uns.'

'Ah! 'said Ichabod, with warmth, 'he's the right sort is the squire. And there's no sort or kind o' sport as comes amiss to him. A gentleman after my own heart.'

'He made us shake hands and promise we'd be friends,' said Master Richard, 'and we're going to be.'

'Make him turn the brook back first, Master Richard,' said Ichabod. The two were almost at the bridge by this time, and the listener could hear distinctly.

'Turn the brook back?' the boy asked. 'What do you mean, Ichabod?'

'Ax thy feyther, when thee gettest home,' answered Ichabod. 'He'll tell thee all the rights on it. So fur as I can make out—and it was the talk o' the country i' my grandfeyther's daysen—it amounts to this. Look here! 'He and the boy arrested their steps on the bridge, and Ichabod pointed along the frozen track of the brook. 'Seest that hollow ten rods off? It was in the time o' Cromwell Hast heard tell o' Cromwell, I mek no doubt?'

'Oliver Cromwell,' said Master Richard. 'He was Lord Protector of England. He fought King Charles.'

'Like enough,' said Ichabod. 'In his daysen, many 'ears ago, there was the Reddys here and the Mountains

there'—indicating either house in turn by pointing with his thumb—'just as they be now. The Reddy o' that day—he was thy grandfeyther's grand-feyther as like as not—maybe he was *his* grandfeyther for aught as I can tell, for it's a deadly-dreadful heap o' time long past—the Reddy o' that day went to the wars, and fowt for Cromwell. The Mountain o' that time stopped at hum. Up to then they'd niver been misfriended as fur as I know. That's how it's put about, anyway. But whilst the Reddy was away what's the Mountain do?'

The boy was looking at Ichabod, and Ichabod, stooping a little to be the more impressive, was looking at him. The surly-faced man with the gun had hitherto been concealed by the hedge beside which he had knelt to fasten his gaiter, and neither of the two had suspected his presence. It was natural, therefore, that both of them should start a little when his voice reached them.

'Well?' The voice was sour and surly, like the face, and the word was rapped out sharp and clear. Master Richard and Ichabod turned with one accord. 'Well?' says the surly man, 'what does the Mountain do?'

Ichabod, less discomfited by the suddenness of the interruption than might have been expected of him, rubbed the frozen base of his nose with a cold forefinger and grinned. Master Richard looked from one to the other with a frank and fearless interest and inquiry which became him very prettily. The surly man bestowed a passing scowl upon him, and turned his angry regard again upon Ichabod.

'Come, now,' he said, 'you backbiting, scandal-mongering old liar! What does the Mountain do? Out with it!'

'Why, nayther thee nor me was there at the time, gaffer,' responded Ichabod, his frosty features still creased with a grin. 'So nayther thee nor me can talk for certain. Can us?'

'I suppose,' said the surly, burly man, 'you're going to stuff that young monkey with the old lie about the stream being turned?'

Ichabod made no verbal response, but continued to rub his nose with his forefinger, and to grin with an aspect of uncertain humour. The surly man stooped for his gun, threw it over his arm, and stared at Ichabod and his young companion with eyes of hatred and disdain. Then, having somewhat relieved his feelings by a curse or two, he turned his back and went off with a long, heavy, dogged-looking stride, his feet crunching noisily through the frosty grasses.

'It eat for me to talk about my betters, and them as the Lord has put in authority over us,' said Ichabod, with an expression which belied these words of humility; 'but I put it to thee, Master Richard. Dost think that old Mountain ther looks like a likeable un? No, no. Might as well expect cat an' dog t' agree as Reddy and Mountain.'

This speech was made in a carefully modulated tone, when he and the boy were at some distance from the surly man, who was still visible, three or four fields away.

'What was it about the brook, Ichabod?' asked Master Richard.

'Why,' said Ichabod, 'when that old longaway grandfeyther o' thine was away a-fighting for Cromwell, 'tis said his neighbour turned the brook so as to bring in four-score acres o' land as ud niver have been his by right. The Reddy o' that day died in the wars, and his widder could mek no head again the Mountain lot; but her taught her son to hate 'em and look down upon 'em, and hated an' looked down upon is the name on 'em from that day to this.'

'But Joe Mountain didn't do it,' said Master Richard.

'No, no,' assented Ichabod. 'But it's i' this way. It's i' the blood. What's bred i' the bone will come out i' the flesh. Afore thee makest friends with young Joe Mountain, Master Richard, thee ax thy feyther.'

Master Richard, lapsing into silence, thought things over.

'Ichabod,' he said at last, 'is a boy *bound* to be bad if he has a bad grandfather?'

'Sure!' said Ichabod, who was not going to be worsted in argument for want of corroborative fact if he could help it.

Master Richard thought things over a little while longer, and returned to the charge.

'Suppose the boy with the bad grandfather had a good grandmother, Ichabod?'

'None of the Mountain lot ever had,' Ichabod replied. There was no item in Ichabod's creed more fixed than this—the Mountains of Mountain Farm were hateful and contemptible. He had imbibed the belief with his mother's milk and his father's counsel. His grandfather had known it for the one cardinal certainty of nature.

Just as the serving-men of Capulet hated the serving-men of Montague, so the oldest servants of the Mountains hated the older servants of the Reddys. The men made the masters' quarrel their own. There was a feudal spirit in the matter, and half the fights of this outlying district of the parish were provoked by that ancient history of the brook. At this time of day it mattered very little indeed if the history was true or false, for neither proof nor disproof was possible, and the real mischief was done past remedy in any case.

'Are you sure our side fought for Cromwell, Ichabod?' Master Richard. asked, after another long and thoughtful silence.

'To be sure,' said Ichabod.

'I don't think it can be true, then, about the brook,' said the boy, 'because Cromwell won, and everybody who was on his side had their own way. Mr. Greenfell teaches history at school, and he says so.'

This was nothing to Ichabod, whose intellect was not constructed for the reception of historical evidences.

'Then ax thy feyther, Master Richard,' he answered; 'he'll tell thee the rights on it.'

The boy walked on pondering, as children of his age will do. The seniors would be surprised pretty often if they could guess how deep and far the young thoughts go, but, then, the seniors have forgotten their own young days, or were never of a thinking habit. Ichabod clamped along with his mind on beer. The boy thought his own thoughts, and each was indifferent for a while to outer signs and sounds. But suddenly a little girl ran round a corner of the devious lane with a brace of young savages in pursuit. The youthful savages had each an armful of snowballs, and they were pelting the child with more animus than seemed befitting. The very tightness with which the balls were pressed seemed to say that they were bent less on sport than mischief, and they came whooping and dancing round the corner with such rejoicing cruelty as only boys or uncivilised

men can feel. The little girl was sobbing, half in distress, and half because of the haste she had made, and Master Richard's juvenile soul burnt within him at the sight like that of a knight-errant. He had read a great deal about knights-errant for the time which had been as yet allowed him for the pursuit of literature, and he was by nature a boy of much fire and gentleness, and a very sympathetic imagination. So the big heart in the small body swelled with pity and grew hot with valour, and, without parley, he smote the foremost boy, who happened to be the bigger of the two, and went headlong into fight with him.

Ichabod followed the young master's lead without knowing, or in the smallest degree caring, why, and tried to seize the smaller savage, who skilfully evaded him and ran. The little maiden stood and trembled with clasped hands as she looked upon the fray. Ichabod lifted his smock-frock to get his hands into the pockets of his corduroys, and watched with the air of an old artist standing behind a young one.

'You shouldn't work at it so much, Master Richard,' said Ichabod. 'Tek it easier, and wait for him. That's it!'

The combat was brief and decisive. The youthful savage carried the heavier metal, but he was slow with it; but suddenly, as if to show that he was not altogether without activity, he turned and ran his hardest Master Richard, with blue-gray eyes still glistening and hands still clenched in the ardour of battle, turned upon the little girl, who was some two years younger than himself. At the sight of her he turned shy and blushed, and the little girl turned shy and blushed also. She looked at the ground, and then she looked at Richard, and then she looked at the ground again. She was slender and delicate, and had very beautiful soft brown eyes, and the hero of a minute back was abashed before her.

'You 'm a Mountain, baint you?' said Ichabod, looking at her with disfavour. She looked shyly at him, but did not answer. 'What's your name?' he asked, stooping towards her.

'Julia Mountain,' said the child, in a trembling treble.

'Ah!' said Ichabod, 'I thought so. Come along, Master Richard, or else we shall niver get hum again afore dark.'

Master Richard walked away with backward glances, shyly directed at the little girl, and the little girl stood with her cheek inclining to her shoulder, and the shoulder drawn up a little, as if to shelter her, and looked after him. This exchange went on until Ichabod and the boy had turned the corner of the lane, when Miss Julia Mountain ran home as fast as her small legs would take her, and Master Richard Reddy, with a vision in his mind, walked alongside his companion.

'You should tek a lesson or two, Master Richard,' said Ichabod, 'and then thee'dst do a heap better. I'm rusty nowadaysen, but I used to love it when I was a young un.'

Master Eichard heard nothing of this or of the advice which followed it. He enacted many times over the small adventure of the last five minutes, and at the end of every mental history he traced, the little figure stood in the lane looking shyly at him over one shoulder as he turned the corner.

II

Samson Mountain went home in an ill-temper, and, as was usual with him when in that condition, did everything he had to do with a sulky and noisy emphasis, bursting open doors with unnecessary violence, slamming them with needless force behind him, and clamping heavily from room to room. His wife, who was submissive at the surface, but unconquerable at bottom, knew these signs, and accepted them with outer show of meekness. Samson tramped into the sitting-room, and there found his wife alone. He flung to the door behind him with a crash which would have been startling if it had been unexpected, and fell heavily into a roomy arm-chair by the fireside. Mrs. Mountain took no notice of this, but went on placidly with her sewing. Samson threw his heavily-booted feet noisily into the fender, and still Mrs. Mountain went on placidly, without so much as looking at him. Stung by this disregard of his obvious ill-humour, Samson made a lunge with his foot at the fire-irons, and brought them down with a bang.

'Lawk a daisy me, Samson,' said his wife mildly. 'What's the matter with the man?'

'Matter!' growled Samson. 'It's a thing as ud get a saint to set his back up. I was down i' the bridge leasowe bare an hour ago, and who should I see but that young imp of a Reddy along wi' that old viper of a Bubb. Thee know'st the chap—that Ichabod.'

'I know him, Samson,' answered Mrs. Mountain. 'He's the most impudent of all of 'em.'

'They stood atop o' the bridge,' pursued Samson, 'and I could hear 'em talkin'. Th' ode rip was tellin' the young un that outworn lie about the brook. I'd got a shot i' the barrel, and I'd more than half a mind to ha' peppered him. I'd ha' done it if it had been worth while.'

'There's no end to their malice and oncharitable-ness,' said Mrs. Mountain.

'I heard the young imp say he'd fowt our Joe and licked him,' pursued Samson. 'If ever it should come to my knowledge as a truth I'd put Master Joe in such fettle he wouldn't sit down for the best side a month o' Sundays.'

'They 'm giving the child such airs,' said his wife, 'it's enough to turn the bread o' life which nourishes.'

Mrs. Mountain had an object in view, and, after her own fashion, had held it long in view in silence. The moment seemed to her propitious, and she determined to approach it.

'Young toad!' said Samson, rising to kick at the coals with his heavy-heeled boot, and plunging backward into the chair again.

'To hear him talk—that fine an' mincin'—you'd think he was one o' my lord's grandchildren or a son o' the squire's at least,' said Mrs. Mountain, approaching her theme with circuitous caution.

'Ay!' Samson assented 'It's enough to turn your stomach to listen to him.'

'If they go on as they're goings pursued his wife, circling a little nearer, 'we shall live to see fine things.'

'We shall, indeed,' said Samson, a little mollified to find his wife so unusually warm in the quarrel. 'There's no such a thing as contentment to be found amongst 'em. They settle up to be looked upon as gentlefolks.'

'Yes; fine things we shall live to see, no doubt, if we don't tek care. But thanks be, Samson, it's left in our own hands.'

'What be'st hoverin' at?' demanded Samson, turning upon her with his surly red face.

'Things ain't what they used to be when you an' me was younger,' said Mrs. Mountain. 'The plain ode-fashioned Barfield talk as you and me was bred up to, Samson, ain't good enough nowadays for the very kitchen wenches and the labourers on the farm. Everybody's gettin' that new-fangled!'

'Barfield's good enough for me, and good enough for mine,' said Samson, with sulky wrath.

'It's good enough for we, to be sure, but whether it's good enough for ourn is another churnin' o' butter altogether,' his wife answered. 'It ud seem as if ivery generation talked different from one another. My mother, as was a very well-spoken woman for her day, used to call a cup o' tay a dish o' tay, and that's a thing as only the very ignorant ud stoop to nowadays.' Samson growled, and wallowed discontentedly in the big arm-chair. 'A mother's got her natural feelings, Samson,' Mrs. Mountain continued, with an air and tone of mildest resignation. 'I don't scruple to allow as it'll hurt me if I should live to see our Joe looked down upon by a Reddy.'

'Looked down upon!' cried Samson. 'Where's the Reddy as can count acre for acre agen us, or guinea for guinea?'

'The Reddy's is fairly well-to-do, Samson,' said Mrs. Mountain; 'very nigh as well-to-do as we be.'

'Pooh!' returned Samson.

'Oh, but they be, though,' his wife insisted. 'Pretty near. There's nothing so much between us as'd prevent 'em from taking airs with us if they could find out anything to do it for.'

'If they could!' Samson assented. 'Abel Eddy was a bragger and a boaster from his cradle days.'

'That's where it is,' cried Mrs. Mountain, in a tone which implied that Samson had made a discovery of the first importance, and that this discovery unexpectedly confirmed her own argument. 'Let 'em have the least little bit of a chance for a brag, and where be you?'

'You might trust 'em to tek advantage on it if they had it,' said her husband.

'Of course you might,' said she, with warmth, 'and that's why I'm fearful on it.'

'Fearful o' what?' demanded Samson.

'O' these here scornful fine-gentleman ways as'll be a thorn in our Joe's side as long as he lives, poor little chap, unless we put him in the way to combat again 'em.'

'Ah!' Samson growled, suddenly enlightened. 'I see now what thee beest drivin' at. Now, you take a straight sayin' from me, Mary Ann. I'll have no fine-mouthed, false-natur'd corruption i' my household. If the Reddys choose to breed up that young imp of theirn to drawl fine and to talk smooth above his station—let 'em.'

'Well, Samson,' returned Mrs. Mountain, who knew by long experience when her husband was malleable, 'you know best, and you're the master here, as it's on'y fit and becomin' an' in the rightful nature o' things as you should be.'

The first effect of the oil of flattery seemed to be to harden him.

'I be, and I mean to be,' he answered, with added surliness. 'If the speech and the clothes and the vittles as have been good enough for me ain't good enough for any young upstart as may follow after me, it *is* a pity.'

Mary Ann kept silence and looked meek. Samson growled and bullied a little, and wore the airs of a dictator. By and by a serving-maid came in and began to arrange the table for tea, and a little later a boy and a girl stole noiselessly into the room.

'Joe,' said Samson sternly, 'come here!' The boy approached him with evident dread. 'What's this I hear about thee and that young villin of a Reddy?'

'I don't know, father,' the boy answered.

'I heard him makin' a boast this afternoon,' said Samson, rolling bullyingly in his arm-chair, 'as you and him had fowt last holidays, and as he gi'en you a hiding.'

Joe said nothing, but looked as if he expected the experience to be repeated.

'Now, what ha' you got to say to that?' demanded his father.

'Why,' began Joe, edging back a little, 'he's bigger nor I be, an' six months o'der.'

'Do you mean to tell me,' cried Samson, reaching out a hand and seizing the little fellow by the jacket, 'do you mean to tell me as you allowed to have enough to that young villin?'

'No,' Joe protested. 'That I niver did. It was the squire as parted us.'

'You remember this,' said his father, shaking him to emphasise the promise. 'If ever you agree to tek a hiding from a Reddy you've got one to follow on from me. D'ye hear?'

'Yes, father.'

'Tek heed as well as hear. D'ye hear?'

'Yes, father.'

'And here's another thing, mind you. It's brought to me as you and him shook hands and took on to be friends with one another. Is that trew?' Joe looked guilty, but made no answer. 'Is it trew?' Still Joe returned no answer, and his father changing the hand with which he held him, for his own greater convenience, knocked him off his feet, restored him to his balance, knocked him off his feet again, and again settled him. 'Now,' said Samson, 'is it trew?'

The boy tried to recoil from the uplifted threatening hand, and cried out 'No!'

'Now,' said Samson, rising with a grim satisfaction, 'that's a lie. There's nothin' i' the world as I abhor from

like a lie I'll teach thee to tell me lies. Goo into the brewus and tek thy shirt off; March!

The little girl clung to her mother's skirts crying and trembling. The mother herself was trembling, and had turned pale.

'Hush, hush, my pretty,' she said, caressing the child, and averting her eyes from Joe.

'March!' said Samson, and Joe slunk out of the room, hardening his heart as well as might be for endurance. But when he was once out of sight of the huge bullying figure and threatening eye and hand, the sight of his cap lying upon a chair in the hall supplied him with an inspiration. He seized the cap, slipped out at the front door, and ran.

The early winter night was falling fast by this time. Half a dozen stars twinkled intermittently in the black-blue waste of sky, and when the lad paused to listen for possible sounds of pursuit the hollow moaning of the wind and the clang of bare wintry poles mingled with the noise of his own suppressed breathing.

The runaway fancied himself bound (as all British runaway boys seem bound) for sea, and he set out without delay to walk to Liverpool. He got as far as the brook which formed the limit to his father's farm, and lingering before he set foot upon the bridge, began to cry a little, and to bemoan his chances and the dear ones left behind. His father came in for none of Joe's regrets. It was in the nature of things to the boy's mind that his father should administer to him periodical thrashings, whether he had earned them or not. It was the one social relationship which existed between them. It was only quite of late that Joe had begun to discern injustice in his father's bullyings. Children take things as they come, and to the mind of a child—in a modified sense, of course—whatever is, is right. That a thing exists is its own best justification. There is no reason to seek reasons for it. But Joe Mountain, having nearly outgrown this state of juvenile acquiescence, had begun to make inquiry of himself, and, as a result, had familiarised himself with many mental pictures in which he figured as an adventurer rich in adventures. In his day the youth of England were less instructed than they are now, but the immortal Defoe existed, and Lemuel Gulliver was as real as he is to-day. Perhaps the Board schools may have made that great mariner a little less real than he used to be. Joe believed in him with all his heart, had never had the shadow of a doubt about him, and meant to sail straight from Liverpool to Lilliput. He would defer his voyage to Brobdingnagia until he had grown bigger, and should be something of a match for its inhabitants.

But it was cold, it was darkening fast, it was past his ordinary tea-time. Liverpool and Lilliput were far away, pretty nearly equidistant to the juvenile mind, and but for Samson's shadow the tea-table would have looked alluring. To be sure of tea, and a bed to sleep in afterwards, it seemed almost worth while to go back to the brewhouse and obey the paternal command to take his shirt off. To do the child justice, it was less the fear of the thrashing than the hot sense of rebellion at unfairness which kept him from returning. His father had beaten him into that untrue cry of 'No,' and had meant to force him to it, and then to beat him anew for it. Joe knew that better than Samson, for Samson, like the rest of us, liked to stand well with himself, and kept self-opinion in blinkers.

Joe set foot on the bridge. He had crossed the boundary brook hundreds of times in his brief life, and it had generally come into his mind, with a boyish sense of adventure, that when he did so he was putting foot into the enemy's country. But the feeling had never been so strong as now. The Mountain Farm was home, and beyond it lay the wide, wide world, looking wide indeed, and bleak and cold. What with hot rebellion at injustice and cold fear of the vast and friendless expanse, Joe's tears multiplied, and leaning his arms upon the low coping of the bridge, with his head between them and his nose touching the frozen stone, he began to cry unrestrainedly.

Suddenly he heard a footstep, and it struck a new terror into his soul. Freebooters, footpads, kidnappers, *et hoc genus omne*, roamed those fields by night, in course of nature. To the snug security of the home fireside and bed their images came with a delightful thrill of fear, but to be here alone and in the midst of them was altogether another thing. He crept crouching across the bridge, and stowed himself into the smallest possible compass between the end of the stonework and the neighbouring hedgerow, and there waited trembling. His pulses beat so fast and made such a noise in his ears that he was ready to take the sound of footsteps for the tread of a whole ogreish army, when he heard a voice.

'Hode on a minute, while I shift the sack.'

The sack? It was easy—it was inevitable—to know that the sack contained a goblin supper.

'I shall be late for tea, Ichabod,' said another voice, 'and then I shall get a blowing-up for coming.'

*Let him who sighs in sadness here,
Rejoice, and know a friend is near.*

Joe sprang from his hiding-place, and startled Master Richard and Ichabod more than a little.

'That thee, Dick?'

He knew it well enough, but it was quite delightful to be able to ask it with certainty.

'Hillo,' said Master Richard, recognising his sworn friend. 'What are you doing? Are you trapping anything?'

'No,' the hereditary enemy answered. He had been crying, the poor little chap, until he had been frightened into quiet, and now on a sudden he was as brave and as glad again as ever he had been in his life. Once more adventures loomed ahead for the adventurous, and he shone within and grew warm with the sweet reflux of courage as he whispered, 'I'm running away from home!'

Once again, the feat was glorious.

'No?' said Master Richard, smitten with envy and admiration. 'Are you? Really?'

'Yes,' Joe answered. 'I'm agooin' to Liverpool, to begin wi.'

This was exquisitely large and vague, and Master Richard began to yearn for a share in the high enterprise upon which his friend had entered. He had half a mind to run away from home himself, though, to be sure, there was nothing else to run away from. In Joe's case there was a difference.

'Where are you going to stay to-night?' asked Master Richard. The question sounded practical, but at

bottom it was nothing of the sort. It was part of the romance of the thing, and yet it threw cold water on Joe's newly-lighted courage, and put it out again.

'I don't know,' said Joe, somewhat forlornly.

'I say,' interjected Ichabod, 'is that young Mountain, Master Richard?'

'Yes,' said Master Richard.

'Thee know'st thy feyther is again thy speakin' to him, and his feyther is again his speakin' to thee.'

'You mind your own business, Ichabod,' said the young autocrat, who was a little spoiled perhaps, and had been accustomed to have his own way in quite a princely fashion.

'I'm mindin' it,' returned Ichabod. 'It's a part o' my business to keep thee out o' mischief.'

'Ah!' piped Master Richard, 'you needn't mind that part of your business to-night.'

'All right,' said Ichabod, reshouldering the sack he had meanwhile balanced on the coping of the bridge. 'See as thee beesn't late for tay-time.'

With that, having discharged his conscience, he went on again, and the two boys stayed behind.

'What are you running away for?' asked Eichard.

'Why, feyther said it was brought to him as you and me had shook hands and had took on to be friends with one another, and he told me to go into the brewus and take my shirt off.'

'Take your shirt off?' inquired the other. In Joe's lifetime, short as it was, he had had opportunity to grow familiar with this fatherly formula, but it was strange to Master Richard. 'What for?'

'What for! Why, to get a hidin', to be sure.'

'Look here!' said Richard, having digested this, 'you come and stop in one of our barns. Have you had your tea?'

'No,' returned Joe, 'I shouldn't ha' minded so much if I had.'

'I'll bring something out to you,' said the protector.

So the two lads set out together, and to evade Ichabod, struck off at a run across the fields, Joe pantingly setting forth, in answer to his comrade's questions, how he was going to be a sailor or a pirate, 'or summat,' or to have a desert island like Crusoe. Of course, it was all admirable to both of them, and, of course, it was all a great deal more real than the fields they ran over.

The runaway was safely deposited in a roomy barn, and left there alone, when once again a life of adventures began to assume a darkish complexion. It was cold, it was anxious, it seemed to drag interminably, and it was abominably lonely. If it were to be all like this, even the prospect of an occasional taking off of one's shirt in the brewhouse looked less oppressive than it had done.

The hidden Joe, bound for piracy on the high seas, or a Crusoe's island somewhere, gave a wonderful zest to Master Richard's meal. But an hour, which seemed like a year to the less fortunate of the two, went by before a raid upon the well-furnished larder of Perry Hall could be effected. When the opportunity came, Master Richard, with no remonstrance from conscience, laid hands upon a loaf and a dish of delicious little cakes of fried pork fat, from which the lard had that day been 'rendered,' and thus supplied, stole out to his hereditary enemy and fed him. The hereditary enemy complained of cold, and his host groped the dark place for sacks, and, having found them, brought them to him.

'I say,' said Joe, when he had tasted the provender, 'them's scratchings. That's gay and fine. I never had as many as I should like afore. Mother says they're too rich, but that's all rubbish.'

He made oily feast in the dark, with the sacks heaped about him. With Master Richard to help him, he began to swim in adventure, and the pair were so fascinated and absorbed that one of the farm-servants went bawling 'Master Richard' about the outlying buildings for two or three minutes before they heard him. When at last the call reached their ears they had to wait until it died away again before the surreptitious host dare leave the barn, lest his being seen should draw attention to the place.

Then Joe, who had been hunting wild beasts of all sorts with the greatest possible gusto, began in turn to be hunted by them. The rattlesnake, hitherto unknown to Castle Barfield, became a common object; the lion and the polar bear met on common ground in the menagerie of Joe's imagination. Whatever poor blessings and hopes he had, and whatever schoolboy wealth he owned, he would have surrendered all of them to be in the brewhouse of the Mountain Farm, even though he were there to take his shirt off. But the empty, impassable, awful night stood between him and any refuge, and he must need stay where he was, and sweat with terror under his sacks, through all the prodigious tracts of time which lay between the evening and the morning. He was to have been up and afoot for Liverpool before dawn, but tired nature chose the time he had fixed for starting to send him to sleep, and when Master Richard stole into the barn with intent to disperse the sacks and clear away any sign of Joe's occupancy, he found him slumbering soundly, with a tear-stained cheek resting on a dirty brown hand.

There had been the wildest sort of hubbub and disorder at the Mountain Farm all night. Mrs. Mountain had wept and wrung her hands, and rocking herself to and fro, had poured forth doleful prophecy. Samson, who had begun with bluster, had fallen into anxiety, and had himself traced the course of the brook for a full mile by lanthorn-light. The farm hands had been sent abroad, and had tracked every road without result. Of course the one place where nobody so much as thought of making inquiry was the house of the hereditary foe, but pretty early, in the course of the morning, the news of Joe Mountain's disappearance, and something of the reasons for it, reached Perry Hall. Everybody at Perry Hall knew already what a terrible personage Samson Mountain was, and his behaviour on this occasion was the theme of scathing comment.

Master Richard was guilty at heart, but exultant. Being a boy of lively imagination, he took to a secrecy so profound, and became so strikingly stealthy, as to excite observation and remark. He was watched and tracked to the barn, and then the discovery came about as a matter of course. The Reddys made much of Joe—they had no quarrel with an innocent persecuted child—but their kindness and commiseration were simply darts to throw at Samson.

It was noon when Reddy put the trembling adventurer into his trap, and with his own hands drove him home. The two enemies met and glowered at each other.

'I've found your lad and brought him home,' said Reddy; 'though I doubt it's a cruel kindness to him.'

Samson, with all the gall in his nature burning at his heart, lifted Joe from the trap and set him on the ground in silence. Reddy, in silence, turned his horse's head, touched him with the whip, and drove away. Joe was welcomed home by a thrashing, which he remembers in old age.

The episode bore fruit in several ways. To begin with, Master Joe was packed off to a distant school, far from that to which young Reddy was sent. But the boys found each other out in the holidays, and became firm friends on the sly, and Joe was so loyal and admiring that he never ceased to talk to his one confidante of the courage, the friendliness, the generosity, the agility, and skill of his secret hero. The confidante was his sister Julia, to whom the young hereditary enemy became a synonym for whatever is lovely and of good report. She used to look at him in church—she had little other opportunity of observing him—and would think in her childish innocent mind how handsome and noble he looked. He did not speak like the Barfield boys, or look like them, or walk like them. He was a young prince, heir to vast estates, and a royal title in fairyland. If story-books were few and far between, the sentimental foolish widow, Jenny Busker, was a mine of narrative, and a single fairy tale is enough to open all other fairy lore to a child's imagination. If the little girl worshipped the boy, he, in his turn, looked kindly down on her. He had fought for her once at odds of two to one, and he gave her a smile now and then. It happened that in this wise began the curious, half-laughable, and half-pathetic little history which buried the hatreds of the Castle Barfield Capulet and Montague for ever.

III

In this Castle Barfield version of Romeo and Juliet the parody would have been impossible without the aid and intervention of some sort of Friar Laurence. He was a notability of those parts in those days, and he was known as the Dudley Devil. In these enlightened times he would have been dealt with as a rogue and vagabond, and, not to bear too hardly upon an historical personage, whom there is nobody (even with all our wealth of historical charity-mongers) to whitewash, he deserved richly in his own day the treatment he would have experienced in ours. He discovered stolen property—when his confederates aided him; he put the eye on people obnoxious to his clients, for a consideration; he overlooked milch cows, and they yielded blood; he went about in the guise of a great gray tom-cat. It was historically true in my childhood—though, like other things, it may have ceased to be historically true since then—that it was in this disguise of the great gray tom-cat that he met his death. He was fired at by a farmer, the wounded cat crawled into the wizard's cottage, and the demon restored to human form was found dying later on with a gun-shot charge in his ribs. There were people alive a dozen—nay, half a dozen—years ago, who *knew* these things, to whom it was blasphemous to dispute them.

The demon's earthly name was Rufus Smith, and he lived 'by Dudley Wood side, where the wind blows cold,' as the local ballad puts it. His mother had dealt in the black art before him, and was ducked to death in the Severn by the bridge in the ancient town of Bewdley. He was a lean man, with a look of surly fear. It is likely enough that he half expected some of his invocations to come true one fine day or other, with consequences painful to himself. The old notions are dying out fast, but it used to be said in that region that when a man talked to himself he was talking with the universal enemy. Rufus and his mother were great chatters in solitude, and what possible companion could they have but one?

It is not to be supposed that all the ministrations for which the people of the country-side relied upon Rufus were mischievous. If he had done nothing but overlook cattle and curse crops, and so forth, he would have been hunted out. Some passably good people have been said, upon occasions, to hold a candle to the devil. With a similar diversion from general principle, Rufus was known occasionally to perform acts of harmless utility. He charmed away warts and corns, he prepared love philtres, and sold lucky stones. He foreran the societies which insure against accident, and would guarantee whole bones for a year or a lifetime, according to the insurer's purse or fancy. He told fortunes by the palm and by the cards, and was the sole proprietor and vendor of a noted heal-all salve of magic properties.

He and his mother had gathered together between them a respectable handful of ghastly trifles, which were of substantial service alike to him and to his clients. A gentleman coming to have his corns or warts charmed away would be naturally assisted towards faith by the aspect of the polecat's skeleton, the skulls of two or three local criminals, and the shrivelled, mummified dead things which hung about the walls or depended head downwards from the ceiling. These decorations apart, the wizard's home was a little commonplace. It stood by itself in a bare hollow, an unpicturesque and barn-like cottage, not altogether weather-proof.

It fell upon a day that Mrs. Jenny Rusker drove over from Castle Barfield to pay Rufus a visit. She rode in a smart little trap, the kind of thing employed by the better sort of rustic tradesmen, and drove a smart little pony. She was a motherly, foolish, good creature, who, next to the reading of plays and romances, loved to have children about her and to make them happy. On this particular day she had Master Richard with her. She kept up her acquaintance with both her old lovers, and was on terms of rather coolish friendship with them. But she adored their children, and would every now and again make a descent on the house of one or other of her old admirers and ravish away a child for a day or two.

Mrs. Jenny had consoled herself elsewhere for the loss of lovers for whom she had never cared a halfpenny, but she had never ceased to hold a sort of liking for both her old suitors. Their claims had formerly been pretty evenly balanced in her mind, and even now, when the affair was ancient enough in all conscience to have been naturally and quietly buried long ago, she never met either of her quondam lovers without some touch of old-world coquetry in her manner. The faintest and most far-away touch of anything she could call

romance was precious to the old woman, and having a rare good heart of her own under all her superannuated follies, she adored the children. Dick was her especial favourite, as was only natural, for he was pretty enough and regal enough with his childish airs of *petit grand seigneur* to make him beloved of most women who met him. Women admire the frank masterfulness of a generous and half-spoiled boy, and Mrs. Jenny saw in the child the prophecy of all she had thought well of in his father, refined by the grace of childhood and by a better breeding than the father had ever had.

So she and Dick were great allies, and there was always cake and elderberry wine and an occasional half-crown for him at Laburnum Cottage. It was only natural that, so fostered, Dick's affection for the old lady should be considerable. She was his counsellor and confidante from his earliest years, and the little parlour, with its antiquated furniture and works of art-in wool, its haunting odour of pot-pourri emanating from the big china jar upon the mantelshelf, and its moist warm atmosphere dimly filtered through the drooping green and gold of the laburnum tree, whose leaves tapped incessantly against the lozenged panes of its barred windows, was almost as familiar in his memory in after years as the sitting-room at home at the farm.

Dick conferred upon its kindly and garrulous old tenant the brevet rank of 'Aunt' Jenny, and loved her, telling her, in open-hearted childish fashion, his thoughts, experiences, and secrets. Naturally, the story of the fight with the paynim oppressors of beauty came out in his talk soon after its occurrence, and lost nothing in the telling. Mrs. Jenny would have found a romance in circumstances much less easily usable to that end than those of the scion of one house rescuing the daughter of a rival and inimical line, and here was material enough for foolish fancy. She cast a prophetic eye into the future, and saw Dick and Julia, man and maid, reuniting their severed houses in the bonds of love, or doubly embittering their mutual hatred and perishing—young and lovely victims to clannish hatred and parental rigour—like Romeo and Juliet.

The boy's account of the fight was given as he sat by her side in her little pony-trap in the cheerfully frosty morning. Dick chatted gaily as the shaggy-backed pony trotted along the resounding road with a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of harness, and an occasional sneeze at the frosty air. They passed the field of battle on the road, and Dick pointed it out. Then, as was natural, he turned to the family feud, and retailed all he had heard from Ichabod, supplemented by information from other quarters and such additions of fancy as imaginative children and savages are sure to weave about the fabric of any story which comes in their way to make tradition generally the trustworthy thing it is.

Mrs. Busker was strong on the family quarrel. A family quarrel was a great thing in her estimation, almost as good as a family ghost, and she gave Dick the whole history of the incident of the brook and of many others which had grown out of it, among them one concerning the death of a certain Reddy which had tragically come to pass a year or two before his birth. The said Reddy had been found one November evening stark and cold at the corner of the parson's spinney, with an empty gun grasped in his stiffened hand, and a whole charge of small shot in his breast. Crowner's quest had resulted in a verdict of death by misadventure, and the generally received explanation was that the young fellow's own gun had worked the mischief by careless handling in passing through stiff undergrowth. But a certain ne'er-do-well Mountain, a noted striker and tosspot of the district, had mysteriously disappeared about that date, and had never since come within scope of Castle Barfield knowledge. Ugly rumours had got afloat, vague and formless, and soon to die out of general memory. Dick listened open-mouthed to all this, and when the narrative was concluded, held his peace for at least two minutes.

'She isn't wicked, is she, Aunt Jenny?' he suddenly demanded.

'She? Who?' asked Mrs. Eusker in return. 'The little girl, Julia.'

'Wicked? Sakes alive, whatever is the boy talking about? Wicked? O' course not. She's a dear good little thing as iver lived.'

'Ichabod said that all the Mountains were wicked. But I know Joe isn't—at least, not very. He promised me a monkey and a parrot—a green parrot, when he came back from running away. But he didn't run away, because father found him and took him home. His father gave him an awful thrashing. He often thrashes him, Joe says. Father never thrashes me. What does his father thrash him for?' 'Mr. Mountain's a harder man than your father, my dear. An' I fear as Joe's a bit wild, like his father when he was a boy, and obstinit. Theer niver was a obstinater man i' this earth than Samson Mountain, I do believe, an' Joe's got a bit on it in him.'

'She's pretty,' said Dick, returning with sudden childish inconsequence to the subject uppermost in his thoughts. 'Joe isn't Why is it that the girls are always prettier than the boys?'

'I used to think it was the other way about when I was a gell,' said Aunt Jenny, with perfect simplicity. 'But she is pretty, that's true. But then her mother was a likely lass, an' Samson warn't bad lookin', if he hadn't ha' been so fierce an' cussid. An' to think as it should be you, of all the lads i' Barfield, as should save a Mountain. An' a gell too.. I suppose as you'll be a settin' up to fall in love wi' her now, like Romeo and Juliet?'

'What was that?' asked the boy.

'It's a play, my dear, wrote by a clever man as has been dead iver so many 'ears, William Shaakespeare.'

'Shakespeare?' said Dick. 'I know. It's a big book on one of the shelves at home, full of poetry. But what's Romeo and Juliet?'

'Romeo and Juliet was two lovers, as lived a long time ago in a place called Verona. I don't know where it is,' she added quickly, to stave off the imminent question already on the boy's lips. 'Somewhere abroad, wheer Bonyparty is. Juliet's name was Capulet, an' Romeo's was Montague, an' the Capilets and the Montagues hated each other so as they could niver meet wi'out havin' a bit of a turn-up one with another. They was as bad as the Reddys an' the Mountains, only i' them daysen folks allays wore swords an' daggers, so's when they fowt they mostly killed each other. Well, one night old Capilet gi'en a party, an' asked all his friends, an' everybody wore masks, so's they didn't know half the time who they was a-talkin' tew, as was the fashion i' them times, an' Romeo, he goes, just for divilment, an' he puts on a mask tew, so as they didn't know him, else they'd ha' killed him, sure an' certain. An' theer he sees Juliet, an' she was beautiful, an' he falls plump in love wi' her, an' she falls in love wi' him, an' they meets o' nights, i' the moonlight, on the window-ledge outside her room, but they had to meet i' secret, 'cause the two fam'lies was like cat an' dog, an' there'd ha' been awful doin's if they'd been found out. Well, old Capilet—that was Juliet's feyther—he

finds a husband for Juliet, a nice chap enough, a count, like Lord Barfield, on'y younger an' likelier. An' Juliet, she gets welly mad, because she wants to marry Romeo. And then, to mek matters wuss, Romeo meets one o' Juliet's relations, a young man named Tybalt, as hates him like pison, an' they fowt, an' Romeo killed him. Well, the Capilets was powerful wi' the king as ruled in Verona, like Joseph used to be with Pharaoh in the Holy Land, my dear, an' Romeo, he has to run away an' hide himself, else p'raps they'd ha' hung him for killin' Tybalt, though it was Tybalt as begun the fight, so poor Juliet's left all alone. An' her marriage day's a-gettin' near, and old Capilet, he's stuck on her marryin' the count, an' the day's been named, and everything provided for the weddin'. Well, Romeo takes a thought, an' goes to a friar, a kind o' priest, as was a very book-learned man, and asks if he can help him. And at first he says no, he can't, an' Romeo gets that crazed, he's goin' to kill himself, but by an' by he thinks of a plan. He gives Juliet a bottle o' physic stuff to send her to sleep, and make her look as if she was dead. Then her relations 'll be sure to bury her i' the family vault, an' he'll write to Romeo to come back to Verona i' the night-time an' take her out o' the vault, an' goo away quiet wi' her till things have blown over, an' they can come back again. An' Juliet takes the physic, an' everybody thinks her dead, her father, an' her mother, an' her old nuss, an' Paris—that's the name of the gentleman as they wanted her to marry—an' there's such a hullabaloo an' racket as niver was. An' they buried her i' the vault, wi' all her relations, an' the old friar thinks as it's all a-comin' straight. But the letter as he'd writ to Romeo niver reaches him, an' Romeo hears as how Juliet's really dead, and he buys a bottle o' pison, an' comes to Juliet's grave i' the night-time, an' there he meets Paris, as has come to put flowers there an' pray for Juliet's soul, knowin' no better and lovin' her very dear. An' him an' Romeo fights, and Romeo kills him, an' opens the vault, an' go's in, an' theer's Juliet, lyin' stiff an' stark, because the physic ain't had time to work itself off yit. An' he kisses her, an' cries over her, and then he teks the pison, and dies. An' just as he's done it, Juliet wakes up, and finds him dead, and she takes his knife, an' kills herself, poor thing, an' that's the hend on 'em.'

The old sentimentalist's eyes were moist, and her voice choked, as she concluded her legend. It was the first love-story Dick had ever heard, and in pity at the beautiful narrative, which no clumsiness of narration could altogether rob of its pathos, he was crying too. There is no audience like an impressionable child, and the immortal story of love and misfortune seemed very pitiful to his small and tender heart.

'Why, theer! theer! Dick! It's only a story, my dear, wrote in a book,' said Mrs Jenny. 'It most likely ain't true, an' if it is, it all happened sich a time ago as it's no good a-frettin' about it. Why, wheeriver did you get all them warts? 'She took one of the hands with which Dick was rubbing his eyes. 'You should have 'em looked tew, they quite spile your hands. I must get Rufus Smith to have a look at 'em. You know who we'm agoin' to see, don't you? You've heard tell o' the Dudley Devil, Dick?'

'Yes,' said Dick. 'Ichabod goes to him for his rheumatism.'

'It's on'y a step away. That's his cottage, over there. We'll get him to charm the warts away.'

A hundred yards farther on Mrs. Jenny checked the pony, and, dismounting from the vehicle, bade Dick tie him to an elder-shoot and follow her. They went through a gap in a ruinous hedge, and traversed a furzy field, at the farther side of which stood the wizard's hut, a wretched place of a single story, with a shuttered window and a thatched roof full of holes and overgrown with weeds. As they approached the door a mighty clatter was audible within, and Mrs. Jenny held the boy's hand in a tightened grasp, fearful of devilry. As they stood irresolute to advance or retreat, a big cat dashed out at the doorway with a feline imprecation, and the wizard appeared, revengefully waving a stick, and swearing furiously.

'Cuss the brute,' he said, 'the divil's in her, sure an' sartin'.'

It seemed not unlikely to the onlookers, the cat being the wizard's property, and therefore, by all rule and prescription, his prompter and familiar. She was not of the received colour, however, her fur being of a rusty red. But as she raised her back, and spat at her master's visitors from under her chubbed tail, she looked demoniac enough for anything. And from the fashion in which, her anathema once launched, she sat down and betook herself to the rearrangement of her ruffled coat, it might have been conjectured that it was not purely personal to them, but that they were attacked merely as types of the human race, whose society she and her master had forsworn.

'Cuss her!' reiterated the wizard. 'Where's her got tew? My soul, what's this?'

He peered with a short-sighted terror-stricken scowl on Mrs. Jenny and her charge, as if for a moment the fancy had crossed him that his refractory familiar had taken their shapes. His gray lips muttered something, and his fingers worked oddly as he took a step or two forward, clearly outlined in the cold winter sunshine against the black void beyond his open door.

'Why, Rufus, what's the matter?' asked Mrs. Jenny. 'Don't look like that at a body.'

'It's you, mum?' said the necromancer. A look of relief came into his wizened face. 'I didn't know but what it might be——' His voice trailed off into an indistinct murmur, and he smeared his hand heavily across his face, and looked at it, mistrustfully, as if he rather expected to find something else in its place. 'Cuss her!' he said again, looking round for the cat.

'What's she done?' demanded Mrs. Jenny.

'Done? Ate up all my brekfus, that's what she's done,' rejoined the wizard. The familiar grinned with a relish of the situation so fiendishly human that Dick clung closer to Mrs. Rusker's hand, and devoutly wished himself back in the trap. To his childish sense the incongruity of one gifted with demoniac powers being helpless to prevent the depredations of his own domestic animal did not appeal. As for Mrs. Jenny, she had piously believed in witchcraft all her life, and was quite as insensible to the absurdity as he.

'I want you to look at this young gentleman's hands,' said Mrs. Busker. 'He's got warts that bad. I suppose you can charm 'em away for him?'

Appealed to on a point of his art, the wizard's air changed altogether. He assumed an aspect of wooden majesty.

'Why, yis,' he said. 'I think I'm equal to that Step inside, mum, and bring the young gentleman with you.'

'Couldn't you——' Mrs. Busker hesitatingly began, 'couldn't you do it outside?'

'The forms and ceremonies,' said the necromancer, with an increase of woodenness in his manner, 'cannot be applied out o' doors. Arter you, mum.'

He ushered them into the one room of his hut, and the cat, with her tail floating above her like a banner, entered too, evading a kick, and sprang upon a rotten deal shelf, which apparently acted as both dresser and table.

Rufus closed the ruinous door, thereby intensifying the gloom which reigned within the place. The floor was of simple earth, unboarded, and the air smelt of it. Here and there a fine spear of ghostly sunlight pierced a crack in roof or wall. By the time their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom they saw that Rufus, on his knees on the floor, was scratching a circle about himself with a scrap of a broken pot, and the indistinct rhythmic murmur of the spell he muttered reached their ears.

The cat, perched upon the dresser, purred as if her internal machinery were running down to final collapse, and her contracting and dilating eyes borrowed infernal fires from the chance ray of sunshine in which she sat. The brute's rusty red head, so lit, fascinated Dick, and the mingled rhythms of her purring and the wizard's mounted and mounted, until to his bewildered mind the whole world seemed filled with their murmur, and the demoniac head seemed to dilate as he gazed at it. Suddenly, Rufus paused in his sing-song, and the cat's purr ceased with it, as though her share of the charm was done.

'Come into the ring,' said Rufus. His voice was shaky, and if there had been light enough to see it, his face was gray with terror of his own hocus-pocus. The cat's head had dropped out of the line of sunlight, and she had coiled herself up on the dresser among a disorderly litter of crockery ware. Dick, relieved from the fascination of her too-visible presence, obeyed the summons, and Rufus, seating himself upon a broken stool, took his hand in moist and quivering fingers, and touching the warts one by one, recommenced his mumble. It had proceeded for a minute or so, when a crash, which, following as it did on the dead stillness, an earthquake could scarce have equalled, elicited a scream from Mrs. Jenny and brought the wizard to his knees with a yell of terror.

'My blessid!' he cried, with clacking jaws, 'I've done it at last! Get thee behind me, Satan!'

In terror-stricken earnest he believed that the Great Personage he had passed all his life in trying to raise had answered to his call at last. So, though it was unquestionably a relief to him to find that the appalling clatter had merely been caused by his familiar's pursuit of a mouse among the crockery, a shade of disappointment may have followed the discovery.

'Cuss her!' he said, for the third time that morning, and with additional unctious. 'Her'll be the death of me some day, I know her will!'

IV

A summer sunset filled all the sky above Castle Barfield and its encircling fields. The sun had disappeared, leaving behind him a broad reflected track of glory where, here and there, a star was faintly visible. A light wind was blowing from the hollow which sheltered the town towards the higher land whereon the rival houses of Eddy and Mountain faced each other. Below, it was already almost night, and as the wind blew the shadow mounted, as if the wind carried it. The rose and gold left by the departing sun faded down the sky, and settled at the horizon into a broad band of deep-toned fire, which, to one facing it in ascending from the lower ground, seemed to bind the two houses together. Some such fancy might have been in the head of Mrs. Jenny Rusker, as she went in the warm evening air towards the little eminence on which stood the long low-built house of Samson Mountain, already a-twinkle with occasional lights in the gloom, its own bulk cast against the fast-fading band of sunset.

Mrs. Jenny, hale and vigorous yet, and still a widow, was older by fifteen years than on the day when she unfolded to Dick Reddy the story of Romeo and Juliet. Fifteen years was a good slice out of a lifetime, even in Castle Barfield in the first half of the century, when time slipped by so quietly and left so little trace to mark his flight.

She passed the gate which opened on the public road, and entered the Mountain domain. The air was so still that the bubble of the boundary brook was clearly audible a hundred yards away, with nothing to accent it but the slow heavy flap of a late crow, winging his reluctant flight homewards, and save for him, sky and earth alike seemed empty of life, and delivered wholly to the clinging peace of evening. So that when Mrs. Jenny came to the only clump of trees in her line of progress between the gate and the house the little scream of surprise with which she found herself suddenly face to face with an unexpected human figure was justified.

'Sh-h-h!' said the figure's owner. 'Don't you know me, Aunt Jenny?'

'Dick!' said Mrs. Jenny, peering at him. 'So it is. You welly frightened the life out o' me. What brings you here, of all places in the world?'

'Can't you guess?' asked Dick. He was tall and broad-shouldered now, an admirable fulfilment of the physical promise of his boyhood, and far overtopped Mrs. Rusker. 'It isn't for the first time.'

'I feared not,' said the old woman. 'You was allays main venturesome.'

'It will be for the last, for some time, Aunt Jenny. I leave Castle Barfield to-morrow.'

'Leave Barfield?' cried the old woman. 'Why, Dick, wheer are ye goin'? You ain't agoin' to do nothin' rash, that I do hope.'

'I am going to London,' said Dick, 'and I must see Julia before I go. You must help me. You are going to the house now, aren't you?'

'Going to London?' repeated Mrs. Eusker, who had no ears for the last words after that announcement. 'What's made you so hot foot to go to London all of a minute like?'

'It was decided to-day. My father suspects what is going on. I feel sure of it, though he has never said a word about it. You know he always meant to make a doctor of me—it was my own choice when I was quite a little fellow, and it has always been understood. Last month he asked me if I was of the same mind still, and to-day he told me that my seat is taken in the coach from Birmingham. You know my father, Aunt Jenny, as well as I do. He has been a very good father to me, and I would not give him pain or trouble for the world. I could not refuse. Indeed, it is my last chance of ever doing anything for myself and making a home for Julia.'

'My dear, they'll never hear on it, nayther of 'em. Samson Mountain 'd rather see his daughter in her coffin than married to any kin of Abel Reddy's. Though he loves her, too, in a kind o' way. An' your father's jist as hard; he's on'y quieter with it, that's all They'll niver consent Niver, i' this world.'

'Then we must do without their consent, that's all. I must see Julia to-night, and you must help me. Tell her that I am here and must see her. Oh, Aunt Jenny, you are surely not going to desert us now, after helping us so often.'

'I'm dub'ous, my dear. I hope good may come of it, but I'm dub'ous. I'm doubtful if I did right in helping you, again your father's will, an' Mr. Mountain's, too.'

'You won't refuse to do so little, after doing so much,' pleaded the young man. 'Why, it was at your house that I used to meet her, when we were children together, and you first christened us Romeo and Juliet.'

'A name o' bad omen, my dear. I wish I hadn't gi'en it to you now.'

'For niver was a story o' more woe, Than this o' Jewliet an' her Romeo.'

'I don't believe much in omens,' said Dick. 'But you will tell Julia that I am here, won't you? It's the last time, for ever so long.'

'I'll tell her,' said Mrs. Rusker. 'But don't stay here; goo down to the Five Ash. Mr. Mountain's gone to Burmungem, an' he'll come across this way when he comes back. You must tek a bit o' care, Dick, for the gell's sake.'

'I'll take care, dear. It's good-bye this time, Aunt. You've been very good to me always, and I shan't forget your kindness while I'm away. And you'll be good to Julia, too, while—while I'm away, won't you?'

Mrs. Rusker's objections had never had any heart in them, and had been merely perfunctory, and such as she conceived her age and semi-maternal authority compelled her to make. She was wholly given over to Dick and Julia, and all her simple craft was for their service. She kissed him, and cried over him, and so they parted, he bound for the Five Ash field, and she for the farmhouse.

'Why, lacsaday, Jenny, whatever is the matter?' asked Mrs. Mountain, when her visitor entered her sitting-room, and gave her tear-stained cheek to her old friend's embrace. Julia, a lithe, graceful girl, rose at the query from the other side of the little table, and came to Mrs. Rusker's side.

'Why, you're cryin',' continued the elder woman. 'What is it, my dear, as has upset you i' this wise?'

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Rusker, wiping her eyes and smoothing her dress, as if her grief was done with and put away, 'it ain't a trouble as I expects sympathy from you in.'

Mother and daughter exchanged glances.

'It must be a queer sort o' trouble, then,' said Mrs. Mountain; 'an' you might tell me what it is afore you say that, Mrs. Rusker, arter all these 'ears as we'n knowed each other.'

'Well, if you must know, I've jist sin young Reddy, i' the road, jist outside the Five Ash.' Julia's hand was on her shoulder as she spoke, and she felt the soft touch tremble. 'He's a-leavin' Barfield, agoin' to London, for a long time.'

'Oh, that's the matter, is it? Well, I don't know anythin' agin the young man, barrin' as he is a Reddy. An' for the matter o' that, though o' course a woman has no ch'ice but to stand by the kin as her marries into, I niver found much harm in 'em, unless it is as they're a bit stuck up. I know as you was allays fond on him, an' I hope the young man 'll do well. I've often said to Samson as it was all rubbidge, a-keepin' up a old quarrel like that, as keeps two dacent fam'lys at daggers drawn. Theer, theer, let Julia get you a cup o' tay, an' let's talk o' somethin' cheerful.'

'I'll go and send it in to you,' said Julia. She exchanged one quick glance of intelligence with the widow as she left the room. The old woman had done her errand, and Julia knew where to seek her lover. She found her hat in the hall, and slipped out by the back way, after directing the servant to take in the required refreshment to Mrs. Busker. It was bright moonlight now, and as she ran lightly across the Five Ash field in her white summer dress, Dick, waiting in the shelter of the hedge, saw her plainly, and advanced to meet her.

'Oh, Dick, is it true?'

He took her in his arms and kissed her before he answered. 'Yes, dear, it's true. I am going to London.'

'But why so suddenly, so soon?'

'I must, dear. It is my own choice. I am going to study, to fit myself to take my place in the world, and to find a home for you. Be brave, dear. It is only for a little time.'

'It is all so sudden.'

'Yes. I had hoped to stay a little longer, to see more of you, to get used to my happiness before I lost it. But my father suspects, I am sure, if he does not know, and I dared not refuse. It hurts me to go, but what can I do? You know the man he is. And there is only one thing in the world that your father would help him to do—to separate us. I must go away and make a home for you with my own hands; we can expect no help from them. If we are true to each other we shall be happy yet. Our love may end the ridiculous family squabble which has lasted all these generations. But it would be madness to speak yet.'

'It is that which makes me so unhappy, Dick. Why am I not like other girls? Why can't you come to the farm and ask my father's leave to court me, as other girls' sweethearts do, and as you would like to do? I can't help feeling that this is wrong, meeting you in secret, and being engaged to you against my father's will, without his knowledge.'

'The quarrel is not of our making, Julia. We only suffer by it. I hope we shall bring it to an end, and teach

two honest men to live at peace together, as they ought. Why, you're crying.'

Her tears had been running quietly for some minutes past, but at this she began to sob unrestrainedly. Dick comforted her in the orthodox fashion, and in that sweet employment almost succeeded in forgetting his own sorrow. He drew bright pictures of the future: youth held the palette, and hope laid on the colour. Two or three years of partial separation—so little—and he would have a livelihood in his hand, and could offer her a safe asylum from parental tyranny, and bid his own people either to accept the situation or renounce him, as they might choose. He was quite heroic internally about the whole business. He felt the promise of the coming struggle brace his nerves, and he was more than ready for the test. Young love is selfish at the best, and the heroic likeness of himself doing battle with the world of London half obliterated the pitiful figure of the poor girl, left at home, with nothing to fill her heart but dreams. For him, the delight of battle; for her, long months of weary waiting.

It was no doubt of him, but only the rooted longing for assurance of his love, that made her ask,

'You won't forget me, Dick, in London?'

Forget her! His repetition of the word, his little laugh of loving scorn, were answer enough, though he found others, and arguments unanswerable, to clinch them. How could he forget the sweetest, dearest girl that ever drew the breath of life, the prettiest and the bravest? She spoke treason against herself in asking such a question. He could no more forget her in London than Romeo, Juliet in Mantua. She laughed a little at his recalling the old story, from which Mrs. Jenny had drawn so many illustrations of the course of their love since they were children. It recalled the old woman to their minds.

'I shall write to you every week, and send the letters under cover to her,' said Dick. 'And you may be sure that I shall find—or make—plenty of opportunities to run down here from time to time. There is a coach every day to Birmingham.'

They had been walking slowly all this time. It was night now, the last gleam of sunset had faded, the stars were lustrous overhead, and a yellow moonlight flooded the surrounding country. A long distance off, faint but clear in the dead hush of the summer night, they heard, but did not mark, the beat of horses' hoofs approaching them.

'I must go, Dick,' said Julia. 'It is late, and they will wonder where I am. No, let me go now, while I have the strength.'

He took her in his arms again, and her head dropped on his shoulder, and the tears began to run afresh. He held her close, but in that last moment of parting could find no word of comfort, only dumb caresses. The hoof-beats were near at hand now, just beyond the bend of the road. They rounded the corner, and broke on the lovers' ears with a loud and startling suddenness. The girl broke away, and ran through the gate into the field with a stifled sob. Dick turned, and walked down the road in the direction of the approaching horseman. The moon was at the full, and shone broadly upon his face and figure.

'Hullo!' cried the rider, in gruff challenge, and pulling his horse into Dick's path, reined in. The young man looked up and recognised Samson Mountain. Flight would have been as useless as ignominious, and it had never been Dick's way out of any difficulty.

'Well?' he asked curtly, and stood his ground.

'Is that my daughter?' demanded Mountain, pointing with his heavy whip after the white figure glinting across the field. 'Spake the truth for once, though you be a Reddy.'

'It's a habit we have,' said Dick quietly. His calm almost surprised himself. 'Yes.'

Mountain had always been of a heavy build, and of late years had increased enormously in girth and weight. But his wrath at this confirmation of his half-guess stirred him so, that before the sound of the word had well died out on the air he had dismounted, and came at the young man with his riding-whip flourished above his head.

'Don't do that, sir,' Dick spoke in a low voice, though quickly; and there was something in his tone which brought the weapon harmlessly to the farmer's side again. 'It is your daughter. We love each other, and she has promised to be my wife.'

Mountain staggered, as if the words had been a pistol bullet or a stab, and struck furiously. Quick as was Dick's parry, he only half saved himself, his hat spun into the road, and the whip whistled within an inch of his ear. He made a step back, and stopped a second furious stroke. The whip broke in the old man's hand, and he flung the remaining fragment from him with a curse.

'I can't strike you, sir,' said Dick. 'You're her father.' Mountain's choking breath filled in the pause, and Dick went on: 'You know well enough there's not another man in England I'd take that from.'

'You're a coward, like all your tribe,' said Mountain.

'Not at all, I assure you, sir,' said Dick calmly. 'If you like to send anybody else with that message, I'll talk to him. Let us talk sensibly. What harm have I ever done you? Or my father either? Why should two honest families keep up this ridiculous story, which ought to have been buried ages back? Why not let bygones be bygones? I love your daughter. I am a young man yet, sir, with my way to make in the world, and I am going away to London to study. I met your daughter to-night to say goodbye to her, and if you had not come I should have gone away and said nothing until I could come and claim her, with a home worthy of her to take her to.'

But since you know, I speak now. We love each other, and intend to marry.'

'Oh!' said Mountain. He had gone all on a sudden as cool as Dick, and nothing but his stertorous breathing hinted of the rage which filled him. 'That's it, is it? Then, if you're finished, hear me. I ain't got the gift o' the gab as free as you, but I can mek plain my meanin', p'raps. I'd rather see her a-layin' theer' (he pointed with a trembling hand at the ground between them); 'I'd rather lay her there, dead afore my eyes, an' screw her in her coffin a'terwards, than you or any o' your kin should as much as look at her, wi' my goodwill. And now you've got your answer, Mr. Fair an' Fine. Remember it, an' look out for yourself. For, by the Lord! 'he went on, with a solemn malignity doubly terrible in a man whose passion was ordinarily so violent, 'if iver I ketch you round my house again, I'll put a bullet atween thy ribs as sure as my naame's Samson Mountain.'

With this, he took his horse by the bridle, and passed through the gate, leaving the young man to his own reflections. He took the beast to the stable, delivered him into the care of a servant, and made straight for the parlour, where his wife and Mrs. Rusker were seated at an early supper.

'You're back early, Sam,' said the former, rising to draw an additional chair to the table. 'Wilt have some tay, or shall Liza draw you a jug o' beer?'

Samson returned no answer, either to this or to Mrs. Rusker's greeting.

'Lawk a mussy, what ails the man?' asked Mrs. Mountain, as Samson stood looking round the room. She had never seen such an expression on her husband's face before. The skin was livid under its rude bronze, and his lips twitched strangely.

'Wheer's that wench of ourn?' he asked, after a second glance round the room, Mrs. Rusker's heart jumped, and she held on tight to the arm-pieces of her chair.

'Julia?' said Mrs. Mountain. 'Her's about the house, I reckon.'

'Call her here,' said Samson; and his wife wondering, but not daring to question, went to the door of the sitting-room and screamed 'Julia!' A servant girl came running downstairs at the call, and said that Miss Julia did not feel well, and had gone to bed.

'Fatch her down,' said Samson from the sitting-room, and the girl, on receipt of a confirmatory nod from Mrs. Mountain, went upstairs again. Samson took a chair and sat with his head bent forward and his arms folded, staring at the paper ornaments in the grate.

'Samson!' said his wife appealingly, 'don't skeer a body i' thisnin. Whativer *is* the matter?'

'Hold thy chat,' said Samson. 'Thee'st know soon enough,' and the trio sat in silence until Julia entered the room. She was pale, and there were traces of tears on her cheeks, and Samson, as he glanced at her askance from under his heavy eyebrows before he rose, saw that she was struggling to repress some strong emotion. She advanced to kiss him, but he repelled her—not roughly—with his heavy hand upon her shoulder.

'You wanted to see me, father,' she asked, trembling.

'I sent for you.'

Mrs. Rusker was in a state of pitiable excitement, if anybody had had the leisure to notice her.

'Theer's some'at happened to-day as it's fit an' right as yo' should know. I met ode Raybould today i' th' Exchange, an' he tode me some'at as I'd long suspected, about his son Tom. I reckon you know what it was.'

Julia knew well enough. Tom Raybould was a young farmer, a year or two older than herself. She had known him all her life, and he had been a schoolfellow and chosen chum of her brother's. He had shown unmistakable signs of affection for her, but had never spoken. He was a good fellow, according to common report, and she had a good deal of liking and respect for him, and a little pity, being a good girl, and no coquette.

'I see thee understandest,' said Samson. 'I told th' ode man as he might look on it as settled, an' Tom 'll be here to-morrow. He's a likely lad, an' he'll have all the Bush Farm when his father goes, as must be afore long, i' the course o' nature. The two farms 'll goo very well in a ring fence. Theer's no partic'lar hurry, as I know on, an' we'll ha' the weddin' next wik, or the wik after.'

The girl's breast was labouring cruelly, in spite of the hand that strove to still it.

'Father!' she said. 'You don't mean it!'

'Eh?' said Samson. 'I ginerally mean what I say, my wench. I should ha' thout as yo'd ha' known that by this time.'

He stopped there, for Julia, but for her mother's arm, would have fallen.

'You great oaf!' cried Mrs. Mountain, irritated for once into open rebellion. 'Oh, it's like a man, the stupid hulkin' creeturs as they are, to come an' frighten the life out of a poor maid i' that style.'

'Theer, theer!' said Samson, with the same heavy and threatening tranquillity he had borne throughout the interview. 'Tek her upstairs.'

He sat down again, and without another word filled and lit his churchwarden, and stared through the smoke-wreaths at the grate.

V

Mrs. Jenny Rusker, who was half dead with fear of an *exposé* of her part in this unlucky love-affair, was additionally prostrated by the dire reversal of all her hopes by Samson Mountain's ultimatum. Mrs. Mountain, with the aid of a female servant, supported Julia upstairs, and Samson smoked on stolidly, taking no note whatever of the visitor's presence. Still in doubt of what Samson might or might not know, and fearing almost to breathe, lest any reminder of her presence should call down his wrath upon her, she listened to the tramping and the muffled noises overhead until they ceased, and then, gathering courage from his continued apathy, slipped from the room and left the house.

She got home and went to bed and passed an interminable night in tossing to and fro, and bewailing the untoward fate of the two children. Dawn came at last, though it had seemed as if it never would break again, and, for the first time for many a year, the first gleam of sunlight saw her dressed and downstairs. She felt feverous and ill, and having brewed for herself a huge jorum of tansy tea, sat down over this inspiring beverage, and tried to pull her scattered wits together and think out some way of untangling the skein of difficulty with which she had to deal. The danger was pressing, and if she had been herself the poor lovesick girl who lay a mile away, stifling her sobs lest they should reach her father's ears, and vainly calling on her lover's name, she would scarcely have been more miserable.

One thing was clear. Dick must be warned, and his journey to London postponed by some device. He might lie hidden for a day or two in Birmingham, and Julia be smuggled there and secretly married. It was no time for half measures, and whatever was done should be done quickly and decisively. At this idea, at once romantic and practical, Mrs. Jenny's spirits revived.

'Samson 'll disown Julia, I know. Her 'll never see a penny o' his money. An' I doubt as Abel Reddy 'll do the same wi' Dick. He's just as hard and bitter as th' other, on'y quieter wi' it. Well, they shan't want while I'm alive, nor after my death neither, and Dick ud make his own way with nobody's help. I'll write to him, and find somebody to take the letter. I won't go myself, at this hour o' the day.'

She concocted a letter and sealed it, and putting on her bonnet sallied out to find a messenger. Fate was so far propitious that scarce a hundred yards from her door she met Ichabod Bubb, bound for his morning's work at Perry Hall Farm. Ichabod was bent and gnarled and twisted now, stiff in all his joints and slow of movement, but his quaint visage bore the same look of uncertain and rather wistful humour which had marked it in earlier times.

'Morning, mum,' he said, with a stiff-necked nod at Mrs. Jenny.

'Good-mornin', Mr. Bubb,' said the old lady. Ichabod beamed at this sudden and unexpected ceremonial of title, and straightened his back.

'You 'm afoot early, mum.'

'Why, yes. But it's such a beautiful morning; it's a shaame to lie abed a time like this.'

'So many folks, so many ways o' thinkin',' said the ancient one; 'not as it's a sin as I often commits, nayther, 'cos why, I don't get the chance.'

'I've got a bit o' business as I want done, Mr. Bubb,' said Mrs. Busker, 'if ye don't mind earnin' a shillin'.'

'Why,' returned Ichabod, 'I don't know as I've got any, not to say rewted, objection to makin' a shillin'.'

'You're goin' to the farm?' Ichabod nodded. 'Then I want you to take this note to Mr. Richard. But mind, you must get it to him private. Nobody else must know. D'you understand?'

'I'm all theer, missus,' responded Ichabod.

'Then there's the note, an' there's the shillin'.' An' if you're back in two hours you shall have a pint o' beer.' Ichabod took the note and the shilling, and clattered off with a ludicrous show of despatch, and the old lady returned to her sitting-room to await the result of his message. It came in less than the appointed time, and disappointed her terribly. Ichabod had ascertained that Dick had started half an hour before his arrival at the farm for Birmingham, and would only return to-morrow night to sleep and take away his luggage on the following morning.

'And you come to me w' a message like that, y' ode gone-off!' said the exasperated old woman. 'You might ha' caught him up i' the time as you've wasted comin' back here.'

'Caught him up,' said Ichabod, with a glance at his legs. 'Yis, likely, like a cow might ketch a race-hoss. I'm a gay fine figure, missus, to ketch up the best walker i' the country-side.'

Mrs. Jenny was a woman, and therefore to offer her reason as an antidote to unreasoning anger was merely to heap fuel on flame.

'Ah!' she said, reasonably enraged with the whole masculine half of her species, 'you're like the rest on 'em.'

'Then I'm sorry for the rest on 'em,' said Ichabod, 'whoever they may be.' Here Mrs. Jenny shut the door upon him, leaving him in the street, and retired to her sitting-room. But with beer to be gained by boldness, Ichabod was leonine in courage. He knocked, and the summons brought the old lady to the door again. Ichabod spoke no word, but writhed his twisted features into a grin which expressed at once humorous deprecation and expectancy, and rabbed the back of his veiny hand across his bristly lips.

'Go round to the brewus,' said Mrs. Jenny; 'you'll find the maid there. It's all you're fit for, ye guzzlin' old idiot.'

Ichabod retired, elate.

'Her tongue's a stinger; but, Lord bless thee, Ichabod, her bark's a long sight worse than her bite. An' her beer's main good.'

Mrs. Jenny, meanwhile, retired to the sitting-room, and there sat immersed in gloom. Things looked black for her young protégés, and fate was against them. With that curious interest in familiar trifles which comes with any fit of hopelessness or despondency, she sat looking at the furniture of the room and the pictures which decorated the walls. Among these latter was a work of her own hands, her masterpiece, a reproduction in coloured wool of a German engraving of the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. There was a pea-green Capulet paralytically embracing a sky-blue Montague in the foreground, with a dissolving view of impossibly-constructed servitors of both houses and the County Paris, with six strongly accented bridges to his nose and a worsted tear upon his cheek, in the background. Under this production was worked in white, upon a black ground, the legend which Mrs. Rusker mournfully repeated as she gazed on it—

*'For never was a story of more woe,
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo';*

and as she spoke the words an inspiration flashed into her mind. She had her plan.

The new-born idea so possessed her that she could not sit or rest. It drove her out, as the gad-fly drove lo, to devious wanderings in the neighbouring lanes, and as she walked and walked, finding some little ease in the unusual and incessant exercise, she drew nearer and nearer to the Mountain Farm. As she paused on a little eminence and looked towards it, the distant church bell struck clear across the intervening fields, proclaiming nine o'clock.

'Thank the Lord,' said the old woman. 'I can go now. I dussent go too early. They might suspect.'

She made straight for the house, and found Mrs. Mountain alone. Samson was afield, and in answer to Mrs. Busker's inquiries regarding Julia, Mrs. Mountain tearfully informed her that the poor girl was too ill to come

downstairs, and had not eaten a crumb of the tempting breakfast prepared and sent to her room for her. Mrs. Mountain was voluble in condemnation of her husband's lack of wit in his announcement of the matrimonial scheme he had formed for the girl, and Mrs. Jenny was fluent and honest in sympathy. Might she see the girl? Julia was fond of her, and her counsels might bring some comfort. Mrs. Mountain yielded a ready assent, and the old lady went up to the girl's room, and entering on the languid summons which followed her knock, saw Julia seated at the window, listless, dejected, and tearful. The tears flowed even more freely at the sight of her, and the girl sobbed on her old friend's breast in full abandonment to the first great grief of her life.

'My dear,' said Mrs. Jenny, when this gush of sorrow was over, 'take a bit o' heart. Things is rarely as bad as they seem; an' there's help at hand always if we on'y know where to look for it.'

There was more meaning, to Julia's thinking, in the tone in which this commonplace condolence was delivered than in the words themselves. Mrs. Rusker's manner was big with mystery.

'Now, my darlin', I know you 'm a brave gal, and can act accordin' when there's rayson for it. I've got a plan as 'll save you yet, if on'y you've got the courage.'

Julia's clasped hands and eager look encouraged her to proceed.

'My dear, you remember *Romeo and Juliet*? You remember how Juliet got the sleepin' draught an' took it? Julia's look was one of wonder, pure and simple, now. 'That's my plan, my dear, an' the Dudley Divil can do it for us, if on'y you'll ha' the courage to tek it. Not as I mean as you need be buried afore Dick comes to you. We shouldn't go as far as that. But I'll get the stuff, an' it'll send you to sleep, an' they'll think as you're dead, an' then I'll tell 'em how you an' Dick loved each other so's you couldn't bear to part wi' him, an' the fear of it's killed you. That'll soften their hard hearts, my dear. Old Reddy knows all about it—that's why he's sendin' Dick away to London an' I'll get him fetched back to see the last o' you, an' I'll mek your father an' his father shaake hands, an' then you'll come to, an' after that what can they do but marry you to Dick, an' forget all that rubbidge about the brook, an' live in peace together, as decent folk should do.'

Julia's reception of this brilliant scheme, which Mrs. Rusker developed with a volubility which left no opportunity for detailed objection, was to fall back in her chair and begin to cry anew at the sheer hopeless absurdity of it.

'What's the matter wi' the wench?' demanded Mrs. Rusker, almost sternly. 'Come, come,' she continued, her brief anger fading at the sight of Julia's distress, 'have a bit o' sperrit. Now, will you try it? Spake the word, an' I'll goo to the Divil this minute.'

This wholesale self-abandonment in the cause of love produced no effect on Julia, except to frighten her. Mrs. Rusker argued and reasoned, but finding her fears too obdurate to be moved by any such means, left the house in dudgeon, whereat poor Julia only cried the more. But Mrs. Rusker's confidence in her plan was unshaken, and her persistency unchecked. She would save the silly girl against her will, since it must be so, and half an hour after she had crossed the Mountain threshold she was in her trap, *en route* for the dwelling of the wizard.

She found that celebrity alone, and opened fire on him at once.

'Ruffis, I want thy help, an' I'm willin' to pay fur it.' The necromancer's fishy eye brightened. Things were going poorly with him, the rising generation followed newer lights unevindent in his earlier days, and his visitors were mostly of Mrs. Rusker's age, and were getting fewer day by day.

'My skill's at your service, ma'am, such as it is,' he answered, with gravity.

'I want some'at as 'd send a body to sleep—mek 'em sleep for a long time, wi'out hurtin' 'em. Can you doit?'

'Why, yis; I could do that much, I think.' His tone and manner intimated vaguely how much more he could have done, and his disappointment at the facility of his task. 'But,' he added prudently, 'it's a job as ain't s' easy as you might fancy.'

Mrs. Busker laid a sovereign on the table.

'Wilt do it for that?' she asked.

The wizard stole a look at her. She was obviously very much in earnest.

'The hingredients,' he said, 'is hard to find, and harder to mix in doo perportions.'

'I must have it now, and at once,' said Mrs. Busker.

'That,' said Rufus, 'ain't possible.' Mrs. Jenny laid a second piece of gold beside the first 'It's a dangerous bisness, missus,' he went on. 'Theer's noofangled laws about. 'Twas only last wik as that young upstart, Doctor Hodges, comes an' threatens me with persecution as a rogue an' vagabond, a-obtainin' money under false pertences for practisin' my lawful an' necessary art. Why, it ain't so long since I cured his mother o' the rheumatiz, as is more nor he can dew, wi' all his drugs, an' the pestle an' mortar o'er his door.'

'You ought to know as you're safe wi' me, Rufus,' said Mrs. Rusker. 'Who should I tell? Why, I should tell o' myself tew, at that raate; an' is that likely?'

'It's dangerous, missus,' repeated the wizard.

'Well, if yo' won't, I must try them as wull,' said Mrs. Jenny, rising and taking up the coins.

'I didn't say as I wouldn't,' returned Rufus. 'Theer's no call to be so uppish. But if I tek a chance like that I expect to be paid for it.'

'Two pound ud mek it wuth your while to do more than that.'

'I'll dew it,' said the wizard. 'Give us the money?'

'Wheer's the stuff?'

'Why, it ain't made yet. D'you think as I can percure a precious hessence like that all of a minute?'

'Then mek it, an' I'll gie you the money.'

'Gi' me a pound in advance, an' I'll bring it to you.' And on that understanding the bargain was made, and the time fixed for the delivery of the potion. The intervening time was filled in by the astute wizard journeying to a neighbouring town and procuring from a chemist a sleeping draught, which he paid for out of Mrs.

Busker's sovereign. He turned up at Laburnum Cottage at the stipulated hour, handed over the draught (having previously washed off the chemist's label), received his second sovereign, and departed.

Mrs. Rusker, with the fateful bottle in the bosom of her dress, betook herself again to Mountain Farm. Her unfeigned interest in the patient, and the intimacy she had so long enjoyed with the whole family, made the house almost as free to her as was her own, and when she took possession of Julia in the capacity of nurse she was made welcome, and the poor girl's other attendants hoped much from her ministrations. Julia was undoubtedly very ill, so ill that even Samson Mountain forbore to force her to descend to the parlour in which Mr. Tom Raybould nervously awaited her coming, and where, on Samson's return from his daughter's chamber, the pair sat and drank their beer together in miserable silence, broken by spasmodic attempts at conversation regarding crops and politics. The doctor had been called in, and, knowing nothing of the grief which was the poor girl's only ailment, had been too puzzled by the symptoms of her malady to be of any great service. She was feverish, excited, with a furred tongue and a hot skin. He had prescribed a mild tonic and departed. Mrs. Jenny, intent on the execution of her plan, gained solitary charge of her patient by telling Mrs. Mountain that her attendance on her daughter had already told upon her, and advising a few hours' rest.

'I don't feel very well,' Mrs. Mountain confessed. 'Not a wink o' sleep have I had iver since Samson came home last night. Nor him nayther, for the matter o' that, though he tried to desave me by snorin', whinever I spoke to him; an' as for any sympathy—well, you know him aforetime, Jenny—I might as well talk to that theer poker.'

Then Jenny was fluent in condolence, and at last got the old lady out of the room.

'When did you take your medicine last, my dear?' she asked the patient 'Ain't it time as you had another drop?'

'It doesn't do me any good,' said the patient fretfully. She knew better herself what was wrong with her than anybody else could guess, and only longed passionately to be alone and free to think and cry over her lost love and broken hopes.

'Why, my dear, you've on'y took one dose yit,' said Machiavel. 'You must give it time. I'll pour you out another.' Her back was towards the patient as she clattered about among the glasses on the table with a shaking hand. She poured out the wizard's potion, the phial clinking against the edge of the glass like a castanet, and her heart beating so that she almost feared Julia would hear it. The girl at first pettishly refused the draught, but Mrs. Jenny, in her guilty agitation, made short work of her objections, and poured it down her throat almost by main force.

'Maids must do as their elders bid 'em,' she said, as she returned the glass to its place.

'It doesn't taste the same,' moaned the patient

'You're like all th' other sick folk I iver nursed. As fall o' fancies as you can stick,' said Mrs. Jenny. 'Lie quiet, and try an' go to sleep.'

The girl lay silent, and Mrs. Jenny, more than half wishing the whole business had never been begun, sat and listened to her breathing. She stirred and sighed once or twice, but after a while lay so utterly still that the old lady ventured to approach the bed. Julia's face was almost as white as her pillow, and her breath was so light that it hardly stirred the coverlet above her bosom.

'It's a-workin,' said Mrs. Rusker.

VI

Mrs. Jenny's simple faith in the talents of Rufus Smith underwent a severe trial during the ensuing night. She had left Julia still sleeping, and the memory of the last glance she had bestowed upon the white face in the light of the carefully-shaded candle haunted her all night, and roused a foreboding too dismal to be expressed, or even formulated in definite thought. The matchmaker lay and trembled all night at that terrible idea, and again the pale-faced dawn visited a sleepless pillow, and found her haggard with anxiety and lack of sleep. Juliet's query to the Friar had been, 'What if the potion should not work?' but Mrs. Jenny's terrified inquiry of her own soul was, 'What if it had worked too well?' What if it had killed Julia in very deed? It was too horrible to happen, Mrs. Jenny said to herself. Too horrible to think of. But, if it had happened, she would have nothing else to think of all her life, and the fancy drove her nearly mad.

She was dressed and afoot even earlier than on the preceding morning. She crept out and encircled the Mountain Farm in a radius of a mile or thereabouts, looking anxiously towards it at every step, as if its silent walls might speak comfort or confirm her fears, even at that distance. The house looked peaceful enough amid its surrounding trees under the tranquilly broadening light of dawn, but Mrs. Rusker knew how ghastly white the face of the poor child she loved as her own might look in that roseate glow. Presently a thin line of smoke curled from a chimney on the noiseless air. The farm was waking to its daily round of life. A burly figure on horseback came towards her as she stood on a little eminence. She waited long enough to identify Samson Mountain, and hid among the ferns and bushes until the horse's hoof-beats had clattered swiftly by on the stony road below her, and faded in the distance.

Time crept on, slow but inexorable. She longed, as she had never longed before for anything, for the courage to go to the farmhouse and ask tidings of Julia. But her fear was greater than her longing, and she roamed at random in a circle, never losing sight of the house, but not daring to approach it or be seen from its windows. She dreaded what might be the news to greet her there. She feared her own face, with its haggard lines of sleeplessness and anxious watching. At last, from the very depths of her misery, she plucked the heart of despairing hope, and made for the farm. The farm labourers and country folk she met stared after her. Even their bovine understandings were troubled by her scared face. She scarcely saw them, or

anything but the farmhouse, which drew her now with an influence as strong as its repulsion had been an hour ago. She entered the house by the back door, and made straight for the sitting-room. Mrs. Mountain was there, arranging a tray, on which were tea and jam and other homely luxuries. She wore her ordinary look of placid contentment, and at the sight of her quiet face Mrs. Rusker dropped panting, with a vague unformulated feeling of relief, into a chair.

'Sakes alive! Whatever is the matter?' demanded Mrs. Mountain.

'Julia!' panted the visitor. 'How's Julia?'

'Why,' said Mrs. Mountain, 'how should her be?'

'Is she awake yet?' asked Mrs. Jenny, more calmly.

'No. Her was sleepin' when I seed her, jist for a minute, a hour ago. I'm jist goin' upstairs wi' some breakfast for her. Well, I declare, yo' look as pale as a ghost. What's the matter with you?'

'Oh, I've passed a miserable night,' said Mrs. Jenny, in unconscious quotation from her favourite poet. 'I couldn't sleep a-thinkin' o' Julia.'

'Well, then, you do look poorly,' said her hostess, with all her motherly heart warmed by this solicitude for her daughter. 'Why, theer's no cause to fret i' that way. To be sure, Samson might ha' knowed better than to blunder such a thing as that right out, but, then, he's a man, and that'd account for a'most anything. Married life might teach 'em better, you'd think, and yet after nigh on forty year on it he knows no more about women folk than any bachelor i' Barfield. Theer, tek your bonnet off, an' I'll gi' ye a cup o' tay, an' then you can goo upstairs wi' me and see the wench.'

Mrs. Jenny gratefully accepted the proffered tea, and, having drunk it, much to her inward refreshment, accompanied Mrs. Mountain upstairs. As the latter had said, the girl was sleeping still, and Mrs. Busker saw that her position had not changed by a hair's breadth. She lay like a carven statue, her face marble white in the clear morning light.

'I'm a'most doubtful about wakin' her,' said her mother. 'Theer's no doubt as Samson gi'en her a shock, an' sleep's good for her. But her's had welly fifteen hours of it now, if she's been asleep all the tima Julia, my love,' she said softly, almost in the sleeper's ear. 'My sakes, how pale her is. Jenny! come here!'

They both bent above her. Mrs. Rusker's heart was beating like a muffled drum, and seemed, to her own ears, to fill the house with its pulsation.

'Julia!' said Mrs. Mountain again, in a louder voice, and shook the girl with a tremulous hand, 'Julia!'

The white eyelids did not even stir.

'My blessid! Julia! Don't skeer a body i' this way!' She shook the girl again. 'Jenny! whatever's come to the silly wench?'

Mrs. Jenny was more frightened, and with better reason, than her companion. Julia's marble pallor, and the awful stillness of her form—the keenest glance could not detect a quiver in the face or a heave of the bosom—almost stilled that exigent pulse within her own breast with a sudden anguish of despair.

'Oh, Jenny, she's a-dyin!'

Mrs. Mountain's scream rang through the house, and startled every soul within it, except that marble figure on the bed. Hurried steps came up the stairs, the heavy tread of a man, the light patter of women's feet, and the room filled as if by magic.

'Fetch a doctor,' screamed Mrs. Jenny; 'Julia's a-dyin!'

Samson Mountain stood for one moment with his hands aloft and his eyes glaring at his daughter. Then he dropped with a sobbing groan into a chair, with his head in his hands. There was a general scream from the women. One, more serviceable than the rest, called from the window to a gaping yokel below in the yard, and bade him ride for help. Her face and voice froze him for a moment, but he caught the words 'Miss Julia,' and two minutes after he was astride a broad-backed plough-horse, making for the distant village.

Samson Mountain sat with his face hidden and spoke no word; at the sight of him his wife's face had turned to sudden rage, and she stood over him like a ruffled hen, and clacked commination of masculine imbecility, intermixed with wild plaints for her child.

Julia slept through the tumult as she had slept through the calm, and Mrs. Jenny, kneeling beside her with her face in the bedclothes, moaned love and penitent despair. Samson raised his head at last, and looked with a dazed stare first at his daughter and then at his wife, and left the room without a word, pursued by a hailstorm of reproach. He went into the yard and pottered aimlessly about, looking old and broken on a sudden. The sound of horses' hoofs roused him; it was the rustic messenger returning. 'Where's the doctor?' demanded Samson. 'Gone to Heydon Hey. What am I to dew?' 'Follow him an' fetch him back. Hast not gumption enough to know that?' asked Samson wearily. The man started again, and Samson began once more his purposeless wanderings about the yard. He had no sense of time or place, only a leaden weight on heart and limb, which in all his life he had never known before. He leaned his elbows on the fence of the fold yard, and became conscious of a running figure which neared him rapidly. He watched it stupidly, and it was within twenty yards of him before he recognised it—Dick Reddy, dust and mud to the collar, hatless, and panting.

'Julia!' he gasped. 'Tell me, is it true?' 'Julia's dyin,' said Samson. 'My God!' he cried, with sudden passion, as if his own voice had unlocked the sealed fountain of his grief, 'my little gell's a-dyin!'

'Mr. Mountain,' said Dick, 'I love her, you know I love her. Let me see her.' His voice, broken with fatigue and emotion, his streaming eyes, his outstretched hands, all pleaded with his words.

'It's all one who sees her now,' said Samson, and leaned his elbows on the fence again. Dick took the despairing speech for a permission, and entered the house. At the bottom of the stairs, in the otherwise deserted hall, he met Mrs. Jenny, a very moving statue of terror.

'Dick,' she said, clutching the young man by the arm, 'I can't abear it any longer. Come in here wi' me.' She pulled him into a side room, and sitting down, abandoned herself to weeping, wringing her hands, and moaning.

'I can't abear it any longer,' she repeated. 'I must tell somebody, an' I'll tell you. It's all my wicked cruel fault.'

The old woman was so crazed with her secret that she would have spoken in the shadow of the gibbet. Ramblingly and incoherently, with many breaks for tears and protestations and self-accusation, she told her story.

'I've killed her, Dick. But it was for your sake and hers as I done it. I reckon they'll hang me, an' it'll serve me right.' She besought him not to betray her, and, in the same breath, announced her intention to surrender herself at once to the parish constable; and, indeed, between fear and remorse and sorrow for the hopeless love she had striven to befriend, was nearly mad. Dick heard her with such amazement as may be best imagined, and suddenly, with a cry that rang in her ears for many a long day afterwards, ran from her and scaled the stairs to Julia's room, led thither by the sound of Mrs. Mountain's weeping. The old woman stared, as well she might, at the intrusion, with a wonder which for a moment conquered sorrow. He went straight to the bed, and leaned over the stark figure upon it.

'She's not dead yet,' he said, more to himself than to the grief-stricken mother. Mrs. Mountain heard the words, and clutched his arm. He turned to her. 'Trust me,' he said, 'and I'll save her.' The wild hope in the mother's eyes was terrible to see. 'I love her,' said Dick. 'You will trust me? Do as I bid you, and you shall have Julia back in an hour.'

Samson Mountain meanwhile wandered in the same purposeless fashion about the farm, and held dumb converse with himself. He was a rough man, something of a brute—a good deal of an animal—but animals have their affections, and he loved Julia as well as it was in his nature to love anything. It was ingrained in him by nature and by years of unquestioned domination to bully and browbeat all defenceless people; but Julia, the most defenceless of his surroundings, had been treated always with a lighter hand. Childlike, she had taken advantage of her immunity in many little ways, and though Samson had never forborne to bluster at her girlish insubordination, he rather liked it than not, and relished his daughter's independence and spirit. Julia was the only creature in the household who dared to hold her own against him. He was proud of her beauty and what he called her 'lurning,' and, more or less grumblingly, petted her a good deal, and would have spoiled her had she been of spoilable material. But till this heavy blow fell he had never sounded the depths of his own affection for her. The suddenness of the blow stunned and bewildered him. He remembered his words to Dick during their stormy interview in the road, when he had said that he would rather see Julia dead than married to him. Had Providence taken him at his word? He did not say it, he did not even think it consciously, but he would have submitted to almost any conceivable indignity at the hands of Abel Eddy himself, to have felt his daughter's arms about his neck again. Little incidents of Julia's past life were fresh and vivid in his memory. He had forgotten many of them, years ago, but they sprang up in his mind now, like things of yesterday.

He had wandered back to the front of the house, and sat upon the rustic bench beside the porch, with his elbows propped upon his knees, and his eyes hidden in his shaking hands, when a voice fell on his ear.

'Neighbour!'

He raised his head. Abel Reddy stood before him.

With something of the old instinct of hatred he had believed to be unconquerable he rose and straightened himself before the hereditary enemy.

'Neighbour,' said Reddy again. The word was pacific, but Mountain's blurred eyes, dim with pain and dazzled by the sunlight, could not see the pity in his old enemy's face, and he waited doggedly. 'It's come to my ears as you're i' sore trouble. So am I. Your trouble's mine, though not so great for me as it is for you, I was wi' Dick when he heard o' your daughter's danger, an' what I'd suspected a long time I know now to be the truth. I did my best to keep 'em apart—it was that as Dick was going to London for. It seemed to behove me to come to you and offer you my hand i' your affliction. I take shame to myself that I didn't mek an effort to end our quarrel long ago. We're gettin' on in life, Mr. Mountain, and we've got th' excuse o' hot blood no longer.'

Therewith he held out his hand, and Samson, with hanging head, took it with a growl, which might have been anathema or blessing. And as the life-long enemies stood so linked, a window was suddenly opened above, and Mrs. Mountain's voice screamed to her husband,

'Samson! Her's alive! Her's awake! Both men looked up, and beheld an unexpected picture framed by the open window, Dick violently embraced by Mrs. Mountain, and submitting to the furious assault with obvious goodwill.

'When the liquor's out, why clink the cannikin?' The story of Julia and her Romeo, like all other stories, had found its end, and merged a little later into the history of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Reddy. The family feud was buried, and Samson and Abel made very passable grandfathers and dwelt in peace one with another. Dick never told a living soul, not even Julia herself, of the stratagem by which Mrs. Jenny had succeeded in uniting them, and Mrs. Jenny, by complete reticence on the subject, disproved the time-worn calumny which declares woman's inability to keep a secret.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JULIA AND HER ROMEO: A CHRONICLE OF CASTLE BARFIELD ***

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