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"Eli's Children"

"The Chronicles of an Unhappy Family"

Part 1, Chapter I.

Part 1 — The Rectory Folk.

Hot Water in Lawford.

“Eh? What?”

“I say, why don’t you give it up quietly?”

“Speak up; I’m a little hard of hearing.”

“I say, why don’t you give it up quietly?” roared the speaker to a little bent old man, with a weak, thin, piping voice, and a sharp look that gave him somewhat the air of a very attenuated sparrow in a severe frost, his shrunken legs, in tight yellow leather leggings, seeming to help the idea.

“Don’t shout at me like that, Master Portlock. I arn’t deaf, only a trifle hard of hearing when I’ve got a cowd—just a trifle, you know.”

“Have you got a cold?” asked the man addressed, a sturdy-looking, fresh-coloured, middle-aged man, with a very bluff manner, and a look of prosperity in his general appearance that made him seem thoroughly adapted to his office. In fact, he was just the man that a country clergyman would be glad to elect at a vestry meeting for vicar’s churchwarden. “Eh?”

“I—say—have—you—got—a—cold? Hang him, how deaf he is!”

“Oh, no! oh, no!” chirped the little old man, sharply; “I’m not deaf. Just a little thick i’ the ears. Yes; I’ve got a cowd. It’s settled here—just here,” he piped, striking himself upon his thin chest with the hand that held his stick. “A bad cowd—a nasty cowd as keeps me awake all night, doing nowt but cough. It’s that stove, that’s what it is, Master Portlock.”

“Nonsense, man! It would keep the cold off.”

“Eh?”

“I say it would keep the cold off.”

“Nay, nay; not it. A nasty, brimstone-smelling, choking thing, as sends out a reek as settles on your chest. Stove, indeed! What do we want with your noo-fangled stoves? We never had no stoves before. Here he stops away from town all these years, only coming now and then, and now all at once he’s back at the Rectory, and nothing’s right. Mr Paulby never said a word about no stoves.”

“No; but see how damp the church was.”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

“Damp,” roared the Churchwarden; “church—damp. Cush—shuns—moul—dee.”

“Chah! Nonsense, Master Portlock. Damp? Suppose it was? A chutch ought to be damp, and smell solemn like of owd age and venerations. Mouldy? Ay; why not?” he piped. “’Mind ta chutch folk o’ decay, and what they’re comin’ to some day. I once went to London, Master Portlock—forty year ago now, sir—forty year ago. It was cowd weather, and I got ’most froze a’ top o’ the coach, and it was a ’mazin’ plaace. Ay, that it was. But you’ve been there?”

“Ay, lots o’ times in my life.”

“Niver been in your life? Then don’t go. Niver go if you can help it. Owd Mr Burton paid for me to go, he did—owd vicar’s father, you know—and he said to me a did, ‘Mind ta go and see some o’ the London chutches, Warmoth,’ he says; and I did, and bless thou, pretty places they weer. I niver see a playhouse, but Sammy Mason wint to one i’ London, and he towd me what it were like, and the chutch I went into i’ the City weer just like it. Why, mun, theer were a big picter ower the ’mandments, and carpets on the floors, and all the pews was full o’ red cushions an’ basses, just as if they was all squires’ sittings, and brass rails and red curtins an’ grand candlesticks. Then reight up i’ the gallery wheer the singers sit was a great thing all covered wi’ goolden pipes, an’ a man i’ the front sittin’ lookin’ at his self i’ a lookin’ glass. That was t’ organ, you know, and eh, but it was a straange sort o’ plaace altogether to call a chutch.”

“Not like our old barn, eh, Sammy?” shouted the Churchwarden.

“Nay, not a bit, Master Portlock,” piped the old man. “Gi’e me whitewesh, and neat clean pews and a plait-straw cushion and bass. Folk don’t go to sleep then, and snore through t’ sarmunt. If I had my way, Master Portlock, I wouldn’t hev a thing changed.”

“No, I suppose not, Sam,” said the Churchwarden, nodding.

“Sixty years have I been clerk o’ t’ owd chutch, and hae buried generations of them as comed to the owd place—christened ’em, and married ’em, and buried ’em, Master Portlock. They didn’t like me being made clerk so young in them days. Jacky Robinson, as wanted to be clerk when father died, said I was nobbut a boy, but t’ owd vicar said—owd Master Willoughby, you didn’t know him?” The Churchwarden shook his head. “No; he died eight and fifty year ago. He said, ‘No; let Sammy Warmoth step into his father’s shoes, same as him as is dead stepped into his father’s shoes. I find,’ he says, ‘there’s been Warmoth’s clerks here for a hundred years at least;’ and now, Master Portlock, sir, I can say there’s been Warmoths clerks here for a hundred and sixty year, and if my life is spared I’ll make it two hundred, for they can’t turn me out, and I wean’t go.”

“How old wert ta when you was made clerk, Sammy?” said the Churchwarden, looking at the old man with a pitying smile. “Thrutty-three, and I was just married, Master Portlock, and thrutty-three and sixty makes ninety-three, eh?”

“Fine owd age, Sam.”

“Eh?”

“A fine owd age, I say.”

“Chah! Not it. Read your Bible more, man. Ninety-three’s as good as nowt to what men used to be. Nay, nay, nay, I shan’t give up. Yow may go and tell parson as theer’s lots o’ life in me yet, and that he’d best go back again to London and foreign parts, and leave us alone here wi’ Mr Paulby. He’ll drive all the congregation over to the Dissenters, they’re talking a’ready o’ building noo chapel for ta Wesley folk.”

“Ay, they’re going ahead, Sammy, but we don’t care for the opposition shop. We’ve got the old established bank, eh?”

“That’s a true word, Master Portlock,” piped the old man, “and we can pity ’em, wi’ their plans and local preachers, a set o’ nobodies, o’ sons o’ Levi, takking off their aprons and running fro’ behind their counters to usurp the priest’s office; but you mark my words, and you may tell parson what I say; if he’s coming down here thinking to do just as he likes, he’ll be driving all folk to chapel.”

“No, no; not he, Sammy.”

“Ay, but he will, altering ta chutch sarvice, an’ upsetting all that’s owd—schoolmaster, and clerk, and chutch. You tell him that he may keep his man till I’m dead, and then put him in, for I nivver had a boy o’ my own to tak’ my place.”

“But he hasn’t got a man.”

“Eh? Not got a man? Good job too. He don’t want one?”

“No. He isn’t going to have a clerk any more.”

“Eh?”

“I say you’ll be the last clerk o’ Lawford. There’ll nivver be another.”

“Nivver be another? What dost ta mean?”

“Mr Mallow is going to do the service wi’out a clerk,” roared the Churchwarden.

“Do sarvice wi’out a clerk!” piped the old man, indignantly; “who’s to say t’ ‘Amens’?”

“Congregation and singers.”

“An’ what ’bout t’ ’sponses?” quavered the old clerk.

“People!”

They were standing in the churchyard, walled up high above the town street, and as the Churchwarden spoke the old clerk placed his left hand across the small of his back, and stamping his stick on the cobble stones of the path, he made an effort to straighten himself up so as to gaze at the venerable mouldering square-towered church, taking it in from end to end with his pale grey eyes before resuming his former attitude with his head on one side.

“Not going to have another clerk?” he quavered.

“No,” roared the Churchwarden.

“No one to say t’ amens and ’sponses?”

“No.”

“Who’s t’ help him on wi’ his gownd?”

The Churchwarden shook his head.

“Who’s going to shut pulpit door?”

There was another shake of the Churchwarden’s head.

“Then who’ll gi’e out t’ psalms?”

“Parson.”

“Ah!” ejaculated the old man, staring down at his feet.

“Look here, Sammy,” said the Churchwarden, kindly, and with his lips close to the old man’s ear; “Mr Mallow’s a nice sort o’ man, and means kindly.”

“No one to say t’ amens?” said the old clerk, softly.

“He thinks you’re getting too owd for the work.”

“Nobbut t’ people to say the ’sponses,” continued the old clerk, without seeming to hear the Churchwarden’s words.

“He’s been talking to us at sort o’ meeting, and he wants to get up testimonial for thee. Says we owt to make un enew to mak’ thee comfortable to end o’ thee days, and he’ll give twenty pounds towards it, and you’re to have one of the Bede Houses.”

“How’s he going to bury them as dies?” piped the old man, suddenly.

The Churchwarden shook his head.

Old Sammy Warmoth took a couple of feeble steps towards the edge of the path, and began to poke at the loose, friable earth of the grave nearest to him with the long brass ferrule of his stick, taking two hands to the task, and making quite a little hole.

“It’s getten time I was put down theer,” he said, in a low voice that was very pathetic in its tones. “There’s a sight o’ my owd friends I’ve seen put down here, and its getten time for me to be put along wi’ ’em, sown a corruptible body to be raised an incorruptible, for I spose I’m getten owd and good for nowt.”

“Oh, nay, nay, Sammy,” said the Churchwarden, warmly. “Don’t take on about it. Tak’ my advice. Don’t be obstinit, but just go up and see parson quiet like, an’ say you give up, and tak’ it kindly, an’ I’ll see as you don’t come to no wrong.”

“No one to say t’ amens,” muttered the old man—“no one to say t’ ’sponses—no one to gi’e out t’ psalms. Why,” he cried, raising his voice, “I b’lieve it now.”

“Believe what, Sammy?”

“That he’s goin’ to have t’ owd pews out, and put i’ benches; and I said when I heerd it as the dead wouldn’t rest i’ theer graves if he did.”

“It’s all true, Sammy. They’re going to spend three thousand pounds i’ doing up t’ owd church, and young Lord Artingale’s going to give us an organ.”

“Then I wean’t go,” cried the old man, stamping his stick down on the stones. “I’ll nivver do it. I’ve been here clerk and saxton these sixty year, and I helps wi’ ivvery grave even now. It wean’t do. It’s a revvylootion, and a sweeping away of t’ owd chutch, like they did among the French, and I’ll be one o’ the faithful while I live.”

“Nonsense, man; come, say thou’lt give up quiet like,” said the Churchwarden, soothingly. “Eh?”

“Say thou’lt give up quietly.”

“Nivver, nivver!” quavered the old man, angrily. “It’s as much my chutch as his, and if he goes wrong wi’ his new notions and idees, I’ll stand by mine. There’s nivver been a clerk o’ Lawford as didn’t die a clerk, and dost ta think I’ll be the first, Master Portlock? Nivver. I’ll howd by chutch till t’ last, say what thou will!”

“Poor owd boy!” said the Churchwarden, as he stood watching the tottering figure descending the slope on the farther side of the churchyard, till it seemed from where the gazer stood as if the old man were sinking slowly into a grave. First he disappeared to the middle, then the path line was level with his shoulders, and a few moments more and his head had gone.

“Poor owd boy!” said the Churchwarden, musingly. “It can’t be for long. I’ll ask parson to let him stop.”

Part 1, Chapter II.

The Rectory Girls.

“I love the country! I love the country!”

“Hush, hush, Cynthy! don’t be so childish; some one will hear you.”

“No one is near us, Ju. That’s why I like being down here.”

“But it is so childish to keep running up the banks and shouting like that.”

“Well, but that’s what I like. It’s the country air makes one feel so young, and I am so, so glad that we are going to stay at home. I want to know the people. Oh, I was tired of the Continent. I want to be free.”

“Now, Cynthy, what would papa say if he saw you climb up on that gate?”

“Don’t know—don’t care!”

“Well, then,” said Julia Mallow, smiling, “what, would Lord Artingale say?”

“That I was a jolly little girl, and come and sit beside me.”

“Oh! Cynthy!”

“And put his arm round my waist to keep me from falling off. Oh, I say, Ju, he did once, and it was so funny.”

“Cynthy, I’m ashamed of you,” cried her sister, and there was a slight deepening of the colour in her sweet English face.

“Well, I am ashamed of myself,” cried Cynthia, springing lightly off the gate, and passing her arm round her sister as they walked on along the rutty lane. “But I do feel so happy, Ju. So will you some day, when you meet the special him. Not Perry-Morton though. Ha, ha, ha! How stupid papa is! I say, Ju, though, who shall we go and see? Papa says we are to visit the people a great deal, and get them to know more of us, but I shan’t go near any of the horrid Dissenters.”

“Don’t call people horrid because they don’t think the same as we do, Cynthy.”

“Well, but it is horrid. Papa says it’s dreadful, the opposition that is in the town. I heard him say to mamma yesterday that he couldn’t understand the people a bit, and that though he had now come to settle down amongst them for good, only when we go to town for the season, everybody seemed so independent, and they were all in opposition to him.”

“Yes, he was talking to Mr Paulby about it at dinner on Tuesday.”

“Papa is going to improve everything, he says. The place must have been terribly neglected by Mr Paulby. Oh, what a funny little man he is!”

“I think him very nice and genuine,” said Julia, quietly.

“But you mustn’t fall in love with him, Ju. He’s too old. But I say, what was the real reason of our being away from Lawford so much?”

“Money matters,” said her sister. “Papa got to be very much behindhand through Frank and Cyril.”

“Oh, I wish I were a man!” cried Cynthia, with her pretty fair young face flushing. “How I would have whipped those two fellows and made good boys of them! They’ve half broken poor mamma’s heart.”

“I’m afraid papa indulged them too much,” said Julia, quietly, and the two girls walked on for some little distance in silence, enjoying the briskness of the morning air.

“Now where are we going?” cried Cynthia suddenly. “Oh, I know. Down that lane leads to the ford, where the wheelwright’s is. Let’s go and see Polly Morrison.”

“Shall we?” said her sister, smiling.

“Oh, yes. It will be a parochial visit all the same. Only fancy, Polly with a baby! What a little stupid she was to leave us to come back here and marry a wheelwright!”

“I don’t know,” said Julia quietly; “perhaps she is very happy.”

“Oh, of course. People are when they get married. Come along; I want to see Polly’s baby. I wish she had not left us. She was such a clever maid.”

“I was very glad she went,” said Julia gravely.

“Glad? Why?”

“Because of Cyril. He was always following her about. She complained to me several times.”

“Cyril is a wretch!” said Cynthia, with heightened colour. “Papa ought to whip him. He always would look at pretty girls. I say, Ju, did you see Miss Portlock, the schoolmistress, on Monday? Was she nice?”

“Yes, I thought her very nice and superior. She is the churchwarden’s niece. Hush! here is Mr Paulby.”

“Good-morning, ladies,” said a little plump man, raising his hat and showing his slightly-bald head. “What a lovely morning! I think I dare prophesy where you are going.”

“If you prophesy Morrison’s cottage, Mr Paulby, you are right,” said Cynthia, merrily.

“Then I am right,” said the curate. “I have just come from there, and Mrs Morrison has been chatting about old times, and how she went all over the Continent with you.”

“She didn’t tell you about Cyril, I know,” said Cynthia to herself.

“I’m really very, very glad, ladies, that the rectory is inhabited again,” said the curate, “and I hope you will help me a great deal.”

“That indeed we will, Mr Paulby,” said Julia.

“Yes, and visit, and do needlework, and help in the schools, and everything,” said Cynthia, quickly. “And now we must say good-morning, Mr Paulby. Come, Julia.”

There was the customary hand-shaking and raising of the curate’s hat, and then they separated, the little plump rosy man looking very thoughtful as he made some observation to himself, and that observation was “Hah!” a remark that evidently meant a great deal.

“I’m not going to allow that, Ju,” said Cynthia, decidedly. “The little man is quite smitten with you, and if Frank or Cyril were to know—”

“Don’t be absurd!” said her sister, colouring a little.

“That would be as bad as Perry-Morton. Oh, here we are. Why, what a pretty little place Polly has got!”

The sisters stopped at the road-side to gaze at the long low ivy-covered cottage, with a broad patch of green in front, upon which was a lumber of broken carts and waggons waiting to be doctored. There was a shed at one end, from which came the sound of sawing, for which job there was a good-sized pit, while farther on the road dipped suddenly down and passed through a little river, which foamed and bubbled and sparkled as it turned the gravelly shallows into liquid silver in the morning sun.

“Oh, what a funny little thing!” cried Cynthia, as they were welcomed into the neat cottage. “Look at its little button-hole of a mouth. Let me take it, Polly.”

The young mother, quite a rustic beauty, with a touch of refinement in her appearance, picked up during her stay on the Continent as maid to the rector’s daughters, handed her plump little baby to the extended arms; watchfully, though, and as if afraid the treasure might be dropped upon the red-brick floor.

“And how are you, Polly?” said Julia, looking rather searchingly at the young wife as she set chairs for her visitors. “I hope you are very happy?”

“Oh, as happy, Miss Julia, as the day is long, and I’m so busy that the days are never long enough.”

“Cooey, cooey, cooey, cooey!” cried Cynthia to the baby in a very dove-like manner, as she kissed and fondled it, laughing merrily the while.

“I was so surprised, Miss, to hear that you had come back to the rectory.”

“Not going to stop very long this time, Polly—I mean Mrs Morrison,” said Cynthia, without raising her face from the baby. “We are going to town for the season. Oh, you, you, you funny little thing! There’s a wet mouth. Oh, I say, Ju, I wonder whether I shall ever have a baby of my own.”

“Cynthia!” cried her sister, reproachfully.

“It would be such fun. I say, Polly, is it good?”

“Oh, there never was such a good baby, Miss, and Tom worships it. She’s as good as gold.”

“She?” cried Cynthia. “Is it a she?”

“Oh, yes, Miss,” cried the young mother, proudly.

“How funny!” said Cynthia. “It might be anything, it is so round and soft.”

“Would you mind feeling how heavy she grows, Miss Julia?” said the young mother and the baby was duly handed to Julia, who held it to her cheek, and then gazed lovingly at the little thing, her eyes wearing a curious wistful aspect, full of tenderness, while the young mothers face lit up with pleasure.

“Isn’t it heavy, Miss?” she said.

“Wonderfully,” replied Julia quietly, and with as much decision as if her life had been spent in the management of babies.

“She don’t know!” laughed Cynthia. “I don’t believe she ever had hold of one before. Here, give it to me.”

“No; let it stay,” said Julia softly, and to the young mother’s great satisfaction, for she seemed rather scared lest Cynthia should let it fall in tossing it up and down.

“She gets heavier every day, Miss, and Tom says it’s wonderful now for a baby a month old.”

“You must introduce us to your husband, Polly.”

“Yes, Miss, I’ll call him in. Or no, Miss, not this morning,” said the young wife, rather hurriedly; “he is very busy.”

“Some other time then,” said Julia. “I suppose you are very fond of it, Polly?”

“Fond of it, Miss Julia? Oh, you can’t think how I love it.”

“No,” said Julia, softly, and looking curiously at the young mother, “I suppose not.”

“Oh, here is Budge,” said little Mrs Morrison, as a heavy, stolid-looking girl entered the room. “She will take baby now, Miss. There, Budge, take her in the kitchen, and don’t go too near the fire.”

“No, missus,” said the girl, taking the well-wrapped-up baby in her red arms, staring heavily the while at the visitors, and consequently nearly bringing her charge to grief by stumbling over a stool.

“Oh, Budge!” cried little Mrs Morrison.

“I ain’t hurt, missus,” said the girl coolly, and she allowed herself to be piloted out of the room by her mistress, when a chair was heard to scroop.

“Oh, how funny it does seem!” cried Cynthia.

“Hush! don’t talk like that,” said her sister; “here she is.”

Little Mrs Morrison came into the room again, looking very red-faced and hot.

“What a funny little maid you have got, Polly!” cried Cynthia.

“Yes, Miss Cynthia; she is from the workhouse, and she is a little clumsy, but she is very faithful, and so fond of baby.”

“And what is to be its name?” cried Cynthia.

“Rose, Miss; and—and,” stammered the young wife, looking very hard at Julia.

“And what, Polly?”

“I—I had a sort of idea, Miss Julia, that—”

“That what, Polly? Speak out!”

“Of asking you and Miss Cynthia if—”

“If what?”

“You wouldn’t mind being little Rose’s godmothers.”

“Oh, no, Polly,” said Julia, “I think not.”

“Oh, yes, Ju, it would be good fun,” cried Cynthia.

“I told Tom it would be too much to ask, Miss Julia; but he said you could only say *no*.”

“Of course,” said Julia, thoughtfully. “And he is very kind to you?”

“Oh, kind isn’t the word, Miss Julia,” cried the young wife.

“And are his relations kind to you too?”

“He has no relations, Miss, but one brother,” replied Polly, “and he is a good deal of trouble to him—I mean to us,” she added, correcting herself.

“Trouble to you, Polly?”

“Yes, Miss; he won’t work, and he has taken to a gipsy sort of life, and goes poaching, I’m afraid.”

“That’s *very*, very sad,” said Julia, remembering that her father had just been made chairman of the bench of magistrates.

“Yes, Miss, very, very sad, for we are always afraid of his getting into trouble; but there, you know, Miss, what brothers are.”

“Yes, yes,” said Julia, hastily. “I will think about what you said, Polly,” she added, rising, and holding out her hand, “and if papa does not object, Cynthia and I will be godmothers to baby.”

“Oh, if you would, Miss!” cried the young wife, flushing with pride; and then, in a low voice, as Cynthia went on out of the room, “You always were kind to me, Miss Julia, and more like a sister than a mistress. May I kiss you, Miss?”

“Oh, yes, Polly,” said Julia, kissing her smilingly.

“You always were kind to me, Miss, and there’s nothing in life I wouldn’t do for you if you wanted it.”

“Come, Ju,” cried Cynthia, from without.

“Oh, thank you, Polly, I know you would.”

“And you’d come and ask me, Miss, if you wanted help, wouldn’t you?”

“Indeed I would, Polly; but why do you ask me in that strange way?”

“Because—because, Miss, I want to ask a favour of you now,” cried the young wife, desperately.

“What is it, Polly?” said Julia, showing deep interest now.

“Please, Miss, you—you remember when we were at Dinan.”

“Yes, yes; what?” cried Julia.

“About Mr Cyril.”

“Yes,” cried Julia, catching her hand; “he has not dared?”

“He—he came here yesterday, Miss, while Tom was out,” cried Polly, bursting into tears, “and he came once before; and it frightens me, Miss—it horrifies me; for Tom loves me so dearly, Miss; and it would make him angry, and break his heart if he thought ill of me, Miss Julia.”

“But did you encourage him to come again?” cried Julia, angrily.

“No, Miss Julia, I nearly went on my knees to him, and begged him not to come again, but he only laughed, and—and called me a little fool.”

“You shall tell your husband, Polly,” cried Julia, hotly.

“I—I was afraid, Miss Julia,” sobbed Polly. “I was afraid of making mischief. I dared not tell him. If he thought Mr Cyril came here and troubled me, he would be ready to kill him, Miss, and me too. Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?”

“I’ll tell papa,” said Cynthia, who had come back unseen. “I declare it’s shameful, and I—I wish my brothers were both dead. Oh, Ju, papa must know.”

“No, no,” said Julia, holding the sobbing little woman to her breast; “Polly is right. It would be making terrible mischief. I’ll speak to Cyril myself, and if he will not listen to me, mamma shall try. But, Polly, you will tell me if he comes again?”

“Oh, yes, yes, Miss Julia,” cried the young wife, gazing up passionately in her visitor’s face.

“And always tell me the whole truth?”

“Indeed—indeed I will. Please, Miss Julia,” she said simply, “I don’t think I ever told a lie.”

“I don’t believe you ever did, Polly,” said Julia, kissing her, and turning to the door to go. “There, good-bye, and don’t be low-spirited. Cyril is soon going away again, and even if he is not, he shall not trouble you.”

“Thank you, Miss Julia, and you too, Miss Cynthia,” said the young wife, wiping her eyes; “and perhaps you will be at

baby’s christening?”

“If papa doesn’t object, indeed we will,” cried Julia, smiling, and the sisters went back along the lane.

“I would—I would indeed,” said the young mother, softly; “I’d do anything to serve dear Miss Julia, and I hope and pray she may never feel such trouble as I do now. Oh, if only they had stopped away!”

She was standing in the little porch, listening to the regular harsh sound of a saw in the work-shed, some fifty yards away, gazing after the sisters, till a step coming in the other direction made her sharply turn her head, and then, as she shrank back, her whole aspect seemed to change. She turned ghastly white, her eyes dilated, and she trembled visibly, as if at the sight of some great horror.

It was nothing so very terrible approaching either, being only a tall, well-built, handsome young man of six or seven and twenty, his hands in the pockets of his loose jacket, and a cigar in his mouth.

Part 1, Chapter III.

The State of Lawford.

Only some twenty years ago, but from the streets and surroundings of the place the date might have been in the last century. For Lawford was in an out-of-the-way part of Lincolnshire towards which one of the main northern lines had been running straight, but the company were beaten in Parliament, and the iron road curved off, leaving Lawford where it was—all behind.

When the new rector was appointed to the living he resolutely refused to go without a fresh rectory was built, for the old house, with its low rooms, was ten yards from the churchyard, which in the course of centuries had gone up, while the old rectory seemed to have gone down, so that you walked along a slope and then descended three steps into the ancient, damp, evil-smelling place, which had more the aspect of a furnished mausoleum than a house.

The consequence was that a grant was made for the building of a new rectory, which was erected a mile and a half out of the town; and as the living was rich, the Rev. Eli Mallow borrowed a couple of thousand pounds to have the house made handsomer, and to add conservatories and greenhouses to the place, got it all in excellent order, and then went on the Continent for a few years, when the old rectory did very well for Mr Paulby, the curate who was left in charge.

Difficulties of pocket had certainly had something to do with the absenteeism of the Rev. Eli Mallow, but there had been other troubles as well in connection with his sons, whom he had made several efforts to start in life and get away from Lawford. They were the sons of a clergyman, but two more unclerical youths never troubled father, and so unfortunate were his efforts, so persistently did the young men return home to their fond and indulgent mother and their proud weak father, that the Lawford people, famous among themselves for nick-naming those that they did not like, called Frank Mallow, the elder brother, “The Bad Shilling,” while Cyril, consequent upon a visit to Australia, they named “The Boomerang.”

They were an old-fashioned people at Lawford, and the “owd rector” had been old-fashioned too. It was past the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty, and Victoria was seated upon the throne, but the old rector thought it no wrong to go to one of the inns and sit and drink his mug of ale and chat and gossip with any townsman who came in.

As to the church, a colder, damper, more musty-smelling place could not have been found. Its glory was its whitewash, which was so rich and fat and thick that every here and there it bore a crop of curious spindly mushrooms, which grew and flourished and died, leaving great black patches on the walls like hatchments to record their vegetable deaths, till about once in a generation the whitewash brush came into use again, and a new coat was laid on to moulder and grow damp, and fall in patches of a goodly thickness upon the stained stone pave.

The worst of that whitewash was that it was not white, only a dirty wash that covered the ceiling and face of the wall, great blank patches of which used to be mentally studied by the schoolboys as maps of unknown regions, for the moisture that streamed down from the roof soon marked black rivers, while dark boundary lines seemed to be traced by cracks and mould of strange continents, islands, and seas, upon which in summer-time bluebottle flies and spiders made islands or cruising barks.

In the moist autumn times the place always broke out into a cold perspiration, the wet standing in great tears upon the flat tombstones and even upon the broad slab of old blackened oak that served for Sammy Warmoth’s desk, where his books, like those above his head, were patterned on their covers with white mould-spots exhaling an odour of mushrooms not fit to eat.

The pews were of dull white deal; the sacramental table was covered with a ragged green baize in the sere and yellow leaf, and as worthy of being called green as the church whitewash was of being termed white. Taken altogether, there was a strong suggestion on entering Lawford church of going into a cellar without the sawdust, and wanting in the wine; and old Mrs Marley, lately gone to her rest, and over whom as a very ancient friend Sammy Warmoth had affectionately patted down the earth with his spade, moistening it a little with his tears to make it stick, afterwards building up her grave with a mound of the finest, most velvety turf he could cut, that he protected with brambles from the sheep—old Mrs Marley, when she was schoolmistress, always made a point in winter of taking a large stone bottle of hot water with her to the church, smuggling it regularly beneath her cloak, and pitying the four-and-twenty blue-nosed little children, whom she led, because only two could sit by her at a time and warm their hands.

Humphrey Bone, the schoolmaster, also made a point of taking a bottle to church, but his was small, and he made occasions for bending his head beneath the front of the pew and imbibing portions of its contents through a very long turkey quill.

The church had remained *in statu quo* during the Rector's stay abroad, but now that he had returned, it was with ideas similar to the new broom—he meant to sweep clean. Perhaps the Rev. Eli Mallow was a little conscience-stricken for past neglect. At all events the Rector had now set himself to work on a general reform, but his absence had embittered a by no means friendly people.

"Taking that great wage out of the place year after year," said Tomlinson, one of the townspeople, "and leaving that curate to do all the work on eighty pounds a year; I haven't patience with him."

Several other fellow-townsmen expressed their opinions that it was a shame, and declared that they had not patience with the parson, and the consequence was that he was so talked over, that when he came back and set about his work of reformation he was met at his very first movement by a hedge of thorns that regularly surrounded the church. Every one of these thorns was a prejudice which he had to fight.

"Church did very well for t' owd rector, and always has done," was the cry; "why won't it do for he?"

"*Festina lente*," said the Reverend Eli to himself; and he set to work slowly, cautiously, and well, making such advance in his undertaking that plenty of money was promised, and he saw in the future a handsome, well-warmed church, with all the surroundings for reverent worship.

"Poor old fellow!" he had said to himself as he listened to the clerk, for the old man would utter the three first words of a response in a shrill tenor, and then drop his voice, nothing, else being heard until it came to the end, when to a new-comer his peculiar "*Hup-men*" was almost startling in its strangeness.

"*Week, week, week; wubble, wubble, wubble*," the school-children always declared he said, no matter what was the response; and then, after giving out the psalm or hymn so that no one could hear, the poor old fellow would sing in a shrill unmusical voice from behind a huge pair of tortoiseshell framed spectacles, holding his great hymn-book with both hands, and emphasising the words he sang by raising and lowering the book; turning to right and left, singing to the people below his desk, and then at the huge whitewashed beams of the ceiling, before turning three parts round to send his voice into the chancel, for the benefit of the old women from the Bede houses who sat there upon a very uncomfortable bench.

"I dare say it is very wrong," said Lord Artingale, who had ridden over from Gatton one Sunday to welcome the Mallows back to Lincolnshire, "but much as I want to be reverent, I really don't think I could go to your church again, Mr Mallow, without laughing in the middle of the service."

The Rector looked grave, for poor old Warmoth was a great trouble to him, and, as may be gathered, he had consulted the churchwardens on the question of the alterations, and among other things suggested that the old clerk should be asked to resign.

The effect we have seen, and that same day Portlock, the farmer, went up and told the result of his chat with the old clerk.

"It is very provoking, Mr Portlock, very. I want the old man to go quietly—in fact, to resign," said the Rector. "If I send him away the people will say that he is ill-used."

"That they will, depend on't," replied the Churchwarden. "Our folk take a deal o' driving."

"Well, well; what is to be done?"

"Best let things bide as they are, sir; you wean't do any good by trying to alter 'em."

"Oh, but that is absurd, Mr Portlock, highly absurd. No, I regret it very much, but he must go. There, I will see him myself."

The Rector saw the old clerk sooner than he expected, for in crossing the churchyard next day he met him going up to the church.

"Poor old fellow! ninety-three," said the Rector to himself, as he looked curiously at the strange old figure tottering up the rough cobble-stone path.

"Good-morning, Warmoth," he said. "Here, give me your hand."

The old man stopped short, thumped his stick down, and peered up fiercely.

"Nay, nay, nay," he groaned, "not so owd as all that, mester. I can do it yet. Let me bide, I'm reight yet. Yow want to get shut o' me—to drift me off. Yow thowt wi' your new ways that I wasn't good enew for t' church, but revvylootion or no revvylootion, I stick to church as my fathers did afore me. When I'm down theer, and can howd out no more, thou mun do thy worst."

"That's all put aside, Mr Warmoth," said the Rector, smiling. "I do want to make improvements here, but not to that extent. I did not want to hurt your feelings. Come, shake hands."

"Nay; I'll not," cried the old man, fiercely, his bearing seeming to have wonderfully altered now. "Thou want'st to get round me wi' soft words, but I'll howd thee off—I'll howd thee off. There ain't every servant of t' owd church like me,

and I'll howd my own unto the last."

"My good old fellow, Heaven forbid that I should be guilty of so unkind an act. You shall stop on, Warmoth, till the last, for no act of mine shall remove you from your post."

The old man's jaw fell, and he stepped back, slipped, and would have fallen, but for the Rector's hands, to which the old fellow clung spasmodically, his face working, his lips twitching in his efforts to speak. But for a long time no words would come, and then but two, twice repeated, though with earnest emphasis—

"Bless thee! Bless thee!"

Then, quickly snatching his hands away, the old man turned aside, leaned his trembling arm against a tombstone which had gradually encroached upon the path, and stood with his head bent down, trying to recover his strength.

It was a strange contrast: the thin, sharply featured old man, and the handsome portly figure of the Rector, as he stood there vexed with himself at having, as he called it, been so weak as to give way at the first difficulty that he had to encounter; and he afterwards came to the conclusion that he might just as well have held out, for the people gave him the credit of killing old Warmoth so as to have his way.

"Let me help you into the church to sit down for a bit," he said to the trembling old man.

Old Warmoth turned and laid one hand upon the Rector's, gazing up in his face, and there was a piteous smile upon his withered lips.

"I was afraid thou'd want me to go as soon as I heard thou was coming back; and they said thou'dst get shut o' me. But sixty year, sir! It would have killed me. I couldn't have beared to go."

Two Sundays later the congregation had just left the church, and Portlock was going up to the vestry, when he saw there was something wrong in the clerk's seat.

"Why, Sammy, owd man," he cried, "what ails—"

He did not finish his broken sentence, but tore open the door of the clerk's desk, the Rector coming forward to where the old man knelt in his accustomed narrow place, his hands upon his book, his head upon his breast, as he had knelt down after the sermon.

"He's like ice," whispered the Churchwarden, putting forth his great strength, and lifting the old man bodily out, to lay him by the stove, the Rector placing a cushion beneath his head.

The motion seemed to revive the old man for a moment, and he opened his eyes, staring strangely at the Rector, who held one hand.

Then his lips moved, and in a voice hardly above a whisper they heard him say—

"Bless—thou!—Bless—thou!—those words would—have killed me."

There was a pause, and the Churchwarden was hastening forth to fetch help, when there arose in the now empty church a shrill "*Amen*."

It was the old clerk's last.

Part 1, Chapter IV.

At Lawford School.

"Oh!" in a loud shrill voice; and then a general titter.

"Silence! who was that?"

"Please, Miss, Cissy Hudson, Miss. Please, Miss, it's Mr Bone."

This last delivered in a chorus of shrill voices; and Sage Portlock turned sharply from the semi-circle of children, one and all standing with their toes accurately touching a thickly-chalked line, to see a head thrust into the schoolroom, but with the edge of the door held closely against the neck, pressing it upon the jamb, so that the entire body to which the head belonged was invisible.

The head which had been thus suddenly thrust into the schoolroom was not attractive, the face being red and deeply lined with marks not made by age. The eyes were dull and watery, there was a greyish stubble of a couple of days' growth upon the chin, and the hair that appeared above the low brow was rough, unkempt, and, if clean, did no justice to the cleansing hand.

"How tiresome!" muttered Sage Portlock, moving towards the door, which then opened, and a tall man, in a very shabby thin greatcoat which reached almost to his heels, stumped into the room.

Stumped or thumped—either word will do to express the heavy way in which Humphrey Bone, thirty years master of Lawford boys' school, drew attention to the fact that he had one leg much shorter than the other, the difference in length being made up by a sole of some five inches' thickness, which sole came down upon the red-brick floor like

the modified blows of a pavior's rammer.

Such a clever man! Such a good teacher! the Lawford people said. There was nothing against him but a drop of drink, and this drop of drink had kept Humphrey Bone a poor man, dislocated his hip in a fall upon a dark night, when the former doctor of the place had not discovered the exact nature of the injury till it was too late, and the drop of drink in this instance had resulted in the partaker becoming a permanent cripple.

Lawford was such a slow-moving place in those days, that it took its principal inhabitants close upon twenty years to decide that a master who very often went home helplessly intoxicated, and who had become a hopeless moral wreck, living in a state of squalor and debt, could not be a fitting person to train and set an example to the boys left in his charge. And at last, but in the face of great opposition from the old-fashioned party arrayed against the Rev. Eli Mallow and his friends—the party who reiterated the cry that Humphrey Bone was such a clever man, wrote such a copperplate-like hand, when his fingers were not palsied, and measured land so well—it was decided that Humphrey Bone should be called upon to resign at Christmas, and Luke Ross, the son of the Lawford tanner, then training at Saint Chrysostom's College, London, should take his place.

It was only natural that Sage Portlock, as she advanced to meet Humphrey Bone, should think of the coming days after the holidays, when Mr Ross, whom she had known so well from childhood, should be master of the adjoining school, and that very unpleasant personage now present should cease to trouble her with visits that were becoming more and more distasteful and annoying.

"Mornin'! Ink!" said Mr Bone, shortly. "Ours like mud. How are you?"

"Ink, Mr Bone?" said the young mistress, ignoring the husky inquiry after her health. "Yes; one of the girls shall bring some in."

This and the young mistress's manner should have made Mr Humphrey Bone retire, but he stood still in the middle of the room, chuckling softly; and then, to the open-eyed delight of the whole school, drew a goose-quill from his breast, stripped off the plume from one side of the shaft, and, with a very keen knife, proceeded to cut, nick, and shape one of the pens for which he bore a great reputation, holding it out afterwards for the young mistress to see.

"That beats training, eh? Didn't teach you to make a pen like that at Westminster, did they, eh?"

"No," said Sage, quietly; "we always used steel pens."

"Hah—yes?" ejaculated the old schoolmaster, with a laugh of derision. "Steel pens—steel teaching—steel brains—they'll have steel machine teachers soon, who can draw a goose like that on a black board with a bit of chalk. Faugh!"

He pointed to one of a series of woodcuts mounted on millboard and hung against the whitewashed wall, stumped away three or four yards, and then returned.

"New ways—new theories—new machines! Wear the old ones out and chuck 'em away—eh?"

"I do not understand you, Mr Bone," said the young mistress, longing for the interview to come to an end; but he went on, speaking angrily, and ignoring her words—

"When old Widow Marley died, I said to Mallow and the rest of 'em, 'Knock a hole through the brick wall,' I said; 'make one school of it; mix 'em all up together, boys and gals. Give me another ten a year, and I'll teach the lot;' but they wouldn't do it. Said they must have a trained mistress; and here you are."

"Yes, I am here," said Sage Portlock, rather feebly, for she had nothing else to say.

"Only the other day you were a thin strip of a girl. Deny it if you can!"

"I do not deny it, Mr Bone," said Sage, determining to be firm, and speaking a little more boldly.

"No," he continued, in his husky tones, "you can't deny it. Then you leave Miss Quittenton's school, and your people send you to town for two years to be trained; and now here you are again."

Sage Portlock bowed, and looked longingly at the door, hoping for some interruption, but none came.

"And now—" began the old master.

"Mary Smith, take the large ink-bottle into the boys' school," said the young mistress, quickly; and the girl went to the school cupboard, took out the great wicker-covered bottle, and was moving toward the door, when the old master caught her by the shoulder, and held her back.

"Stop!" he said sharply. "Take it myself. Ha! ha!"

Sage started and coloured, for the children were amused.

"Ha, ha!—Ha—ha—ha—ha—ha!"

The old man continued his hoarse cachinnation, ending by wiping his eyes on a washed-out ragged old print cotton handkerchief.

"It makes me laugh," he said. "Young Ross—him I taught to write—evening lessons up at his father's house. Young Luke Ross! warmed him up like a viper in my breast to turn and sting me. Ha, ha, ha! Master here!"

“For shame, Mr Bone,” exclaimed the young mistress, indignantly. “Mr Ross never sought for the engagement. It was only after Mr Mallow’s invitation that he accepted the post.”

“Mr Mallow’s invitation, eh? The Rev. Eli Mallow, eh? Better look after his sons. Nice wild sons! Nice old prophet he is. Better look after his boys.”

“And only the other day when he was down, young Mr Ross said that he was doubtful about taking the post, and thought of declining it after all.”

“Told you so, eh? Ha—ha—ha! Not he. Sweet-hearting, eh? Ha—ha—ha! Very well, when he comes, knock a hole through the wall, and make one school of it, eh? Get married. Fine thing for the school. Faugh!” Sage Portlock’s face was now scarlet, and she was about to utter some indignant remonstrance against the old man’s words, when, to her intense relief, he took the ink-bottle roughly from the girl’s hand, and stumped with it to the door.

Before he reached it, however, there was a sharp rap. It was opened, the latch rattling viciously, and a common-looking woman, whose face told its own tale that its owner had been working herself up ready for the task in hand, entered, dragging behind her a freshly-washed girl of eleven or twelve, whose face bore the marks of recent tears.

“Youkem here,” exclaimed the woman, dragging in the unwilling child, and finishing by giving her a rough shake. “Youkem here, and I’ll see as you’re reighted, Miss.”

To Sage Portlock’s great disgust, instead of the old schoolmaster passing through the open door, he carefully closed it behind the woman, set the ink-bottle down upon a form, and, taking out his knife, began to remake the pen, well attent the while to what went on.

“Now, Miss, if you please,” said the woman, “I want to know why my girl was kep’ in yesterday and punished. I told my master last night I’d come on wi’ her this morning, and see her reighted; and, if *you* please, I want to know what she’s done.”

“I am sorry to say, Mrs Searby—” began the young mistress.

“Oh, you needn’t be sorry, Miss. Strite up and down’s my motto. I want to know what my ’Lizabeth’s done. There’s no getting her to school nowadays. When Mrs Marley was alive all the gals loved to come to school, but now they hates it, and all the noo-fangled ways.”

As the woman spoke, she darted a glance at the old schoolmaster, who chuckled softly, and shook his head.

“If you will allow me to speak—” began the young mistress.

“Oh, lor’, yes, Miss, I’ll allow yer to speak. I don’t forget my position. I’m only a humble woman, I am; but I says to my master only last night, the trouble there is to get them gals to school now is orful. When Mrs Marley was alive—”

“Your daughter, Mrs Searby—” began the young mistress, again.

“Yes, Miss, my daughter went to Mrs Marley, she did, and there was never no trouble with the gal then. As I said to Mrs Marley, I said, all she wants is properly putting forward, that’s all she wants; for there couldn’t be a quicker gal wi’ her book; but nowadays there’s no gettin’ of her to come; and when she do come she don’t larn a bit, with the noo-fangled ways, and gettins up and sittins down, and holdin’ out their hands, and being drilled, and stood out, and kep’ in for doing nowt. I say it isn’t fair to a child, for as I said to Mrs Marley, I said, and she said to me, all my gal wanted was putting forward, for a quicker gal with her book there never was, and now there’s no getting of her to school of a morning, and never no getting her back when she does come; and the boys as goes to Mr Bone a loving their master and their books, and a getting on wonderful. And now, if you please, Miss,” said the woman, with a derisive curtsey, and so far run down that she had to keep taking up the tantalising iteration of uneducated people in a fit of temper, “I want to know, if you please, what my gal has done.”

“Your daughter was very rude, very inattentive, refused to learn the lesson I set, and incited some of the older girls to insubordination, Mrs Searby, so that I was compelled, most reluctantly, to punish her as an example.”

The old master went on carving the quill to pieces, making and remaking it, till the amount of useful pen was getting very short, chuckling the while, and evidently enjoying the sidewise compliments directed at him and his old system by the irate woman.

“My gal not behaving herself! Why, she’s as good in school as her brothers is. She’s the best o’ gals at home; and poor old Mrs Marley, who used to keep the school here, said as my gal was one of the best behaved and nicest children she ever see.”

“Then she must have altered very much in her opinion, Mrs Searby,” said a quiet, deep, rich voice; and the woman and the old schoolmaster started to see the Rector standing in the open door. “Mrs Marley consulted me several times upon the advisability of expelling your child from the school, and, for my part, I must say that she is the most tiresome girl that attends the Sunday classes.”

“My gracious, sir!” exclaimed the woman, curtseying humbly.

“Leave her a little more to Miss Portlock here, and don’t interfere,” continued the Rector. “Elizabeth Searby, you had better go to your class. Mr Bone, I have been waiting in the boys’ school to see you. Mrs Searby’s two sons are heading a sort of insurrection there, and the boys, when I went in, were pelting each other with pieces of coke from the stove.”

“Let ’em,” said Humphrey Bone, snapping his fingers in defiance, as Miss Elizabeth Searby took the opportunity of her elders’ backs being turned to put out her tongue at them, as if for medical inspection, and then sought her class, while her mother beat a hasty retreat from the Rector’s presence.

“Let ’em!” said Humphrey Bone again; “I’ve done with ’em all. I defy you all I’ve worked for this school,” he cried, raising his voice, “for thirty years, and trained boys to make good men. As for you, Rev. Eli Mallow, head of the parish as you call yourself, you haven’t.”

“Don’t be foolish, Humphrey Bone,” said the Rector, with a grave smile. “Don’t try to quarrel about the past. What I did was as my duty; and when you are calm you must know that it was inevitable. Forbearance has its limits.”

“Quarrel! Forbearance!” cried the old schoolmaster, furiously. “How have you done your duty? I’m not afraid of you; you shan’t kill me like you did old Warmoth; and I’ll speak now.”

“My duty? Not so well as I should,” said the old clergyman, sadly. “We all have our regrets, Bone, for the past.”

“Yes, for what you’ve neglected,” cried the master, furiously. “You’re not pitched out of your living in your old age; I am. I trained my boys well. How about the training of yours, Rev. Eli—old prophet? How about your boys? Say, if you can, they are not a disgrace.”

The old clergyman started as if he had been stung; his handsome, florid face turned deadly pale, but the next moment the hot flush of indignation suffused his countenance, mounting right up amongst the roots of his silver hair.

“How dare—” he began; but he checked himself by an effort, and the colour faded slowly from his face.

“Bone,” he said, sadly, “you are angry, and in no fit state, mental and bodily, to talk about these matters. I will forget what you have just said. Now, back to your school; but before you go, let me tell you that I am not the enemy you seem to think. I have here,” he said, drawing a blue envelope from his breast, “a list of contributions, which I am getting towards a testimonial to our old schoolmaster for his long services. I hope to make it reach a handsome sum.”

Humphrey Bone’s lips were parted to speak, but these words disarmed him, and, muttering and shaking his head, he turned and left the place.

“Poor fellow!” said the Rector, calmly. “I fear that at times he hardly knows what he says.”

Sage Portlock looked at him wonderingly for a few moments, and he stood gazing at her, his countenance growing less troubled the while; and no wonder, for Sage Portlock’s was a pleasant face. She was not handsome, but, at the same time, she was far from plain; and there was something attractive about her broad forehead, with its luxuriant, smoothly-braided hair crossing each temple—for young ladies in those days had not taken to either cutting their hair short, or to wearing fringes or hirsute hysterics on their fronts. There was a pleasant regularity in her by no means classical features; her eyes were large and winning, and her well-cut mouth, if too large according to an artists ideal, curved pleasantly, and displayed on parting the whitest of teeth.

“Well, Miss Portlock,” said the Rector, smiling, “what a bad mistress you must be!”

“Indeed, sir,” she exclaimed, colouring, “I try very hard to—”

“Of course—of course,” he said, laughing, as he walked up the schoolroom by her side. “My dear child, it is the old story.”

“But was Mrs Marley so good a mistress, sir?” asked Sage, eagerly.

“My dear Miss Portlock, she was one of the most amiable of old women; but it was quite shocking to see the state of the school. ‘Steeped in ignorance’ is about the best description I can give you of its condition. Such encounters as you have had this morning fall of necessity to the lot you have embraced, and, as you see, one of my cloth is not exempt from such troubles.”

The old man started and frowned, for just then the door was once more opened in reply to a summons, and the gentleman who had troubled Polly entered the school, took off his hat politely to the mistress, replaced it, and then, apparently feeling that he had done wrong, took it off once more.

“I heard you had come to the school,” he said, “and I thought I would follow you.”

“You might have known, Cyril, that I should not be long,” said the Rector coldly. “Good-morning, Miss Portlock,” and without another word he went to the door, pausing to hold it open while the new-comer passed out, saluting the mistress as he did so; and then Sage Portlock was left to continue her task.

Part 1, Chapter V.

One of the Boys.

“Mr Mallow seemed displeased with Mr Cyril,” thought Sage Portlock, as she went on with her duties. “He must have done something to annoy his father.”

Her thoughts left the subject the next moment, as she casually glanced at the window, through which the sun was streaming, for it was one of those glorious days when the dying year seems to flicker up, as it were, into a hectic

glow, and for the time being it seems as if summer has come again.

In the schoolroom there was the busy hum of some sixty girls, reading, repeating, answering questions, and keeping up that eternal whispering which it is so hard to check, and the sun's rays as they streamed across the room made broad, bold bars full of dancing dust. Outside there was the pleasant country, and, in spite of herself, the thoughts of the young mistress strayed away a couple of miles to her home, where on such a day she knew that they would be busy gathering the late apples, those great, red-streaked fellows, which would be laid in the rack and covered with straw till Christmas. The great baking-pear tree, too, would be yielding its bushels of heavy hard fruit, and the big medlar tree down by the gate—she seemed to see it, as she thought—would be one blaze of orange and red and russet gold.

It would be delicious, she thought, to run home at once instead of being busy there; but the next moment a calm, satisfied smile came across her face, as she recalled the long tedious days she had passed the year before at Westminster, and began thinking and wondering about some one else.

"I wonder how he is getting on?" she thought; "and whether he will get one of the highest certificates. He tries so hard, I should think it is almost certain."

There was a pause here—a busy pause, during which a change of duty was instituted in two or three classes; but Sage Portlock's thoughts went back soon after, in spite of herself, to the progress of Luke Ross at the London training college.

As she thought her cheeks reddened slightly, and she could not help recalling the spiteful words of the old master; and, as thoughts will, hers bounded on ahead faster and faster, till in effect she did see the day when her old friend and companion would be settled at Lawford, and perhaps a closer connection than that of master and mistress of the schools have come to pass.

Meanwhile the look of displeasure upon the Rev. Eli Mallow's countenance had grown deeper and more marked as he walked away from the school with his son, and angry words had taken place.

"Why, what nonsense, father!" exclaimed the young man. "I heard that you had just entered the schoolroom, and I followed to speak to you, that's all; and here you turn rusty about it. Hang it all, a fellow comes home for a little peace, and the place is made miserable."

"By you, Cyril," retorted his father, sharply. "Home is a calm and peaceful place till you come back, and then—I grieve to say it—trouble is sure to begin."

"Why, what have I done now?"

"Done?" said his father, bitterly, as they walked up the long town street. "Why, given up another chance in life. Here, at the expense of a thousand pounds, you are started upon this Australian expedition, to become a settler, but at the end of two years you are back home, with the money gone, and as unsettled as ever."

"Well, we had all that over last night and the night before. You need not bring it up again. That is not why you have turned rusty," said the young man, sulkily.

"I think I will ask you to speak respectfully to me, Cyril," said his father, with dignity.

"Respectfully!" said Cyril, with a mocking laugh. "Why, I'm behaving wonderfully. If I had stayed out at the sheep farm for another year I should have been a perfect boor."

"And I must request, finally, that you interfere no more in any of the parish matters."

"Well, who has interfered, father?"

"To put it plainly, then, my boy, I insist upon your keeping away from that school."

"And for goodness' sake, father, why?"

"I will tell you," said the old clergyman, with no small show of excitement. "I have been reviled this morning, and accused of being wanting in duty, especially in the management of my sons."

"Who dared to be so insolent?" cried the young man.

"I was compared to Eli of old, my boy; and I fear only too justly."

"Let's see; Eli's sons were very naughty boys, weren't they?" said the young man, laughing.

"Silence, sir!" cried his father, flushing; "these are not matters for your idle jests. I acknowledge that, for your poor mother's sake, I have given way, and been weak and indulgent to the boy she, poor invalid, has ever worshipped; but the time has come now for me to make a stand, ere worse befall our house."

"Why, father, what do you mean?"

"This, my son," cried the old clergyman, sternly. "You left home two years ago, wild and fighting against restraint. You have come back now rougher in your ways—"

"No wonder. You should have led such a life as I have amongst sheep farmers and roughs, and you wouldn't wonder at my ways."

“And far less amenable to discipline.”

“Why, what do you want, father?” cried the young man, impatiently.

“Strict obedience in all things, but more especially in those where any lapse might reflect upon my conduct as the clergyman of this parish.”

“Why, of course, father—what do you suppose a fellow is going to do?”

“Do you think I’m blind, Cyril?” said his father, sternly.

“Not I, father. Why do you ask?”

“Answer me this question. Why did you follow me to the school?”

“To have a chat with you. It was precious dull at home.”

“Very. It must be,” said the old clergyman, ironically. “You have been away from home two years, and after a few days’ return, its calm and peaceful life is found dull.”

“Well, so it is; plaguy dull.”

“Your mother has been confined to her couch ever since Cynthia was born, Cyril. I have never yet heard her complain of home being dull, or repine at her lot.”

“Ah, well, I know all that! Poor mamma!” exclaimed the young man.

“And you make that pitiful excuse to me, Cyril,” cried his father: “you stoop to deceit already.”

“Who does?” cried the young man fiercely.

“You do, sir, and I tell you this shall not be. Sage Portlock is a pure, sweet-minded girl, in whom both your sisters and I take the greatest interest; and I tell you that, if not engaged, there is already a very great intimacy existing between her and Luke Ross.”

“Phew!” whistled Cyril. “What, that young prig of a fellow! I say, father, he’s turning schoolmaster, isn’t he?”

“It is settled that he shall succeed Mr Bone as soon as he has finished his training,” said Mr Mallow, quietly.

“Poor old Bone!—dry Bone, as we used to call him, because he was such a thirsty soul. And so Luke Ross is to be the new man, eh? I congratulate Lawford,” he added, with a sneer.

“You have never liked Luke Ross since he gave you so sound a thrashing,” said his father, quietly.

“He? Thrash me? Absurd, father! Pooh! the fellow is beneath my notice.”

“I think we understand each other now,” said Mr Mallow, with quiet firmness. “While you stay here, Cyril, there is to be no trifling with any one. You can share our home for the present—that is, until you obtain some engagement.”

“Oh, hang engagements!” cried the young man, impatiently. “You have plenty of money, father, both in your own right and mamma’s. Why should I be constantly driven from home to some menial work?”

“Because it is time that your spoiled life of indulgence should cease. There is nothing degrading in work; it is idleness that degrades.”

“Oh, yes; you’ve lectured me enough about that,” said the young man, rudely.

“And you may take it for granted that as soon as an opening can be made for you—”

“Opening wanted for a pushing young man,” cried Cyril, mockingly.

“I shall ask you to leave home and try to do your duty in this busy world.”

“Thanks, father,” said the young man, roughly. “What am I to be?”

“Three years ago I felt that I was doing wrong in keeping you in idleness at home.”

“Idle? Why, I was always busy, father.”

“Yes—hunting, shooting, fishing, and the like; but you did not stop there.”

“Oh, nonsense?”

“To-day I feel certain that I should be doing a great injustice to the parish—to your mother—to your sisters—”

“Any one else?” said the young man, mockingly.

“To you,” replied his father, sternly.

“Any one else?”

“And to Miss Portlock and Luke Ross by allowing you to stay here.”

They had reached the rectory, and the Rev. Eli Mallow, who had paused with one hand upon the oaken bar to finish his sentence, now pushed open the quaintly-made gate, held it for a moment as if for his son to follow; but as he did not, the Rector allowed it to close, and, placing his hands behind him, walked slowly up the well-kept gravel walk, too intent upon his thoughts to give heed to his favourite flowers, or to enter the conservatory, according to his custom, on his way to his own snug room, whose walls were well stored with works on botany and his favourite pursuit, gardening.

Cyril Mallow gave his long moustache a tug as he watched his father’s bent back till it disappeared amongst the choice shrubs and evergreens; then, taking out his cigar-case, he selected one from its contents, bit off the end viciously, and there was the petulance of a spoiled child in his action as he struck one of the old-fashioned flat fusees upon the rough oaken gate-post till he had torn the match to rags without obtaining a light, another and another following before he could ignite his cigar.

“Confound the place!” he exclaimed. “It’s as dull as ditch water. Pretty state of affairs, indeed! One can’t look at a soul without being jerked up short. Luke Ross, eh? I’d like to—”

He did not say what, but he gave his teeth a grind, and, thrusting his hands deep down into his pockets, he walked on towards the fields beyond the little town.

“I declare everybody’s hard on me,” he said aloud. “Just because I’m a bit unlucky and want change. Here’s the governor rolling in riches, and might make me a handsome allowance, and yet I’m always to be driven out into the world. Hanged if it isn’t too bad.”

He leaped over a stile and strolled a little way on across a field, beyond which was a patch of woodland, all aglow with the rich tints of autumn, but Cyril Mallow saw them not, his thoughts being elsewhere.

“I won’t stand it,” he cried suddenly, as he stopped short. “A man can’t always be in leading-strings, and I’m old enough now, surely, to strike for my liberty, and—”

His hand went involuntarily to his vest pocket, from which he drew a delicately-made lady’s gold watch, whose presence was accounted for by the fact that Cyril’s own stout gold watch had passed into the hands of a station shepherd out at a place called Bidgeewoomba, in Queensland, and Cyril’s indulgent mother had insisted upon his using hers until it was replaced.

“Beastly dull place!” he muttered, gazing at the watch. “It’s of no use to go across to the ford; ‘our master’ will be coming in to dinner. Little fool! why did she go and marry that great oaf?”

He turned the watch over and over, laughing unpleasantly.

“Pretty Polly!” he said out aloud, but ended by opening and snapping to the back of the watch.

“Five minutes to twelve,” he exclaimed, involuntarily. “The children will be coming out of school directly.”

He made a sharp movement in the direction of the town—stopped short—went on again—stopped to think of the words he had had with his father, and then, with an impatient “pish!” thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked quickly in the direction that he knew Sage Portlock would take on leaving the school, bent on the mission of causing misery and dissension between two young people just making their first start in life, and sowing the seed of certain weeds that would spring up to the overtopping of much goodly grain.

He paused again, hesitating as he neared the rectory gates, and for a moment he seemed as if he would enter.

But just then the church clock struck twelve, and the deep-toned bell, as it slowly gave forth, one by one, the tale of strokes announcing that the day had climbed to its greatest height, seemed to bring before Cyril Mallow the scene of the schoolgirls racing out, panting and eager, while Sage Portlock was putting on that natty little hat and long silk scarf she wore when going to and fro.

“Oh, what nonsense!” ejaculated Cyril. “What harm? Perhaps I shan’t see her after all.”

He strode off hastily back towards the town, for it was now five minutes past twelve, and just at this time Sage was locking the school door, and enjoying the fresh air, as she thought of Luke Ross with a pleasant little smile upon her lip, and a ruddy tint on the cheek; while just a hundred and twenty miles away Luke Ross had shouldered a spade on his way to the great garden for the hour’s manual labour prescribed by the rules of the training school; and, oddly enough, he was not thinking of the piece of earth he was about, in company with many more, to dig, but of Sage Portlock, and the pleasant days when he should be down in the country once again.

Part 1, Chapter VI.

Magisterial Functions.

People had always said that the Rev. Eli Mallow was a most fortunate man, but somehow fate gave him his share of reverses. He had been born with the customary number of bones in his vertebra, wonderfully joined together after Dame Nature’s regular custom and good style of workmanship, with suitable muscle and nerve to give proper

pliability. The nurse who used to wash and wipe and then powder his delicate young skin considered that he was a beautiful baby, and certainly he had grown up into a very handsome man, an ornament, with his portly form and grey head, to the county bench, to his seat on which he was warmly welcomed back by his neighbours, for however unpopular he might be in the dissent-loving town of Lawford, the Rev. Eli Mallow was a favourite in his part of the county.

The late Lord Artingale had always been one of the loudest in his praise.

“He is a man of breed, sir,” his lordship would say. “There’s blood and bone in the man. I wish we had more clergymen of his kind. There’d be less poaching in the country, I can tell you, and fewer empty bags.”

For the Rev. Eli Mallow worked by rule, that is to say, by law. Secular and ecclesiastical law were to be obeyed to the letter, and he was most exacting in carrying out what he considered to be his mission, with the result that, however well he stood in favour with his friends, his popularity did not increase.

He was not a bad man, for he was strictly moral and self-denying, fairly charitable, had prayers morning and evening, always walked to church on Sundays, kept a good table, and was proud of having the best horses in the neighbourhood. He did his duty according to his light, but that light was rather a small one, and it illumined a very narrow part of the great book of life. There were certain things which he considered duties, and his stern obedience to cut-and-dried law, rule, and regulation made him seem harsher than he really was.

During his absence from Lawford something approaching to economy had been practised, and his wife’s and his own property had been nursed; but now the family had returned there was no sign of saving, for, in addition to being a clergyman, the Rector devoted himself largely to the carrying out of what he called his *rôle* as a country gentleman, and at whatever cost to his pocket and general strain upon the property, this he did well as a rule. Now, for reasons of his own relating to his two daughters, he was launching out to an extent that made a second visit to the Continent a very probable matter before many years were past.

Breakfast was over at the rectory. There had been words between master and Mr Cyril, the butler said, and master had been very angry, but, as was usually the case, Mr Cyril had come off victorious; and now, as it was market-day at Lawford, the bays were at the door, champing their bits, the butler and footman were in the hall waiting, and punctual to the moment the young ladies came hurrying down the oak staircase just as the Rev. Eli received his gloves from the butler and put them on, the domestic waiting to hand him his hat. This was carefully placed upon his head, and then there was a little ceremony gone through of putting on the glossy black overcoat, as if it were some sacred garment.

The Rev. Eli did justice to his clothes, looking a thoroughly noble specimen of his class, and once ready he unbent a little and smiled at his pretty, ladylike daughters, whom he followed down to the handsome barouche, which it had always been a custom to have out on bench days, the appearance of the stylish turn-out lending no little *éclat* to the magisterial proceedings.

It was certainly not a mile and a half to the market-place, but though that distance might be traversed again and again upon ordinary days, this was out of the question when the magistrates were about to sit.

So the steps were rattled down, the young ladies handed in, Cyril Mallow, with a cigar in his mouth, watching the proceedings from his bedroom window. The Rev. Eli followed and took his seat with dignity; the steps were closed, the door shut, the footman mounted to the box beside the coachman, both stretched their legs out rigidly, and set their backs as straight as their master’s, and away the carriage spun, through the avenue, and out at the lodge gates, where the gardener’s wife was ready to drop a curtsey and close them afterwards, and then away through the lanes by the longest way round, so as to pass Portlock’s farm and enter Lawford by the London road.

Market-day was a busy day at Lawford, and the ostler at the King’s Head had his hands full attending to the gigs of the farmers and the carts of the clergy and gentry round.

The word “cart” seems more suggestive of the vehicle of the tradesman; but it was the custom around Lawford for the clergy to use a capacious kind of spring cart, neatly painted and padded within, but in other respects built exactly on the model of an ordinary butcher’s or grocer’s trap, save that it had a door and step behind for access to the back seats, while, below the door, painted in regular tradesman style for the evasion of tax, would be, in thin white letters, the owners name and address, as in the case of the vicar of Slowby, whose cart was lettered—

“Arthur Smith, Clerk, Slowby.”

There were several such carts in the inn yard on this particular morning, for the ladies of the clerical families generally shopped on market-days, and fetched the magazines from the bookseller’s if it was near the first of the month.

The farmers’ wives and daughters, too, put in a pretty good appearance with their egg and butter baskets, which were carried in good old style upon the woman’s arm, irrespective of the fact that she was probably wearing a velvet jacket, and had ostrich feathers in her bonnet.

Tomlinson, the draper, was answerable for the show, and he used to boast that the Rector might preach as he liked against finery; his shop-window could preach a far more powerful sermon in silence, especially with bonnets for a text.

Some of the farmers had protested a little against the love of show evinced by their wives and daughters, but in vain. The weaker vessels said that the egg and butter money was their own to spend as they pleased, and they always had something nice to show for their outlay, which was more than the husbands and fathers, who stayed at the King’s

Head so long after the market ordinary, could say.

The Rev. Eli Mallow was dropped at the town-hall, where a pretty good group of people were assembled. There were the rustic policemen from the various outlying villages and a couple of Lord Artingale's keepers in waiting ready to touch their hats. Then the ladies went off in the carriage to make a few calls before returning to pick up papa after the magistrates' sitting was over.

The usual country town cases: Matthew Tomlin had been drunk and riotous again; James Jellicoe had been trespassing in search of rabbits; Martha Madden had assaulted Elizabeth Snowshall, and had said, so it was sifted out after a great deal of volubility, that she would "do for her"—what she would do for her not stated; a diminutive being, a stranger, who gave his name as Simpkins, had torn up his clothes at the workhouse, and now appeared, to the great delight of the spectators, in a peculiar costume much resembling a sack; another assault case arising out of the fact that Mrs Stocktle had "called" Mrs Stivvison,—spelt Stockton and Stevenson,—with the result that their lawful protectors had been dragged into the quarrel, and "Jack Stivvison had 'leathered' Jem Stocktle."

Upon these urgent cases the bench of magistrates, consisting of the Rev. Eli Mallow, chairman, the Rev. Arthur Smith, Sir Joshua St. Henry, and the Revds. Thomas Hampson, James Lawrence Barton, and Onesimus Leytonsby, solemnly adjudicated.

Then came the important case of the day; two men, who gave the names of Robert Thorns and Jock Morrison, were placed at the table.

The first was a miserable, dirty-looking object, who seemed to have made a vow somewhere or another never to wash, shave, or sleep in anything but hay and straw, some of which was sticking still in his tangled hair; the other was a different breed of rough.

Rough, certainly, a spectator who had judged the two idlers would have said; but he was decidedly a country rough, and did not belong to town. His big, burly look and length of limb indicated a man of giant strength; at least six feet high, his chest was deep and broad, and in his brown, half gipsy-looking face, liberally clothed with the darkest of dark-brown beards, there shone a pair of fierce dark eyes. Scraped and sand-papered down, and clothed in brown velveteen, with cord trousers and brown leather gaiters, he would have made a gamekeeper of whose appearance any country magnate might have been proud. As it was, his appearance before the country bench of magistrates was enough to condemn him for poaching.

There was something of the keeper, too, in his appearance, for he had on a well-worn velveteen coat and low soft hat, but his big, soft hands told the tale of what he was—a ne'er-do-well, who looked upon life as a career in which no man was bound to work.

Such was Jock Morrison.

The case was plain against them, and they knew that they would have to suffer, for Jock was pretty well known for these affairs. Upon former occasions his brother Tom, the wheelwright, had paid guineas to Mr Ridley, the Lawford attorney, to defend him, but there were bounds to brotherly help.

"I can't do it for ever," Tom Morrison had said to his young wife. "I've give Jock every chance I could; now he must take care of himself."

Big Jock Morrison looked perfectly able to do that, as he now stood with his hands in his pockets, staring about him in a cool defiant way. It seemed that he had been warned off Lord Artingale's ground several times, but had been too cunning for the keepers, and had only been taken red-handed the previous day, very early in the morning, so evidence showed; and he and his companion had upon them a hare, a rabbit, and a couple of pheasants, beside some wire snares and a little rusty single-barrelled gun, whose barrel unscrewed into two pieces, and which, so the head-keeper deposed, was detached from the stock and stowed away in the inner pocket of the big prisoner's coat.

Gun, powder-flask, tin measure, and bag of shot, with game, placed upon the table.

"And what did the prisoners say when you came upon them by—where did you say, keeper?" said one magistrate.

"Runby Spinney, Sir Joshua, just where the Greenhurst lane crosses the long coppice, Sir Joshua."

"And what did the prisoners say?" said the chairman stiffly.

"Said they was blackberrying, Sir."

"Oh!" said the chairman, and he appeared so stern that no one dared laugh, though a young rustic-looking policeman at whom Jock Morrison winked turned red in the face with his efforts to prevent an explosion.

"Did they make any—er—er—resistance, keeper?" said the chairman.

"The big prisoner, sir, said he'd smash my head if I interfered with him."

"Dear me! A very desperate character," said Sir Joshua. "And did he?"

"No, Sir Joshua, we was too many for him. There was me, Smith, Duggan, and the two pleecemen, so they give in."

And so on, and so on.

Had the prisoners anything to say in their defence?

The dirty man had not, Jock Morrison had. “Lookye here: he didn’t take the game, shouldn’t ha’ taken it, only they foun’ ’em all lying aside the road. It was a fakement o’ the keeper’s, that’s what it was. They was a pickin’ blackberries, that’s what him and his mate was a doin’ of, and as soon as the ’ops was ready they was a going down south to pick ’ops.”

The magistrates’ clerk, the principal solicitor in the town, smiled, and said he was afraid they would miss the hop-picking that season, as it was over.

There was a short conference on the bench, and then the Rev. Eli Mallow sentenced the prisoners to three months’ imprisonment, and told them it was very fortunate for them that they had not resisted the law.

“You arn’t going to quod us for three months along o’ them birds and that hare, are you?” said Jock Morrison.

“Take them away, policeman.”

“Hold hard a moment,” said the big fellow, so fiercely that the sergeant present drew back. “Look here, parsons, you’ll spoil our hop-picking.”

“Take them away, constable,” said the Rev. Eli. “The next case.”

“Hold hard, d’ye hear!” cried the big ruffian, in a voice of thunder. “I s’pose, parson,” he continued, addressing the chairman, “if I say much to you, I shall get it laid on thicker.”

“My good fellow,” said the Rev. Eli, “you have been most leniently dealt with. I am sorry for you on account of your brother, a most respectable man, who has always set you an admirable example, and—”

“I say,” exclaimed Jock, “this arn’t chutch, is it?”

There was a titter here, but the chairman continued:—

“I will say no more, as you seem in so hardened a frame of mind, only that if you are violent you may be committed for trial.”

“All right,” said the great fellow, between his gritting teeth; “I don’t say no more, only—all right: come along, matey; we can do the three months easy.”

There was a bit of a bustle, and the prisoners were taken off. The rest of the cases were despatched. The carriage called for the chairman, and on the way back it passed the police cart, with the sergeant giving the two poaching prisoners a ride, but each man had his ankle chained to a big ring in the bottom of the vehicle, where they sat face to face, and the sergeant and his man were driving the blackberry pickers to the county gaol.

“What a dreadful-looking man!” said Julia, as in passing Jock Morrison ironically touched his soft felt hat.

“Yes, my dear—poachers,” said the Rev. Eli calmly, as one who felt that he had done his duty to society, and never for a moment dreaming that he had been stirring Fate to play him another bitter turn.

Part 1, Chapter VII.

Polly’s Surprise.

There was a dark shadow over Polly Morrison’s mind, and she started and shivered at every step when her husband was away at work, but only to brighten up when the great sturdy fellow came in, smelling of wood, and ready to crush her in his arms with one of his bear-like hugs.

Polly had been furtively gazing from the window several times on the afternoon of that market-day, and turned hot and cold as she had heard steps which might be those of some one coming there; but the cloud passed away in the sunshine of Tom Morrison’s happy smile, now that he had come in, and she felt, as she expressed it, “oh! so safe.”

“There, let me go, do, Tom,” she cried, merrily. “Oh, what a great strong, rough fellow you are!”

“No, no; stop a minute,” he said here. “I oughtn’t to be smiling, for I’ve just heard something, Polly.”

“Heard something, Tom!” she faltered, and she turned white with dread, and shrank away.

“Here, I say,” he cried, “you must get up your strength, lass. Why, what a shivering little thing thou art!”

“You—you frightened me, Tom,” she gasped.

“Frightened you? There, there, it’s nothing to frighten thee. I have just heard about Jock.”

“Oh! about Jock,” cried Polly, drawing a breath full of relief. “I hope he has got off.”

“Well, no, my lass, he hasn’t, and I’m sorry and I’m not sorry, if thou canst understand that. I’m sorry Jock is to be punished, and I’m not sorry if it will do him good. Arn’t you ashamed of having a husband with such a bad brother?”

“Ashamed! Oh, Tom!” she cried, throwing her arms about his neck.

“Well, if you are not, I am,” said Tom, sadly; “and I can’t help thinking that if old Humphrey Bone had done his duty better by us, Jock would have turned out a different man.”

“But tell me, Tom, are they going to do anything dreadful to him?”

“Three months on bread and water, my lass,” said Tom Morrison,—“bread of repentance and water of repentance; and I hope they’ll do him good, but I’m afraid when he comes out he’ll be after the hares and pheasants again, and I’m always in a fret lest he should get into a fight with the keepers. But there, my lass, I can’t help it. I’d give him a share of the business if he’d take to it, but he wean’t. I shan’t fret, and if people like to look down on me about it, they may.”

“But they don’t, Tom, dear,” cried Polly, with her face all in dimples, the great trouble of her life forgotten for the time. “I’ve got such a surprise for you.”

“Surprise for me, lass? What is it? A custard for tea?”

“No, no; what a boy you are to eat!” cried Polly, merrily.

“Just you come and smell sawdust all day, and see if you don’t eat,” cried Tom. “Here, what is it?”

“Oh, you must wait. There, what a shame! and you haven’t kissed baby.”

She ran out to fetch the baby and hold it up to him to be kissed, while she looked at him with all a young mother’s pride in the little one, of which the great sturdy fellow had grown so fond.

“It makes me so happy, Tom,” she said, with the tears in her eyes.

“Happy, does it, lass?”

“Oh, yes. So—so happy,” she cried, nestling to him with her baby in her arms, and sighing with her sense of safety and content, as the strong muscles held her to the broad breast. “I was afraid, Tom, that you might not care for it—that you would think it a trouble, and—and—”

“That you were a silly little wife, and full of foolish fancies,” he cried, kissing her tenderly.

“Yes, yes, Tom, I was,” she cried, smiling up at him through her tears. “But come—your tea. Here, Budge.”

Budge had been a baby herself once—a workhouse baby—and she looked it still, at fourteen. Not a thin starveling, but a sturdy workhouse baby, who had thriven and grown strong on simple oatmeal fare. Budge was stout and rosy, and daily putting on flesh at Tom Morrison’s cottage, where her duty was to “help missus, and nuss the bairn.”

But nearly always in Polly’s sight; for the first baby was too sacred a treasure in that cottage home to be trusted to any hands for long.

She was a good girl, though, was Budge; her two faults prominent being that when she cried she howled—terribly, and that “the way”—to use Tom Morrison’s words—“she punished a quartern loaf was a sight to see.”

Budge, fat, red-faced, and round-eyed, with her hair cut square at the ends so that it wouldn’t stay tucked behind her ears, but kept coming down over her eyes, came running to take baby, and was soon planted on a three-legged stool on the clean, red-tiled floor, where she began shaking her head—and hair—over the baby, like a dark-brown mop, making the little eyes stare up at it wonderingly; and now and then a faint, rippling smile played round the lips, and brightened the eyes, to Budge’s great delight.

For just then Budge was hard pressed. Workhouse matron teaching had taught her that when she went out to service it would be rude to stare at people when they were eating; and now there was the pouring out of tea, and spreading of butter, and cutting of bread and bacon going on in a way that was perfectly maddening to a hungry young stomach, especially if that stomach happened to be large, and its owner growing.

Budge’s stomach was large, and Budge was growing, so she was hard pressed: and do what she would, she could not keep her eyes on the baby, for, by a kind of attraction, they would wander to the tea-table, and that loaf upon which Tom Morrison was spreading a thick coating of yellow butter, prior to hacking off a slice.

Poor Budge’s eyes dilated with wonder and joy as, when the slice was cut off, nearly two inches thick, Tom stuck his knife into it, and held the mass out to her, with—

“Here, lass, you look hungry. Tuck that away.”

Budge would have made a bob, but doing so would have thrown the baby on the floor; so she contented herself with saying “Thanky, sir,” and proceeded to make semicircles round the edge of the slice, and to drop crumbs on the baby’s face.

“Well, lass,” said Tom, as Polly handed him his great cup of tea, “about the christening? When’s it to be?”

“On Sunday, Tom, and that’s what I wanted to tell you—it’s my surprise.”

“What’s a surprise?”

“Why, about the godmothers, dear. Why, I declare,” she pouted, “you don’t seem to mind a bit.”

“Oh, but I do,” he said, “only I’m so hungry. Well, what about the godmothers?”

“Why, Miss Julia and Miss Cynthia have promised to stand. Isn’t it grand?”

“Grand? Oh, I don’t know.”

“Tom!”

“Well, I suppose it is grand, but I don’t know. It’s all right if they like it. But about poor Jock?”

“Oh, that won’t make any difference, dear. They’ve promised, and I know they won’t go back. They’ll be the two godmothers, and you the godfather.”

“Of course,” cried Tom, eating away; “two godmothers and a godfather, eh, lass? that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Tom,” said the little woman, eagerly attending to her husband’s wants, “and two godfathers and a godmother if it’s a boy.”

“It’ll be a grand christening, won’t it, Polly?” said Tom.

“Oh, no, dear. Miss Julia and Miss Cynthia are the dearest and best of girls, and they have no pride. Miss Julia talked to me the other day just like a friend.”

“I say,” cried Tom, eagerly.

“What, dear?”

“Why not do the thing in style while we’re about it. What do you say to asking young Mr Cyril to be godfather?”

If Tom Morrison had looked up then he would have been startled at the livid look in his young wife’s face, but he was too intent upon his tea, and Polly recovered herself and said—

“Oh, no, dear, that would not do, and the young ladies would not like it. Look here, Tom.”

Polly tripped to a basket, from which she produced a white cloak and hood, trimmed with swan’s-down; and these she held up before her husband, flushed and excited, as, in her girlish way, she wondered whether he would like them.

Budge left off eating, and wished for a white dress on the spot, trimmed with silk braid, like that.

“Say,” said Tom, thickly, speaking with his mouth fall, “they’re fine, arn’t they?—cost a lot o’ money.”

“No,” said Polly, gleefully, “they cost nothing, Tom. Miss Julia made me a present of the stuff, and I made them.”

“Did you, though?” he said, looking at her little fingers, admiringly. “You’re a clever girl, Polly; but I often wonder how it was you came to take up with a rough chap like me.”

Polly looked up in his steady, honest eyes, and rested one hand upon his, and gazed lovingly at him, as he went on—

“My old woman said it was because I’d got a cottage, and an acre of land of my own.”

“Did she say so, Tom?”

“Yes,” he said, taking her hand, patting it, and gazing up in the pretty rustic face he called his own; “but I told her you were a silly little girl, who would have me if I’d got a cottage and an acre less than nothing to call my own.”

“And you told the truth, Tom, dear,” she whispered. “Tom, you make me so happy in believing in me like this.”

“Tut, tut, my girl. I’m not clever; but I knew you.”

“And married me without anything, only enough to buy my wedding dress and a little furniture.”

“D’yer call that nothing?” said the hearty, Saxon-faced young fellow, pointing to the baby; “because I don’t. And I say, Polly, dear,” he whispered, archly, “perhaps that’s only the thin end of the wedge.”

“Hush, Tom, for shame!” she said, trying to frown, and pointing to Budge; while he took a tremendous bite of bread and bacon, and chuckled hugely at his joke.

“The old lady used to have it that you were too fine for me, Polly, and would have been setting your cap at one of the young gentlemen at the rectory when you was abroad with them.”

“Tom!” she panted, as his words seemed to stab her, and she ran out of the room.

“Why, Polly, Polly,” he cried, following her and holding her to his breast, “what a touchy little thing thou art since baby came! Why, as if I didn’t know that ever since you were so high you were my little sweetheart, and liked great rough me better than the finest gentleman as ever walked. There, there, there! I was a great lout to talk like that to thee. Come, wipe thy eyes.”

“I can’t bear it, Tom, if you talk like that,” she sobbed, smiling at him through her tears. “There, it’s all over now.”

There was a little cold shiver at Polly Morrison's breast, though, all the same, and it kept returning as she sat there over her work that evening, rocking the cradle with one foot, and wondering whether she could gain strength enough to tell her husband all about Cyril Mallow, and the old days at Dinan.

But no, she could not, and they discussed, as Tom smoked his pipe, the state of affairs at the rectory; how Mrs Mallow remained as great an invalid as ever, and how they seemed to spare no expense, although people had said they went abroad because they had grown so poor.

"Folk seem strange and sore against parson," said Tom at last.

"Then it's very cruel of them, for master is a real good man," cried Polly.

"They don't like it about owd Sammy Warmoth. They say he killed him," said Tom, between the puffs of his pipe.

"Such nonsense!" cried Polly; "and him ninety-three."

"Then they are taking sides against him for wanting to get rid of Humphrey Bone."

"And more shame for them," cried Polly, indignantly.

"Well, I don't know," said Tom; "I've rather a liking for old Humphrey. He taught me."

"He's a nasty wicked old man," cried Polly. "He tried to kiss me one day when he was tipsy."

"He did?" cried Tom, breaking his pipe in the angry rush that seemed to come over him.

"Yes, Tom, and I boxed his ears," said the little woman, shivering again, for the fit of jealous anger did not escape her searching eyes.

"That's right, lass. I'm dead on for a new master now."

Then a discussion arose as to the baby's name, Tom wanting it to be called after his wife, who was set upon Julia, and she carried the day.

"There," said Tom, "if anybody had told me a couple of years ago that any bit of a thing of a girl was going to wheedle me, and twist me round her finger, and do what she liked with me, I should have told him he didn't know what he was talking about."

"And you don't mind, Tom, dear?"

"No," he said, smiling, "I don't mind, if it pleases thee, my lass."

"And it does, dear, very, very much," she said, kissing him.

But Polly Morrison did not feel happy, and several times that night there was the little shiver of dread at her heart, and she wished she could tell Tom all.

Part 1, Chapter VIII.

The Black Shadow.

It was, as Julia Mallow said, a very pretty baby, that of Polly Morrison and her husband, when she spoke to her invalid mother, lying so patiently passive upon the couch in her own room; but that weak little morsel of humanity had a part to play in the troubles of the Rev. Eli Mallow's life. For hardly had the tiny babe sent to the care of Tom Morrison and his young wife begun to smile upon them, than it was taken suddenly ill.

No childish ailment this, brought on by careless attendance; but the cold grey hand of death was laid upon the fragile form, its little eyes—erst so bright and blue—sunken, and the tiny nose pinched and blue.

Julia and Cynthia Mallow had been in to see her, and found the little woman prostrate with grief, and then hurried to the town for medical advice, though that of fifty doctors would have been in vain.

"Pray, pray, Tom, go and ask Budge not to cry," sobbed Polly, as her husband knelt at her side; for ever and again, from below, came a long, dismal cry, that almost resembled the howl of a dog in a state of suffering.

Tom Morrison rose in a heavy, dull way, and slowly descended the stairs, returning in a minute to resume his place beside his wife, turning his eyes to hers, as they looked up to him in mute agony.

They could not speak, but they read each other's hearts, and knew full well that nothing could be done; that the tiny life that had been given to them to have in charge was passing fast away—so fast, and yet so gently that neither knew it had gone till, alarmed by the slow dilation of the little eyes, and their fixed and determinate look, Polly bent over the waxen form in eager fear, caught it tightly to her breast, and then sank back in her chair, crying—

"Tom, Tom, God has taken it away!" An hour later, husband and wife were sitting hand in hand by the little couch on which their darling lay, so still and cold, its tiny face seeming restful, free from pain, and almost wearing a smile, while on either hand, and covering its breast, were the best of the simple, homely flowers the garden could produce.

There was a heavy, blank look upon the parents' faces; for even then they could not realise their loss. It was so sudden, seemed so strange; and from time to time Polly got softly up, to lean down and hold her cheek close to the little parted lips, to make sure that the infant did not breathe; but there was no sign, and when she pressed her lips to the white forehead, it was to find it cold as ice.

Budge had been silent for some time, going about the house on tiptoe, and, like those above, too stunned to work; but her homely mind was busy for a way to show her sympathy, and this she did by making and taking up on the little tray two steaming cups of tea, each flanked by a goodly slice.

Poor Budge! she had not calculated her strength aright; for on softly entering the room, and setting down the tray, she turned her head, and saw the simple flower-strewn bier, gave a long, loving look, and then, sinking on her knees, with her hands to her eyes, burst forth into a wild and passionate wail.

It was even ludicrous, but it touched the hearts of those who heard; for with it came the passionate yearning of the desolate child for the love and sympathy it had never known, but for which its young heart had hungered so long. It told of nights of misery, and a desire for a something it felt it ought to possess but had never had, as now, raising her hands, she wailed forth her prayer—

"Oh, please, God, let me die instead, let me die instead."

As she finished, there was another wild burst of hysterical sobbing, and Polly had flung herself in the child's arms, clinging to her, kissing her passionately, as she cried—

"Oh, Budge, my poor girl! Oh, Budge, you'll break my heart!"

Tom Morrison could bear no more, but stumbled heavily from the room, down-stairs, and out into his garden, where daybreak found him sitting, with his face buried in his hands, on the bit of rustic seat beneath the old weeping willow that grew in the corner, with its roots washed by the river that formed one of the boundaries of the little freehold.

The sun was rising gloriously, and the east was one sheet of gold and orange damask, shot with sapphire, as the sturdy workman rose.

"I must be a man over it—a man," he faltered, "for her sake." And he slowly strode into the house, and up-stairs, to find his wife kneeling where he had left her, wakeful and watching, with poor Budge fast asleep, with her head upon Polly's lap, and her two roughened hands holding one of those of her mistress beneath her cheek.

The wheelwright walked up to the sleeping babe, and kissed it; then, gently taking Budge's head, he placed it upon a pillow from the bed; while, lastly, he raised poor Polly as though she had been a child, kissed her cold lips, and laid her down, covering her with the clothes, and holding one of her hands, as he bade her sleep; and she obeyed, that is to say, she closed her heavy eyes.

In the course of the morning, stern, crotchety old Vinnicombe, the Lawford doctor, sought out the stricken father, finding that he had not been to his workshop, but was down his garden, where, after a few preliminaries, he broke his news.

"What?" he said, starting. "There, sir, I'm dazed like now; please, say it again."

"I'm very sorry, Morrison—very," said the doctor, "for I respect you greatly, and it must be a great grief to your poor little wife; but I have seen him myself, as I did about Warner's child, and he is very much cut up about it; but as to moving him, he is like iron."

"I can't quite understand it, sir," said Tom, flushing. "Do you mean to say, sir, that parson won't bury the child?"

"Well, it is like this, Morrison," said the doctor, quietly, "he is a rigid disciplinarian—a man of High Church views, and he says it is impossible for him to read the Burial Service over a child that was not a Christian."

"That was not a Christian?" said Tom slowly.

"He says he condoles with you, and is very sorry; that the poor little thing can be buried in the unconsecrated part of the churchyard; but he can grant no more."

"Doctor," cried the wheelwright, fiercely, "I don't be—There, sir, I beg your pardon," he continued, holding out his rough hand; "but it seems too hard to believe that any one could speak like this. The poor little thing couldn't help it, sir; and we should have had it done next Sunday. Why, sir, the poor girl was only showing me the little—don't take notice o' me, sir, please; I'm like a great girl now."

As he spoke, he sank down upon an upturned box, and, covering his face with his hands, remained silent; but with his heaving shoulders telling the story of his bitter emotion.

"Be a man, Morrison—be a man," said the doctor, kindly, as he laid his hand upon the stricken fellow's shoulder.

"Yes, doctor," he said, rising and dashing away the signs of his grief—"this is very childish, sir; but it's a bit upset me, and now this news you bring me seems to make it worse. I'll go up and see parson. He won't refuse when he knows all."

"Yes, go up and see him," said the doctor, kindly. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, sir, thanky," said the wheelwright, meekly; "you couldn't do what I wanted, sir—save that poor little thing's life.

There's nothing more."

"No," said the doctor; "our profession is powerless in such a case. The child was so young and tender that—"

"Don't say any more, sir, please," said Morrison, with his lip quivering. And then he turned away from the house, so as to avoid Biggins the carpenter, who had just come in at the garden gate, and walked on tiptoe along the gravel walk, up to the door, where he was met by a neighbour, who led him up-stairs.

Biggins, the Lawford carpenter, was the newly-appointed sexton of the church, and between him and Tom Morrison there was supposed to exist a bitter hatred, because Biggins the carpenter had once undertaken to make a wheelbarrow for the rectory garden, and Morrison had made a coffin for one of the Searby children who died of a fit of measles.

The feud seemed to be a bitter one, for when he came out of the cottage five minutes later, he turned down the garden, seeing which, the doctor shook hands with Morrison, and at parting said—

"Let me give you something to do you good, Tom."

"What, sir, doctor's stuff?" said the wheelwright, with a look of wonder. "I want no physic."

"Yes, you do," said the doctor, smiling, as he laid the silver knob of his stick on the stout fellow's breast—"yes, you do. I can minister to a mind diseased as well as to a body. Look here, my lad, you must bear your suffering like a man; so, now go and do this—"

Tom made an impatient movement to go, but the doctor stayed him.

"There is nothing like work at such a time as this," he said. "Go and see the parson, and then set to and work harder than ever you worked before in your life. It will give you ease."

"You're right, Mr Vinnicombe, you're right," said Tom, bluntly. "Thanky, sir—thanky. Good-bye."

As the doctor walked out of the gate, Biggins the carpenter, a hard-faced man, who emitted a strong odour of glue from his garments, walked up, tucking a piece of sandpaper upon which he had been writing, and his square carpenter's pencil, that he had pointed with four chops of his chisel before starting, into one of his pockets.

"Thy savoy cabbages look well, neighbour," he said quietly, as being the most sympathetic thing he could think of at the moment. Then he held out his hand, shook the other's warmly, without a word, and then stood by him, breathing heavily, and looking down at the ground.

Five minutes passed like this, without a word on either side, Morrison manifesting no impatience, and Biggins showing no disposition to go; for it was his way of showing sympathy to a friend in distress, and Morrison felt it so to be, and thanked him in his heart.

At last the carpenter, who was used to funerals, and who was now next door to being clerk, heaved a heavy sigh, stooped down, picked a strand from the grass plot, and held it at arm's length, looking at it fixedly for a minute or so, before saying, huskily—

"All flesh is grass, Tom Morrison—flowers of the field—cut down—withered. Amen."

He said it in a slow, measured way, and with a nasal twang, the last word closing his disconnected speech after quite an interval; and then the two men stood together for some minutes in silence.

At last Biggins spoke again, but without raising his eyes, looking down at the garden path, as if for a place to plant the bent he had broken from its roots.

"Poor wife! She's terribly cut up, Tom."

There was another interval of silence, and then Biggins said, as if to himself, and still gazing at the path—

"White cloth, and silver breastplate and nails?"

There was another pause, and then Tom said in a weary, dull way—

"As if it was one of your own, my lad—as if it was one of your own."

"Good-bye, Tom Morrison—good-bye, lad," said Biggins, holding out his hand once more, but with his back half turned to his neighbour "Good-bye," said Tom, squeezing the honest, hard fist held out to him in a manly grip; and, with a sigh, Biggins was turning off, when a word from the wheelwright arrested him. "Come down here, lad, away from the house," said Tom, huskily.

Biggins looked up now, his heavy face lighting up. Tom Morrison wanted him to do something for him. He could do that, if he could not show sympathy.

They walked down the neatly-kept garden, till they stood under the willow tree, where, after a few minutes' silence, Tom Morrison said huskily—

"They've made you saxon now, haven't they, Joe?"

"Yes, and ought to be clerk as well, but it don't seem like being saxon in these newfangled days, when the ground's

cut from under a man, and there's no chance of putting in a simple, honest amen anywhere. Ah, I don't know what poor, dear old parson would have said to see the change. He'd think we'd all gone over to Popery."

Tom waited till his friend, now suddenly grown voluble, had ceased.

"Joe Biggins," he said, "didst ever know old parson—God bless him!—to refuse to bury any one out of the place because—because they wasn't baptised?"

"Never," said Biggins—"never," energetically.

"He never had such a case, p'raps," said Tom.

"Oh, but he did," said Biggins—"even in my time. Why, there was poor Lizzy Baker's child. You knew Sam Baker?"

Tom nodded.

"Well, when their little one died it hadn't been christened, I know. I remember father talking about it while he made the coffin, and I recollect it so well because it was the first coffin I ever put the nails in all by myself. Let's see, that's a good fifteen year ago now, Tom, that it be."

"And he buried it?"

"To be sure he did. Why, I remember as well as if it had been yesterday. He says to my father, he says, 'I never like to be too partic'lar about these baptismal matters. It's not 'cording to church law, but I couldn't put such a sorrow on the poor father and mother as to refuse the service, and I hope I'm right.'"

"He said so?" whispered the wheelwright, half turning away his face.

"I can't as a man, Tom, sweer to the zact words," said the carpenter, earnestly; "but I'll sweer as they meant all that, long ago as it is."

"God bless him!" muttered Tom, with his lower lip working.

"Old parson wasn't particular about those sort o' things. Don't you remember about poor old Dick Granger? To be sure—yes—we were boys then, and went to Humphrey Bone. Ay, and what a rage he do wax in again parson now, toe be sewer. I recklect father talking about it. You remember, sewer*ly*, old Granger went off his head, and drowned himself in Cook's mill dam, and the jury said it was *felo de se*; and Johnson up at the Red Cow was foreman, and wanted him to be buried at the cross roads, with a stake druv through his heart. Why, it's all come back now. I recklect it all; how old parson went to the poor old widow, and talked to her; and there was a big funeral. Everybody went to see poor old Granger buried in the churchyard; and he was buried all regular, and parson preached the next Sunday about brotherly love and Christian charity. Why, Tom, you and I was about seventeen then. How time do go!"

"Yes—I remember," said the wheelwright, bowing his head.

"Ah," said Biggins, "those were the days, Tom; even if one did get to know some of poor old parson's sarmons. We sang the old psalms and hymns then, and Miss Jane used to practise twice a week with us boys at the little organ that old Davy, Franklin's gardener, used to turn the handle on. There was no choral sarvice then, and white gowns for the children. Ah, a clerk's place was worth having then. It wasn't many on 'em as could roll out *Amen* like poor old Sammy Warmoth."

"Joe Biggins," said the wheelwright, checking the flood of recollections—"doctor says Rev. Mallow won't—won't—"

"Won't bury the little one?" Tom's voice failed him, and he nodded shortly.

"Phew!"

Biggins gave a low, sibilant whistle. Then, flushing up, he exclaimed—

"Damn him! No—I don't mean that. Lord forgive me for speaking so of a parson. But, I say, Tom—oh, no, he can't mean it, lad. Tell you what, he's a queer one, and as proud as a peacock, and his boys arn't what they should be. You needn't tell him what I say, for I don't want to offend nobody, that's my motter through life; but parson's a parson, and he's bound to practise what he preaches. You go and see him."

"I mean to."

"Shall I go with thee, lad?"

"No. I'll go alone."

"P'raps you'd better, lad. If he makes any bones about it, ask him as a favour—don't be hot with him, Tom, but a bit humble. I know thee don't like to ask favours of any man; but do't for her sake, Tom—indoors."

Biggins pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, and the wheelwright nodded.

"When is the best time to see him?" said Tom, after a few moments' silence.

"Well, it's no good to go till 'bout two o'clock, after his lunch. He won't see me, even on parish matters, in the morning."

The wheelwright nodded, and, without another word, Biggins went away, passing the cottage, with its drawn-down blinds, on tiptoe, and shaking his fist at a boy who was whistling as he went along the road.

Part 1, Chapter IX.

Orthodox to a Degree.

The Rev. Lawrence Paulby looked rather aghast at the changes Mr Mallow was effecting in the church, and sighed as he thought of the heart-burnings that were ever on the increase; but he said nothing, only went on with his daily routine of work, and did his best, to use his own words, “for everybody’s sake.”

Joe Biggins, as we have learned, had succeeded old Sammy Warmoth as far as a successor was wanted, and he now, in a most sheepish manner, looking appealingly at the Curate, wandered about the church as a verger, in a long black gown, and carrying a white wand, to his very great disgust and the amusement of the schoolboys, several of whom had tested its quality. The little old organ had been brought down from the loft where the singers used to sit, and placed in the chancel, where there was no room for it, so a kind of arched cupboard had been built expressly to contain it; and where the Rector’s and churchwardens’ families used to sit, close up by the communion rails, was now occupied by the surpliced choir, who weekly attempted a very bad imitation of a cathedral service. They chanted all the psalms to the Gregorian tones, item, the responses and the amens; and beginning always very flat, they gradually grew worse and worse, till, towards the close of the service, they would be singing a long way on towards a semitone beneath the organ, which always gave a toot to pitch the key for the Rector or Curate to start in intoning his part.

The very first Sunday that this was tried, Mr Lawrence Paulby broke out into a vexatious perspiration that made his head shine; for in spite of all his practice at the schoolroom, no matter how he tried to draw their attention to the coming task, dwelling as he did upon such words at the end of a prayer as “Be with us all—ever—m—o—r—e,” the chanted “Amen,” delivered out of tune by the inattentive young surpliced choir, aided and abetted by the schoolmaster Bone’s bass, was something so shocking that, if it had been anything but a sacred service, it might have been called a burlesque.

It did not matter whether he was himself intoning, or listening to Mr Mallow’s rich deep voice, the Curate always sat in agony lest any one should laugh, a horror that he could not contemplate without a shudder, and he wished in his heart that the Rector would take it into his head to go again.

Parish business took the Curate over to the rectory on the morning succeeding the death of Tom Morrison’s little one. He had been up to town, and returned only late the past night, the result being that he had not heard of the wheelwright’s trouble, or he would at once have called.

He was a very nervous man, and the probabilities were that had he known what was about to happen, he would have stayed away. He had expected to be asked to stay lunch, and he had stayed. Then conversation had ensued on the forthcoming visitation of the bishop of the diocese. Cyril Mallow had made two or three remarks evidently intended to “chaff the Curate,” as he would have termed it, and to provoke a laugh from his sisters; but in neither case was he successful, and as soon as lunch was over, the Rector rose and led the way to his study, where he waved his hand towards a chair.

The Curate had hardly taken his seat, feeling rather oppressed at his principal’s grand surroundings as contrasted with his own modest apartments at the old rectory, when the butler entered softly to announce that the wheelwright wished to see him.

The Curate rose to leave.

“No, no, sit still,” said the Rector. “That will do, Edwards; I will ring,” and the butler retired.

“I am glad you are here, Paulby; I was going to speak upon this business. You have heard of it, I suppose?”

“Heard? Of what?” said the Curate.

“Morrison’s child is dead,” said the Rector.

“The baby! God bless me!” ejaculated the Curate. “I beg your pardon, Mr Mallow,” he continued, blushing like a girl. “It was so shocking. I was so surprised.”

The Rector bowed gravely, and went and stood with his back to the fireplace, and rang.

“You can show Mr Morrison in, Edwards,” said the Rector, and poor Tom Morrison was ushered in a few moments later, to stand bowing as the door was closed; but in no servile way, for the sturdy British yeoman was stamped in his careworn face, and he was one of the old stock of which England has always felt so proud.

The Rector bowed coldly, and pointed to a seat—standing, however, himself behind his writing-table.

“Ah, Morrison,” exclaimed the Curate, after an apologetic glance at the Rector, “I cannot tell you how I am shocked at this news. I did not know of it this morning, or I would have come down.”

He held out his hand to the visitor as he spoke, an act Mr Mallow forgot, and it was gratefully pressed.

Then feeling that he was not at home, Mr Paulby coughed, and resumed his seat.

“I’ve come, sir,” said the wheelwright, “about a little business.”

He hesitated, and glanced at Mr Paulby as if he did not wish to speak before him.

“I think, sir,” said the Curate, respectfully, “Mr Morrison wishes to speak to you in private.”

“I believe it is on a church question,” said the Rector, sternly. “Mr Morrison, you need not be afraid to speak before him.”

“I’m not, sir, on my account,” said the wheelwright, bluntly. “I was thinking of you, sir.”

“What you have to say can be said before Mr Paulby. It would be affectation on my part not to own that I know the object of your visit.”

“Well, sir, then, to be plain,” said Tom, clearing his throat, but speaking very humbly, “I thought I should like to know, sir, whether what I heard from doctor was true.”

“First let me say, Mr Morrison, that I heard with deep sorrow of the affliction that has befallen you. I am very, very sorry—”

“Thank you, sir, thank you,” said Tom, with his under lip working.

“I say I am sorry that the chastening hand of the Lord has been laid upon you so heavily. But you must remember that it is not for us to question these chastisements. Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth. I hope your wife seeks for consolation in prayer.”

“Yes, sir, I know all that—thank you, sir—yes, sir—poor lass!—yes,” he said, or rather murmured, with his lower lip quivering at the allusion to his wife.

The Curate fidgeted in his chair, and kept changing the crossing of his knees, his fingers moving uneasily, as if they longed to go and lay themselves on the poor fellow’s shoulder while their owner said a few kindly words.

“I intend to call upon your wife this afternoon,” continued the Rector.

“No, sir—thank you, sir—please, don’t—at least not yet,” said Tom. “The poor girl is so broken down, she could not bear it.”

“The more need for me to come, Mr Morrison,” said the Rector, with a sad smile. Then, seizing the opportunity to deliver the first thrust after all his fencing, he continued, reproachfully, “I am sorry I did not know, Morrison, how ill your infant was. You should have sent to me; it was your duty.”

“Yes, sir, I suppose it was,” said the wheelwright, humbly. “But, gentlemen,” he continued, looking from one to the other, “I was in such trouble—my poor wife—we thought of nothing but saving the poor child’s life.”

“There is a life beyond the grave, Thomas Morrison,” said the Rector, whose voice grew firmer as he found that his visitor seemed awed at what he said. “The duty of man is to think of that before the world. I am sorry that you and your wife—such respectable, well-educated people—should have put off your duty to your offspring so long, neglecting it even at the very last, when I was but a few hundred yards from your door. I am grieved, deeply grieved. It has been to me a terrible shock, while you and your wife have incurred an awful responsibility by wilfully excluding your first-born from the pale of Christ’s Church.”

The stricken man looked from one to the other—the tall, portly, calm clergyman, standing behind his table, with one hand resting upon a large open book, the other upon his heart, his eyes half closed, his face stern and composed, and his words falling, when he spoke, in measured cadence, as if they had been studied for the time.

The Curate uncrossed his legs, and set his knees very wide apart, resting his elbows upon them, and joining his fingers very accurately, as he bent down his head, till Tom Morrison could see nothing but his broad, bald, shining crown.

“Not wilfully, sir—not wilfully,” said the wheelwright, appealingly, and his voice grew very husky. “The poor girl, sir, had set her mind—on the christening—Mr Paulby was to do it, sir, as he married us—next Sunday; and now—”

The poor fellow’s voice shook, and his face grew convulsed for a moment; but he clenched his fists, set his teeth, and fought hard to control his grief. The Curate drew a long breath and bent down lower.

“But, sir,” said Morrison, after a few moments’ pause, during which the library, with its rows of books, looked dim and misty, while the clergyman before him stood as if of marble—“but, sir, I know I deserve it—and I suppose I have neglected my duty; but the poor innocent little one—don’t say as it’s true that you won’t bury it in the churchyard.”

The Rector sighed and coughed vaguely. Then, in a low, sad voice, he said—

“Morrison, I am grieved—deeply grieved and mine is a most painful duty to perform; but I stand here the spiritual head of this parish, a lowly servant of Christ’s Church, and I must obey her laws.”

“But, sir,” said Tom, “that tiny child, so innocent and young—you couldn’t be doing wrong. I beg your pardon, sir, I’m an ignorant man, but don’t—pray, don’t say you won’t bury it.”

“Mr Morrison, you are not an ignorant man,” said the Rector, sternly. “You know the laws of the Church; you know your duty to that unfortunate child—that you have wilfully excluded it from the fold of Christ’s flock. I cannot, will not,

disobey those laws in departing from my duty as a clergyman."

The Curate moved his fingers about an inch apart, and then rejoined them, in time to a deep sigh, but he did not raise his head; while Tom Morrison stood, with brow contracted, evidently stricken by some powerful emotion which he was struggling to master; and at last he did, speaking calmly and with deep pathos in his appealing voice.

"Sir, I am a man, and rough, and able to fight hard and bear trouble; but I have a wife who loved, almost worshipped —"

"Set not your affections upon things on earth," said the Rector, in a low, stern voice, as if in warning to himself.

Tom paused a few moments, till the speaker had finished, and then he went on—

"She almost worshipped that child—I ask you humbly, sir, for her sake, don't say no. At a time like this she is low, and weak, and ill. Parson, if you say no, it will go nigh to break her heart."

"Morrison," said the Rector, slowly, with his eyes still half closed—"as a man and a fellow-Christian, I sympathise with you deeply. I am more grieved than I can express. By your neglect you have thrown upon me a painful duty. The fold was open—always open—from the day of its birth for the reception of your poor lamb, but in your worldliness you turned your back upon it till it was too late. I say it with bitter sorrow—too late. Let this be a lesson to you both for life. It is a hard lesson, but you must bear it. I cannot do what you ask."

The wheelwright stood with the veins in his forehead swelling, and his clenched fists trembled with the struggle that was going on within his breast; but the face of his sorrowing wife seemed to rise before him, and he gained the mastery once more, and turned to the silent Curate.

"Mr Paulby, sir, you married Mary and me, and, we seem to know you here, sir, as our parson—"

The Rev. Eli winced as he heard the emphasis on the *you*.

"Please help me, sir," continued Morrison, appealingly; "you've known me many years, and I hope you don't think I'd be the man to wilfully refuse to do my duty. Will you say a word for me, sir? You understand these things more than me."

The Curate raised his head sharply, and as his eyes met those of the suffering man, they were so full of sympathy, that the look was like balm to the poor fellow, and he took heart of grace.

"I will, Morrison—I will," said he, huskily; and he turned to his brother clergyman.

"Mr Mallow," he said, gently—and there was as much appeal in his voice as in that of the suppliant before them —"forgive me for interfering between you and one of your parishioners, but I do it in no meddling spirit, only as a servant of our Great Master, when I ask you whether in such a case as this the Church would wish us to adhere so strictly to those laws made for our guidance so many years ago. I think you might—nay, as a Christian clergyman, I think you should—accede to our suffering brothers prayer."

"God bless you, sir, for this!" ejaculated Morrison, in a broken voice.

The Rector turned slowly round, and his eyes opened widely now as they fixed themselves upon the countenance of his curate.

For a few moments he did not speak, but panted as if his feelings were too much for him. Then, in a voice faltering from emotion, he exclaimed—

"Mr Paulby, you astound me. You, whom I received here with testimonials that were unimpeachable, or I should not have trusted you as I have,—you, a priest of the Church of England, to counsel me to go in direct opposition to her laws!"

"I ask you, sir," said the Curate, gently, "to perform, at a suffering father's prayer, the last duties to the dead, over the body of an innocent babe, freshly come from its Maker's hands, freshly there returned."

"Sir," exclaimed the Rector, and there was indignation now in his words, "well may the enemies of the Church triumph and point to its decadence, when there are those within the fold who openly, and in the presence of back sliders, counsel their brother priests to disobey the sacred canons of her laws. I feel sure, however, that you have been led away by your feelings, or you would not have spoken so."

"Yes," said the Curate, sadly. "I was led away by my feelings."

"I knew you were, sir," said the Rector, sternly. "Sir, it was time that a party should arise in the Church, ready and strong, to repair the broken gaps in the hedges, and to protect the sheep. I grieve to find that I have been away too long. I thought, sir, you would have been ready to stand fast in the faith, when assaulted by the worldly-minded who would lead men astray; ready to—"

"Forget the dictates of humanity, for the hard and fast laws made by men who lived in the days of persecution, and before the benignant, civilising spread of education had made men to know more fully the meaning of brotherly love."

"Sir—"

“I beg your pardon, Mr Mallow,” said the Curate, whose face was now flushed. “You seem to forget that we do not live now in the days of the faggot and the stake. But, there,” he said, gently, “I think you will accede to the wishes of my poor friend.”

“Sir,” said the Rector, “I can only repeat that I am grieved beyond measure at this expression of opinion. What you ask of me is impossible.”

The wheelwright had listened with growing indignation to these words on either side, and now, flushed and excited, he spoke out.

“You will not do this, then, sir?” he said, hoarsely.

“You have had my answer, Mr Morrison,” was the cold reply, and he walked towards the bell.

“Stop, sir—a minute,” exclaimed Morrison, panting. “You called me an educated man time back?”

The Rector bowed coldly.

“You’re not right about that, sir; but I have read a little, and so as to behave as a decent man, as I thought, next Sunday, I read through the christening service, and what it says about children who have been baptised dying before they sin being certain to be saved.”

“That is quite right,” said the Rector, gravely; and he now seemed to ignore the Curate’s presence.

“And do you take upon yourself to say, sir, that, as my child was not baptised, it goes to—the bad place?”

“I am not disposed to enter into a controversy with you. My duty is to obey the canons of the Church. ‘He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved: he that believeth not shall be damned,’” he added, only to himself, but heard by the others.

“How could that tender child believe?” said Morrison, fiercely.

There was no reply.

“Mr Mallow, sir,” exclaimed Morrison, difference of grade forgotten in his excitement, “you refuse my child Christian burial, and you speak those dreadful words. I say, sir, do you wish me to believe that my poor, tender infant, fresh given to us by God, has gone to everlasting punishment for what it could not help—my neglect, as you call it?”

“I have told you that I cannot enter into a controversy with you; these are matters such as you cannot understand.”

“Then I swear—” roared Morrison.

“Stop!” exclaimed the Curate. “Thomas Morrison, my good friend, you are angry and excited now, and will be saying words that, when cooler, you may repent.”

“This is little better than an outrage,” said the Rector, in whose cheeks two angry spots now glowed.

“Allow me to speak, sir,” said the Curate, firmly. “I speak on behalf of that fold whose fences you accused me of neglecting.”

The Rector turned upon him wonderingly, while the wrath of the wheelwright was quelled by the calm, stern words of the little man who now stood before them.

“Morrison,” he continued, “I have been a clergyman many years, and, God helping me, it has been my earnest work to try and convince my people of the love and tenderness of the Father of all for His children. Whenever a dogma of the Church has been likely to seem harsh to our present day ideas, I have let it rest, knowing how much there is of that which is just and good in our grand old religion. Mr Mallow, as your subordinate, sir, I may seem presumptuous. You are an older man than I, and perhaps a wiser, but I ask you, sir, with no irreverent feeling, whether, if it were possible that He who said, ‘Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not,’ were holding your position here—the God as man and teacher of the people of this parish—He would act as you are acting? Would He not deal with such a canon as He did with the teachings of the Pharisees? Why, sir, He took little children into His arms, and blessed them, and said, ‘Of such is the kingdom of heaven.’”

He paused for a moment, while the Rector stood calm, stern, and cold, with his eyes once more half closed, covered in his cold church armour, and a pitying smile of contempt upon his lip; while Morrison stayed, angry still, but with quivering lip, and his hand upon the door.

A dead silence fell upon the little group when Mr Paulby had done speaking, and both the Curate and Tom Morrison watched the Rector, expecting him to make some reply, but none came.

At last the silence was broken by the wheelwright, out of whose voice every tinge of anger had now gone, and he spoke in tones which sounded deep, and trembled exceedingly at first, but gained strength as he went on:—

“Mr Paulby, sir,” he said, “I thank you. I can’t say all I feel, sir, but my poor wife and I thank you with all our hearts for what you’ve just said for us. I’m only a poor ignorant man, sir, but if I couldn’t feel that what you’ve said is just and true, I should be ready to do what so many here have done—go to the chapel. That wouldn’t be like the Morrisons though, sir. We’ve been church-folk, sir, for a couple of hundred years, and if you go round the churchyard, sir, you will see stone after stone marked with the name of Morrison, sir; some just worn out with age, and others growing

plainer, till you come to that new one out by the big tower, where my poor old father was laid five years ago. There's generations and generations of my people, sir, lying sleeping there—the whole family of the Morrisons, sir, save them as left their bones in foreign lands, or were sunk in the deep seas, sir, fighting for their country. And now my little one is to be kept out. Oh, parson, it's too bad, and you'll repent all this. Mr Paulby, sir, God bless you for your words. Good-bye!"

He strode out of the room, and the two clergymen stood listening to his heavy feet as he crossed the hall and passed out of the house. For a few minutes neither spoke.

At length the Curate broke the silence. The fire had gone out of his voice, and the light from his eye, as he said in a low voice—

"Mr Mallow, I am very, very sorry that this should have occurred."

"And at a time when I am fighting so hard to win these erring people to a better way, Mr Paulby," said the Rector, sternly.

"And I have tried so hard too, Mr Mallow," said the Curate, plaintively. "When they all seem bent on going to one or the other of the chapels here."

"I do not wonder, sir," said the Rector, "but I do wonder that my own curate should turn against me."

"No, do; not turn against you, sir. I wished to help."

"Mr Paulby, I regret it much, but I shall be obliged to ask you to resign."

"No, no, sir; I beg you will not," cried the Curate, excitedly. "I have grown to love the people here, and—"

"Mr Paulby," said the Rector, "our opinions upon the duties of a priest are opposite. You will excuse me—I wish to be alone."

The Curate stood for a moment or two with his hand extended, then he let it fall to his side.

"As you will, sir," he said, sadly. "But there, you will think about this. Let me come over to-morrow, and see you. Will you be at home? Let us talk the matter over."

No response.

"I spoke hotly, perhaps, sir. I ought not to have done so, but I was moved. Forgive me if I was wrong—let us part friends."

Still no reply.

"I will leave you now, as you wish it, sir. Drop me a line, and send it by one of the school-children, and I will come over and see you."

The Rector might have been made of stone as he stood there motionless, till, with a heavy sigh, his visitor slowly left the room, and trudged across the fields to his gloomy little room in the old, half-buried rectory.

Part 1, Chapter X.

Another Trouble for Discussion.

That night, just at dark, Joe Biggins walked on tiptoe along the little gravel walk, bearing something beneath his arm; and, as he tapped at the door, the wheelwright rose and led his sobbing wife to an inner room, where he held her tenderly, with her head resting upon his breast, as they stood listening to the opening door, the creaking stairs, and the smothered, heavy step in the bedroom overhead. Then, after a few minutes, there was the sound of descending footsteps, the creaking of the cottage stairs, a whisper or two in the little entry, the closing door, the step upon the gravel, and all was still.

The sad hours glided by in the little darkened house, till Saturday arrived. There had been gossip enough in the place, and endless messages, fraught with good feeling, had come to the stricken couple from far and near; but there had been no sign from the rectory, and it was the general belief that the wheelwright would take the infant to the graveyard at the Wesleyan Chapel at Gatton. For somehow the whole affair had been well spread, and, as Humphrey Bone, the schoolmaster, said with a hearty chuckle of delight, it was a glorious chance for the Rector's enemies to blaspheme, and there and then, in the presence of several witnesses, he took advantage of the glorious opportunity.

Both Julia and Cynthia had called and sympathised very warmly with their old maid, to have the door opened to them by Tom Morrison himself, who frowned when he saw who were the visitors; but as Julia laid her hand upon his arm, and he saw Cynthia with her eyes overflowing, he drew back, and somehow the wheelwright's heart was softened, and grew softer still as he saw his young wife sobbing in Julia Mallow's arms.

Both Julia and her sister tried to mediate, but were sternly forbidden to interfere, and though they tried again through the interposition of Mrs Mallow, she shook her head.

"No, my dears," said the patient invalid, looking at her daughters with her great wistful eyes, "it is of no use; papa will never give way upon a matter of the Church. He says—"

Mrs Mallow paused, for she felt that she ought not to repeat her husband's words, which were to the effect that he had been neglectful for years, and that now nothing should turn him from the path of duty.

Towards evening Joe Biggins went softly along the lane, and on seeing him at the gate, Tom Morrison went to meet him, and returned his friendly grip, the visitor standing afterwards, as before, perfectly silent and looking down at the walk.

"You've come to say something to me," said Tom at last, in a quiet, resigned way.

"Amen to that, Tom; I have," said the other, in a low voice. "I thought I should see you here. About to-morrow aft'noon."

"Yes," said the wheelwright, quietly.

"I don't like troubling you about it, lad," said Biggins, "only I must. I wanted to tell you, you know. You see, I must be up at church, and if you hear from parson, why, I shall meet you all right; if you don't hear from him, there'll be the little mourning coach all ready waiting to take you all to Gatton. I've seen to everything. That's all."

He was going off on tiptoe, but Morrison stopped him, to press his hand with a strong man's hearty grip; and he walked with him to the gate.

"Call in when you go up to the church in the morning," he said, quietly; and then they parted.

It was quite dark before the wheelwright had finished his work in the garden, and went in to the evening meal, to be met by his wife's searching look.

He shook his head sadly, as he bent down and kissed her.

"No, my lass," he said, "Joe brought no message."

Polly began to weep, the tears flowing fast, till she saw Budge's face working, ready for a tremendous howl, when, mastering her emotion, she sat down with her husband to the table where their evening meal was spread.

An hour later, husband and wife, hand in hand, ascended to the death chamber, where, with the moonlight full upon it, lay the tiny coffin, bathed in a silvery flood of light.

Biggins had obeyed his friend's instructions, even as if it had been for one of his own, and the simple silver ornamentation shone upon the coarse white cloth.

The tear-blinded pair lingered for a few moments without approaching their sacred dead; but at last they stood beside it, and the young mother removed the lid that lightly pressed the flowers which covered the tiny breast.

Their loving lips kissed, for the last time, the cold, waxen forehead; and a groan escaped from Polly's heart as the lid was replaced closely, this time by the father's hands.

"Hush, Polly," he whispered, "you said you would be strong."

"I will, I will," she sighed. And they stood for a few moments, hand clasped in hand, with the silence only broken by a smothered sob from below.

At last, reverently taking the little coffin in his arms, Tom Morrison bore it slowly down the stairs, followed by his weeping wife, who held something white in her hands, and this she laid over the coffin like a little pall.

Poor Budge was there, trying hard to keep down her grief, but a wail would burst forth; and covering her mouth tightly with her hands, she darted away into the back kitchen.

It was the little christening robe, that was to have been worn next day; and drip after drip, to form dark spots in the moonlight, the hot, burning tears of anguish fell from the mother's eyes as they slowly bore the little burden out into the garden, down the neat path, and away to the corner where the willow laved its long green branches in the brook—a veritable stream of silver now, dancing and sparkling in the beams of the broad-faced moon.

Where Tom Morrison stopped at last, beneath the willow, was his evening's work—a small, dark trench, lying amidst the mellow, sweet-scented, newly-turned earth; and here, upon his own land, he was about to lay the dead—to be sown in corruption, to be raised in incorruption—in soil unconsecrated, and without the rites of the Church.

Unconsecrated? No, it was consecrated by the loving tears that bedewed the earth, and fell upon the little white coffin as it was tenderly lowered to its resting-place; and, failing rites, the stricken pair kneeled on either side in the soft mould, and, joining hands, prayed that they might meet again.

Tom's words were few; but simple and earnest was his prayer as ever fell from the lips of man; while, kneeling at the foot of the grave was poor Budge, who only burst forth with a sob when all was over. For the mother stayed while the earth was reverently drawn over the cold bed, till a little hillock of black soil lay silvered by the dropping moonbeams falling through the willow boughs.

It was poor Budge who laid her offering—a bunch of daisies—upon the little grave, while Tom led his trembling wife back to their desolate home.

Joe Biggins, true to his word, called at the wheelwright's next morning on his way to church, and on coming within sight of the house he took off his hat to indulge in a good scratch, for he was puzzled on seeing that the blinds were

all drawn up.

Replacing his hat very carefully, he softly entered upon tip-toes, and walked up the little path, where he was met by Tom Morrison, looking pale and worn, but with a restful look in his face that had not been there for days.

They shook hands warmly, for Joe Biggins had resolved never to think about that coffin Tom Morrison had made again, and just then fresh steps were heard, and they saw old Mr Vinnicombe coming up.

“I thought I’d call, Morrison,” he said, “and ask you to let me be the bearer of a message to the rectory. Let’s make a last appeal to the bigot.”

“Hush, sir!—don’t call him names,” said Tom. “He thought he was right, no doubt.”

“Then you’ve heard from him.”

“No, sir, no,” said Tom, sadly; “but I forgive him all the same, though I could never bear to go and hear him more.”

The doctor and Biggins looked at each other, and the latter shook his head till his white cravat crackled, for he was got up ready for his verger’s gown.

“Will you walk down the garden, doctor?” said the wheelwright, quietly.

They both followed him, wonderingly, till, nearing the willow, they heard a low, wailing sob; and, drawing nearer, found poor Budge crouching in a heap upon the ground, her face buried in her hands, sobbing as if her desolate young heart would break.

They approached her unheard; and, at the scene before them, they involuntarily took off their hats, and stood watching, as Tom bent over the weeping girl.

“I did, oh, I did love you so!” they heard her sob in broken accents. And then, as Tom touched her gently on the shoulder, she started up in a frightened way, staring at him wildly, and, but for his firm grasp, she would have fled.

By many a scene of sorrow had old Vinnicombe stood untouched, but his eyes were moistened now, and a choking sensation seemed to affect his throat, as Tom looked kindly down on the poor rough girl, and, bending over her, lightly pressed his lips upon her brow.

“Thank you, my little lass. Don’t cry no more,” he said. “Poor baby’s happy now, and quite at rest.”

There was silence for a moment or two in the little shady garden, for the tinkling streamlet seemed to be at rest as well. Then came the soft buzzing of a bee seeking a fresh flower; from the fields beyond, a lark shot up in the blue sky, lay-laden, and flashed a fount of sparkling notes upon the morning air; a creamy white butterfly flitted through the trees, poised itself for a moment, lit upon the bunch of daisies lying on the little grave, and then rose and rose till hidden from their sight, as they stood where the dark soil was dappled now with the morning sunbeams glancing through the willow boughs.

“Yes,” said Tom, with a smile, as the breeze brought a waft of flowery scent to mingle with the newly-turned earth, “perhaps Parson Mallow is quite right, but I feel as if my little one’s at rest.”

Part 1, Chapter XI.

The New Master for Lawford.

Oh, that bell! A clanging, jangling, minor-sounding bell that always sounded so harsh and melancholy at six o’clock, if the particular morning happened to be dark, wet and wintry in chill December, and he who heard it was rudely awakened from pleasant dreams of home and country and those he loved, to the fact that if he got up then he would have some time to wait, and that if he dropped asleep again he might sleep too long.

The warm bed was very tempting as Luke Ross lay gazing at the spot where he knew the window must be, but where there was no light of coming day, and listened to the hissing, fluttering noise made by the gas-jets just turned on to enable the students to dress and, such of them as had beards, to shave, for it was in that happy, blissful time when the natural growth of hair upon a man’s chin was spoken of as “filthy,” and, if the beard was at all full, said to look “like some old Jew.”

The warm bed, it is repeated, was very tempting; but after a few minutes’ hesitation, and just as that fatal drowsiness was coming on, Luke Ross rose, tried to repress a shiver, failed, and began to dress hastily by such light as came over the open partition from the corridor, where the four gas-jets sang and sputtered and sent a blue glare into the twenty-four dormitories—very prisonlike, with their sham stone walls, narrow barred windows, and iron bedsteads—that this corridor contained.

For some minutes the hissing of the gas was the only sound heard, till the trickle of water into Luke Ross’s basin, and sundry pantings, sighs, and splashings, seemed to arouse others to their fate, when there was a thud as of some one leaping out of bed, a loud yawn prolonged into a shivering shudder, and an exclamation of “Oh, that blessed bell!”

A more thorough scene of discomfort than Saint Chrysostom’s on a dark winters morning—one of those mornings that might be midnight—it would be impossible to conceive, and the students seemed to feel it, and try to vent their feelings upon their fellows.

“Here, I say!” said a voice, “I know these beds are damp. I’ve got my hands covered with chilblains.”

“Get out!” cried another—conversation being easy, from the fact that every dormitory opened for a space of a couple of feet above its door on to the passage. “Damp don’t give chilblains. Oh, I say, how miserable it is to have to shave with cold water in the dark!”

“Serve you right for having a beard!” cried another.

“Which you’d give your ears to own. Oh, hang it! now I’ve cut myself. Here, who’s got a silk hat? Pull us out a scrap of down, there’s a good fellow.”

“Wipe it dry, and stick a bit of writing-paper against it.”

“Will that stop it?”

“Yes.”

“Mind and get your hair parted right, lads. Examination day!”

“I’ll give any fellow a penny to clean my boots.”

“Why don’t you let Tycho clean ’em?”

“Hot water, gentlemen! hot water! Any gentleman who wants his boots cleaned please to set them outside the door.”

“There, get out. It won’t do, Tommy Smithers. I’d swear to that squeak of yours from a thousand.”

“If you come that trick again, Tommy, we’ll make you clean every pair of boots in the corridor,” shouted a fresh speaker, for by degrees the yawning, and creaking of iron beds and thuds of bare feet upon bare floors had grown frequent, with shuffling noises, and gurgling, and splashing, the chinking of ewers against basins, the swishing of tooth-brushes, and the stamping of chilblained feet being thrust into hard, stout boots, and all done in a hurried, bustling manner, as if those who dressed were striving by rapid movement to get some warmth into their chilly frames.

Luke Ross was one of the first dressed: a well-built, dark-eyed, keen-looking young man of five-and-twenty, with a good deal of decision about his well-shaped mouth.

The noise and bustle was on the increase. With numerous grumblings and unsatisfied longings floating about his ears, he stood gazing at the square patch of yellow light near his door, thinking of the trials of the day to come, till, apparently brought back to the present by the shudder of cold that ran through him, he turned and began to pace rapidly up and down his little room, from the dark window covered with soft pats of sooty snow to the dormitory door.

That brought no warmth, and, knowing from old experience that the fire in the theatre stove would only be represented by so much smoke, he began to beat his chest and sides in the familiar manner by flinging his arms across and across to and fro.

This set off others, and then there was the stamping of feet and the sound of blowing of hands to warm them, mingled with which was the scuffling noise made by late risers who had lain until the last minute, and were now hurrying to make up for lost time.

The clanging bell once more, giving five minutes’ law for every student to be in his place by ten minutes to seven, at which time, to the moment, the little self-possessed principal would walk into the theatre, with his intellectual head rigidly kept in place by the stiffest of white cravats.

Upon this particular morning the vice-principal had the first lecture to deliver, and the very last man had scuffled into his place, ink-bottle and note-book in hand, and a buzz of conversation had been going on for nearly a quarter of an hour before the little well-known comedy of such mornings took place.

Then enter the vice-principal, looking very brisk and eager, but particularly strained and squeezy about the eyes, and he had nearly reached the table and was scanning the rows of desks and their occupants, rising blue cold, tier above tier, into the semi-gloom beneath the organ, when a broad face that was not blue, cold, nor red, but of a yellowish white, stared him full in the eyes from the whitewashed wall, and mutely reproached him for being late.

“Dear me!” he exclaimed, “that clock is not right!”

“Yes, sir, quite right,” exclaimed half-a-dozen eager voices, and their owners consulted their watches.

“Oh, dear me, no!” exclaimed the vice-principal, sharply; “nearly a quarter of an hour fast.”

No one dared to contradict now, and the lecture by gaslight, in the cold, dark morning, went on till nearly eight, when those who assisted at tables left to look after the urns and cut the bread-and-butter.

A dozen students hurried off for this task, glad of the chance of feeling the fire in the great dining-hall; and, intent as he was upon the business of the exciting day to come, Luke Ross was not above sharing with his fellow-students, in providing a more palatable meal for himself and the head of his table by washing the coarse salt butter free of some of its brine.

The bell once more, and the rush of students into the dining-hall in search of the warmth that a couple of cups of steaming hot coffee, fresh from the tall block-tin urns, would afford.

The students assembled at the two long boards, and looked strikingly like so many schoolboys of a larger growth; there was the sharp rapping of a knife-handle upon a little square table in one corner, the rustling noise of a hundred men rising to their feet, grace spoken by the vice-principal, in a rich mellifluous voice, followed by a choral “Amen” from all present, and then the rattling of coffee cups and the buzz of conversation, as the great subject of the day—the examination—was discussed, more than one intimating in a subdued voice that it was a shame that there should have been any lecture on such a morning as this.

Breakfast at an end, there was the regular rush again, schoolboy like, out into the passage, where a knot of students gathered round one of the masters, who was giving a word or two of advice.

“Ah, Ross,” he said, smiling, “I have been saying now what I ought to have said before breakfast, that no man should eat much when he is going in for his examination. Brain grows sluggish when stomach is full.”

“I’m afraid we have all been too anxious to eat much, sir,” replied Ross.

“I’m sure you have, Ross; but don’t overdo it. Slow and steady wins the race, you know. Ah, here comes some one who has made a good meal I’ll be bound. Well, Smithers,” he continued, as a remarkably fast-looking young man came up, “have you had a good breakfast?”

“Yes, sir, as good as I could get.”

“Thought so,” said the assistant master, smiling. “Well, what certificate do you mean to take, eh? First of the first?”

“Haven’t been reading for honours, sir,” said Smithers, grinning.

“No, indeed,” said the assistant master, shaking his head. “Ah, Smithers, Smithers! why did you come here?”

“To be a Christian schoolmaster, sir,” was the reply, given with mock humility by about as unlikely a personage for the duty as ever entered an institution’s walls.

The bell once more; and at last, feeling like one in a dream, and as if, in spite of a year’s hard training and study, he was no wiser than when he first commenced, Luke Ross was in his place with a red sheet of blotting-paper before him, and the printed set of questions for the day.

The momentous time had come at last, a time which dealt so largely with his future; and yet, in spite of all his efforts, his brain seemed obstinately determined to dwell upon every subject but those printed upon that great oblong sheet of paper.

He had no cause to trouble himself. All he had to do was to acquit himself as well as he could as a finale to his training; but in the highly-strung nervous state to which constant study had brought him, it seemed that his whole future depended upon his gaining one or other of the educational prizes that would be adjudged, and that unless he were successful, Sage Portlock, his old playmate and friend—now some one very far dearer—and for whose sake he had striven so hard, would turn from him with contempt.

At another time the questions before him would have been comparatively easy, and almost, without exception, he could have written a sensible essay upon the theme; but now Sage, his old home at Lawford, the school, the troubles in the town and opposition to the Rector, and a dozen other things, seemed to waltz through his brain.

He had several letters in his pocket, from Sage and from his father, and they seemed to unfold themselves before him, so that he read again the words that he knew by heart: how indignant the people were at the death of poor old Sammy Warmoth and the appointment of Joe Biggins; the terrible quarrel that there had been between Mr Mallow and the Curate about the burial of Tom Morrison’s child, and how the quarrel had been patched up again because Mr Mallow had not liked Mr Paulby to leave just when people were talking so about the little grave in Tom Morrison’s garden. There was the question of the wretched attempt at choral singing too on Sunday—singing that he was to improve as soon as he was master; for Sage said it did not matter how well she taught the girls, Humphrey Bone made his boys sing badly out of spite, so as to put them out.

Then he had a good look at the examination paper, and tried to read, but Humphrey Bone’s threat to expose him and show him up as an ignoramus before all the town,—a clod who ought to go back to his father’s tannery,—all duly related in one of her letters by Sage Portlock, came dancing out of the page before him.

Again he cleared his head and took up his pen, but he felt that he could not write. And now came up the letter which told how Cyril Mallow had come back from Queensland—handsome Cyril, whom he had severely punished some time before, just, in fact, as he was about to sail for Australia.

Luke Ross did not know why he should feel uneasy about Cyril Mallow being back; it was nothing to him. He was a bit of a scamp, and so on, but he was not so bad as Frank Mallow, who had been obliged to get off to New Zealand after the scandal about a couple of the Gatton village girls, and the fight with Lord Artingale’s keepers, in which he was said to have joined Jock Morris. The Lawford people said it was from this that the Rector became non-resident, as much as from having overrun the constable.

It was tantalising to a degree, for, strive hard as he would, these things seemed to dance before Luke Ross’s eyes; while as to the questions themselves, as he read them through and through, not one did it seem that he could answer.

And so it was morning after morning during the few busy days that the examination lasted. Every night he went to bed almost in despair; every morning he gazed blankly at the various questions.

But, in spite of his self-depreciation, first one and then another of the masters, who gathered up the papers at each sitting's end, gave him a friendly nod of approval, and glanced with interest at the closely-written sheets.

"I've made a dismal failure, sir," he exclaimed at last, as night closed in upon his fifth day's work.

The assistant master in whose hands lay the everyday subjects taught at the institution laughed as he clapped the young man upon the shoulder.

"I wish every man in the college had made as great a failure, Ross," he said. "There, there, you are weary and nervous. Get out of doors and have a good blow and as much exercise as you can till you have regained your tone. I ought not to say so, perhaps, but, Ross, you might, if you liked, look higher than a schoolmaster's life; that is, if you have any ambition in your soul."

At that moment Luke Ross's highest ambition was to win Sage Portlock's regard, and to acquit himself so creditably as the new master of Lawford School, that there might be no room for that modern Shimei, Humphrey Bone, to say hard words against his management and power of training the young. Later on circumstances caused him to undergo a complete revolution of thought.

Part 1, Chapter XII.

A Question of Income.

They were busy times at Kilby, the farm occupied by the Portlocks, and Sage was laughing and merry in her holiday enjoyment of domestic duties.

A few friends were expected next night, and busy preparations were being made by Mrs Portlock and her niece, whose pleasant-looking, plump, white arms were bloomed to the elbow with flour, to which was soon to be added the golden-looking yolks of a dozen eggs, being beaten up in a large white basin in the most unmerciful way by Mrs Portlock herself.

It was a comfortable-looking country kitchen where they were busy, in thorough, old-fashioned style. Not from necessity, for from the back kitchen and room beyond came the sound of voices where the two maids were engaged over other household duties. In the low, wide window, in spite of the season, were some brightly blooming geraniums, between which could be seen the home close, dotted with sheep, and through which field meandered the path leading down to the town.

"Don't forget the salt, Sage," said Mrs Portlock, "and put in a dash of carb'nate. For goodness' sake let's have the cake light, and—why, what ails the girl now?"

Sage had darted back from the table, and torn off the large bibbed apron she wore so roughly that she snapped one of the tape strings, before hastily wiping the flour from her arms, and pulling down her pinned-up sleeves.

The reason was plain enough, and to be seen through the geraniums, where Luke Ross was making his way across the home close, looking fresh and eager in the crisp January air, as he gazed straight before him at the farm.

"There, get on with thy work, child," cried Mrs Portlock, in a half-petulant, half-laughing way; "there's nothing to be ashamed of in making a cake. If you marry Luke Ross you won't have many cakes to make," she added petulantly.

"Oh, for shame, aunt! How can you?" cried Sage, looking conscious and uncomfortable, as her cheeks turned scarlet.

"Because that's what he has come for, I'll be bound. There, go and let him in."

"Oh, no, aunt! I'd—I'd rather not," faltered Sage.

"Such stuff, child! Just as if I couldn't see you were longing to go. There, if you don't run and open the door, I'll go myself, and tell him you were ashamed."

"I'll go and open the door," said Sage, quietly; and there was a curious, introspective look in her countenance, as, after waiting till the imperative rap of the young man's knuckles was heard, she hastily replaced the apron, turned up her sleeves, and floured her hands, before going to let the visitor in.

"I'm not ashamed of making cakes, aunt," she said, quietly.

"Bless the girl, what a strange one she is!" muttered Mrs Portlock, apostrophising the great eight-day clock, and then pausing in the beating of eggs, to listen, with the greatest eagerness, as Luke Ross's voice was heard at the door, and Sage's directly after, but in quite a low buzz, for the intervening door was shut.

"I don't know what to say to it," said Mrs Portlock, querulously. "He's very nice, and kind, and good-looking, but I'd a deal rather she married a farmer. Schoolmastering don't fill bacon-racks, nor the tub with pickled pork."

The buzzing at the front door continued, and the increased current of air made the fire to roar up the wide kitchen chimney.

"For goodness' sake, why don't they come in?" exclaimed Mrs Portlock. "That girl will catch her death o' cold."

She made this remark also in confidence to the brass-dialled eight-day clock, at the top of which a grotesque-looking human-faced sun was just peering over an engraved arc, above which it revolved in company with various other

planets when the mechanism within properly worked; and, after making the remark, Mrs Portlock's wooden spoon began once more to batter the already well-beaten eggs, between pauses to listen what was going on at the door.

"I hate such shilly-shallying ways," she muttered. "He's come on purpose to see us, so why does he loiter there at the door? I'll be bound to say if it was young Cyril Mallow he'd have been here by now."

The mention of this name made Mrs Portlock pause and rub her face thoughtfully with one corner of her apron.

"I don't see why not," she muttered. "I'm sure he likes her, or else he wouldn't be so fond of coming out here to smoke a pipe with Joseph. And if they are gentry, why, gentry are only human flesh; and as to their money, I'll be bound to say they're not so much better off than we are, in spite of their show."

There was another fierce attack upon the golden fluid in the white basin.

"He seems nice, does Cyril; very different to his brother. Poor Rue, she had an escape there; and I dare say this will only be a bit of a flirtation with both of them. I shall not interfere, and matters may go as they like."

The eggs once more suffered from the severe attack.

"It's my belief Sage don't know her own mind," exclaimed Mrs Portlock. "Here, Anne, bring some more coals to this fire; I want the oven to be well hot."

Just then there was the sound of the closing door, and Luke Ross entered, followed by Sage, looking more conscious than before.

"Morning, Mrs Portlock," cried the young man frankly.

"Good-morning, Luke," she replied. "Why didn't you take him in the parlour, Sage? There's a good fire there."

"Because I begged to be allowed to come here, Mrs Portlock, so as not interfere with the preparations. My father said he would be glad to come."

"Ah, that's right!" exclaimed Mrs Portlock. "There, sit down by the fire; you must want a bit o' lunch. Sage!—why, bless the girl, I didn't see her go."

"She has gone up-stairs, I think," said Luke.

"To put her hair straight or some nonsense, when we are that busy that we shall never be ready in time."

"No, no, Mrs Portlock," said Luke, who looked hot and nervous, and instead of taking a chair by the fire, he edged away to stand by the crockery-covered dresser, with his back half turned from the light; "I think she has gone up-stairs on account of what I wanted to say."

"There, there, there," said Mrs Portlock, labouring frantically now at the egg-beating, "I think I know what's coming, and I'd a deal rather you wouldn't say a word to me about it."

Luke Ross looked discomfited and troubled, and became exceedingly interested for a moment in the little silk band of his soft felt hat.

"But surely, Mrs Portlock," he began at last, "you must have known that I was deeply attached to Sage?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I did," replied Mrs Portlock; and this time some of the yellow egg flew over the basin side; "but it's a very serious matter."

"Indeed, yes," said Luke, quietly, "I look upon it as the turning-point of my life."

"And I don't believe that Sage half knows her own mind yet. She's too young, and it's not as if she was my own child."

"But we can wait, Mrs Portlock," said Luke, gaining confidence, now that he had made the first plunge. "Of course we should have to wait for some time."

"Won't say anything about it," cried Mrs Portlock, as the sturdy red-faced servant-maid entered to pour a half-scuttle of coals on the roaring fire. "If you want to talk about it—"

Mrs Portlock here began to work viciously with a piece of nutmeg, the eggs being considered enough beaten.

"I should be sorry to hurt your feelings about this matter, Mrs Portlock," continued Luke; "but I have always thought you looked upon Sage and me as being as good as engaged."

"Oh, I don't know! I can't say! There, I won't say anything about it. Oh! here's Master, and you must talk to him."

Luke Ross's face wore a particularly troubled look, as a hearty, bluff voice was just then heard bidding a dog lie down, and, directly after, the kitchen door was thrown open, and the broad-shouldered bluff Churchwarden, in his loose brown velveteen coat and cord breeches with leather leggings, entered the room. His clear blue eyes and crisp grey hair made him look the very embodiment of health, and his face lit up with a pleasant smile as he strode in with a double gun under his arm, while his pockets had a peculiarly bulgy appearance at the sides.

"Ah, Luke, my lad! how are you?" he said, bluffly, as he held out his hand. "Glad to see you, my boy. Why, you ought

to have been out with me for a run. Thy face looks as pasty as owt."

"I should have liked the walk immensely," said Luke, brightening up at the warmth of his reception, and he wrung the others hand.

"Schoolmastering don't improve thy looks, Luke, my lad," continued the Churchwarden. "Why, you are as pale as if you had been bled. Hang that London! I don't care if I never see it again."

"There's worse places than London, Joseph," said Mrs Portlock, who had a weakness for an occasional metropolitan trip.

"Tell me where they are, then," said the Churchwarden, "for I don't know 'em. Got two hares," he said, standing the gun in the corner by the dresser.

"Ah! we wanted a hare," said Mrs Portlock, busying herself over the work her niece had left undone.

"There you are, then," said the Churchwarden, drawing them, one at a time, from the inner pockets of his shooting-coat.

"But is that gun loaded, Joseph?" cried Mrs Portlock, who had been to the dresser and started away.

"Yes, both barrels," said the Churchwarden, with a comical look at the visitor. "I wouldn't touch her if I were you."

"I touch the horrid thing?" cried Mrs Portlock. "There, for goodness' sake unload it, Joseph, before we have some accident."

"All right," said the Churchwarden, tossing the hares out into the stone passage at the back, and taking up the gun just as Mrs Portlock had raised the great white basin of well-beaten egg to pour into a flour crater which she had prepared. Stepping to the window, the head of the house turned the fastening quietly, and opened the casement sufficiently wide to allow of the protrusion of the barrels of the gun, when—

Banff! Banff!

Crash!

All in rapid succession, for the double report so startled the good housewife that she let the great white basin slip through her fingers to be shattered to atoms on the red-brick floor, and spread its golden treasure far and wide.

"Joseph!" exclaimed Mrs Portlock.

"Say, Luke, I've done it now," he cried. "There's nothing the matter, lass, only a basin broke."

"And a dozen eggs destroyed," cried Mrs Portlock, petulantly.

"Here, let's go into the parlour, Luke," continued the Churchwarden, after a merry look at Sage, who had run down-stairs, looking quite pale. "Sage, my dear, send Anne in with the bread and cheese, and a mug of ale. Luke Ross here will join me in a bit of lunch." He led the way to the parlour, Luke following him, after pausing a moment to obtain a look from Sage; but she was too conscious to glance his way, and had begun already to help Mrs Portlock, who looked the very picture of vexation and trouble combined.

The parlour was a fine old oak-panelled, low-ceiled room, with dark beams reflecting the flaming fire, whose ruddy light danced in the panes of the corner cupboard and glistening sideboard and polished chairs.

"Sit down, my boy, sit down," cried the Churchwarden, as he stooped to toss a piece of oak root on the flaming fire. "What with Christmas-keeping, I've hardly seen thee since you came back. My word, how time goes! Only the other day thou wast a slip of a boy helping me to pick the apples in the orchard and playing with Sage, and now thou'rt a grown man."

The Churchwarden seated himself, took his tobacco-jar from a bracket, his pipe from the chimney-piece, and proceeded to fill it.

"You won't smoke, I know. Good job, too. Bad habit, lad. But what's the matter—anything wrong?"

"Only in my own mind, sir," said Luke, rather excitedly, as he sat opposite the farmer, tapping the table.

"Out with it, then, Luke, my boy, and I'll help thee if I can. Want some money?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Luke, flushing. "The fact is, I have finished my training, and I am now down home expecting to take the management of the school as master."

"Ha! yes!" said the Churchwarden softly, leaning forward to light a spill amongst the glowing logs. "There's a bit o' trouble about that. Half-a-dozen of 'em's taking Humphrey Bone's side against parson, and they want me to join."

"But you will not, I hope, sir?" said Luke, anxiously.

"I should, my lad, but for Master Humphrey's drink. He's not a man to have the care of boys."

"No, sir, indeed," said Luke, who paused, while the ruddy servant lass brought in a napkin-covered tray, with the bread and cheese, and a great pewter tankard of home-brewed ale.

“Help thyself, lad,” said the Churchwarden; “and now what is it?”

“I must speak out plainly, sir, or not at all,” said Luke, excitedly.

“Surely, my lad,” said the other, watching him keenly, as he poured out some ale.

Luke hesitated for a few moments, and then tried to clear his voice, but failed, and spoke huskily as he rose from his seat.

“Mr Portlock,” he said, “you have known me from a boy.”

“And always liked thee, my lad, and made thee welcome,” still watching him keenly.

“Always, Mr Portlock, and you will agree that it is not strange that now I am grown a man I should love my little playmate Sage, whom I’ve known ever since the day you called at our house with her and Rue—poor little orphans, looking so pretty and helpless as they sat in black in your gig.”

“Ay! ay! that was a sad time, Luke Ross,” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully. “Poor little bairns! mother and father in one sad week, Luke. Hah! well, I’ve never had any of my own, and I never think of ’em now but as if they had been born to me.”

“No, sir, I know that,” said Luke, smiling.

“And you want me to say thou mayst have Sage for thy wife. That’s the plain English of it, lad, eh?”

“Yes, sir—yes, sir,” cried Luke, excitedly; but delighted to have his task cut short.

“Ha!” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully. “I expected as much. I said to myself that was what you would ask me when you came back.”

“And you consent, sir?” cried Luke, joyously.

There was a moment’s silence, while the Churchwarden crossed a sturdy, well-shaped leg over the other, Luke gazing the while upon his lips, until he spoke, and then sinking back, as if smitten, into his chair.

“No, my lad, I do not give my consent. I like thee, Luke, almost as well as if thou wast my own son, and I believe you’d make Sage a good husband; but, to be plain with you, I don’t like this schoolmastering and mistress work.”

“You don’t like it, sir!”

“No, my lad. It was against my wish that Sage took to it. I would rather have seen her making the bread-and-butter at home; and there was no need for her to have gone into the world; and as you know, it was then I set my face against your going in for it as well.”

“Indeed, sir!”

“Yes, my lad. You’d a deal better have been content to take up with your father’s honest old business of tanning. There’s a good trade to be done.”

“Yes, sir, but I felt myself so unsuited for the trade, and I liked books.”

“And didn’t care about dirtying thy hands, Luke. No, my lad, I think it was a mistake.”

“A mistake, sir?”

“Yes, and I’ll show you. Now, look here, my boy,” continued the Churchwarden, pointing with the waxy end of his pipe. “No lad of spirit thinks of taking help from his father, after his first start in the world.”

“Of course not, sir.”

“And a lad of spirit don’t go hanging on to his wife’s people.”

“No, sir.”

“Then, look here, my boy. What is your salary to be, if you get Lawford School; I say, *if* you get it?”

“Seventy pounds per annum, sir, with a house, and an addition for my certificate, if I have been fortunate enough to win one.”

“Seventy pounds a year, with a house, if you get the school, and some more if you win a certificate, my lad; so that all your income is depending upon ifs.”

“I am sure of the school, sir,” said Luke, warmly, as he coloured up.

“Are you, my lad? I’m not,” said the Churchwarden, drily. “No, Luke Ross, I like you, for I believe you to be a clever scholar, and—what to my mind’s ten thousand times better than scholarship—I know you to be a true, good-hearted lad.”

“I thank you, sir,” said Luke, whose heart was sinking; and Portlock went on—

“I’m not a poor man, Luke, and every penny I have I made with my own hand and brain. Sage is as good as my child, and when we old folks go to sleep I dare say she and her sister will have a nice bit o’ money for themselves.”

“I never thought of such a thing as money, sir,” cried Luke, hotly.

“I don’t believe you ever did, my boy,” said the Churchwarden. “But now listen. Sage is very young yet, and hardly knows her own mind. I tell you—there, there, let me speak. I know she thinks she loves you. I tell you, I say, that I’d sooner see Sage your wife than that of any man I know; but I’m not going to keep you both, and make you sacrifice your independence, and I’m not going to have my child goto a life of drudgery and poverty.”

“But you forget, sir, we should be both having incomes from our schools.”

“No, I don’t, boy. While you were young. How about the time when she had children—how then? And I don’t believe in a man and his wife both teaching schools. A woman has got enough to do to make her husband’s home so snug that he shall think it, as he ought to do, the very best place in the whole world, and she can’t do that and teach school too. Do you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” said Luke, very humbly, though he did not approve of his old friend’s opinions.

“Then look here, Luke Ross, I like you, and when you can come to me and say, ‘Joseph Portlock, I have a good permanent income of five hundred a year,’ Sage, if she likes, shall be your wife.”

“Five hundred a year, sir!” faltered Luke, with a strange, unreal dread seeming to rise before him like a mist of the possibility that before then Sage’s love might change.

“Yes, my lad, five hundred a year.”

“Uncle,” said Sage, opening the door, “Mr Mallow has called to see you;” and a strange look passed between the two young men, as Cyril Mallow entered the room.

Part 1, Chapter XIII.

Visitors at the Farm.

The morning of Mrs Portlock’s party, and Uncle Joseph just returned from his round in the farm, to look smilingly at the preparations that were going on, and very tenderly at Sage, who looked downcast and troubled.

“Well, girls,” he cried, “how goes it? Come, old lady, let it be a good set-out, for Sage here won’t have much more chance for helping you when these holidays are over.”

“I wish she’d give the school teaching up,” said Mrs Portlock, rather fretfully, as she sat gathering her apron into pleats.

“She can give it up if she likes,” said the Churchwarden, heartily. “It’s her own whim.”

“Well, don’t you fidget, Joseph, for Sage and I will do our best.”

“Of course you will, my dears,” he said. “Here, Sage, fill me the old silver mug with ale out of number two.”

“But it is not tapped, uncle.”

“Ah!” he shouted, “who says it isn’t tapped? Why I drove the spigot in night before last on purpose to have it fine. And now, old woman, if you want any lunch, have it, and then go and pop on your black silk and bonnet, while I order round the chaise, and I’ll drive you in to town.”

“No, Joseph, no,” exclaimed Mrs Portlock, who had now gathered the whole of the bottom of her apron into pleats and let them go. “I said last night that I would not go with you any more unless you left the whip at home. I cannot bear to sit in that chaise and see you beat poor Dapple as you do.”

“But I must have a whip, old girl, or I can’t drive.”

“I’m sure the poor horse goes very well without.”

“But not through the snow, my dear,” said Sage’s uncle, giving her another of his droll looks. “Really, old girl, I wouldn’t answer for our not being upset without a whip.”

“But you wouldn’t use it without you were absolutely obliged, Joseph?”

“On my honour as a gentleman,” said Uncle Joseph; and his wife smiled and went up-stairs to get dressed, while Sage took the keys to go down to the cellar and draw the ale, as her uncle walked to the door, and she heard him shouting his orders to Dicky Dykes to harness Dapple and bring him round at once.

Sage stood in the low-ceiled, old-fashioned parlour, with the quaintly-made silver tankard in her hand, waiting for her uncle to come in. There was a smile upon her lip, and as she listened now to the Churchwarden’s loud, hearty voice shouting orders to the different men about the yard, and now to her aunt’s heavy footsteps overhead, she was gazing straight into the great glowing wood fire, whose ruddy flames flickered and danced in the broad, blue-tiled chimney; and though it was so cold that the frost was making silver filigree upon the window panes, she felt all aglow, and kept

on picturing in the embers the future that might have place.

“By George!” roared the Churchwarden, coming in. “Hallo! didn’t kick all the snow off. Here, let’s melt it before the tyrant comes down;” and he shone all over his broad face, and his eyes twinkled with mirth, as he held first one boot and then the other to the blaze. “Now, the ale, Sage, my pet. Give’s a kiss first, darling, to give it a flavour.”

He hugged her to his side, and gave her a loud-sounding smack upon the lips, holding her close to him as he smiled down in her eyes.

“And I used to grumble, my pet, because I had no children,” he said, tenderly, “little thinking I should have Sage and Rue to take care of till—Oh! I say. Ha-ha-ha! Look at the colour. Poor little woman then. Was he coming to-day?”

“Please don’t tease me, uncle dear,” she whispered, as she laid her head upon his shoulder, and hid her burning face.

“I won’t then,” he said; but she could feel him chuckling as he went on. “I say though, Sage. I’ve been thinking one ought to have asked him to come and stay here for a few days. Very hospitable, eh? But hardly conventual. That’s not right, is it, schoolmistress? No, no; I mean conventional. No you don’t. I’ve got you tight,” for Sage had tried to run away.

“Then please don’t tease me, uncle.”

“But what will old Vinnicombe say?”

“Uncle dear,” she whispered, appealingly. “There then, my pet, I won’t,” he said. “What time do you expect Jack and Rue?”

“By about four o’clock, uncle dear.”

“That’s right, my pet, and now you must bustle. See that there’s plenty of jolly good fires, for I hate people to come and find the place chilly. Let’s give ’em a warm reception, and I’ll see if I can’t fill up some of old Vinnicombe’s wrinkles out of his face. Let me see, I want some more tobacco. Hah!” he cried, after a deep draught, “that’s good ale. Taste it, pet.”

Sage took the tankard with a smile, raised the creaking lid, and put her lips to it to please him.

“Fine, ain’t it, lass?”

“Capital, uncle.”

“I say, Sage, if that don’t make old Vinnicombe smile I’m a Dutchman. By the way, my dear, shall I ask Cyril Mallow to drop in?”

“Uncle!” cried Sage, turning pale.

“Well, why not? He has no pride in him, not a bit. And if he wants gentlemen to meet, why, there’s Paulby and Vinnicombe. Hang it all, my girl, if I liked to set up for a gentleman I dare say I could, after you had toned me down and mended my manners, and oiled my axles with grammar grease, eh?”

“Oh, no, no, uncle; don’t think of it,” she said, imploringly.

“Just as you like, my dear; ’tis your party like, and it’s for you to choose. He is a bit cocky and priggish, and a bit gallant, but my darling knows how to keep him in his place.”

“Oh, yes, uncle, of course,” said Sage, hastily; “but Rue will be here, you know, and it might set her thinking of his brother Frank.”

“Hah! Yes; I had forgotten that,” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully. “To be sure! she did think a little about him, didn’t she? Hullo!”

“I want Sage,” cried Mrs Portlock down the stairs.

“Yes, aunt, dear.”

“Hold that wrapper to the fire, my dear, ready for your uncle,” and she threw down a great white cashmere belcher to her niece.

“Here! Hoi! I say, old girl, I’m not going to wear that thing.”

“Yes, dear, it’s a very long drive, and the air is very cold.”

The Churchwarden sank into a chair, and, raising the lid of the tankard, gazed into it despondently.

“Tyranny, tyranny, tyranny!” he groaned. “Oh! why did I ever marry such a woman as this?”

“Now don’t talk nonsense, Joseph,” cried his wife, rustling down into the room so wrapped up that she looked double her natural size, what with cloak, and boa, and a large muff. “Put it round your uncle’s neck, Sage, the frost is very severe.”

The Churchwarden threw his head back ready for Sage to tie on the wrapper, uttering a low moan the while, and then

sighed as he stood up and walked—at first slowly and then with alacrity—into the hall to put on his hat.

“I can’t get into my coat with this thing on,” he roared. “Come and give us a lift.”

Sage ran laughingly into the hall to help the greatcoat on to his broad shoulders just as the four-wheeled chaise came crunching to the front door, Dapple giving a loud snort or two, and stamping upon the frozen gravel.

Just then the Churchwarden gave a comical look at his niece, rushed to the corner by the eight-day clock, and made a great deal of rattling as he took up the whip and gave it a sharp lash through the air, and a crack on the broad balustrade.

Sage heard her aunt start, and her uncle chuckled.

“Now, old lady,” he said. “That’s right, Sage, plenty of rugs, or we shall have her frozen. That’s it, old girl, right leg first. Hold his head still, Dicky. There you are; tuck that rug round you. There, that’s better,” he cried, taking his seat and fastening the apron. “Let him go, Dicky. Tck!”

He started Dapple, and then stood up in the chaise with a quick motion, raising the whip as he set his teeth, and seemed about to strike the cob a tremendous blow, making Mrs Portlock jump and seize his arm, when he subsided, looking round at Sage with a comical expression in his eye, but pulled up short.

“Here. Hi! I say. Yah! artful. Here you, Luke Ross, you’re three hours before your time,” he cried.

“Yes, sir. I thought I might help a little, and—”

“You thought you might help a little, and—G’on with you—get out. G’long!” and the Churchwarden flicked and lashed at Luke Ross, as he stepped to the side of the chaise and shook hands, while Sage, with her heart beating fast, drew back into the porch, seeing her uncle begin poking at the new arrival with the butt of the whip-handle.

Then the cob was started again with another pretended furious cut, which made Sage’s aunt catch at her uncle’s arm; and then as, frightened, fluttering, and yet happy, she saw Luke coming towards her, the Churchwarden’s voice came roaring through the wintry air—

“Here! I say, Luke Ross, remember what I said. I mean it—seriously.”

“Sage, my dear Sage!” Those were the next words Sage Portlock heard, as Luke took her hand to lead her, trembling and nervous, into the hall.

“I hardly hoped for such good fortune,” he cried, as Sage gently disengaged herself from his clasp, and stood gazing rather sadly in his face; “but oh! pray, pray don’t look at me like that, darling, I’m here to go down on my knees to you, Sage. There,” he cried, “I will, to beg pardon—to tell you I was a weak, jealous fool—that I know you could not help Cyril Mallow coming and admiring you (he’d have been a fool if he hadn’t!)—that you’re the best, and dearest, and truest, and sweetest, and most innocent-hearted of girls—that I love you more dearly than ever, and that I’ve been a miserable wretch ever since last night.”

“Don’t do that, Luke,” she said, as he literally went upon his knees; “it hurts me.”

“And I’d suffer anything sooner than give you a moment’s pain,” he cried, springing to his feet; and they stood now in the middle of the old parlour. “But you haven’t forgiven me, Sage,” he said, piteously.

“Yes, Luke, I’ve forgiven you, but I want you to know and trust me better. Your words seemed so cruel to me, and if you knew me you would not have said them. I did not know that Cyril Mallow when he called did so that he might see me, and we hardly exchanged a dozen words.”

“And if you had exchanged a thousand, sweet, what then?” cried Luke, proudly. “I was a jealous idiot, and ought to have known better; but it has been a lesson to me on my weakness, and now I am going to wait patiently till I can say what your uncle wishes.”

Sage was silent, for she was thinking it was her duty to tell him that, after the sad little trouble that had come between them, it would be better for them to be more distant for a time; but she could not say it with his eyes looking appealingly at her. She had felt so proud of him for his manly bearing and straightforward honesty of purpose. The words would not come, and somehow the next minute she was sobbing in his arms as he whispered those two words, but in such a tone—

“My darling!”

She started from him guiltily the next moment, and ran up-stairs, and stayed till there was a fresh crunching of wheels and the trampling of a horse’s hoofs, when she came down again to welcome her sister and her husband, John Berry—a bluff, middle-aged farmer to whom Rue had been married some five years, and they had come now to spend a few days, bringing their two little girls.

“Ah, Luke, my man of wisdom, how are you? Sage, my dear, give us a kiss. Bless you, how well you look. How am I? Hearty, and so’s Rue.”

Sage was kissing her sister affectionately the next moment, heartily glad to see her looking so rosy and well, but blushing redder as she whispered merrily—

“Oh! I am sorry we came and interrupted you. You look so guilty, Sagey. When’s it to be?”

“Not for years to come, dear,” said Sage, as she busied herself with Lotty and Totty, their two golden-haired little children, who were so wrapped up that they were, as John said, warm as toasts.

He plumped himself into a chair directly, to take one on each knee. Then Sage and Rue busied themselves in taking off pelisses and woollen leggings, and reducing the little things into a less rounded shape, while John sat as stolid and serious as a judge, evidently being very proud of his two little ones, as he was of his handsome young wife.

“And now, John, you’d like a tankard of ale, wouldn’t you?” cried Sage.

“Well, I don’t know,” said John, quietly; “a mug of squire’s ale is nice, if Luke there will have one too.”

“Oh! I’ll join,” said Luke, heartily; and, after drawing it, Sage went up with Rue to her room, and she began to tease her about Luke, but ended with an affectionate embrace.

“I’d marry him any time, dear,” she said, “for I think he’s a good fellow, and if you are as happy as I am with dear old John you will be satisfied.”

“But uncle has said that it is not to be till Luke has five hundred a year,” said Sage, dreamily, “and that will not be for a long time; and—and, Rue, dear,” she faltered, “I—I don’t think I feel quite happy about it.”

“Stuff and nonsense, Sagey! Uncle will come round. He wants to see us quite happy.”

“But you misunderstand me, dear,” said Sage, thoughtfully. “I mean that I’m half afraid I’m not doing right in letting Luke Ross believe I love him, because—because—”

“Because—because you are a goose,” cried Rue, merrily. “I felt just the same about John, and was ready to break it off, and now I think him the dearest and best fellow under the sun. Sage, dear.”

“Yes, Rue.”

“You are in the sugar-plum stage just now, and don’t know your own mind. I like Luke Ross. He’s frank and straightforward. Don’t play with him, for he’s a man to be trusted, and you’re lucky to have him care for you.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Sage, dreamily; “but it is not to be for a long time yet.”

As she spoke she was thinking of the past, and her sister’s love affair with Frank Mallow, who used to follow her whenever she was out for a walk; and then about the trouble at the rectory, when Frank Mallow went off all on a sudden. Of how poor Rue was nearly heartbroken, and used to tell Sage that she would go after him if he sent for her; but he never even wrote to her in spite of all his professions; and then they learned how badly he had behaved; and after that Rue never mentioned his name but in a quiet subdued way, and at her uncle’s wish accepted John Berry—a man of sterling qualities—and she had grown brighter and happier ever since she had been his wife.

The final preparations were made and the table spread long before the Churchwarden and his wife came back, with the chaise loaded up, and Mrs Portlock protesting that she would never go again if Joseph took a whip.

The culprit chuckled as Sage helped him with his overcoat, shouting orders all the while to Luke and John Berry, who were busy bringing in the load of parcels till it seemed wonderful how they could all have been packed into the chaise.

At last the final packet was in, and the cold air shut out; but hardly had the door been closed, and they were standing laughing at Rue’s little girls, who were staggering in and out of the great parlour with packets which they carried by the string, than the bell rang.

“Here’s Vinnicombe!” cried Portlock, and the doctor, in a fur cap tied down over his ears, blue spectacles over his eyes, and his tall lean form muffled in a long thick greatcoat, came in, stamping his feet.

“Here, help me off with this coat, somebody,” growled the doctor. “How do, girls? Take away those children, or I shall tread on ’em. Hate youngsters running about under one’s feet like black beetles. What have you got there?” he added, pointing to the parcels.

“Fal-lals and kickshaws. The old woman’s been pretty well emptying the grocer’s shop.”

“Now, Joseph, that is really too bad,” said Mrs Portlock, full of mild indignation. “Now you know you would persist in buying three-parts of what is there.”

“Humph! Thought you fancied you were going to be snowed up,” growled the doctor, shaking himself free of his coat, and holding out first one leg and then the other for Luke to pull off his goloshes. “That’s right, Luke Ross; I don’t see why you young fellows shouldn’t wait on us old ones. I had lots of trouble with you, you young rascal; fetched out of bed for you often.”

“Well, doctor,” cried Luke, “you see I’m willing enough,” and his cheeks flushed with pleasure to find that in spite of the Churchwarden’s serious treatment of his proposals, he was warmer than ever he had been before.

“There, look sharp, girls,” cried the Churchwarden. “Come, old lady, take off your things. Sage, put the doctor in the chimney-corner to thaw. He’ll soon come round.”

Dr Vinnicombe shook his fist at the speaker, and let Sage lead him to the glowing fire, while the next moment the Churchwarden was having what he called “a glorious cuddle,” four little chubby arms being fast about his great neck,

and a couple of pairs of little red lips kissing him all over his rugged, ruddy face.

Part 1, Chapter XIV.

The Bad Shilling.

Michael Ross, Luke's father, came soon after with a couple of fellow-townsmen, and their chat about the state of affairs, social and political, that is to say, the state of affairs in connection with the rectory and the price of corn, was interrupted by the call for tea.

The warm fire and the pleasant social meal did make the doctor come round, and very pleasant everything seemed as they afterwards sat about the blazing fire. Sage noted how happy and contented her sister was, with her pretty young matronly face, as she sat by her husband's side and seemed to glow with content, as first one little golden-haired cherub and then the other was seated on Dr Vinnicombe's knee, the soured old cynic telling them tales to which they all listened with almost childish delight.

Luke's heart was full of joy, and he kept glancing across at Sage, who avoided his gaze in a timid, cast-down manner; but it did not displease him, for he thought she was all that was modest and sweet, and told himself that he was proud indeed to have won such a woman for his future wife.

Then there seemed to be a blank in the room, for Sage left with her sister to put the little ones to bed, Rue sending the blood flushing into her cheeks as she half mockingly said—

"How long will it be, Sage, before I am helping you to put a little Luke and a little Sage to sleep?"

They were very silent directly after, and Sage felt a kind of wondering awe as, in obedience to a word from their mother, the two little white-robed things, with their fair hair like golden glories round their heads, knelt at Aunty Sage's knee to lisp each a little simple prayer to God to send his angels to watch round their couch that night; and then back came Rue's merry words, and with them wondering awe, almost dread, at the possibility of such as these at her feet ever calling her mother, and looking to her for help.

They stayed for a few minutes to see the children sleep, with their rosy little faces on the same pillow, and then, with their arms around each other, Sage and Rue, happy girls at heart once more, descended to the dining-room, where their aunt was telling Doctor Vinnicombe about her troubles with her garden, while their uncle's face was full of good-humoured crinkles as she spoke.

"Here, girls," he said, putting down his pipe, "come and comfort me while I'm being flogged."

"I'm not flogging you, Joseph," said Mrs Portlock, speaking in a serious, half-plaintive way; "but it will soon be time for Dicky to be doing up my garden again, and I do say that it is a shame that in my own ground you will be always planting seeds and things that have no business there."

"Never put in anything that isn't useful," chuckled the Churchwarden, with his arms round his nieces' waists as they stood by his side.

"Useful, yes; but you ought not to sow carrot-seed amongst my mignonette, and plant potato-cuttings in amongst my tulips and hearts-ease. I declare, doctor, if my verbena-bed was not full of cabbage plants one day, and when I pulled them up he had them set again, and often and often I've allowed swedes, and mangolds, and rape to get ever so big in the garden before I've known what they were."

"He's a terrible rascal, Mrs Portlock, that he is; and if I were you I'd have a divorce," said the doctor.

"Ah, do, old lady," chuckled the Churchwarden, but he became serious directly as his wife rose from her seat and went and stood behind his chair, with her hands upon his shoulders.

"A divorce?" she said, smiling. "Thirty years we've been man and wife, Joseph;" and he leaned back his head and said softly—

"Ay, dear, and I worked five years till I was well enough off to give you a good home, and please God we'll have thirty more years together—here, or in the better world."

Luke Ross felt that the words were meant for him, and he tried to catch Sage's eye, but she would not raise her face, and he sat thinking that after all the farmer was right.

There was a dead silence in the room for some minutes, and then Dr Vinnicombe exclaimed—

"Come, Churchwarden, here are Michael Ross and I famishing for a game at whist."

"To be sure," cried the Churchwarden. "Now, girls, let's have the card-table. My word, what a night! It's a nipper indeed. Let's have another log on, old lady, and—What the dickens is the matter with those dogs?"

For just then, as the flames and sparks were roaring up the chimney, the two dogs in the yard set up a furious barking, growing so excited, and tearing so at their chains, that the Churchwarden went out to the door, opened it, and a rush of cold, searching wind roared into the room as he shouted—

"Down, Don! Quiet, Rover! Who's there?"

“Port—lock, ahoy!” came in reply, and Rue turned pale, uttered a low moan, and clung to her sister, who trembled in turn as another voice shouted—

“Call off the dogs, Mr Portlock; it is only I.”

“Sage,” whispered Rue, with her face close to her sister’s ear, “let us go away.”

“Why, it must be Mr Frank Mallow,” cried Mrs Portlock, excitedly, and she glanced in a frightened way at her nieces.

“Yes, that it is,” she said, beneath her breath, as a tall, dark man with a heavy beard entered the room, closely followed by Cyril Mallow.

“Beg pardon,” he said, in a curious, half-cynical way. “Didn’t expect to see me, I suppose. Only got back this afternoon; thought I should like to see all old friends.”

“Hearty glad to see you back again,” said the Churchwarden, frankly. “Sit down, Mr Cyril,” he continued, as the new-comer shook hands. “Take a chair, Mr Frank. It’s like old times to see you here again.”

“Hah! yes. How well you look, farmer, and you too, Mrs Portlock. Miss Sage, I presume? Why, what a change! Grown from a slip of a girl to a charming woman. And how is Miss Rue Portlock?” he said, with mock deference, as he fixed the pale, shrinking face with his dark eyes.

“I am quite well, Mr Frank,” said Rue, making an effort to be composed, but not taking the visitor’s extended hand. “John, dear,” she continued, turning to her husband, “this is Mr Frank Mallow, of whom you have heard me speak.”

“Ah! to be sure,” said John Berry. “Glad to know my little wife’s friends. How are you, sir—how are you?”

Frank Mallow’s eyes closed slightly, and he gazed in a half-curious, contemptuous way at John Berry as he shook hands, and then turned to Luke Ross.

“And is this Miss Sage’s husband?” he said, laughingly, but in a sarcastic way that turned Sage cold.

“Well, no; I am not Miss Portlock’s husband, Mr Mallow,” said Luke, smiling, and taking the extended hand, his tone saying plainly enough that he hoped soon to be.

“Ah, well, we all get married some time or other,” said the visitor, in a careless, unpleasant way.

“Have you got married then, my lad?” said the Churchwarden, reaching a cigar-box from the fireplace cupboard.

“No, not yet,” he replied, “not yet. Cyril and I are particular, eh, Cil, old man? I’ve come over to fetch myself a wife perhaps. Cigar? Yes; thanks. Take one, Cil? Hah! how cosy this old room seems! I’ve spent some pleasant hours here.”

“Ay, you’ve smoked many a pipe with me, Mr Frank. That was when you were in your farming days.”

“Farming days?”

“Ay,” chuckled the Churchwarden, “sowing thy wild oats, my lad.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Why, Portlock, you’re as fond of a joke as ever. Ladies, I hope you won’t mind so much smoking,” he said, puffing away vigorously all the same, while Luke Ross gazed uneasily from one brother to the other, till he caught Cyril looking at him in a haughty, offended manner, when in spite of himself his eyes fell.

“Old folks surprised to see you, eh, sir?” said the Churchwarden, to break the blank in the conversation.

“Yes, preciously,” was the short reply.

“Humph!”

Frank Mallow, who was staring at Rue, while his brother was trying to catch her sister’s eye, turned at this loud grunt and smiled.

“Oh, you’re there!” he exclaimed. “And how is Doctor Vinnicombe?”

“Doctor Vinnicombe is in very good health, and in the best of spirits,” said the doctor, sarcastically, “for one of his old patients has come back, evidently to pay a heavy bill that his father refused to acknowledge.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Frank Mallow.

“And how have you got on, Mr Frank?” said the Churchwarden. “I hope you’ve made a better hit of it than Mr Cyril there, and after all the teaching I gave him about sheep.”

“Better hit? Well, I hope so. Nice fellow he was to come out to the other side of the world, and never call upon his brother.”

“You took precious good care not to let us know your address,” retorted Cyril.

“And what may you have been doing, Mr Frank?” said the Churchwarden, who was beginning to have an uneasy idea that the visitors were not adding to the harmony of the evening, and also recalling the ugly little affairs that had to do

with Frank's departure.

"Doing?"

"Yes; sir; did you try tillage?"

"Not I, farmer," exclaimed Frank Mallow, staring hard at Rue, who kept her eyes fixed upon the carpet, or talked in a low voice to Sage, while bluff John Berry listened eagerly for what seemed likely to be an interesting narrative.

"Let's see, Mr Frank, you went to New Zealand?"

"Yes, but I did not stay there; I ran on to Australia, and tried the diggings."

"And did you get any gold, sir?" said John Berry, eagerly.

"Pretty well," replied Frank Mallow; "enough to buy and stock a good sheep farm; and now I'm as warm as some of them out there," he added, with a coarse laugh, "and I've come back home for a wife to take care of the house I've built."

"That's right, sir," said John Berry, nodding his head, and smiling at Rue; "nothing like a good wife, sir, to keep you square."

"Then you are not going to stay?" said the Churchwarden.

"Stay! what here? No thanky; I had enough of England when I was here. Other side of the world for me."

The Churchwarden was right in his ideas, for, as the night wore on, Frank Mallow seemed to be trying to pique Rue by his strange bantering ways, while all the time he was so persevering in his free attentions to Sage that Luke's face grew red, and a frown gathered upon his forehead.

Cyril saw it too, and as he found that his brother's conduct annoyed both Sage and Luke, he increased his attentions, laughingly telling Frank not to monopolise the ladies, but to leave a chance for some one else.

"And they call themselves gentlemen!" thought Luke Ross, as he listened gravely to all that was said, and tried to keep from feeling annoyed at the free and easy way of the two brothers, who seemed to have put on their Australian manners for the occasion, and refused to believe in Mrs Portlock being troubled and her nieces annoyed.

They had the greater part of the conversation, and thoroughly spoiled the evening, so that it was with a feeling of relief that Luke heard Cyril Mallow say—

"Well, come along; we must get back. Past twelve; and the governor likes early hours in the country."

"Let him," said Frank Mallow, lighting his fourth cigar.

"But the mater said she should wait up to see you before she went to bed," said Cyril.

"Poor old girl! then I suppose we must go," said Frank, rising. "Ladies, I kiss your hands, as we say in the east. Good-night!"

He shook hands all round, holding Rue Berry's hand very tightly for a moment, at the same time that her brother had Sage's little trembling fingers in his clasp.

"Good-night, gentlemen; you don't go our way."

The next minute Mrs Portlock uttered a sigh of relief, for the dogs were barking at the visitors whom Churchwarden Portlock was seeing to the gate.

"There's a something I like about that young fellow," said John Berry, breaking the silence, as the sisters stood hand clasped in hand, with Mrs Portlock looking at them in a troubled way. "I've heard a good deal of evil spoke of him, but a young fellow who is fond of his mother can't be so very bad. Good-night, doctor; good-night, Mr Ross; good-night, Luke Ross. I'll walk with you to the gate."

The "good-night" between Luke and Sage was not a warm one, for the girl felt troubled and ill at ease, but Luke was quiet and tender.

"She's very tired," he said, "and I promised her—yes, I promised her—"

He did not say what he promised her, as he went thoughtfully home, leaving his father and Doctor Vinnicombe to do all the talking; but as they parted at the doctor's door in the High Street, the latter turned sharply, and said—

"Good-night, Luke Ross. I say, Michael Ross, I don't think you need envy the parson his good fortune in the matter of boys."

"I don't envy him, Luke, my boy," said the little thin, dry old man, as soon as they were out of hearing; "and if I were you, my boy, I'd have precious little to do with these young fellows."

"Don't be alarmed, father," said Luke, laughing; "they would think it an act of condescension to associate with me."

"No," he said to himself, as he stood at last in his clean, plainly-furnished bedroom in the quaint little market-place, "I

should be insulting Sage if I thought she could care for any one but me."

But all the same Luke Ross's dreams were not of a very pleasant kind that night; and those of the two sisters of a less happy character still.

Part 1, Chapter XV.

The Prodigal Sons.

To look at the red-brick gabled rectory, with its rose and wistaria-covered trellis-work, the latter at its season one mass of lovely pendent lavender racemes, and the former in some form or other brightening the house with blossoms all the year round, it might have been thought that it was the home of peace and constant content. The surrounding gardens were a model of beauty, the Rector sparing no expense to make them perfect in their way; but he had long enough before found that beauty of garden and choicest interior surroundings would not bring him peace.

His first great trouble had been the illness of his wife, who, after the birth of Cynthia, had for years and years been taken to this famous specialist, to that celebrated physician, and from both to springs all over the Continent, till, finding no relief, Mr Mallow had yielded to the suffering woman's prayer.

"It is hopeless, dear," she had said, with a calm look of resignation in her pensive eyes. "Let us go home, and I will pray for strength to bear my lot."

They returned then, and it was for her sake that the garden was made to bloom with flowers, and the hothouses to produce the most delicious fruits. Their income was large from private resources, while the Lawford living was good, so that all that money could bring to alleviate the suffering woman's trouble was there, and the Rector was almost constantly at her side.

But Fate, as has been said, who had endowed the Rev. Eli Mallow with wealth, a handsome presence, and with good intellect, had not been chary in the matter of what commercial people term set-offs. Trouble besides his wife's sickness came upon him thickly, principally in the persons of his handsome, manly-looking sons.

Frank had been a difficulty from childhood. He had not been more spoilt than most boys are, though certainly his invalid mother had been most indulgent; but there was a moral bias by nature in his disposition, which somehow seemed to make him, just as he was apparently going straight for a certain goal, turn right off in a very unpleasantly-rounded curve.

Quite early in his youth he had to be recalled, to save expulsion from a certain school, on account of his heading a series of raids upon various orchards, and in defiance of divers corrections on the principal's part.

He had to return home from his two next schools for various offences against their rules, and finally his college career came to an end with rustication.

Frank laughed, and said that he did not know how it was. One thing, he said, was evident: he was not cut out for the church, and he would not go back to college when the term of his rustication was at an end.

A clerkship was obtained for him then, through great interest, in the Treasury, and here for three or four years he got along pretty well, the confinement not being great, and the number of friends he met with being of a character to suit his taste.

There were bounds, though, even in those days, to the limits accorded to a gentlemanly clerk of good birth, and when Frank took to absenting himself from the office for a week at a time, matters became serious.

For the first time or two the plea of illness was accepted, but when another absence occurred, also from illness, and Mr Frank Mallow was seen by his superiors riding a showy-looking hack in the park, and was known to have given a bachelors' party in the same week, to which several fellow-clerks were invited, it became necessary to hint to the peccant youth that the next time he was unwell, a certificate to that effect would be necessary from some well-known medical man.

Frank was ill again, so he sent in word to the office, and stayed away for another week, after which, on presenting himself, he received a warning—one which he bore in mind for a couple of months, and then his head must have once more been very bad, for there was a fresh absence, and this endured so long that Frank's seat in the Treasury knew him no more.

"Well, it don't matter, mother," he said. "It was a wretched set-out, and I was sick of the eternal copying."

"But it was such a pity, dear," his mother said, in a tone of remonstrance.

"Pity? Stuff! Eighty pounds a year, and a rise of ten pounds annually! Not bricklayer's wages, and all the time people think it's such a tremendous thing to be a Treasury clerk."

"Poor papa is so vexed and grieved, for he took such pains to get you the appointment."

"Then poor papa must get pleased again," said the young man, petulantly. "I cannot, and I will not, stand a clerk's desk. I'd sooner enlist."

"Frank!" cried his mother, reproachfully.

“Well, I declare I would, mother,” he said, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and walking up and down the room.

“To find freedom?” said his mother, with a smile.

“Oh! I dare say there would be discipline to attend to, and officers to obey; but there would be some change. I should not have to be tied down to a wretched writing-table, copy, copy, copy, the whole day long.”

“Change?” said Mrs Mallow, and she gazed wistfully in her son’s face.

“Yes, of course; one must have some excitement.”

He stood gazing out of the window, and did not notice the strange despairing look in his mother’s eyes, one which seemed to tell of her own weary hours—weary years, passed upon that couch, with no hope of change save that of some day sinking into the eternal rest. It was evident that she was contrasting the selfishness of her son and his position with her own, and she sighed as she closed her eyes and lay there in silence for a time, uttering no reproach.

Then came the day when the Rector was goaded almost to madness by the young man’s follies, and the reports constantly reaching his ears of Frank’s exploits at the principal hotel in billiard-playing and various unsavoury pursuits with one or other of the young farmers round. Reports these that lost nothing doubtless in the telling, and which never failed to reach the Rector in a way that seemed to suggest that he was answerable for his son’s misdoings.

Then followed other troubles, culminating in an affray with the keepers, an affair which, from the family friendship with old Lord Artingale, could easily have been hushed up; but the Rector jumped at the opportunity he found in his son’s dread and evident anxiety to get away from the neighbourhood, so quite in a hurry Frank was shipped off to New Zealand.

And there was peace at the Rectory? Nothing of the kind. There was the misery of hearing endless little stories of Frank’s “carryings on,” as they were termed; some bill was constantly being brought to the house, with a request that the Rector would pay it, and, to hide his son’s disgrace, this he sometimes did. But the annoyance was none the less, and the Rector used to declare plaintively to his wife that if it were not for Julia and Cynthia he would run right away.

“And for me, Eli,” said the suffering woman, with a smile.

“And for you, dear,” he said, tenderly, and there was peace until some new peccadillo of the eldest son was discovered.

Then to the Rector’s dismay he found that Cyril—his mother’s darling—seemed to have taken a leaf out of his brother’s book. If the younger brother’s career had been to run upon a tram-line laid down by his elder brother, he could not have followed in the course more truly, and just as the Rector was beginning to feel calmed down and happy in the society of his two pretty daughters, troubles concerning Cyril kept cropping up.

“Nice chaps for a parson’s sons,” said Jabez Fullerton, the principal draper at Lawford, who could afford to speak out, as Mrs Mallow and her daughters sent to Swan and Edgar’s for everything. And he did speak out; for, as deacon at his chapel and occasional preacher, he never lost an opportunity of saying a few words by way of practice.

“Nice chaps for a parson’s sons! This is the sort of stuff they send to college, and then send back to teach us, in their surplices which we have to pay for the washing of, though we never go to church. Nice fellows they’ll be to preach sermons—out of books too—read ’em. We at chapel never read our sermons, eh?”

There was a murmur of acquiescence here, and Mr Jabez Fullerton felt happy.

Not that the Rev. Eli Mallow had thought of making his sons clergymen after testing them for a short time. Cyril had, like his brother, been to college, and with a view to his succeeding to the living of Lawford, but, as in the case of Frank, the Rector soon gave him up in despair.

Matters grew worse; then worse still. Expostulation, prayer, anger, all were tried in vain, and, having to bear the trouble to a great extent in silence, so as to hide it from the sick mother, who idolised Cyril, the Rector was at times almost beside himself.

At last there came a crash, and the Rector determined to get this son away before something worse should result.

Emigration was being much talked of just then, and plenty of young men were going out to the various colonies to commence life as squatters both in the far east and west. A couple of the young farmers of the neighbourhood of Lawford were about to start, and, after a stormy scene with his father, Cyril came one day to propose that he should be furnished with a little capital and an outfit, so that he could go and try his luck in Australia.

For a few moments the Rev. Eli Mallow was aghast at the idea. He wished Cyril to leave the town, but not to go abroad.

“I don’t care where I go,” said Cyril; “I’ll either try Australia, or go and hunt out Frank and chum with him.”

“But we don’t know where he is,” said the Rector.

“New Zealand.”

“Yes, but New Zealand is large.”

“Not so large but what a fellow might find out Frank. Everyone would know him.”

The Rector sighed, and wished his sons were not so popular with a certain class, and then he thought over the position, and shrank from giving his consent. Knowing the mother’s intense love for her son, he felt that the parting would nearly break her heart, and after a few moments’ pause he said so.

“Oh, you need not fidget about that,” said the young man. “I’ve talked to her about it for days past.”

“And what does she say?”

“Well, it upset her a bit at first, but she soon came round, and she thinks it would be the best thing I could do.”

It was then with a sense of relief that made him feel ashamed, that the father, after a liberal endowment of money, saw his son sent from Liverpool, after the heartiest promises on the part of the young man to do battle with life and make himself a name and a position in the colony.

“If not for my sake, Cyril, for your mother’s,” the father had said, as he held his son’s hand upon the deck of the Great Central liner.

“Depend upon me this time, father,” was the earnest reply, and Cyril went his way across the sea, fully believing in himself that his wild oats were sown, and that now he was about to make a position of substantial basis for himself.

It was a strange thing, and as if a curious kind of clairvoyance made him prophetic, for the Rev. Eli Mallow went home, and that evening busied himself over his next Sunday’s sermon, involuntarily choosing the parable of the Prodigal Son, and not waking up to the fact of what he had done till he sat there in his study reading the manuscript over by the light of his shaded lamp.

“Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me,” he muttered in a low voice, as, with the manuscript in his hand, he sat gazing straight before him into the darker part of the room, and then became silent.

“And took his journey into a far country,” he muttered again, in the same dreamy abstracted manner, and then there was a longer pause, followed by a deep sigh.

The Rev. Eli Mallow rose slowly from his seat, and, with an agonised look in his face, walked up and down the room for some time before sinking back into his chair.

“And there wasted his substance with riotous living.”

It did not seem to be his voice that spoke in the silence of that room; but he knew it was his that exclaimed piteously as the king of old—“Ah, Cyril, my son, my son!” Again there was absolute silence in that room, till, quoting once more from the parable which he had made the subject of his discourse, the Rector said softly—

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.”

“Yes, and I should forgive him,” he continued, after a pause. “I do try to practise as I preach. Poor Cyril! poor wilful boy. I pray heaven that my thoughts have been doing thee wrong.”

There was a gentle smile upon his lips then as he took the manuscript of his sermon and tore it up into very small pieces before consigning it to the waste-paper basket.

“No,” he said, “I must not preach a sermon such as that: it is too prophetic of my own position with my sons;” and as we know this prodigal did return penniless, having worked his way back in a merchant brig, to present himself one day at the rectory in tarry canvas trousers, with blackened horny hands and a reckless defiant look in his eyes that startled the quiet people of the place.

He made no reference as to his having wasted his substance; he talked not of sin, and he alluded in nowise to forgiveness, to being made as one of his father’s hired servants, but took his place coolly enough once more in the house, and if no fatted calf was killed, and no rejoicings held, he was heartily welcomed and forgiven once again.

He was his mother’s favourite, and truly, in spite of all, there was forgiveness ready in the father’s heart. As there was also for Frank, who after some years’ silence had suddenly walked in at the rectory gates, rough-looking and boisterous, but not in such a condition as his brother, who had quite scandalised the men-servants, neatly clad in the liveries, of which a new supply had come from London, greatly to the disgust of Smithson in the market-place, who literally scowled at every seam.

Part 1, Chapter XVI.

At the King’s Head.

“What I say is this,” exclaimed Jabez Fullerton. “Justice is justice, and right is right.”

“Hear, hear!” murmured several voices, as Mr Fullerton glanced round the room, and drew himself up with the pride of a man who believed that he had said something original.

“I hope I’m too good a Christian to oppose the parson,” he continued, “and I wouldn’t if it had been Mr Paulby, but it’s time we stopped somewhere, gentlemen.”

“Hear, hear!” again; and several of the gentlemen addressed took their long pipes from their mouths to say it, and then, replacing them, continued to smoke.

“Ever since parson has been back he has been meddling and interfering. First he kills poor old Sammy Warmoth. Broke his heart, he did. Then he makes Joe Biggins saxon, a man most unfitted for the post, gentlemen. I say a man most unfitted for the post.”

“Hear, hear!”

“Chap as is always looking at you as if he wanted to measure you for a coffin,” said Smithson, the tailor.

“Natural enough,” said the Churchwarden, chuckling; “you always look at our clothes, Smithson, eh?”

“Ay, I do, Master Portlock, sir; but I don’t want you to die for it. I want you to live and grow stout, and want new suits, not a last one.”

“Stiff, hard suit o’ mourning, eh, Smithson, made o’ wood?”

“Yes, sir, well seasoned; ellum, eh?”

There was a general laugh at this lugubrious joking, and Fullerton tapped impatiently with his pipe-bowl upon the table.

“I say, gentlemen, a most unsuitable man,” he continued.

“Who would you have had then?” said Churchwarden Portlock.

“Why Thomas Morrison, the wheelwright,” said Fullerton, “if you must have a churchman.”

“Yes, a good man,” was murmured in assent.

“Then he must be pulling the church all to pieces, and quarrelling with the curate, and refusing to bury his dead. We wouldn’t have refused to bury our dead at chapel, gentlemen.”

“Not you,” chuckled Portlock. “You’d like to bury the lot of us, parson and all.”

“Gentlemen, this is begging the question,” said Fullerton, with plump dignity, and he settled his neck in his white cravat. “What I say is, that I have no enmity against the parson, nayther have you.”

“Nay, nay,” said Warton, the saddler, who had the rectory pair horse harness on his mind, the new double set, that he saw, by the name on the packing-case, came from Peak’s; “we only pity him. He has plenty of trouble wi’ those two boys of his. I hear the Bad Shilling’s come back now.”

“Ay, he’s back,” said Smithson. “I’ve got a pair of his trousers to mend. One never gets anything to make. Up at thy place last night, wasn’t he, Master Portlock?”

The Churchwarden nodded.

“Nice boys!” said Smithson. “Dessay the father was like ’em, for the girls really are nice, like their mother.”

“Then he was twice as hard as he need be on Jock Morrison,” continued Fullerton, who would finish. “Fancy sending a man to gaol for three months just when his brother’s got a death in the house.”

“Fair play,” cried Portlock. “The bairn died afterwards.”

“Well, maybe it did,” said Fullerton, “but he needn’t have been so hard on the poor bairn’s uncle. Why not give him another chance? He’s no worse in his way than the parson’s boys are in theirs.”

“Boys will be boys,” said Smithson, who wondered whether that pair of trousers to mend might result in an order for a suit.

Fullerton was impatient, and cut in almost before the tailor had finished.

“Clergymen’s all very well in their way, gentlemen, but the dismissing of old schoolmasters and appointing of new ones don’t seem to me to be in their way, especially where there’s governors to a school.”

“Parson’s a governor too,” said Warton, the saddler.

“*Ex officio*?” said Tomlinson, the ironmonger, who kept the bank.

“Of course, of course,” acquiesced Fullerton, who had not the least idea of what *ex officio* meant; “but I said it before, and I said it to parson’s own face, just the same as I’m saying it here behind his back, and any man who likes can tell him what I said,” and he looked round defiantly as he spoke; “what I say is, that, whatever Humphrey Bone’s faults may be, he’s as good a land measurer as ever stepped.”

“Yes, he *is* that,” said a broad farmer-looking man. “Joseph Portlock, you said the very same thing to me yesternight.”

“He’s a first-class penman.”

“Capital,” said Tomlinson.

“And if you know a man with a clearer head for figures,” continued Fullerton, “I should be glad to see him.”

“Capital man at ciphering,” said Smithson, the tailor, whose yearly accounts Humphrey Bone always made up.

“Then, what do you want?” said Fullerton, angrily. “We’ve all got our faults, and if Humphrey Bone does take a little too much sometimes, hasn’t he been master of Lawford school these thirty years?”

The latter part of Jabez Fullerton’s argument was not very clear to his fellow-townsmen assembled at their weekly social meeting at the King’s Head; but they all granted that they had their faults, and Jabez Fullerton waved the spoon with which he had been stirring his brandy-and-water in a very statesmanlike way.

“Look here,” he said, “I never go to church, for chapel’s good enough for me; but all the same I don’t bear enmity against the church, and never would.”

“But you did oppose the church rates, Fullerton,” said Tomlinson, with a chuckle.

“On principle, neighbour, on principle; I couldn’t help that. But in this case what I say is, that though I’d be the last man in the world to oppose parson, it would be a disgrace to the town if we let poor Humphrey Bone be pitched out of the living, just because parson wants the place for Churchwarden Ross’s boy.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say about it,” said Tomlinson, smoking meditatively at his pipe. “Michael Ross is a very good neighbour of mine, and brings his money to our bank regular. I should be sorry to hurt his feelings, ’specially as his boy has been to London on purpose to be trained.”

“Let him get a school somewhere else. There’s always plenty on the way, I’ll be bound.”

“Don’t seem to me as the boys’ll take to a lad as was brought up, as you may say, among ’em,” said Smithson. “Bless my soul, gentlemen, I made that boy his fust suit with three rows o’ brass buttons, with marigolds stamped on ’em. Bottle-green the suit was, and the trousers buttoned over the jacket. You know, Fullerton; I had the cloth of you.”

“Oh, yes, I know,” said the draper suavely.

“Well,” continued Smithson—

“Excuse me, Smithson,” said Fullerton, “we’re just discussing the question of Mr Mallow carrying everything with a high hand, and turning out old Humphrey Bone without our consent.”

Smithson, the tailor, jumped up, scowled round at the assembled company, stuck his hat upon his head with a bang, and walked straight out of the room.

“He’s huffed,” said Fullerton, with a sidewise wag of the head, “but I can’t help his being offended. When a man becomes a public man, he’s got a public man’s dooty to do to his fellow townsfolk, and at times like this he’s bound to speak. So what I say, gentlemen, is this; will you all come to the meeting to-morrow, and back me up?”

No one spoke, and it was remarkable that every man present just then seemed to feel his mouth dry, and reached out his hand for his glass.

“I say again, gentlemen,” cried Fullerton, “will you all come and back me up?”

Every man present seemed to consider that it was the duty of the others to speak out and tackle Fullerton—so they mentally put it—and each looked at the other in turn without avail, till the regards of all present seemed to be concentrated upon Tomlinson, the ironmonger, who after a little hesitation said—

“I don’t think it was wise to upset Smithson. It’s like sending a man over to the enemy.”

“I hope he hasn’t got a long bill against you for clothes, Fullerton,” said Warton, the saddler, with a chuckle. “You’ll have it in before it comes due.”

“If I owed my tailor a bill I dare say I could pay it, Mr Warton,” said Fullerton, haughtily; “and I should be glad to know, gentlemen, whether you mean to discuss the question of the appointment of a new master, because if you don’t I shall throw the whole matter up.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” came in a murmur; “don’t do that, Fullerton,” and an appealing look was directed at Tomlinson, who drew a long breath, refreshed himself, and went on.

“You see I don’t think it would be wise to go and upset Mr Mallow if we could help it,” he said; “he’s a very good customer of mine, and very neighbourly. I don’t think he’s a bad sort of man.”

“Not a bad sort of man!” cried Fullerton, indignantly; “why, it’s a burning shame for him to have charge of this parish at all. What’s a parson for?”

“Well,” said Tomlinson, mildly, “I suppose to have the care of the parish.”

“Yes, and to rule and manage it,” said Warton.

“Yes,” cried Fullerton, “of course; and here’s a man who can’t manage his own household, which is the wastefullest in

the place."

"Might keep your family on what they waste, eh, Fullerton?" said Warton, the saddler, with a chuckle, for he was a great friend of Smithson; and it was a fact often commented upon by neighbours, that Fullerton's domestic economy was of the most parsimonious character.

"I'm not the man to eat the parson's leavings," said Fullerton, angrily, "nor yet the man to go cringing and touching my hat to him in hopes of getting a harness-mending order."

Mr Warton refilled his pipe.

"I say," continued Fullerton, "that a man who can't rule his own sons can't properly rule a parish."

"Nay, nay, nay," cried Tomlinson; "don't be too hard upon him, man. He's a very good sort of fellow is Mallow, and I should be very sorry to go against him."

"But you will go against him," said Fullerton, triumphantly; and he looked very hard in the ironmonger's face.

Mr Tomlinson's pipe needed seeing to just then, and he let his eyes rest upon the glowing fire therein, as he recalled certain little speculative money transactions that had taken place between him and Fullerton, and felt how awkward it might be if he offended his fellow-townsman.

It would be very awkward to have to side against the Rector, but of two evils Tomlinson felt bound to choose the least.

"I'm afraid that in this instance I must go against Mr Mallow," said Tomlinson, deliberately; and Fullerton gave a triumphant glance round the room.

"Hah!" he said to himself, "there's a wonderful power in money, and one never knows what it will do."

Part 1, Chapter XVII.

The Governors' Meeting.

Market morning again at Lawford, and the customary business going on. There were a few pigs in the pens; a larger amount of butter than usual at the cross, some of it holding a good two ounces of salt to the pound. A sale by auction of some old furniture was to take place, and gigs, cars, and carts were coming in.

The rectory carriage, with Julia and Cynthia Mallow looking sweet and attractive enough to tempt the tradespeople who quarrelled with the father to touch their hats, came in quite early, setting down the Rector, who had to visit the bookseller's and order a new volume for the society library, and soon after he was on his way to the chief point of attraction that morning, to wit, the special meeting of the governors of Lawford School, with the Rector in the chair.

The meeting, according to custom, had been called for the vestry-room, which would only comfortably hold six, and then adjourned to the King's Head, where the townspeople and those interested in the important event were gathered in force.

Thirty years before, when Humphrey Bone obtained his appointment, only three people were present—to wit, the then rector of the parish and a couple of governors. But there was no opposition in those days. Dissent had not taken so strong a hold on the little town, and the disposition for making a party fight over every trifling matter had not grown into the ascendant.

On this particular day, however, though to a man every one present, whether Nonconformist or supporter of Church and State, would have stoutly denied that party feeling or local politics had anything to do with his presence, it was very evident that there were two opposing sides, and that the meeting was pretty evenly divided between the supporters of the Rector, who believed in the time being come for the appointment of a new master, and those who nailed their colours to the mast old style, and openly declared that any change made must be for the worse.

Humphrey Bone was there one of the first, making the boards echo with his thick boot, and it was noticed that the said boot had been thoroughly blacked, that Humphrey was well shaved, his hair had been cut, and that he had on a clean white shirt.

Fullerton was there, too, talking to him aside, and Tomlinson, Smithson, and Warton soon put in an appearance, one and all looking as important and solemn as if the constitution of the country were at stake, in place of so mild a question as that which was to be settled—whether Humphrey Bone was to be superseded, or not.

The room was growing pretty full. Michael Ross, the tanner, had entered, followed by his son, who looked very pale and determined, speaking in a quick, decided way to Portlock, the churchwarden, who came up and shook hands with both his father and him in turn.

Then the Rector entered, followed by Cyril, who sauntered into the room with a careless air, nodding at first one and then another, till his eyes met those of Luke Ross, when he started slightly, but returned the keen fixed gaze with one full of angry resentment before looking down.

Then there was a little bustle and settling down in seats as the Rector took the chair. The vestry clerk opened a big calf-skin covered book, stuck a new quill pen behind his ear, and drew the ink a little nearer to him, when there was a

breathless pause, during which all who could looked from Luke Ross, the young, to Humphrey Bone, the old, as if they were the champions of the two causes assembled here, and as though they were expected to come forward in front of the Rector's chair and do battle manfully for the post.

Then the Rector quietly announced that the meeting that day was for the purpose of confirming the appointment of the new master to the boys' school, and also to accept the resignation of the late master, Mr Humphrey Bone.

"Never resigned," shouted that individual; and he involuntarily wiped his mouth, as if to remove all traces of his having been seeking for support at the King's Head bar.

Mr Mallow frowned slightly, and there was a low buzz of satisfaction on one side of the room.

"Didn't resign, and don't want to resign," said Humphrey Bone more loudly, being encouraged by the looks of approbation he received.

"And to confirm the dismissal of Mr Humphrey Bone from the office of master of the school," said the Rector, firmly. "I beg pardon, gentlemen, I was under the impression that Mr Bone had resigned. I may add, gentlemen, that the preliminaries have been settled at the former meeting, and all that is requisite now is for a majority of the governors to sign the minute that the clerk to the vestry will prepare. If any gentleman has a remark or two he would like to make, we shall be most happy to hear him."

"Yes, that's easy enough to say," whispered Warton to Smithson. "He's used to speaking in public. I always feel as if my heart's getting into my mouth."

"Mr Fullerton, I think, wishes to address you, gentlemen," said the Rector, smiling and sitting down.

Mr Fullerton looked as if he would have liked to strangle the Rector for that smile. It was a perfectly innocent smile, in no wise directed at the would-be speaker, but it seemed to Fullerton that the Rector was ridiculing him, and it put him off his text for the moment, but he recovered himself, and in a very florid speech, full of wanderings from the point, opposed the appointment of a new master on the ground that Humphrey Bone having been duly nominated and appointed, unless he had in some special way become unfit for his post, the Rector had no right to dismiss him.

Mr Bone uttered a very loud "Hear, hear!"

Two more of the townsmen, followers of Fullerton, rose in turn to speak, but were silenced on the spot by the announcement of the Rector, that this was not an ordinary meeting of ratepayers, but of the governors of the school, who alone had a right to make any motion and speak to the proposition before the meeting.

This being so, Tomlinson was forced into action by his neighbour, and in smooth tones regretted that he was compelled to go in opposition to "our worthy Rector," but, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, he must object to the appointment of so young a man as Mr Luke Ross to so important a post, and after a long speech, in which he went round and round the subject a dozen times, he ended by declaring that he should vote against the appointment.

To his annoyance, the Rector, as the meeting went on, found himself undoubtedly in the minority, and he felt bitterly the position in which Luke Ross had been placed.

Just then, however, a couple of the governors, upon whom he knew that he could depend, entered the room, and the tables, he felt, were turned.

Luke had been sitting, chafing at every word that had been said against his appointment, and every now and then, as he met Cyril Mallow's eye, it seemed to him to be full of triumph at his discomfiture.

Then, too, he kept glancing at Portlock, and as he did so the bluff, wealthy farmer's words came back, mingled with the contempt he seemed to feel for the pittance that was to be the young master's for the first few years.

Five hundred a year—five hundred a year—seemed to keep repeating itself to Luke Ross, as his eyes once more met those of Cyril Mallow, whose countenance wore a decided sneer.

"Then now, gentlemen, I think," said the Rector, "we will proceed to vote."

"Stop!" cried Luke Ross.

It was on the impulse of the moment. He had had no such thought when he entered the room.

"We will hear you, Mr Ross, after the voting is over," said the Rector, quietly.

"No, sir," replied Luke, "I must ask you to hear me first. I have decided not to accept the post."

There was a dead silence in the room for a few moments after Luke Ross's decisive words, a silence broken by Humphrey Bone, who relieved the excitement under which he laboured by starting from his seat, and bringing his thick-soled boot down with a tremendous clump upon the floor.

"Do I understand you to say, Mr Ross, that you decline the post?" exclaimed the Rector.

"Yes, sir, definitely," replied Luke. "I could not, under the circumstances, think of accepting the appointment."

There was another pause here, and then, led by Fullerton, the opposition party broke into a loud cheer.

"Silence if you please, gentlemen," exclaimed the Rector, with a greater show of indignation than any one present

remembered him to have displayed. “This is no time for showing party feeling. Of course, as Mr Ross declines to accept the appointment—”

“But he don’t,” cried old Michael Ross, “he wants time to think it over.”

“Hush, father,” exclaimed the young man, firmly, “I know my own mind. Mr Mallow, I am sorry to have given all this trouble, and, as it were, placed you in a false position; but until a few minutes back I did not see this matter in the light I do now, and I definitely decline the post.”

“Your action does you great credit, young man,” said Fullerton, pompously; “and I am glad to congratulate my fellow-townsman, Michael Ross, on the possession of such a son.”

“Your compliment is misplaced, sir,” said Luke, coldly, “for my action in this matter is in nowise creditable to me. But that is my affair, and it need not be discussed.”

Mr Fullerton scowled on receiving this snub, and he was about to make some angry retort, but the Rector said at once—

“Then, gentlemen, we need say no more, unless you wish to discuss the question of Mr Bone’s dismissal.”

“I claim,” said Fullerton, “that he cannot be dismissed.”

“A majority of the school governors have the power to dismiss him, Mr Fullerton,” replied the Rector, with dignity; and after a few more words he left the chair, the meeting being declared adjourned until application had been made to one of the institutions for another master.

“I am sorry to find that you have come to such a decision, Mr Ross,” said the Rector, as he encountered Luke outside the inn.

“I was sorry to come to such a decision, sir,” replied Luke; “but, believe me that I have been in no way influenced by those who seem to be in opposition to you, and I hope that you will persist in Humphrey Bone’s dismissal, and the appointment of another man.”

The Rector bowed and walked on with his son, who raised his hat slightly to Luke, that salute being returned as the young men’s eyes met once more, each reading in those of the other a growing dislike which must some day ripen into enmity.

Then they passed on their several ways, both having the same object in view.

Part 1, Chapter XVIII.

Doubts.

It was nearly twelve o’clock, and in spite of her efforts, Sage Portlock’s thoughts had wandered a good deal from the work she had in hand. It was the morning upon which Luke Ross’s appointment was to be confirmed, and her face flushed as she thought of the time when he would be conducting the next school, and the future looked very rosy and bright, for she told herself that in secret she was very fond of Luke.

Julia and Cynthia Mallow had been there to take a class and chat with her for a few minutes, Cynthia being ready with a sly allusion to the business upon which papa had been left.

“We are going to pick up papa after he has fastened your schoolmaster, Sage,” she said; “but first of all we are going to drive over to the farm and see Mrs Berry and the little ones. When does she go away?”

“To-morrow, Miss Cynthia,” said Sage, turning rather white, “and—and she is not very well. Would you mind not calling, Miss Julia?”

“Oh, no, certainly not,” said Julia; “but I am sorry. Give our kind love to her, Sage, and say we will drive over to Lewby some day and see her there.”

“Thank you, Miss Julia,” said Sage, and she gladly saw the school visitors depart, with the intention of going on to the ford.

Sage sighed as she stood at the door and saw the sisters get into the handsomely appointed carriage that was waiting, and then she wished that she had asked them when they were going back to London, for it seemed to her that both she and Rue would feel happier and more at ease if the Mallow family were gone.

Then she recalled her last meeting with Luke at home, and his words upon learning—short conversation interrupted by her aunt—that there was to be no engagement until he had realised a better income than would accrue from the schools.

“That does not matter,” she said, brightening up. “Luke is so brave and determined, and has such spirit, that he will soon become rich enough for us to marry, and, of course, we can wait.”

There was no impatience in Sage’s love for Luke Ross. She told herself that she was very fond of him, and some day they would be man and wife, but when did not seem to her to matter, and she busied herself once more, light-hearted enough, with the children.

Then came the beginning of another train of thought, and there was once more a slight flush in her cheeks as her mind turned to Cyril Mallow, his coming to the school with his father, his meeting and speaking to her once or twice when she was leaving school, and then, too, of his coming to the farm to sit, and smoke, and talk with her uncle.

The colour deepened in her cheeks a little more as she thought of all this; but, directly after, she drove these thoughts away, and busied herself with the conclusion of the morning lessons.

Twelve o'clock, and the buzz and hurry of the dismissal, and then the pleasant scent of the cool outer air as the windows were thrown open, and again the bright elasticity of feeling as, well wrapped in warm furry jacket and with her natty little, not-too-fashionable hat setting off the freshness of her complexion and youthful looks, she started for her brisk walk along the lane and across the field to the farm.

She had to pass Mrs Searby's cottage on her way, where that worthy woman with upturned sleeves was standing at the open door in converse with another of the mothers whose children attended the school.

"Good-morning," said Sage, as she passed them, and the second woman returned the salutation; but Miss Searby's mamma replied by giving her an uncompromising stare, and saying aloud before the young mistress was out of hearing—

"Ah, she's going to meet young Cyril Mallow. Nice goings on, indeed, for one like her."

Sage's cheeks turned scarlet as she hurried on, and a strange feeling of shame and confusion troubled her. It was nothing that she was perfectly innocent of any such intent, she felt horribly guilty all the same, and it was only by a great effort that she kept back the hot tears of indignation.

Then her conscience smote her with the recollection that she had thought a good deal of Cyril Mallow lately, and she asked herself whether she was turning traitorous to Luke Ross, but only to indignantly repel the self-inflicted charge.

It was monstrous, she told herself. She was sure that she loved Luke very dearly, as she always had from a child, when he had been like a brother to her. Some day when he had climbed higher she would be his wife, for she was sure her uncle never meant all that he had said. He was too fond of her, and too eager to do all he could to make her happy.

"Such a shameful thing to say! A wicked woman!" exclaimed Sage then; "as if I ever thought—Oh!"

She quickened her steps with her face growing scarlet once more, the red flush having died out to leave it pale, for there were footsteps behind her coming on quickly, and it was Cyril Mallow, she felt, hurrying to catch her; and that was why the spiteful woman had spoken in that bitter way.

The steps were coming nearer in spite of Sage's efforts to get home before she was overtaken. *Pat, pat, pat, pat*! just as her heart was beating with excitement. She felt frightened, she hardly knew why, and dreaded being overtaken by Cyril, who seemed to have obtained some power over her that she could not understand.

He was very pleasant spoken, and frank, and manly-looking, but she did not like him nor his ways, for she was sure that he was a bad son.

"I wonder whether he would try to improve if I asked him, and pointed out how wrong it is of him to be so much trouble to his parents," thought Sage; and then she shivered with a strange kind of dread.

Why had she thought all that? What was Cyril Mallow to her? It was only out of civility that he had spoken to her as he had, but she felt that it was out of place, and that Mr Mallow would not have approved of it at all, and—and it was very dreadful.

As a rule, Sage Portlock was a firm, determined girl, full of decision and strength of character, but the words of the spiteful woman seemed to have quite unnerved her, and with the sense of being very guilty, and of having behaved treacherously to Luke Ross, she had hard work to keep from starting off, and breaking into a run.

"And he is coming on so quickly," she thought. "He will overtake me before I get to the gate. How dare he follow me about like this, and why is not Luke here to protect me!"

Sage Portlock's excitement had thoroughly mastered her, and she uttered quite a hysterical little cry, as the steps drew quite near now, and a voice exclaimed—

"Why, Sage, I almost had to run."

"Luke!"

"Yes; Luke," he replied, smiling, as he took her hand in his. "Who did you think it was?"

"I—I—didn't know; I wanted to get home quickly," she faltered. "I did not know it was you."

"I know that," he said, drawing her hand through his arm, "or else you would have stopped, wouldn't you?"

"Why, of course, Luke," she said, smiling in his face, and with a calm feeling of rest and protection coming over her disturbed spirit.

"I'm glad I caught you," he said. "Let's walk slowly, for I've a great deal to say to you before you go in."

"But, first of all, tell me, Luke, dear," she cried eagerly, "is the appointment confirmed?"

“No.”

“No? Not confirmed? Then, that wicked old Bone—”

“That wicked old Bone of contention,” he said, laughingly taking her up, “has had very little to do with it. At one time I thought that it would be very cruel to take his post, but I do not think so now.”

“But not confirmed, Luke?” she cried, stopping short and clinging to his arm, the picture of bitter disappointment. “Why, this is the meaning, then, of the opposition uncle spoke of yesterday. Who has dared to stop you from having the school?”

“You,” said Luke, as he gazed admiringly in her animated face.

“I, Luke? I?” she exclaimed, in a puzzled way.

“Well, it is through you, dear,” he said, smiling.

“But I have done nothing, Luke,” she cried. “You are teasing me! Has the meeting taken place?”

“Yes; I have just come from it.”

“Well? Mr Bone was there I know, for he gave the boys a holiday, so that he might come.”

“Yes, he was there, evidently looking upon me as the greatest enemy he had in the world till he heard me decline the post.”

“You?—you declined the post, Luke?”

“Yes, I declined the post.”

“And you told me you loved me,” she said, reproachfully, as she drew back.

“As I do with all my heart,” he cried, taking her hand, and drawing it through his arm once more. “Sage, dear, it is because I love you so well that I have declined to take the school.”

“When it was so near,” she cried; and her tears seemed to have stolen into her voice. “And now you will go and take a school ever so far away. Oh, Luke,” she cried, piteously, “it is too bad!”

“Hush, little one,” he said, firmly. “It is not like you to talk like that. I shall not take a school far away, though I shall have to leave you. Sage, dear, I have felt that I must give up present pleasure for a future joy.”

“I—I—don’t understand you,” she cried; “your talk is all a puzzle to me.”

“Is it, dear? There, it shall not be long. You know what your uncle said to me the other day?”

“Oh, yes, Luke; but I don’t think he quite meant it.”

“I am sure he did mean it,” he replied; “and he is quite right. For the past year I have been learning lessons of self-denial, and been taught to place the schoolmaster’s duty above questions of a pecuniary kind; but your uncle has placed my position in a practical light, and, Sage, dear, it is as if all the past teaching has been undone.”

“Oh, Luke, Luke,” she cried, “don’t talk like that!”

“I must. I have had another talk with your uncle. This morning I overtook him, and he asked me, as a man, whom he says he can trust, to set aside all love-making, as he called it in his homely Saxon-English, and to treat you only as a friend! ‘Let matters stand for the present, and see what a couple of years bring forth, if you are doing well,’ he said, ‘in your new position.’”

“In your new position, Luke? Why, what do you mean?”

“Sage, dear, I have decided to set aside the idea of being the master of a school.”

“Oh, Luke!”

“And to read for the bar.”

“Read for the bar?”

“Yes, read for the bar: become a barrister; and I shall work hard to win a name.”

“But the school, Luke—the training college. It is not honest to take advantage of their teaching, gain all you can, and then take to some other career.”

“You think that?” he said, smiling. “Yes, of course,” she said, indignantly. “The principal at Westminster spoke very warmly about two of the students giving up their schools directly, and taking situations as governesses in good families.”

“I quite agree with her,” said Luke, quietly; “and I have appraised the cost to the institution at fifty pounds. That sum I feel bound to send. It is quite as much as so bad a master as I should have turned out is worth.”

“Oh, Luke, that is nonsense,” she cried, as she looked proudly in his face.

“Nay,” he said, “it is truth. And now listen to me. This has all been very sudden.”

“Yes, and you never said a word to me.”

“I came and told you as soon as I knew,” retorted Luke, firmly. “And now I say once more this has been very sudden, but it is irrevocably in obedience to your uncle’s wishes. I shall exact no promises from you, tie you down in no way, but go away in perfect faith that in a few years as the reward of my hard struggle, and when I can go and say to your uncle, ‘See, here, I can command the income you said that I ought to have!’ you will be my little wife.”

“But must you go away, Luke?” she said, with a pitiful look in her eyes.

“Yes, it is absolutely certain. How could I climb up in the world if I stayed here?”

“But I don’t want you to go,” she cried, excitedly.

“And I don’t want to leave you,” he said, fondly.

“I want you to stop and protect me, and take care of me and keep me for yours, Luke.”

“Don’t—don’t talk like that,” he cried, speaking hoarsely, “or you will make me forget my promise to your uncle. Let us be firm and true, and look the matter seriously in the face. It is for our future, and I pray and believe that I am acting wisely here.”

“But you will be away,” she said, with a piteous look in her eyes. “There will be no one to take care of me when you are gone.”

“Nonsense, little one,” he exclaimed. “There is your uncle. What have you to fear? Only be true to me.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” she sobbed; “but you do not know, Luke. I might be tempted, I might be led away from you—I might —”

“Might!” he said, with scorn in his voice. “My little Sage, whom I have known from the day when she gave me first her innocent sisterly love, could not be untrue to the man she has promised to wed. Sage, dear,” he continued, holding her hands in his, and gazing in her agitated, tearful face, “look at me—look me fully in the eyes.”

“Yes, Luke,” she said, hesitatingly; and her pretty, troubled face looked so winning that it was all he could do to keep from clasping her in his arms tightly to his own trusting breast.

“Now,” he said, smiling, “you see me. Can you doubt, dear, that I should ever be untrue to you?”

“No, no! oh, no, Luke,” she cried.

“Neither could I, dearest,” he said, softly. “I am a very plain, unimpulsive man, wanting, perhaps, in the soft speech and ways that are said to please women; but I think my heart is right, and that in spite of my quiet ways I love you very, very dearly.”

“I know, I know you do,” sobbed the girl.

“Yes, and I trust you, my dear,” he said. “I know that you could never give look or word to another that would cause me pain.”

“No, no, dear Luke, I could not,” she sobbed; “but I want you with me. I cannot bear for you to leave me helpless here.”

“Nonsense, my little pet,” he said, tenderly. “The years will soon slip by, and then all will be well. There, we understand each other, do we not?”

“Yes, yes, Luke, I think so,” she sobbed.

“One kiss, then, darling, the last I shall take, perhaps, for years, and then—”

“Oh, no, not now—not now,” she cried, hastily, as he sought to take her in his arms in the sheltered lane. “Uncle is coming with Mr Cyril Mallow;” and then she moaned passionately to herself, “Him again! Oh, Luke, Luke, I wish that I was dead.”

Part 1, Chapter XIX.

Julia’s Horror.

Two young men leaning over the park railings on a bright spring morning, when the soot-blackened, well-worn grass that had been suffering from a winter’s chronic cold was beginning to put forth its tender green shoots and dress itself for the season.

The rather muddy drive was on one side, the Serpentine on the other, and indications that London was coming to town could be seen in the increasing string of carriages.

One of the young men was undoubtedly dressed by Poole—well dressed; and he looked worthy of his tailor's care. Frank, manly, handsome, there was a pleasant look in his grey eyes; and if his fair moustache had not been quite so heavy, a well-cut firm mouth would have been better seen. Perhaps that very glossy hat was worn a trifle too much on one side, and with the well set up appearance it suggested military, but the gold horse-shoe pin with diamond nails directly after hinted equine: the result being a compromise, and the looker-on concluded cavalry.

The other was of a heavier build, and was decidedly not dressed by a good tailor. He was not shabby, but careless; and while his companion was carefully gloved, he carried his hand-shoes in his hands, and certainly his hat had not been touched by a brush that morning.

He was a good-looking, manly fellow, with very short hair and a very long beard, thick enough to hide three parts of his chest.

The judge of human nature who had tried to read him at a glance, would, if right, have said, "Good fellow, somewhat of a cynic, don't care a *sou* for appearances."

Two of the characters in this comedy, to wit, Henry Lord Artingale, man of fashion with a good income; and James Magnus, artist of a manly school, who had cut deeply his mark upon the time.

Another character was seated upon a bench some twenty yards away, cutting his mark, not on the time, but upon the park seat, with an ugly, sharp-pointed clasp-knife, which he closed with a snap, and then threw one great leg over the newly-cut wood, as he seemed to feel more than see the appearance of a policeman, who ran his eye shrewdly over the fellow as if considering him a "party" likely to be "wanted."

Jock Morrison looked decidedly like the proverbial fish out of water as he stared sullenly about, but not as one might stare who finds himself in an incongruous position by accident. About the only ill-dressed person in his neighbourhood, Jock seemed in no wise abashed, nor yet the worse for his course of imprisonment, his dark beard having rapidly grown and got well over the blacking-brush stage so affected by the Parisian "swell." Far from seeming abashed, Jock Morrison was ready with a cool, defiant look for every one not in the law, and as a rule those who stared at the great swarthy fellow once were satisfied not to repeat the look.

Jock was evidently in the park for a purpose, and every now and then his eyes wandered over the lines of carriages, but without seeing that of which he was in quest, and as soon as the policeman was gone he once more opened his knife, and began to carve, handily enough, a new design—this time a couple of hearts locked together after the time-honoured fashion shown in a valentine.

"That's about as picturesque-looking a blackguard as I've seen for months," said Magnus, looking across the road at where the fellow lounged. "I wonder whether he'd come and stand for me."

"H'm, yes," said his companion; "nice-looking youth."

"He'd make a splendid bull-fighter in a Spanish scene."

"H'm, bull-dog fighter, I should have said, Mag. By the way, I'd have a certificate from the baths and wash-houses before I admitted him to the studio. He looks disgustingly dirty."

"Yah! horrible! Take me away, Harry. I feel as if I were going to be sick."

"Why, what's the matter now?"

"Talk about that great blackguard looking disgusting: here's my great horror!"

"What, Perry-Morton?"

"Yes. Look at his hideously fat, smooth face, and his long greasy hair tucked behind his ears. Look at his open throat, and—confound the animal, yes—a crimson satin tie. Harry, I shall be had up one of these days for an atrocious assault upon that creature. I shall lie in wait for him like a bravo, and armed with a pair of new scissors I shall cut his hair. Is it possible to prevail upon him to go about clothed, and in his right mind?"

"For shame, Jemmy! and you a brother artist."

"Brother artist be hanged! You don't call that thing an artist."

"Why, my dear boy, he's acknowledged in society as the apostle of the poet-painters' school."

"Good God!"

"My dear boy, do restrain yourself," laughed the other.

"I can't help it. I do like a man to be a man, and for goodness' sake look at that thing."

"That thing," as Magnus so contemptuously dubbed him, was certainly striking in appearance, as the open carriage in which he was riding came to a standstill, and he signed to the footman to let him out. For as he descended it was to stand upon a very thin pair of legs that in no sense corresponded with his plump, white, boyish face.

It was a handsome, well-appointed carriage from whose front seat he had alighted, the back being occupied by two ladies of between twenty and thirty, who looked as if their costume had been copied from a disinterred bas-relief; so cold and neutral were their lines that they might have been lady visitors to the Grosvenor Gallery, instead of maidens

to whom the word “aesthetic” was hardly known. For the Graeco-Roman extended to their hair, which stood out from their foreheads, looking singed and frizzed as if scorched by the burning thoughts that were in their brains; for even in those days there were ladies who delighted to belong to the pre-Raphaelic *cum* fleshly school of painting and poetry, and took pains to show by their uniform that they were of the blessed.

As the footman folded the steps and closed the door, the gentleman—to wit, Mr Perry-Morton, of Saint Agnes’, Park Road—posed himself in an artistic attitude with one arm upon the carriage-door, crossed one leg over the other, and gazed in the faces of his sisters, one delicately-gloved hand in correct harmony of tint playing with a cambric handkerchief, specked with toy flowers of the same tone.

As he posed himself, so did the two ladies. The nearer curled herself gracefully, all but the legs, in a pantherine style in the corner of the carriage, and looked at her brother sweetly through the frizz of hair, as if she were asking him to see if there were a parting. The further drooped over florally in a manner that in another ordinary being would have suggested crick in the neck, but here, as with her brother and sister, everything was so deliriously unstudied—or well studied—that she only gave the idea of a bending flower—say, a bud—or a pallid virgin and martyr upon painted glass.

“Oh, Lord!” said Magnus, aloud.

“Hush! don’t. Come along, though. Gently, man, or they’ll see us, and we shall have to talk to the girls.”

“I’m an ostrich,” said the artist; “my head is metaphorically buried in sand. Whatever my pursuers see, I am blind.”

As it happened a group of people came along, and under their cover the two young men escaped.

“He is an awful fool,” said Artingale, “but the people believe in him.”

“Bah! so they will in any lunatic who makes himself fashionably absurd. I’ll be reasonable, Harry, though that fellow has half driven me wild with his airs and patronage. He gave me a thumping price for one of my pictures, for he’s immensely rich. Then he had the impudence to want me to alter it—the composition of months of hard, honest study—and began to lecture me on art.”

“From his point of view.”

“Yes, from his point of view. But as I said, I will be reasonable. There is a deal in this pre-Raphaelitism, and it has done its part in reviving some of the best of the ancient art, and made its mark on our schools of to-day. But there it was not allowed to stop. A pack of idiots—there, I can call them nothing else—go into frantic worship of all the worst portions of old art, and fall down and idolise things that are ugly, ill-coloured, and grotesque.”

“True, O magnate! and they’ll grow worse.”

“They imitate it in their paintings, drawing impossible trees, landscapes, and houses for backgrounds, and people their foregrounds with resurrections in pigment of creatures that seem as if they had been dead and buried for a month, and clothe them in charnel-house garb.”

“Bravo! charnel-house garb is good.”

“Thankye, Polonius junior,” said the artist; “I tell you, Harry, I get out of patience with the follies perpetrated under the name of art, to the exclusion of all that is natural and beautiful and pure. Now I ask you, my dear boy, would you like to see a sister of yours dressing up and posing like those two guys of girls?”

“Haven’t got a sister, worse luck, or you should have her, old fellow.”

“Thanks. Well, say, then, the woman you loved.”

“Hush! stop here, old fellow. Here they come.”

“Who? Those two stained-glass virgins?”

“No, no, be quiet; the Mallow girls.”

There was so much subdued passion in the young man’s utterance that the artist glanced sidewise at him, to see that there was an intensity of expression in his eyes quite in keeping with his words, and following the direction of his gaze, he saw that it was fixed upon a barouche, drawn by a fine pair of bays, which champed their bits and flecked their satin coats with foam as they fretted impatiently at the restraint put upon them, and keeping them dawdling in a line of slow-moving carriages going east.

There was another line of carriages going west between the two young men and the equipage in question, and Magnus could see that his companion was in an agony of dread lest his salute should not be noticed, but, just at the right moment, the occupants of the barouche turned in their direction, acknowledged the raised hat of Lord Artingale, and, the pace just then increasing, the carriage passed on.

“Feel better?” said Magnus, cynically.

“Better? yes,” cried the young man, turning to him flushed and with a gratified smile upon his face. “There, don’t laugh at me, old fellow, I can’t help it.”

“I’m not going to laugh at you. But you seem to have got it badly.”

“Awfully,” replied the other.

“Shouldn’t have thought it of you, Harry. So those are the Mallow girls, eh?”

“Yes. Isn’t she charming?”

“What, that girl with the soft dreamy eyes? Yes, she is attractive.”

“No, man,” cried Artingale, impatiently; “that’s Julia. I mean the other.”

“What, the fair-haired, bright-looking little maiden who looks as if she paints?”

“Paints be hanged!” cried Artingale, indignantly, “it’s her own sweet natural colour, bless her.”

“Oh, I say, my dear boy,” said Magnus, with mock concern, “I had no idea that you were in such a state as this.”

“Chaff away, old fellow, I don’t care. Call me in a fool’s paradise, if you like. I’ve flirted about long enough, but I never knew what it was before.”

“Then,” said Magnus, seriously, “you are what they call—in love?”

“Don’t I tell you, Mag, that I don’t care for your chaff. There, yes: in love, if you like to call it so, for I’ve won the sweetest little girl that ever looked truthfully at a man.”

“And the lady—does she reciprocate, and that sort of thing?”

“I don’t know: yes, I hope so. I’m afraid to be sure; it seems so conceited, for I’m not much of a fellow, you see.”

“Let’s see, it happened abroad, didn’t it?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. I met them at Dinan, and then at Baden, and afterwards at Rome and in Paris.”

“Which means, old fellow, that you followed them all over the Continent.”

“Well, I don’t know; I suppose so,” said the young man, biting his moustache. “You see, Mag, I used to know Cynthia when she was little and I was a boy—when the governor was alive, you know. I was at Harrow, too, with her brothers—awful cads though, by the by. She can’t help that, Mag,” he said, innocently.

“Why, Artingale, it makes you quite sheepish,” laughed the artist. “I wish I could catch that expression for a Corydon.”

“For a what?”

“Corydon—gentle shepherd, my boy.”

“Get out! Well, as I was telling you, old fellow, I met them abroad, and now they’ve come back to England, and they’ve been down at the rectory—Lawford Rectory, you know, six miles from my place. And now they’ve come up again.”

“So it seems,” said Magnus, drily.

“Chaff away, I don’t mind,” said Artingale.

“Not I; I won’t chaff you, Harry,” said the other, quietly. “’Pon my soul I should miss you, for you and I have been very jolly together; but I wouldn’t wish you a better fate than to have won some really sweet, lovable girl. It’s a fate that never can be mine, as the song says, and I won’t be envious of others. Come along.”

“No, no, don’t let’s go, old fellow. They’ll only drive as far as the corner, and then come back on this side. Perhaps they’ll stop to speak. If they do, I’ll introduce you to Julia; she’s a very nice girl.”

“But not so nice as, as—”

“Cynthia,” said the other, innocently. “No: of course not.”

Magnus burst out laughing, and his friend looked at him inquiringly.

“I could not help it, old fellow,” exclaimed Magnus; “you did seem so innocent over it. But never mind that. Plunge head foremost into the sweetest life idyll you can, and, worldly-minded old sinner as I am, I will only respect you the more.”

He spoke so sincerely, and in such a feeling tone, that the younger man half turned and gazed at him, saying directly after—

“Thank you, old fellow; I’m not demonstrative, so just consider that I have given you a hearty grip of the hand.”

“All right,” was the gruff reply. “Hallo! here comes my brigand. By Jove, he’s a fine-looking specimen of the *genus homo*. He’s six feet two, if he’s an inch.”

Jock Morrison, who seemed at home beneath the trees, came slouching along with his hands deep in his pockets, with a rolling gait, the whole of one side at a time; there was an end of his loose cotton neckerchief between his teeth,

and a peculiar satisfied smile in his eye which changed to a scowl of defiance as he saw that he was observed.

“I say, my man,” said Magnus, “would you give me a sitting, if I paid you?”

“Would I give you what?” growled the fellow. “I don’t let out cheers.”

Before Magnus could explain himself, the man had turned impatiently away, and gone on towards Kensington Gardens.

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Artingale. “Our friend is not a model in any way. Have a cigarette, old fellow?”

The artist took one, and they stood smoking for a few minutes, till Artingale, who had been watchfully looking in the direction of the Achilles statue, suddenly threw down his half-smoked cigarette, for the Mallow carriage came into sight, and, as the young man had hoped, a voice cried “stop!” and the coachman drew up by the rails.

“Ah, Harry!” cried Cynthia, leaning forward to shake hands, and looking very bright and charming in the new floral bonnet that had caused her such anxiety that morning; “I didn’t know you had come up to town.”

“Didn’t you,” he replied, earnestly. “I knew you had. I went over to the rectory yesterday, and saw your brothers.”

“Oh, Harry!” cried Cynthia, blushing with pleasure.

“It didn’t matter; I drove over to do the horse good,” said the young man, shaking hands warmly with Julia in turn. “Here, let me introduce my friend Magnus. Julia, this is James Magnus. Cynthia, Magnus the artist.”

“Lord Artingale has often spoken of you, Mr Magnus,” said Cynthia, looking at him rather coquettishly, in fact as if she was better used to London society than the quietude of a country rectory. “He has promised to bring me some day to see your pictures.”

“I shall only be too proud to show you what I am doing,” said the artist, meeting frankly the bright eyes that were shooting at him, but which gave him up directly as a bad mark, as he turned and began talking to Julia Mallow, who seemed to have become singularly quiet and dreamy, but who brightened up directly and listened eagerly, for she found that Magnus could talk sensibly and well.

“Are you going to stay up long?” said Lord Artingale, gazing imploringly in Cynthia’s eyes.

“I don’t know, indeed,” she replied, pouting. “Papa has brought mamma to see a fresh physician, but is so cross and strange now. He has been reforming the parish, as he calls it.”

“Yes; so I heard,” said Lord Artingale, laughing.

“And that has meant quarrelling with all the stupid townspeople, and setting them against us.”

“Not against you, Cynthia,” said the young man in a low voice. “I don’t believe that.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Harry,” she replied, laughing; “not now. But really it is very unpleasant, you know, for it makes papa so cross.”

“Of course it would,” said Lord Artingale, sympathisingly.

“And he talks about being so poor, and says that we shall all be ruined, and makes poor mamma miserable.”

“But he is not in want of money, is he?” cried the young man, eagerly.

“Nonsense! No: that’s how he always talks when Frank and Cyril are at home. Oh, Harry, I’m afraid they are dreadful boys.”

“Well, let’s try and make them better, eh, Cynthia?”

“I said you were not to talk nonsense now,” said Cynthia, shaking her pretty little head at him.

“Oh, murder!” he exclaimed, suddenly. “Hadn’t you better drive on? Here’s Perry-Morton.”

“No, no,” exclaimed the younger girl, “it would look so rude. You silly thing, don’t blush so,” she whispered to her sister; “it looks so strange.”

“Good-morning—” said the subject of the thoughts of the group; and Mr Perry-Morton descended poetically upon them, for he did not seem to walk up like an ordinary being. “Cynthia,” he continued, with an air of affectionate solicitude, and leaving out the full-stops he had placed after his two first words, “you look too flushed this morning, my child. Julia, is not the morning charming? Did you notice the effect of light and shade across the water?”

Julia Mallow, who looked troubled and bored, replied that she had not.

“You observed it, of course, Mr Magnus?” continued the new-comer, with a sweet smile.

“No,” said the gentleman addressed, shortly. “I was talking to the ladies.”

“Ah! yes,” said Mr Perry-Morton, sweetly; and he held his head on one side, as if he were posing for a masculine Penseroso. “But Nature will appeal so to our inmost heart.”

“Yes, she’s a jolly nuisance sometimes,” said Lord Artingale, but only to evoke a pitying smile from Mr Perry-Morton, who, in spite of the decidedly annoyed looks of Cynthia and her lover, leaned his arm upon the carriage-door, and began talking to Julia, making James Magnus look like *Harry Hotspur* must have appeared when the “certain lord” came to him, holding the “pouncet box, which ever and anon he gave his nose.”

Cynthia Mallow made a pretty little grimace at Artingale, and, then turning with a smile to the worshipper of Nature, she stretched out her hand for the check-string so unmistakably that the gentlemen drew back, and raised their hats as the carriage rejoined the stream.

“Won’t you come and speak to the girls, Artingale?” said Mr Perry-Morton in a softly imploring tone; and suppressing a sigh of annoyance, the young man suffered himself to be led off with his unwilling friend, while the carriage went slowly on towards Kensington Gardens, stopping with the stream again and again.

“Julia,” cried Cynthia, flushing with annoyance, as soon as they were alone, “has papa gone mad?”

“Hush! the servants will hear you,” said her sister, reprovingly.

“I can’t help it, dear, it makes me so excited that I can’t bear it. How you can let that hateful creature come and patronise and monopolise, and seem to constrict you as he does, like a horrible short fat snake, I can’t imagine. Papa must be going mad to encourage it. If he were as rich as Cassius or Croesus, or whatever the man’s name was, it ought to be no excuse. I declare if you do not pluck up spirit and make a fight, I will. You can’t like him.”

“Oh, no,” cried her sister, with a look of revulsion.

“Then you must—you shall put a stop to his pretensions. Why, I declare to-day he behaved before Harry’s friend as if he were engaged to you. I felt as if I’d have given my pearls to have been at liberty to box his ears.”

“I think him detestable,” said Julia, sadly.

“Then you shall speak up, dear, or I will. I declare I’ll revolt, or no—Harry shall shoot him. I shall command him never to approach our presence again till he has rid society of that dreadful monster with his Nature worship and stuff. Good gracious, Julia, what is the matter?”

The carriage had stopped, as the younger sister prattled on, close by the railings near the Gardens, and Julia Mallow crouched shrinking in the carriage, gazing with a horrified, fascinated fixity of eye at the great half-gipsy-looking vagabond, who, with his folded arms resting upon one of the iron posts, and his bearded chin upon them, was staring at her in an insolent mocking fashion.

The spell only lasted for a few moments before the carriage went on, and with a low hysterical cry, Julia caught at her sister’s hand to whisper hoarsely—

“Oh, Cynthia, that dreadful man again!”

End of Volume One.

Part 1, Chapter XX.

Jock Morrison’s Threat.

The visit to town was but a flying one upon this occasion. The poverty at the rectory did not seem to be extreme, for the horses and carriage were sent up for the fortnight’s stay, and Mrs Mallow had her interview with the new specialist, who talked to her as some specialists do talk, and then she returned to the house taken for the short stay, and her girls had the use of the carriage.

It was a curious thing, and at first it had passed almost unnoticed, but just before the Mallows left the rectory, undergoing a process of smoking out, Frank and Cyril being the smoke producers, Jock Morrison, whose three months had been over now for some time, appeared once more in the neighbourhood of Lawford.

Julia and Cynthia met him one day by Tom Morrison’s cottage, leaning against the doorpost and talking to little Polly.

He had stared hard at them and then slouched away, Polly apologising for his presence.

“You see, Miss Julia, Miss Cynthia, he’s my husband’s own brother, and we don’t want him to feel that we turn our backs upon him.”

“No, of course not,” said Cynthia, “but I wish he would keep away;” and then they had a long chat with the little wife. She looked very pretty and pathetic in her deep mourning, and they parted very tenderly, Julia’s heart bleeding for the stricken woman.

“I’d have given anything to have asked her to show me where they buried poor baby,” said Cynthia, “but I dare not even allude to it.”

“No, of course not,” said Julia, with a shiver. “It was very sad; I can’t bear to think of it at all. Keep close to me, Cynthy,” she whispered.

They had suddenly come upon Jock Morrison, smoking his pipe as he sat upon a stile by the side of the lane, and as

they passed he stared hard at Julia and laughed in a half-mocking way.

“How dare he stare at us like that!” said Cynthia haughtily, and then she began chatting about Polly Morrison’s trouble, and wishing that papa had not been so strict, and the meeting was forgotten till, three days later, when they reached London, and as they got out of the train, Julia started, for there, leaning against a barrier with his hands in his pockets, was Jock Morrison again.

The next day she saw him staring up at the house, and day after day afterwards she was sure to encounter his bold fierce gaze somewhere or another, till she grew quite nervous, telling her sister that she was certain that the mail was meditating some form of revenge against their father for sending him to prison.

“Nonsense!” cried Cynthia. “Papa is a magistrate, and he would not dare.”

Back at Lawford, and they were free of the incubus, in fact Jock Morrison passed out of mind; for in spite of his breathing out threatenings of poverty, the Reverend Eli Mallow, now that he found his eldest son had not come to him for money, had opened the rectory doors to receive visitors.

“We must entertain a little while we are down here, my dear, for the girls’ sake. Perhaps it is as well too for the boys.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs Mallow, looking up from her sofa with her customary patient smile; and the company arrived, and was entertained in a manner that made Fullerton hope that no one would suffer for it, that was all he could say.

Among the guests who had been staying at the rectory were the Perry-Mortons—*the* Perry-Mortons in society meaning Mr Perry-Morton and his two sisters, for though it was believed that they had, or had had, a father and mother, the seniors were never even heard of, much less seen. Ill-natured people said that Perry-Morton the elder had been a pawnbroker who had made money largely. Be that as it may, Perry-Morton the younger was very rich, and never mentioned any relatives but his sisters.

Lord Artingale was there from Gatton every day, but his friend and companion, James Magnus, was in the North sketching, so the young man, having no restraining arm on which to lean, fell more in love as fast as he could with little Cynthia.

Claudine Perry-Morton—by the way, there was a good deal of familiar nicknaming at the house of the Perry-Mortons, Mr Perry-Morton having been known to call Claudine—Bessy, and the younger sister—Faustine Judy. But that was in the privacy of their home life, and showed the simplicity and deep affection of their natures.

Claudine Perry-Morton had made a dead set at the young nobleman, but finding at once that her chance was *nil*, she graciously made way for her sister, who sang “Jock of Hazeldine” at him, in a very deep contralto voice, and with a graceful stoop over the piano; but Faustine Perry-Morton was woman of the world enough to see that Lord Artingale’s thoughts ran in quite another direction, so she also resigned herself to circumstances, and thought him a man of exceedingly low tastes.

So all the smiles and sweetness of the sisters were lavished upon the rectory girls for their brother’s sake. Nothing particular was said, but it soon became evident that Perry-Morton found favour with the Rector, and it was quite understood that the wealthy visitor would, sooner or later, propose for his elder daughter’s hand.

She was nearly as bright at this time as her sister, and Artingale declared that she was the dearest girl he knew, not from any amiable passages between them, but because she laughingly helped him to pleasant little *tête-à-têtes* with her sister, especially when they were out riding; horse exercise and good long gallops being a great deal in vogue, when the weather was mild and clear.

Lord Artingale would canter over from Gatton, sending two or three or more horses by his grooms, an arrangement highly approved of by Frank and Cyril Mallow, who were very civil to him, though in private they compared notes, and said that he would be an awful fool if he had not borne a title and kept such good cigars.

Sometimes the Rector joined the equestrian parties upon a quiet cob, but he generally turned homeward after two or three miles, either to make a call or two at the outlying farms, or to meet the carriage. Then, to make things pleasant, poor Julia talked art on horseback with Mr Perry-Morton, while her sister and Lord Artingale had a brisk canter over some heath, and the groom behind sat and grinned.

“Talk about the guv’nor,” said the last-named individual, as he returned to the stables with the horses, and compared notes with Lord Artingale’s man, “he is a sight on horseback. That there old cob holds him on almost. But if you want to see riding you should go behind that there Perry-Morton.”

This was in the midst of a chorus of hissing from the helpers, who were rubbing down the horses after one of the morning rides.

“He do look a rum un,” said one of the men.

“Look!” said the groom; “he *is* a rum un. He gets them little thin legs of his one on each side of the horse, and keeps yer altering his sterrups for ever so long. Now they’re too long, and now they’re too short, and when we starts he holds his reins one in each hand, and bends forward so that if his horse didn’t have on a martingale he’d always be finding his nose between its ears.”

“Can’t he ride, then?”

“Ride! Yes; like a sack o’ sharps on a miller’s pony. It’s freezing work going out with him, worse than with the

guv'nor, for he keeps his 'oss at a walk the whole time. Lor', I'd give something to see him on his lordship's *Mad Sal*."

But the groom was not destined to see Mr Perry-Morton upon that greyhound-framed hunter, which was full of fire and fidget with every one but Cynthia, who could have curbed her with a silken thread, for that gentleman was an admirer of repose even on horseback, and would only ride the quietest horse he could hire at the King's Head, although Lord Artingale offered him the pick of his little stud.

Repose, too, gave him so many excellent opportunities for putting forward his suit with Julia, upon whom he beamed in a mezzo-tinto style, the lady hardly realising his meaning, only thinking him very absurd, and laughingly telling her sister that she owed her a long debt of gratitude for giving her so many opportunities for a long canter—one of those delightful long canters from which Cynthia used to come back with a delicious glow upon her cheeks, and with eyes that literally sparkled with health and pleasure combined.

"Looking like a wild gal," Mr Jabez Fullerton said, as he stood at his shop door. "I declare it's immoral, that's what it is; a parson's daughter gadding about like a jockey, Smithson; it's disgusting."

"Yes," said Mr Smithson, who was calculating how many yards, at how much a yard, were in Cynthia's well-fitting riding-habit.

"There's a horse—look at it—for a young gal to ride! Well, all I can say is that I hope his lordship means to marry her. I never saw such goings on."

"That there habit do fit well though, I must say that," said Smithson.

"Fit?" said Fullerton. "Hah! The rectory's a disgrace!"

But it so happened that riding was not always the order of the day. Long brisk walks were taken at times, much to the bemiring of Mr Perry-Morton's patent leather shoes; and upon one of these occasions it had been arranged that Julia and Cynthia were to make a call or two upon some of the poor cottagers, who had been rather neglected during the past two weeks. Lord Artingale was going to ride over, and he and Mr Perry-Morton were to bring forward the ladies to meet them, if the Misses Perry-Morton could walk so far.

"Why, Julie, it's quite a treat to be alone once more," said Cynthia, merrily, as they walked briskly along the sandy lanes, calling at first one cottage and then another.

"Treat!" said her sister, smiling, "I thought—"

"Hush! I won't be teased. But, Julie dear, I won't be a hypocrite to you. I do tease him and laugh at him, but he *is* nice, and I think I'm beginning to like him ever so."

"I like him very, very much," said Julia, naïvely. "He's a very pleasant, manly fellow."

"Yes, isn't he, dear? But, Julie, it's too bad, I know, of me to leave you so long with that dreadful bore. What does he say to you?"

"Say!" said Julia, with a smile; "really I hardly know. Talks about art and nature's colour, and asks me if I do not find a want of thoroughness in our daily life."

"Thoroughness! why that's what his sisters are always talking about. I think it thorough nonsense. Oh, I shall be so glad when they're gone."

"Yes, it will be nicer," said Julia, thoughtfully; "but papa seems to like them very much."

"Yes, isn't it extraordinary?" cried Cynthia. "He wants papa to take a house in town, and to furnish it upon plans designed by him. I heard them talking about it, and papa seems to be guided by him in everything. And what do you think?"

"I don't know, dear."

"I'm as good as certain that that wicked Cyril has been borrowing money of Perry-Morton."

"Why do you think that?" said Julia, quickly.

"Because Cyril does not make fun of him a bit, but both he and Frank are wonderfully civil."

Julia sighed.

"Hadn't we better turn back now, dear?"

"Oh, no! let's go as far as old Mrs Meadows's, poor old lady; she'll think we are never coming again."

They walked a few hundred yards farther on, and sat for a quarter of an hour to learn how the poor old lady's jyntes was uncommon painful just now, thanky, and that she hadn't seen them since before Christmas, and that it had been the mildest Christmas she had knowed this sixty year; and then the old lady sent her visitors on their return walk, with the cheerful announcement that a green Christmas "allers made a full churchyard, my dears," which well she knowed it to be true.

"Oh, what a dreadful old woman, Julie," cried Cynthia, merrily.

“Poor old thing! but how well she is for eighty.”

“No troubles but her jyntes to harass her,” laughed Cynthia.

“How long will it be before we meet anybody?”

A much shorter time than they either of them anticipated, for as they turned a bend in the road, two rough-looking men who had been leaning against a gate came towards them, making no movement to let them pass, but staring offensively.

“Don’t be frightened, Julie,” whispered Cynthia, with spirit, “I’m not afraid.”

She walked on boldly, and darted such an imperious look at the lesser of the two men, that he slunk aside to let her pass, but the other, Jock Morrison, stood his ground. He stared in a peculiar, half-smiling way at Julia, making her shrink aside, and following her up, as, turning pale, her lips parting, and with dilated eyes, she felt as it were fascinated by his gaze, shuddering the next moment as he exclaimed with a coarse laugh—

“Bob, old matey, I mean to have this girl.”

Part 1, Chapter XXI.

At Kilby Farm.

“Well—well—well—well,” said Mrs Portlock, folding her apron full of pleats, as Luke Ross sat talking to her for a while, and ended by telling her his intentions for the future. “Barrister, eh? Well, of all the trades I ever heard tell of—but can barristers make a living?”

“Yes, and a good one, too,” said Luke, laughing.

“Then you are not going to take to the school after all?”

“No, I have quite altered my plans, and I hope all will turn out for the best.”

“Ah, I hope so, I’m sure,” said Mrs Portlock, smoothing down her black silk dress, and then arranging a necklace of oblong amber beads, which she wore on market-days, one which bore a striking resemblance to a string of bilious beetles. “But what does your father say?”

“I have not told him my plans yet, for they have only been made since the governor’s meeting.”

“Well, Luke Ross,” said Mrs Portlock, in a resigned fashion, “I’m sure I don’t wish you any harm.”

“I’m sure you do not,” he said, laughing.

“Indeed I do not,” she continued: “but, for my part, I think you had a great deal better have kept to your father’s trade. Such a business as that is not to be picked up every day. But there, I suppose you know best.”

“Of course he does,” said the Churchwarden, who heard the latter part of her sentence. “You let Luke Ross alone for that. His head’s screwed on the right way.”

“Don’t be so foolish, Joseph,” cried Mrs Portlock. “Do talk sense. Has Mr Cyril Mallow gone?”

“Yes, he’s gone back home,” said the farmer.

“Why didn’t you ask him to stay and have a bit of dinner with us?”

“Because I didn’t want him, mother. He only walked home with me to ask about a bit o’ rabbit shooting.”

“But still, it would have been civil to ask him to stop. It’s market-day, and there’s the hare you shot on Friday, and a bit o’ sirloin.”

“Tchah! he wouldn’t have cared to stay. He dines late and fashionable-like at home.”

“I’ll be bound to say he’d have been very glad to stop,” said Mrs Portlock, bridling. “Fashionable, indeed! He got no fashionable dinners when he was working his way home at sea, nor yet when he was out in the bush.”

“Where he had much better have stayed—eh, Luke?” said the farmer. “He does no good but idle about here.”

“Idle, indeed!” cried Mrs Portlock, taking up the cudgels, rather indignantly, on the young man’s behalf. “It might be idling if it was Luke Ross here, but Mr Cyril Mallow’s a gentleman and a gentleman’s son, and he has a right to work when he likes and leave off when he likes.”

“Oh! has he?” said the Churchwarden, smiling at their visitor, as much as to say, ‘Now, just you listen.’ “Well, I’m not a learned man, like Luke Ross here, who has got his Bible at his tongue’s end.”

“As every man who calls himself a good man ought to,” said Mrs Portlock, tartly. “Sage!”

“Yes, aunt,” came from the next room, where the speaker could hear every word.

“Tell them to take the dinner in directly. And, for my part, Joseph, I think if you’d read your Bible a little more o’ Sundays you’d be a better man.”

“You wouldn’t like me so well if I was a better man, old lady,” he laughed; “but, as I was going to say, when I used to read of such things I got it into my head that the first specimen of a man as was made was a working man, to till the ground, and not idle and loaf about, and eat the fruit and shoot the rabbits in the Garden of Eden.”

“For shame, father, to talk in that way!” cried the lady. “And I wonder that you speak so disrespectfully of Mr Cyril Mallow. For my part, I think he’s a very nice, gentlemanly young fellow, and it’s too bad for people to be always sneering about him as they are.”

“And, for my part,” said the Churchwarden, good-humouredly, “I’m a bit of a Radical, and don’t believe in taking off your hat to a man because he happens to have a few thousand pounds more than one’s got oneself. If he’s a wonderful clever chap, with more brains than I’ve got, why, I do look up to him; but I’m not going down on my knees to a set of folks who yawn through their lives, doing nothing, except telling you by word and look that they are a better class of people than you are; and as for Master Cyril Mallow, he’s a well-built, strapping young fellow, who can talk well, and shoot well, but if he had happened to be my sod, instead of old Mallow’s, I’d have licked him into a different shape to what he’s in now, ay, and his brother too, or I’d have known the reason why. Dinner in, my lass? That’s well. Come along, Luke. Tchah! nonsense! you shall stay. You can tell the old man your reasons better when you’ve got a bit of roast beef under your waistcoat, and some of my ale. Why, Sage, lass, what ails you? Your face is as white as a bit o’ dough.”

“Oh, nothing, uncle, nothing,” she replied, forcing a smile, as she hurried to a tall press to get out a napkin for their visitor, and soon after they were seated at the hospitable meal, which was more bounteous on a market-day, the nearness of the farm to the town making it always probable that the Churchwarden might bring up a friend.

But Luke Ross was the only stranger on that occasion, and he sat opposite Sage, whose countenance, though less troubled than when she had overheard her uncle’s words, was lacking in its ordinary composure.

Luke saw this, and attributed it to their conversation, and the interest she took in his affairs. Her aunt saw it, too, and, with the idea of comforting her niece, kept turning the conversation to the Rector and his family, but not to do any good, for out of mere contrariety, and with a twinkle in his eye as he glanced at Luke, the Churchwarden set to and roundly abused the Rector and his sons for their ways.

“Come, Luke,” he said, “you are not making half a meal. I suppose by and by, sir, you will be as fashionable as Master Cyril Mallow, and won’t eat a bit at dinner-time without calling it lunch. Ha, ha, ha!”

“There, do have done, Joseph,” cried Mrs Portlock. “What have you got to laugh at now?”

“I was thinking of the horse-whipping I gave the young dogs—ay, it’s twelve or fourteen years ago now—that night I caught them in the orchard.”

“There, do let bygones be bygones, Joseph,” cried Mrs Portlock, sharply. “Boys will be boys. I’ll be bound to say you stole apples yourself when you were young.”

“Ay, that I did, and got thrashed for it, too. But I must say that Cyril Mallow don’t bear any malice for what I did.”

A regular duel was fought over that meal between the heads, Sage hardly raising her eyes, but looking more and more troubled as the Mallow attack and defence went on, while Luke Ross was so intent upon his own thoughts that he hardly heard a word.

It was with quite a feeling of relief, then, that Sage heard her uncle say—

“I like parson, not as a parson, but as a man: for the way in which he has tended that poor sick woman ’s an honour to him; but, as for his way of bringing up children, why, if I had carried on my farm in such a fashion I should have been in the Court o’ Bankruptcy years ago. Best thing Mallow could do would be to put the fellow with me to learn farming, and me have the right to do what I liked with him, and five-and-twenty to two? Is it, my dear? I didn’t know it was so late—and make us truly thankful, Amen.”

There was a general scrooping of chairs after this condensed grace, Sage hurrying off to put on her hat and jacket, and her aunt running after her to say, in a mysterious whispered confidence—

“Don’t you take any notice of uncle, my dear. He don’t mean half he says.”

“You’ll walk back with Sage, of course, Luke?” said the Churchwarden, quietly, as he drew his chair to the fire for his after-dinner pipe. “Well, my boy, I think you’re right about what you settled; but I suppose I had something to do with your altering your mind?”

“Yes, sir, I must own to that.”

“Well,” said the Churchwarden, thoughtfully, “I hope it’s for the best; I meant it to be. You’ll go back to London, then, soon?”

“Almost directly, sir, to begin working hard.”

“That’s right, my boy. I believe in work. Come over here whenever you are down at Lawford. I shall be very glad to see you, my lad, very.”

Then, pulling out his watch, he consulted it, and went on chatting for a few minutes as if to keep Luke from speaking about the subject near to his heart, but at last he broke in—“I need hardly say, sir, that I go meaning to work up to the point you named, and—”

“Yes, yes, yes, my lad; let that rest. Let’s see how things go. You’re both young,” he cried, pulling out his big silver watch once more. “I say, mother,” he shouted, “tell Sage that Luke’s waiting to walk back with her. She’ll be late for school.”

Then like a chill to Luke Ross came back Mrs Portlock’s voice—

“Sage? Oh, she went out by the back way ten minutes ago.”

Part 1, Chapter XXII.

Cynthia’s Knights.

That was all—those few insolent, grossly-insulting words—and then the big fellow stood staring after the frightened girls.

“Take my hand, Julia,” whispered the younger sister; and if, as we read in the old novelists, a glance would kill, the flash of indignant lightning that darted from her bright eyes would have laid Jock Morrison dead in the road.

But, powerful as are the effects of a lady’s eyes, they had none other here than to make the great picturesque fellow smile at her mockingly before turning his hawk-like gaze on the frightened girl who clung to her sister’s hand as they hurried away.

“Has he gone, Cynthy?” whispered Julia, at the end of a few moments.

“I don’t know. I can’t hear them, and I won’t look back, or they’ll think we are afraid—and we are not.”

“I am—horribly afraid,” said Julia, in a choking voice.

“I’m not,” said Cynthia. “A nasty, rude, impudent pig that he is. Oh, if I were a man, I’d whip him till he lay down on the ground and begged for mercy. To insult two inoffensive girls like that! Harry shall beat him well, that he shall, or I’ll never speak to him again.”

“Make haste,” whispered Julia. “Let’s run.”

“I won’t run,” cried Cynthia. “I wouldn’t run away from the biggest man that ever lived. I never heard of such a thing. Oh, how cross papa will be.”

“We had better not tell him,” said Julia, faintly; and her face was deadly pale.

“Not tell papa? Why, you foolish little coward, Julie! But only to think of the insufferable impudence of the wretch. I wish he had said it to me.”

“No, no: don’t wish that,” cried Julia, excitedly. “It is too horrible. Oh, Cynthy dear, I shall dream of that man.”

“You shan’t do anything of the kind,” cried her sister, whose eyes sparkled and face flushed with excitement. “Such nonsense! Two unprotected maidens walking through the forest met a wicked ogre, and he opened his ugly great mouth, and gaped as he showed his big white teeth like a lion, and then he said, I am going to gobble up the prettiest of those two little maids; and then they ran away, and a gallant knight coming along, they fled to him for help, and fell upon their poor knees in a wet place, and said, ‘Oh, brave and gallant paladin, go and smite down that wicked ogre, and we will give you smiles, and gloves to wear in your helm, and tie scarves round your waist, and if you will promise not to eat us, you shall some day have one of us for a pet!’ And the name of the gallant knight was Sir Perrino Mortoni, and—”

“Oh pray be quiet, Cynthy, I feel so upset you cannot tell.”

“Stuff and nonsense! Don’t interrupt my story. The ogre has gone.”

“I shall always be afraid of meeting that man.”

“What, after the gallant knight has killed him? Oh, I see, you are afraid that Sir Perrino would not slay him, but would bind him in chains, and keep him at his castle for an artist’s model. Then we will appeal to another knight, Lord Harry the Saucy, and he shall do the deed. Where is the gallant I wis not,” she added, laughing.

“I know who he is,” said Julia, who was trembling still.

“So do I,” said Cynthia, merrily. “Well, never mind, my darling sissy; don’t let a thing like that upset you. Come: be brave. They are gone now, and we shall never see them again.”

“Never see them again,” said Julia, with a wild look in her eye. “That man will haunt me wherever I go.”

“Will he, dear?” said Cynthia, merrily; “then the gallant knight shall not quite kill him, though I don’t believe in haunting ghosts. Here they are.”

“Cynthia!” gasped Julia, with a cry of horror.

“I don’t mean the ogres, you little coward; I mean the gallant knights.”

“Why, we began to think we had missed you,” cried Lord Artingale, who, with Mr Perry-Morton, met them at a turn of the road, the latter gentleman’s patent leather shoes being a good deal splashed, in spite of the care with which he had picked his way.

“Oh, Mr Perry-Morton,” cried Cynthia, ignoring Artingale, and, with a mischievous light in her eye, addressing their artistic friend, “my sister has been so shamefully insulted by a great big man.”

“Who? where? my dear Miss Julia? Where is the scoundrel?” cried Perry-Morton, excitedly.

“Just down the road a little way,” said Cynthia. “I hope you will go and beat him well.”

“A big scoundrel of a fellow?” cried Mr Perry-Morton.

“Yes, and he looks like a gipsy,” said Cynthia, innocently. “He said something so insulting to my sister.”

“Hush, pray, Cynthia,” cried the latter, faintly.

“Oh, poor girl, she is going to faint. Miss Mallow, pray look up. I am here. Take my arm. Let me hasten with you home. This scoundrel shall be pursued, and brought to justice.”

“I am better now,” said Julia, speaking more firmly. “No, thank you, Mr Perry-Morton, I can walk well enough.”

“Oh, I cannot leave you like this, dear Miss Julia,” whispered Perry-Morton, while Cynthia’s eyes were sparkling with malicious glee, as she turned them upon Artingale, whose face, however, startled her into seriousness, as he caught her arm, gripping it so hard that it gave her pain.

“Tell me, Cynthia,” he said, hoarsely, “what sort of a fellow was this?”

“A big, gipsy-looking man, and there was a dirty-looking fellow with him,” faltered the girl, for her lover’s look alarmed her. “But stop, Harry; what are you going to do?”

“Break his cursed neck—if I can,” cried Artingale, in a low, angry growl.

“No, no: don’t go,” she whispered, catching at him. “You may be hurt.”

“One of us will be,” he said, hoarsely.

“But, Harry, please!”

She looked at him so appealingly that he took her hands in his.

“Cynthia—my darling!” he whispered; and if they had been alone he would have caught her in his arms.

But they were not alone, and bending down he whispered—

“You have made me so happy, but you would not have me be a cur. Take your sister home.”

Without another word he turned and started off down the lane at a trot, Cynthia watching him till he was out of sight.

“Oh, Harry! If you are hurt!” she whispered to herself; and then, recalling her sister’s trouble, she ran to her side, where Perry-Morton was making a pretence of affording support that was not required.

“We can soon get home, Mr Perry-Morton,” said Cynthia, with the malicious look coming back into her eyes, and chasing away one that was very soft and sweet. “Wouldn’t you like to go after Lord Artingale?”

“What! and leave you two unprotected?” said the apostle, loudly. “No, I could not, to save my life.”

He did not, but attended the ladies right up to the rectory, sending their father into a fury, and then leading a party of servants to the pursuit of the tramps, as they were dubbed, but only to meet Lord Artingale at the end of a couple of hours returning unsuccessful from his chase.

For he had not seen either of the fellows, from the fact that as soon as the ladies had gone they had quietly entered the wood, to lie down amongst the mossy hazel stubbs, from which post of vantage they had seen the young man go by.

“Hadn’t we better hook it, Jock?” said the lesser vagabond.

“Hook it? No. What for? We haven’t done nothing agen the lor.”

There was hot indignation at the rectory, and Frank and Cyril went straight to Tom Morrison’s cottage, frightening the wheelwright’s wife, and making her look paler as she took refuge with Budge in the back, only coming forward after repeated summonses, and then keeping the girl with her, as she said, truthfully, that Jock Morrison had not been there for days.

“What’s the matter?” said Tom, coming from his workshop, and looking sternly at the two visitors.

“Matter!” cried Frank, fiercely; “we want that brother of yours; he has been insulting my sister.”

“Then you had better find him and punish him,” said Tom, coldly.

“Where is he?”

“You are a parson’s sons,” said Tom, bitterly, “and ought to know Scripture. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’”

“Look here, you Tom Morrison,” cried Frank, “no insolence; I’ve only just come back home, but while I stay I’ll not have my sisters insulted by a blackguard family who have got a hold in the parish, and do it out of spite because my father could not act as they wanted.”

“Out of my place!” roared Tom, fiercely. “How dare you bring up that, you coward!”

“Tom! Tom! oh, for my sake, pray!” cried Polly, throwing herself upon his breast just as he was about to seize Cyril, who had stepped before his brother.

“Well, for thy sake, yes,” said Tom, passing his arm round his wife. “Frank and Cyril Mallow, don’t come to my place again, or there may be mischief.”

“Do you dare to threaten us, you dog?” cried Frank.

“He ought to know what a magistrate’s power—” began Cyril, but he glanced at Polly and checked himself. “Here, come away, Frank. Look here, Tom Morrison, where is your brother Jock?”

“I don’t know,” said Tom, sternly, “and if I did I should not tell you. This is my house, gentlemen, and I want neither truck nor trade with you and yours.”

“I’ll have you both flogged,” cried Frank. “A pretty thing that two ladies can’t go along the lanes without being insulted! By Gad, if—”

“Look here,” said Tom Morrison, stoutly, “who are you and yours that they are not to be spoken to? How long is it since a respectable girl couldn’t hardly walk along one of our lanes for fear of being insulted by the parson’s sons? I tell you—”

“Tom! Tom!” moaned Polly, “I—I—”

“Hush, bairn!” he whispered, and Frank hustled his brother out of the cottage, angrily threatening punishment to the brothers Morrison before many days were over their heads, and went back to the rectory, where Mr Perry-Morton informed Lord Artingale, in confidence, that he would have liked to delete such creatures as that ruffian. They were only blurs, spots, and blemishes upon the face of this beautiful earth, marring its serenity, and stealing space that was the inheritance of those who could appreciate the gift.

“I can handle my fists,” said Artingale, in reply, “for we had a good fellow to teach us, and nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to have had ten minutes’ interview with that blackguard.”

“It is very brave and bold of you,” said Mr Perry-Morton, holding his too fleshy head up with one white hand, as it drooped sidewise, and supporting his elbow with another white hand, as he gazed at him with a kindly, patronising, smiling pity, “but it would be better to hand him over to the police.”

“Oh, the police might have had him when I had done with him,” said the young man, nodding. “I should have liked to have had my bit of satisfaction first.”

The sisters, that is to say, Mr Perry-Morton’s sisters, wound their arms round each other, the elder laying her head upon her sister’s shoulder, so that arms, hair, and dresses were intertwined and mingled into a graceful whole. Doubtless their legs would have been woven into the figure, only they were required to stand on; and then with a series of changes passing over their faces with beautiful regularity, and with wonderful gradations by minor tones or tints, they suggested horror, fear, dread, suffering, pity, pain, with a grand finale representing wakeful repose, as they listened to Cynthia’s history of the encounter, while their brother, after gazing at them diagonally through his eyelashes, softly crossed the room, touched the Rector upon the arm, and pointed to the sisterly group with a smile of satisfied affection.

“Heaven has its reflections upon earth,” he said softly, “and the poetic mind reads rapture in angelic form,” he added, with a fat smile of serene satisfaction and repose.

“Quite so,” said the Rector, and he balanced his double eyeglass upon his nose; “but really, Mr Perry-Morton, I have so many troubles and petty cares upon my mind, that this new one has filled me with indignation, and I hardly know what I say or do. Whether as clergyman or county magistrate, I am sure no one could be so troubled as I have been.”

But the indignation even of a county magistrate availed nothing, although it took the form of a hunt about the place with the resident rural policeman, supplemented by the presence of two more resident rural policemen from two neighbouring villages. Lord Artingale’s keepers, too, were admonished to be on the look-out, but Jock Morrison was not seen, though his companion was traced to one or two casual wards, and then seemed to have made for London.

Part 1, Chapter XXIII.

Clerical Difficulties.

The Fullerton party proved triumphant in the struggle which ensued, and in spite of the Rector's efforts to produce a better state of things at the boys' school, Mr Humphrey Bone kept on teaching in his good old-fashioned way—good in the eyes of many of the Lawfordites—when he was sober, but breaking out with a week's drinking fit from time to time, when the school would be either closed or carried on by the principal monitors, Sage Portlock going in from time to time at the Rector's request when the noise became uproarious.

Those who had been the most determined on Bone's retention shut their eyes to these little weaknesses on the master's part; and, if the boys were not well taught, the tradesmen's accounts were written in a copperplate hand, while the length and amount of the bill was made less painful to its recipient by finding his name made to look quite handsome with a wonderful flourish which literally framed it in curves—a flourish which it had taken Mr Bone years to acquire.

The Rector resigned himself in disgust to the state of things, and devoted his attention to the girls' school.

"It can't be helped, Miss Portlock," he said, with a smile; "if we cannot make good boys in the place we must make super-excellent girls, and by and by as they grow up they'll exercise their influence on the young men."

He thought a great deal of his words as he went homewards, according to his custom, with his hands behind his back, holding his walking-cane as if it were a tail, thinking very deeply of his sons, and whether some day good, true women would have an influence upon their lives and make them better men.

The Rector never knew why the boys laughed at him, setting it down entirely to their rudeness and Humphrey Bone's bad teaching, for no one ever took the trouble to tell him it was on account of that thick black stick he was so fond of carrying, depending from his clasped hands behind.

Upon the present occasion, as he walked homeward, and in fact as he would at any time when excited by his thoughts, he now and then gave the stick a toss up, or a wag sideways, ending with a regular flourish, after the manner of a cow in a summer pasture when much troubled by the flies, adding thereby greatly to the resemblance borne by the stick to a pendent tail.

The Rector was more than usually excited on the morning of his remark to Sage Portlock. There had been something tender and paternal in his way of addressing her, and she had a good deal filled his thoughts of late. There were several reasons for this.

He had had no right to plan out Sage's future, but somehow he had thoroughly mapped it out long before.

He knew of Luke Ross's attachment to her, and from his position as spiritual head of the parish, it was only natural that he should think of the duty that so often fell to his lot—that of joining couples in the "holy estate of matrimony."

But a short time back and in Sage's case it all came so natural and easy. Luke Ross had been trained, he was to have the boys' school, he would soon marry her, the schoolhouses would be occupied, and the schools be as perfect under such guidance as schools could be.

Everything had been gliding on beautifully towards a definite end, and then there had come stumbling-blocks. Luke Ross had gone back to town; the girls' schoolhouse remained unoccupied, as Sage went home for the present; Humphrey Bone was faster than ever in his post, and likely to stay there, the opposition being so strong; and, worst problem of all to solve, there was Cyril.

It was no wonder that the thick black stick was twitched and flourished and tossed up and down, for the Rector's mind was greatly disturbed, especially upon the last question—that of his son.

He had spoken severely without effect; he had tried appeal without better success. Cyril had not openly defied him, but had sat and listened quietly to all his father had said, and then gone and acted precisely as if nothing whatever had been spoken.

"She is so good, and sweet, and innocent a girl; so true, too, in her attachment to Luke Ross, that I cannot speak to her," he said to himself. "Besides, she has given me no opening. But it must be stopped. What shall I do?"

The Reverend Eli Mallow went on for a few yards deeply thoughtful, and then the idea came. He knew what he would do: speak to Mrs Portlock first, or to the Churchwarden, and ask their advice and counsel upon the matter.

"Yes," he said to himself, "it will be the best. Such matters are better checked in their incipient state. I will go and see her at once."

He faced round, glanced at his watch, saw that it was only eleven, and walked sharply in the direction of Kilby Farm, to find the Churchwarden away from home, but Mrs Portlock ready to receive him with a most gracious smile.

"I'm sure you must be tired after your walk, Mr Mallow," she said. "Sit down by the fire. What cold weather we are having! You'll take a glass of my home-made wine and a bit of cake?"

The Rector would rather not, but Mrs Portlock insisted upon getting the refreshments out of the fireside cupboard, extolling the wine the while.

"I'm sure you'd like it," she said. "Your son had some only last night, and he said it was better than any sherry he had ever tasted."

"My son—last night?" said the Rector, quickly. "Which son?"

“Mr Cyril; he drank four glasses of it, and praised it most highly.”

She poured out a glass, and the Rector drew it to him, and sat gazing at the clear, amber liquid, hesitating as to how he should begin, while Mrs Portlock stole a glance at the mirror to see if her cap was straight, and wished she had known of her visitor’s coming, so that she might have put on a silk dress, and the cap with the maroon ribbons and the gold acorn.

“Cyril said that he was down the town last night with Frank,” said the Rector to himself. “He fears my words, and he is playing false, or he would not have been ashamed to answer that he was here.”

“How the time seems to fly, Mrs Portlock!” said the Rector at last, biting his lip with annoyance at the want of originality of the only idea he could set forth.

“Dear me, yes. I was saying so only last week to Mr Cyril. ‘Four months,’ I said, ‘since you came back;’ and he looked up at Sage and said that the time seemed to go like lightning.”

“By the way, Mrs Portlock,” said the Rector, hastily, “have you heard from Luke Ross lately?”

“Oh, dear me, no,” said the lady, rather sharply. “I never call at the Ross’s now.”

“I thought, perhaps, the young people might correspond.”

“Oh, dear me, no; neither Mr Portlock nor myself could countenance such a thing as that.”

The Rector was at a loss to see the impropriety of such an intercourse, but he said nothing—he merely bowed.

“That was only a boy-and-girl sort of thing. Our Sage knew Luke Ross from a boy, but now they are grown up, and as Joseph—Mr Portlock—said they were too young to think about such things as that.”

“But I understood that they were engaged,” said the Rector, who felt startled; and he gazed very anxiously in Mrs Portlock’s face for her reply.

“Oh, dear me, no, sir, nothing of the kind.”

For want of something to say, the Rector sipped his wine.

“My husband very properly said that under the circumstances no engagement ought to take place, and it was not likely. For my part I don’t agree with the affair at all.”

The Rector felt that his position was growing more unpleasant than ever. He had come to say something, but that something would not be said; and at last when he did speak his words were very different from what he had intended they should be.

“My son, Cyril, has taken to coming here a good deal lately, Mrs Portlock,” he said.

“Well, yes, sir,” she said, with a satisfied smile; “he has.”

“I am sorry to have to speak so plainly about him, Mrs Portlock, but I hope you will not encourage his visits. Cyril has travelled a good deal, and has imbibed, I am afraid, a great deal of careless freedom.”

“Indeed?” said the lady, stiffly.

“I’m afraid that he is too ready to laugh and chat with any girl he meets, and I should be sorry if—er—if—”

“If you mean by that, Mr Mallow, sir, that you don’t consider our niece good enough for your son,” said Mrs Portlock, tartly, “please say so downright.”

“I did not wish to imply anything of the kind, Mrs Portlock,” replied the Rector, mildly. “I wish merely to warn you against his foolish, frivolous ways.”

“If there’s a difference at all it’s on your side, Mr Mallow, sir,” continued the lady. “Mr Cyril has been a deal too idle and roving to suit me, while our Sage—”

“Miss Portlock is a most estimable young lady, for whom I entertain the highest respect, Mrs Portlock,” said the Rector, warmly; “and it was on her behalf, knowing as I do how foolish Cyril can be, that I came to speak to you this morning.”

“I don’t know anything about his foolishness, Mr Mallow,” said the lady, who was growing irate; “but I’ve got to say this, that he comes here just as if he means something, and if he does not mean anything he had better stop away, and not behave like his brother Frank.”

“Exactly so, my dear madam,” cried the Rector, eagerly. “I am going to talk seriously to him.”

This did not seem to meet the lady’s ideas, and she looked hot and annoyed, beginning to stir the fire with a good deal of noise, and setting the poker down more loudly.

“I should be deeply grieved, I am sure, Mrs Portlock,” began the Rector; “it is far from my wish to—really, my dear madam, this is a very unpleasant interview.”

The lady said nothing; but she was so evidently of the same opinion that the Rector was glad to rise and offer his hand in token of farewell.

She shook hands, and the visitor left, to hurry home with his black stick hanging behind, and his soul hot within him as he mentally accused Cyril by his folly of getting him into the unpleasant predicament from which he had so lately escaped.

Part 1, Chapter XXIV.

“A Row.”

“Where are you going, Frank?”

“Don’t know; perhaps as far as Lewby. John Berry said he would be glad to show me round his farm.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Cyril, with a meaning look.

“Well, what do you mean by ‘Oh’?” said Frank, roughly.

“Nothing at all, my dear boy—nothing at all,” said Cyril.

“I never grin like an idiot at you when you are going over to Kilby, do I?”

“Oh, no: not at all. It’s all right, I suppose,” laughed Cyril. “But, I say, hadn’t you better be off amongst the blacks? You have grown rather uncivilised lately.”

“Mind your own business,” growled Frank Mallow. “I say!”

“Well?”

“That blackguard regularly frightened Ju. She hasn’t looked the same girl since.”

“No,” said Cyril. “Pity the shooting season’s over.”

“Why?”

“We might have peppered the blackguard by accident if he had shown himself here again.”

“Master would like to see you, sir, in my mistress’s room,” said the butler, entering the study where the young men were smoking.

“Oh, all right, I’ll come,” said Cyril, impatiently. “Hang it, Frank, if you were half a brother you’d go halves with me, and take me back to your place. I’m sick of this life. There’s a lecture about something, I suppose.”

“Caning, I should think,” said Frank, with a sneering laugh. “There, go and get it over; and look here, I’ll give up Lewby to-day, and drive over with you to Gatley. Let’s get a game at billiards and dine with Artingale. It’s no use to have a lord after your sister if you don’t make use of him.”

“All right. No. I’ve an engagement to-night.”

“Go and keep it then, and be hanged. I shall go to Lewby,” growled Frank.

“Blackberrying?” sneered Cyril. “I say, mind you don’t ‘Rue’ going.”

“If you say that again, Cil, I’ll get up and kick you,” growled Frank. “Every fellow isn’t such a blackguard as you.”

“Oh no,” laughed Cyril, “especially not dear brother Frank. There, I’m off.”

“You’re a beauty, Cil!” growled Frank, and he lit a fresh cigar. “Share! Go halves with me! Ha, ha, ha! I dare say he would. How people do believe in stories of the gold mines. I wonder whether anything is to be made out of that poet fool.”

“Want to talk to me, father?” said Cyril, entering the room where his mother lay upon the couch, with a terrible look of anxiety upon her pallid face. “Oh, let’s see; will my smoking worry you, mamma?”

“Always so thoughtful for me,” said the fond mother to herself. Then aloud—

“I don’t mind it, Cyril, but I don’t think your father—”

She stopped short, for the Rector interrupted her, sternly.

“Is an invalid lady’s room a suitable place for smoking pipes, Cyril?”

“Don’t see that it matters what the place is so long as the invalid don’t mind. But there, don’t make a bother about it,” he cried, tapping the burning tobacco out on to the hob; “I can wait until I go down again.”

“Shall we go down, papa?” said Julia, rising with Cynthia from where they sat in the window.

“No, my dears; you must hear what I am going to say, so you may as well hear it now.”

“Oh, no, Eli,” moaned the invalid.

“Very well, my dears, you had better go,” said the Rector, and he led his daughters to the door, which he opened and closed after them with quiet dignity.

“Row on!” muttered Cyril. “Well, ma, dear, how are you?”

“Not—not quite so well, Cyril,” she said, fondly; and her voice trembled, as she dreaded a scene. “Will you come and sit down here by me?” she added, pointing to a chair.

“Yes, I may as well,” he said, laughingly, “and you can take care of me, for I see somebody means mischief.”

The Rector bit his lips, for his was a painful task. He wished to utter a severe reprimand, and to appeal to the young man’s sense of right and wrong, while here at the outset was the mother bird spreading her protecting wing before her errant chick, and ready, the Rector saw, to stand up boldly in his defence.

“Let me punch up your pillow for you, dear,” said Cyril, bending over the couch, and raising the slight frame of the sick woman, whose arms closed softly round the young man’s neck, while he beat and turned the soft down pillow, lowering the invalid gently back into her former place, and kissing her tenderly upon the brow.

“That’s better,” he said. “I hate a hot pillow, and it’s so comfortable when it’s turned.”

Mrs Mallow clung fondly to her son for a few moments, smiling gratefully in his face; and the Rector sighed and again bit his lip as he saw how moment by moment his task was growing more difficult.

“If he would only study her feelings in the broader things of life,” he said to himself; and he took a turn or two impatiently about the room.

“Now, governor, I’m ready,” said Cyril, facing round suddenly, his mother holding his hand between hers. “What’s the last thing I’ve done amiss?”

“Heaven knows,” cried the Rector, startling his wife by the way in which he suddenly flashed into anger. “The last thing that I have to complain of is that I cannot trust my own son.”

“Ah, you mean with money, father,” said the young man, lightly. “Well, it does go rather fast.”

“I mean my son’s word,” said the Rector, quickly. “Cyril, last night you told me a lie.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” cried the mother, quickly. “It is some mistake, dear. Cyril would not tell you what was not true.”

The Rector, after years of patience, was so thoroughly out of temper with the discovery of that day that he retorted hotly—

“A lie—I say he told me a deliberate lie.”

“Nonsense!” said the young man. “People tell lies when they are afraid to tell the truth. I’m not afraid to tell you anything.”

“You told me last night, sir, that you had been down in the town with Frank, whereas I find this morning that you had been at Kilby Farm.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Cyril. “Why, what a discovery, father. You asked me where I had been, and I told you—‘down the town.’ So I had. You did not ask me whether I had been anywhere else, or I might have added, to the Churchwarden’s.”

“And pray why did you go there, sir?” cried the Rector.

“Come, father, don’t talk to me as if I were a naughty little boy about to be sent to bed without his supper.”

“Pray be calm, dear,” cried Mrs Mallow. “Cyril gives a very good explanation. Surely it was natural that he should walk over to Kilby.”

“I say why did you go over there, sir?”

“To smoke a pipe with old Portlock, if you must know, and have a glass of his home brewed ale. It’s dull enough here with the girls.”

“It is false, sir,” cried the Rector, excitedly.

“Well,” said Cyril, coolly, “you may not find it dull, but I do.”

“I say, sir, it is false that you merely went there to drink and smoke.”

“Very well, father,” said Cyril, in the most nonchalant way, as he lay back in his chair and played with his mother’s rings. “Perhaps you know, then, why I went.”

“Oh, hush, Cyril, my boy,” panted the invalid. “Eli, my dear, pray be calm. This hurts me—hurts me more than I can

tell you."

"I am sorry, my dear, very sorry," cried the Rector, excitedly; "but it must be stopped. I cannot allow matters to go on as they do. It is terrible. I feel at every turn as if I were being disgraced. I shiver as I go down the town or make a call, for fear that I should have to encounter some fresh disgrace brought upon us by our own boys."

"What's the matter with the governor, ma, dear?" said the young man, mockingly. "Has Frank been up to some fresh games?"

"Oh, hush, my dear boy," cried the poor woman, imploringly.

"I'll be as quiet as I can, dear," replied Cyril; "but there are bounds to everything. I am not a child."

"No, sir, but you act like one—like a disobedient child," cried his father. "No matter what is done for you, back you come home to idle and lounge away your existence. The idea of the nobility of labour never seems to have dawned in your mind."

"Never," replied Cyril, calmly. "Nobility of labour, indeed! Why, father, what's the good of quoting stuff like that to me out of one of your old sermons?"

"You are utterly wasting your life, sir."

"Not I, father," retorted Cyril. "I am rather enjoying it. Let those work who are obliged. Why should I make myself a slave? I like my existence very well as it is, and don't mean to bother."

"It is disgraceful," cried the Rector, whose usually bland face was now fierce with anger.

"Don't see it. I don't spend much, nor yet get into debt. You've got plenty of money, so why should I trouble myself about work?"

"I'd forgive that," cried the Rector—"I'd forgive your idleness, but when I find that you cannot be trusted, I am compelled to speak."

"But, my dear," remonstrated the invalid, "what has poor Cyril done? He did not like the wretched slavery out in the colony, and he could not content himself with the drudgery of a clerk's desk. Do not be so severe. Be patient, and he will succeed like Frank has done."

"What has he done?" cried the Rector. "What is he doing but leading such a life as must disgrace us all."

"Nonsense, father!" cried the young man. "It is no nonsense, sir. Months ago I spoke to you about your conduct, but it has been in vain. People in all directions are noticing your behaviour towards Miss Portlock. Just, too, when your sisters are about to make excellent matches."

"Miss Portlock!" cried Mrs Mallow, starting. "Oh, Cyril!"

Cyril acted like an animal brought to bay. He began to fight. While there was a chance of his father not being aware of his proceedings, he fenced and parried. Now he spoke out sharply—

"Well, what do people say about my behaviour with Miss Portlock? She's a very nice ladylike girl, well educated, and sweet and clever, and if I like to chat with her, I shall."

"Oh, Cyril!" cried his mother again; and then she added, "Is this true?"

"True? Is what true? That I have been to Kilby sometimes to have a chat with Sage Portlock? Of course it is. Why not?"

"You own to it, then?" said his father. "Own to it, if you like to call it so, sir. And now, pray, where is the harm?"

Mrs Mallow withdrew her hand from her son's grasp, and looked in his face with a terribly pained expression, for, with all her gentleness of disposition, the sense of caste was in her very strongly; and with all his failings, she had looked upon Cyril as a noble representative of the mingled blood of the old family Mallows and the Hesketh from whom she sprang.

"I am to understand, then," said the Rector, "that you propose honouring us with a daughter chosen from the people here."

"I don't say yes, and I don't say no," replied Cyril, cavalierly. "I think I have heard you say often that Sage was a very nice girl."

"Sage?"

"Yes, Sage. I think you had the pleasure of baptising her by her herbaceous name, so you ought to know."

The Rector exchanged glances with his wife, whose face wore a very pitiable look.

"I have—yes—certainly—often said that Miss Portlock was a very good, sensible girl," he said at last.

"Well, then, what more do you want, sir? I suppose you expect a man to think about such things at some time in his life?"

“But have you proposed for her hand?” said his mother, faintly.

“Proposed for her hand? Nonsense, mamma. People of their class don’t understand things in that light.”

This was a false move, and the Rector took advantage of the slip.

“People of that class, sir? Then you acknowledge that you are degrading yourself by these proceedings.”

“Oh, I don’t know about degrading myself, sir. You know what they say. If a lady marries her groom she descends to his level. If a man marries his cook he raises her to his.”

“But does Mr Portlock—my Churchwarden—know of your intentions?”

“How can he,” said Cyril, coolly, “when I have none?”

“But Mrs Portlock believes that you are paying your attentions to her niece.”

“Yes, I s’pose so,” he replied. “Terribly silly woman.”

“Oh, Cyril, Cyril,” said his mother, “this is very, very shocking.”

“Stuff and nonsense, mamma. Why, what a tremendous fuss about a little bit of flirtation with a pretty little schoolmistress. You nearly had her sister for a daughter-in-law when Frank was after her.”

“Frank saw the folly of his proceedings, and grew sensible,” said the Rector.

“Oh, did he!” muttered Cyril.

“The word flirtation, Cyril,” said the Rector firmly, “is a disgrace to our civilisation, and one that ought certainly to be heard from no decent lips.”

“Matter of opinion, of course,” said Cyril; and he placed his hands under his head and stared straight out of the window, while the Rector and his wife exchanged glances.

“Cyril,” said the former at last, after a struggle to keep down his anger, “I will not quarrel with you.”

“That’s right, governor. I hate quarrelling.”

“But while you are under my roof I must be obeyed.”

“Don’t think any man has a more obedient son,” replied Cyril.

“The time, however, has now come when some plan must be devised for you to make a fresh start in life upon your own account.”

“’Pon my word, father, I don’t see it. I’m very comfortable as I am.”

“But I am not, sir,” replied his father, firmly. “For years past it has been thrown in my teeth that I am rightly named Eli. You know why. It is time, now, sir, that we took care not to be ashamed of the enemy in the gate.”

“Please don’t preach, father,” said the young man, in a tone of protestation.

The Rector paid no attention to his words, but went on—

“Let me ask you first,” he said, “one question.”

“Go on,” said the young man, for his father had stopped.

“Has Miss Portlock accepted your attentions?”

There was a pause here. “I say, Cyril, has Miss Portlock accepted your attentions?”

“Matter of confidence,” replied the young man. “Question I would rather not answer.”

“Then she has not,” said the Rector, quickly, “and I am very, very glad.”

“Why, father?”

“Because, as I have told you before, she is receiving the attentions of Mr Luke Ross.”

“Oh, nonsense!” cried Cyril, flushing. “That’s all off now.”

“I heard something of the kind; but what do you mean? Have they quarrelled?”

“Oh, no. Old Portlock wouldn’t have it: and quite right, too. Girl like that to be engaged to such a clod!”

“Cyril,” said his father, angrily, “I would to heaven that I had as good a son.”

“Complimentary to your boys, sir. Let’s see, he threw you over very shabbily about the school, didn’t he?”

“He declined the post, certainly.”

“Then even Mr Luke Ross is not perfect, sir.”

“I am not going to criticise his conduct over that matter, sir, beyond saying that he had no doubt good reasons for declining the post. On further consideration I think he was right, for unless he felt his heart to be in his work, he would have been wrong to venture upon binding himself to the school.”

“Most worthy young man, I’ve no doubt,” said Cyril, with a sneer.

“A young man for whom I entertain a great respect,” retorted the Rector.

“One of those highly respectable young men who push their way on in the world,” sneered Cyril.

“And often become great with the poorest of means for pushing their way,” said the Rector, “while those well started miserably fail.”

“Oh, yes; I know ’em,” said Cyril. “One reads of them in the nice books. Bah! I haven’t patience with the prigs; and as for this Luke Ross,” he cried, with the colour burning as two spots in his cheeks, “I look upon him as one of the most contemptible cads under the sun. You talk of wishing that you had such a son, father! Why the fellow is utterly beneath our notice.”

“Why?” said his father, in a sharp, incisive tone.

“Why?” replied Cyril. “Because he is.”

“A pitiful reply,” said the Rector, angrily. “Can you give me a better reason for your dislike to Luke Ross?”

“Not I. He is not worth it.”

“Then I’ll give you one,” replied the Rector. “The true one, Cyril, though it cuts me to the heart to have to speak so to my son, and before the mother who has worshipped him from his birth.”

“Oh, Eli, pray, pray spare me this,” cried Mrs Mallow, supplicatingly.

“No,” he said, “I have been silent too long—I have given way too much. It is time I spoke out with no uncertain sound. Cyril, you hate this man because he is your rival in the affections of a good, true girl. Your anger has taught me so far, and I rejoice thereat. Your suit has been without success. You teach me, too, that you would stop at nothing, even blackening your rival’s character, to gain your ends; but this must not be. I look upon Sage Portlock as in my charge, and I tell you, once and for all, that you must stop this disgraceful pursuit. I say that it shall not go on.”

“And how will you stop it, sir?” cried Cyril, springing to his feet, while the mother lay back with clasped hands.

“I don’t know yet, but stop it I will,” cried Mr Mallow. “You shall disgrace your mother and sisters no longer—insult Miss Portlock no more by your pursuit.”

“Insult her?”

“Yes, sir, insult her. She is too good and pure-hearted a girl for her affections to be tampered with by such a heartless fellow as you.”

“Eli, Eli,” moaned Mrs Mallow, but her cry was unnoticed by the angry men.

“Tampered with! Heartless! Bah! You do not know what you are saying.”

“I know, my son, that the time has come for me to strike. You must leave here, and at once. Sage Portlock is not for you. If you do not know your position in life and your duty to your class, you must be taught.”

“Then hear me now,” cried the young man, defiantly. “Luke Ross is no rival of mine, for he has never won Sage Portlock’s heart. That belongs to me; and as to duty, caste, and the like, let them go to the devil. Have her I will, in spite of you all, and—”

“Silence, sir!” cried the Rector, beside himself with passion—the rage kept down for years; and he caught his son by the throat. “Man grown—no, you are a boy—a child, whom I ought to soundly thrash for your disobedience and shame. Son? you are no son of mine.”

“Loose me, father,” cried the young man. “I will not bear this. Loose me, I tell you.”

Father and son had forgotten themselves, and in those brief moments of their struggle a strange blindness had come over them. They swayed to and fro, a little table covered with china was overset with a crash, and, at last, getting one hand free, Cyril clenched his fist and struck out fiercely, just as a wild and piercing scream rang through the room.

Part 1, Chapter XXV.

Where Cyril Went.

Mrs Mallow's cry of horror as, after struggling for the first time for many years into an upright posture, she fell back, fainting, had the effect of bringing father and son back to their senses. Another second and Cyril's clenched hand would have struck down the author of his birth; but at that cry his arm fell to his side, and he stood there trembling with excitement as the Rector quitted his hold, and flung himself upon his knees by the couch.

He rose again on the instant to obtain water and the pungent salts which were close at hand, striving with all the skill born of so many years' attendance in a sick room to restore the stricken woman to her senses.

Frank had already left the house, but the cry brought Julia and Cynthia into the room.

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" wailed Julia, and she too busied herself in trying to revive the stricken woman.

Not so Cynthia, who took in the situation at a glance, and burst into a passion of sobs, which she checked directly, and with flushed face and flashing eyes she crossed to her brother.

"This is your doing," she cried; "you will kill mamma before you've done; and Harry might have been here and heard all this. Cyril, I hate you; you're as wicked as Frank;" and to her brother's utter astonishment she struck him sharply in the face.

"Little fool!" he growled fiercely, as he caught her by the wrist, but only to fling her off with a contemptuous laugh. He made no motion to help, but stood with frowning brow and bitter vindictive eye watching his parents alternately; but though he went to and fro many times, and passed close to his son, the Rector never once looked at him, seeming quite to ignore his presence there.

Constant efforts had their due effect at last, for the unhappy mother uttered a low wailing cry, and then, as her senses returned and she realised her position, she began to sob bitterly, clinging to her husband as he knelt by her, bending his face down upon her hands as he held them tightly in his own.

From where Cyril stood he could see his father's face, that it was deadly pale, and that his lips were moving rapidly as if in prayer, and thus all stayed for some little time, till the laboured sobbing of the invalid died off into an occasional catching sigh.

At last she unclosed her eyes, to fix them appealingly upon her son, her lips moving, though no audible words followed; but the look of appeal and the direction of her pathetically expressive eyes told her wishes as she glanced from Cyril to the carpet beside her couch—told plainly enough her wishes, and the young man read them aright—that he should come there and kneel down at his father's side.

"Not I," he muttered. "The old madman! How dare he raise his hand to me like that!"

He thrust his hands in his pockets and remained there with a look mingled of contempt and pity upon his face as he watched the prostrate figure of his father, while, as his mother's appealing eyes were directed to him again and again, he merely replied to the dumbly-uttered prayer by an impatient shake of the head.

At last the Rector raised his eyes, and as he met his wife's agonised look, he smiled gently, and then bent over her and kissed her brow.

"It is passed, my love," he whispered. "God forgive me, I did not think I could have sunk so low."

Julia passed her arm round her sister, and drew her to the window, to lay her head upon her shoulder and weep silently and long.

"Cyril," said the Rector, in a broken voice, as he rose and stood before his son, "you have tried me hard, but I have done wrong. My temper gained the better of me, and I have been praying for strength to keep us both from such a terrible scene again. Come down with me to the study, and let us talk of the future like sentient men. God forgive me, my boy; I must have been mad."

He held out his trembling hands, and Cyril saw that he was evidently labouring under great emotion, as he absolutely humiliated himself before his son, his every look seeming to ask the young man's forgiveness for that which was past. But Cyril's anger was, if not hotter, more lasting than his father's, and rejecting the offer of peace between them, he swung round upon his heels and strode out of the room.

For a few minutes there was absolute silence, as mother and father gazed at the door through which the son had passed. Then, with a piteous sob, Mrs Mallow exclaimed—

"Oh, Eli, Eli, what have we done?"

"Commenced the reaping of the crop of weeds that are springing up in our sons' neglected soil. Laura, I have tried to be a good father to our boys, but my weakness seems to stare me now in the face. I have been fond and indulgent, and now, Heaven help me, I have been weaker than ever in trying to amend the past by an outbreak of foolish violence."

"Go to him; ask him to come back," sobbed the mother.

"Did I not humble myself to him enough?" said the Rector, with a pathetic look at his wife.

"Yes, yes, you did," she wailed; "but this is all so dreadful. Eli, it will break my heart."

"And yet I ought to be strong and stern now, sweet wife," he said tenderly. "Authority has long been thrown to the

winds. Had I not better strive hard to gather up the reins and curb his headlong course?”

“It will break my heart,” the unhappy woman sobbed. “It is so dreadful—so horrible to me, love. Eli, husband—my patient, loving husband, bring him back to me or I shall die.”

“I will fetch him back, Laura,” said the Rector, softly, as he bent down once more and kissed the cold, white forehead of his wife.

Then, rising with a sigh, he softly moved towards the door, turning once to smile at the troubled face he left behind.

As he turned, the suffering woman held out her arms, and he walked back quietly to sink upon his knees by her side.

“Pray,” she said, softly. “Pray for help and guidance in this storm.” And once more there was silence in the room.

“He is our boy,” whispered Mrs Mallow, as the Rector rose. “Be patient with him, Eli, and all will yet be well. Indeed, indeed, he is good and true of heart. See how tenderly he waits on me.”

“Just for a minute, now and then,” the Rector thought; “and only when it does not clash with some selfish object of his own.” And then he fell to thinking of his own years upon years of constant watchfulness and care, and smiled sadly as he saw how that at times the little far outshone the great.

But nothing in his countenance betokened aught but the tenderest sympathy and love for her he was leaving behind, as, once more going to the door, the Rector passed through, and descended to his study, leaving Mrs Mallow weeping in her daughters’ arms.

Here he shut himself in for a few minutes, and rapidly paced the floor, holding his hands the while to his rugged brow.

“It is too much—it is too much!” he groaned, panting with the great emotion to which his soul was prey. “If it was not for my girls! If it was not for my girls!”

Then he threw himself into his chair, and sat leaning forward with his fingers seeming to be driven into the soft padding of the arms, which he clutched with fierce vehemence.

But by degrees the gust of passion passed over, leaving him calm and cool as, once more rising, he smoothed his countenance, and went out of the room in search of Cyril.

He was not in the dining-room, nor yet in the little room where he was in the habit of sitting to read and smoke, while the state of the garden was not such as to induce him to wander there.

The Rector went up softly to his son’s room, but without finding him; and at last he went into the dining-room and rang the bell.

“Where is Mr Cyril?” the Rector asked.

“He went out about half-an-hour ago, sir.”

“With Mr Frank?”

“No, sir; Mr Frank went out before that.”

“Did he say what time he would be back?”

“No, sir; but Williams came in just now, sir, with Lord Artingale’s mare for Miss Cynthia.”

“Yes?”

“And said he met Mr Cyril in the lane leading to Kilby Farm.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, sir; and he was walking up and down as if he expected somebody to come.”

Part 1, Chapter XXVI.

An Interruption.

From the way in which people talk of the tender passion it might be supposed to be one long dream of bliss; but a little examination of other people’s hearts, and the teachings of the knowledge thus obtained with the experience of years, will go far to show that it is as often as not very far from being a dream, being, in fact, a time of misery, disappointment, and oftentimes of despair.

The earlier days of Sage Portlock’s maidenhood had glided peacefully away. She had had her troubles and annoyances like the rest of the world, but they were little, and barely ruffled the even current of her life.

She had been troubled somewhat over her sister’s love affair with Frank Mallow, and had been Rue’s confidante. Now that stormy time had passed away, and she had smiled over the wedding with John Berry, and laughingly accepted her position of Aunt Sage to the two little children that were born.

Luke Ross had been her playmate till a tenderer attachment had sprang up as girlhood passed into womanhood, and the boy became a thoughtful man. There was a thrill of pride ready to run through her, making the colour suffuse her cheeks, as she knew that she was loved; and with the thought came a proud elation that made her feel happier than she believed she had ever felt before.

But that was all. She loved Luke, she told herself, very dearly, and some day she would be his wife; but she felt happy enough when he went away to London, and somehow, though she used to consider that she was the happiest of women, his calm, trusting letters did not seem to awaken any echoes in her heart; while hers to him were pleasant little bits of gossipping prattle, ending with “the dear love of yours very, very affectionately, Sage.”

Yes, she was very fond of Luke, she used to say to herself, and by and by they would be so happy together; but she felt in no hurry for by and by to come. Existence was very pleasant as it was, and once she was back in Lawford from the training institution and engaged in the school, she seemed to wish for nothing more.

Luke Ross wrote, and twice during his absence there he came home, and they had very pleasant walks and chats, and were very boy-and-girlish together, laughing away till a serious fit would come on, when they discussed the future, the cost of housekeeping, and she laughed merrily again at the idea of being Luke’s little housekeeper and wife.

But there was no passionate attachment on her side—no tears at meeting or at parting. All was wonderfully matter-of-fact. She was very happy, she felt, and she could see that Luke was, and what more could she desire?

Then came the change, and Sage was face to face with the fact that she had promised herself to a man for whom she had never entertained a warmer feeling than that of friendship, or the love of a sister for brother, and that at last she had found her fate.

Was it a feeling of rapturous delight?

Far from it; for from that day her nights were sleepless, and too often her pillow was wet with the hot tears of her misery and distress.

On the day of the serious quarrel between father and son Sage was in better spirits than she had been in for some days. A letter had come from Luke telling her of his progress in London; of his father’s willingness to make him a sufficient allowance for the object he had in view, a matter which had been settled since he came up, and that he had taken what his landlord called “chambers” in a legal part of town.

So light-hearted was Sage that day that she laughed over Luke’s merry description of his chambers as being so many square feet of emptiness, with a cupboard in which he had to sleep.

He gave her a very graphic account of the way in which he had furnished his rooms, of how he walked into Fleet-street every day to have a chop for his dinner, and how the woman who made his bed prepared his breakfast and tea, and then followed a sentence which made Sage laugh merrily—a laugh that was repeated several times during school hours, to the great astonishment of the girls.

“And it is wonderful what a very little while half-a-pound of tea seems to last.”

That was the sentence which amused her, and for a time Cyril Mallow passed from her thoughts.

“What a little time it lasts!” she said merrily, as soon as the school had been dismissed, and she was putting on her hat. “Poor boy! of course, he knows nothing at all about housekeeping; and only to think,” she mused, “how dreadful it must be to go on living every day upon chops.”

She started for home, thinking a great deal of Luke, and telling herself that the fancies that had of late come into her head were as foolish as they were wicked, and that now they were dismissed for ever.

What would Mr Mallow himself think of her? What would Mrs Mallow say? She shivered, and felt that unless she sternly determined never to think of Cyril again, she could not meet the Rector, who had always been so kind and fatherly in his ways.

This had been a nasty dream—a day-dream that had come over her, fostered by Cyril Mallow’s looks and ways. For he had followed her about a great deal; watched for her so that they might meet, and had constantly been coming up to the farm of an evening, where, though ostensibly chatting with her uncle, she could not raise her eyes without encountering his.

She could not have explained it to herself, but somehow Cyril Mallow had seemed to influence her life, being, as it were, the very embodiment of sin silently tempting her to break faith with Luke Ross, and think only of him who had come between.

She told herself constantly, when the thoughts of Cyril Mallow intruded themselves, that she loved Luke better than ever, and that the coming of Cyril was hateful to her; but, all the same, there was a strange light in her eyes whenever she thought of him, and her cheeks would burn and her pulses flutter.

It was a strange way of hating, but she told herself that it was hate, and on this particular day the coming of Luke’s letter had seemed to strengthen her, and she began planning what she would say in return; how she would give him good advice about his housekeeping, say words of encouragement to him about his studies, and praise his determination. For was he not striving with all his might; had he not determined upon this long struggle for position that he might win her?

And how could she do anything but love him? Dear Luke! Indeed she would be true to him, and write him such encouraging letters—help him all she could. It was her duty now, for though they were not regularly affianced with her friends' sanction, she told herself that her promise to him was sacred.

"Yes," she said, half aloud, as she walked thoughtfully on, "I love Luke very dearly, and that other was all a bad, feverish kind of dream, and I'll never think about it more. It was wicked of Mr Cyril, knowing what he does, and weak of me, and never again—Oh!"

"Did I make you jump, Sage?" said a low voice; and Cyril came from the gate over which he had been leaning, and jerked the stump of a cigar away.

"I—I did not see you, Mr Cyril," she said, faintly, and the tears sprang to her eyes.

"And I frightened the poor little thing, did I? There, I'll be more careful next time; but, oh, what a while you have been."

"Don't stop me, Mr Cyril," she said, with trembling voice; "I must hurry home."

"Well, you shall directly; but, Sage, don't please be so hard and cruel to me. You know how humble and patient I have been, and yet you seem to be one day warm, the next day cold, and the third day hot and angry with me. What have I done?"

"I do not understand you, Mr Cyril," she said, trying to speak sternly, and walking on towards the farm.

"Then I will speak more plainly," he said, suddenly dropping the bantering tone in which he had addressed her for one full of impassioned meaning. "Sage, I love you with all my heart, and when you treat me with such cruel coldness, it makes me half mad, and I say to you as I say now, what have I done?"

"Oh, hush! hush!" she panted. "You must not speak to me like that. Mr Cyril, I beg—I implore you—never to address me again. You know—you must know—that I am engaged to Mr Ross."

"Engaged to Mr Ross!" he said, bitterly. "It is not true. There is no engagement between you."

"It is true," she panted, hurrying on, and trembling for her weakness, as she felt how strongly her heart was pleading for him, who kept pace with her, and twice had laid his hand, as if to stop her, upon her arm.

"I have your aunt's assurance that it is not true," he continued; "and I have hoped, Sage, I have dared to believe, that you were not really fond of this man."

"Mr Cyril, I beg—I implore you to leave me," she cried.

"If I left you now," he said, hoarsely, "feeling what I feel, knowing what I know, it would be to plunge into some miserable, reckless course that might end who can say how? What have I to live for if you refuse me your love?"

"How can you be so cruel to me?" she cried, angrily. "You insult me by these words, Mr Cyril I am alone, and you take advantage of my position. You know I am engaged to Mr Ross."

"I do not," he retorted, passionately. "I do not believe it; and I never will believe it till I see you his wife. His wife!" he continued. "It is absurd. You will never be Luke Ross's wife. It is impossible."

"I will not—I cannot—talk to you," she cried, increasing her pace. It was on her lips to add, "I dare not"; but she checked herself in time, as she glanced sidewise at him, for with a feeling of misery and despair, strangely mingled with pleasure, she felt that all her good resolutions were being swept away by her companion's words, and, in an agony of shame and dread lest he should read her thoughts, she once more hurried her steps.

"You cannot throw me off like that," he said, bitterly. "I will not be pitched over in this contemptuous manner. Only the other day you looked kindly and tenderly at me."

"Oh no, no, no," she cried, "it is not true."

"It is true enough," he said, sadly, "and I mean to be patient. I cannot believe you care for this man. It is impossible, and I shall wait."

"No, no, Mr Cyril," she pleaded. "I can never listen to such words again. Think of your father and your mother. Mr Mallow would never forgive me if he knew I had listened to you like this."

"Let him remain unforgiving, then," cried Cyril. "As for my mother, she loves her son too well not to be ready to do anything to make him happy."

"Pray, pray go," she moaned.

"No," he said, sternly, "I will not go. You torture me by your coldness, knowing what you do. Do you wish to drive me to despair?"

"I wish you to go and forget me," she cried, with spirit. "As a gentleman, Mr Cyril, I ask you, is such a course as this manly?"

He was silent for a few moments, glancing at her sidewise the while.

“No,” he said, “it is neither manly nor gentlemanly, but what can you expect from a miserable wretch against whom all the world seems to turn? Always unsuccessful—always hoping against hope, fighting against fate, I find, now I come home, that the little girl I always thought of when far away has blossomed into a beautiful woman. How, I know not, but I wake to the fact that she has made me love her—idolise her—think of her as the very essence of my being.”

“Mr Cyril,” pleaded Sage; but he kept on.

“A new life appears to open out to me, and my old recklessness and misery seem to drop away. I waken to the fact that there is something to live for—something to rouse me to new effort, and to work for as an earnest man should work. I did not seek her out; I did not strive to love her,” he continued, as if speaking to some one else; “but her love seemed to come to me, to enweave itself with my every thought.”

“I will not listen,” panted Sage, but her heart whispered, “Luke never spoke to me like that.”

“I fought against it for a time,” he went on, dreamily, “for I said to myself this would be wronging her. She is engaged to another, and I should only make her unhappy and disturb the even tenor of her ways.”

“Which you have done,” she cried, in piteous tones.

“Do not blame me,” he said, softly. “I fought hard. I swore I would not think of you, and I crushed down what I told myself was my mad love within my breast; but when, by accident, I found that I was wrong, and that no engagement existed between you and Luke Ross—”

“But there is, there is,” she cried. “Once more, Mr Cyril, pray leave me.”

“A few mere words of form, Sage. You do not love this man; and, besides, your relatives have not given their consent. Oh, listen to me. Why should you condemn me to a life of reckless misery? You know how I have been drifting for years without an anchor to stay me. You are that anchor now. Let me cling to you for my father’s, my mother’s sake; for if you cast me off, continue this cruel wrong, you drive me once more from home, to go floating aimlessly, without a chance of becoming a better man. You cannot be so harsh.”

“I cannot listen to you,” she murmured. “I tell you,” he cried, “that if you cast me off you condemn me to a life of misery and despair. Sage, dear Sage,” he cried, catching her hand, “I have been wild and foolish, but I have the making in me of a better man. Help me to live aright. You are so good, and pure, and sweet—so wise and gentle. Be my guide and helpmate, and those at home will bless you. Am I always to plead in vain?”

“How can I look Luke Ross in the eyes again if I listen to such words as these?”

“Luke Ross? Am I to stand idly by and let Luke Ross, the cold, careless cynic, snatch you from my arms?”

“How dare you speak of him like that?” she cried, angrily. “He is all that is wise and good.”

“And worships you so dearly that he has gone away for three years, at least, to prove to you his love.”

“It is a great act of noble forbearance,” she said, proudly, “and you slander him by your words.”

“I hope I do,” he said; “but they were wrung from me by my misery and suffering. But no, I will not believe you can be so cruel to me. I know that I may hope.”

They were nearing the gate leading into the great home field, and Sage, trembling and agitated to a terrible degree, hurried on, feeling that, once within sight of the house, Cyril Mallow would leave her. Her mind was confused, and the struggle going on between duty and inclination was terrible; while the knowledge that she was so weak and yielding towards her companion half maddened her for the time.

“Why do you hurry on so?” he pleaded. “Am I to be driven away? Am I to leave home, and go anywhere that fate may drift me?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” she moaned. “This is too cruel to me. Pray, pray leave me now.”

“Then I may hope?”

“No,” she cried, with a fresh accession of strength, as she laid her hand upon the gate; “I have promised to be Luke Ross’s wife.”

“His you shall never be,” he said, in a hoarse whisper. “You do not love him, and you shall not fling yourself away. Sage, you shall be mine, and—”

“Well, young man, are you obliged to whisper what you say to my niece? Come, Sage, my girl, it’s time you were indoors.”

“Uncle!” cried Sage, joyously, as she sprang to his side with a sigh of relief.

“Yes, my girl,” he said, coldly, “it is uncle;” and he stuck his thistle staff down into the soft earth, and leaned his hands upon the round top. “You can go on,” he continued; “I’m not coming home yet.”

“But, uncle,” she cried, excitedly.

“Go home, my lass,” he said, imperatively.

“Yes, dear,” she half sobbed; “but you will not—”

“I say go home!” he shouted; and, with a low wail, she turned off, and walked hurriedly towards the farm, her uncle standing watching her, while Cyril Mallow coolly took a cigar-case from his breast pocket, opened it, carefully selected a cigar, picking, choosing, and returning one after the other till he had found one to his fancy, when he snapped to the case once more and thrust it back in his pocket, afterwards biting off the cigar-end and proceeding to light it with a fusee that evinced a strong dislike to burst into sparks and then smoulder away.

As he did this, however, he kept glancing furtively at the Churchwarden, who was watching the retiring form of Sage, her troubled mien winning a glance or two from Cyril as well.

The cigar burned badly, and had to be lit again, this time being watched by the Churchwarden with a kind of good-humoured contempt for the man who could smoke those rolls of tobacco-leaf in place of an honest pipe.

At last the cigar drew freely, and the eyes of the two men met.

“I’m in for another row now,” said Cyril, to himself. “Awkward; very. Never mind; I don’t care.”

“Now, young man,” said Portlock, at last, in a very short, blunt fashion, “it seems to me that you and I had better have a few words together of a sort.”

“When and where you please,” said Cyril, carelessly.

“Let’s walk along here, then,” said the Churchwarden, pointing down the lane with his thistle staff.

“Away from the farm, eh?” thought Cyril. “All right, old friend.” Then aloud, “Whichever way you please, sir.”

“I didn’t know things had gone so far as this,” continued the Churchwarden, leading the way. “People say that you are the idlest chap in these parts; but it seems to me that, with the work thou likest, thou canst be as busy as the best.”

Cyril flushed a little, and bit his lip, for he told himself that he was a gentleman, and the farmer was making far too free in his way of address; but he checked his annoyance, and said quietly—

“Perhaps, sir, you will kindly explain what you mean.” Then, after a furtive glance at the stern, angry-looking man, he muttered to himself—

“You dare not strike me; and, as to your words, say what you like—little Sage is mine.”

“Now, sir,” exclaimed Sage’s uncle, after a few moments’ pause, “will you have the goodness to explain the meaning of the scene I have just witnessed?”

“Explain, sir?” said Cyril, coolly; “surely it needs no explanation. I am young, and of one sex; Miss Portlock is young and of the other sex, and a mutual attachment has sprung up.”

“Mutual!”

“Well, yes; I hope so, sir. Perhaps, though, I ought to be content with alluding to my own feelings.”

“Humph! Your own feelings, eh? And pray does Mr Cyril Mallow mean to say that he has become attached to my niece?”

“Certainly he does, sir. You are not surprised?”

“But I am surprised,” said the farmer, angrily, “and I am very glad to have witnessed what I did before the mischief went further. Now, look here, Mr Cyril Mallow, I am a man of business, and when I have an unpleasant matter to tackle I go straight to it at once.”

“A very good plan,” said Cyril, calmly.

“I’m glad you think so, sir,” said the Churchwarden, ironically. “And now, if you please, we’ll walk straight up to the rectory.”

“What for?” cried Cyril, who was startled by his words.

“What for? Why to talk this matter over with your father.”

“But suppose he does not approve of the engagement, Mr Portlock?” said Cyril, who was taken somewhat aback by this very prompt way of treating the affair.

“Approve? Whoever thought he would approve, sir? Of course he does not, any more than I do. What I want is for you to be given to understand in a quiet way that it is time you gave up visiting at my place, and hanging about to catch sight of my little girl, when she is leaving or going to the school.”

“Mr Portlock!” exclaimed Cyril, haughtily.

“Mr Cyril Mallow!” cried the Churchwarden. “Now just look here, sir. If I were one of your set, should you be making approaches to my niece in the way you have? Not you: it would not be considered proper. Aunt’s and uncle’s consent would be asked first; but as I’m only a farmer, I’m hardly worth notice. It seems that my little lassie has taken your

fancy, and so you come running after her; but not a word to me."

"But hear me a minute," protested Cyril.

"No, sir; nor yet half a minute. A farmer's a man, if he is not what you call a gentleman, and thinks as much of his people as the highest in the land. I dare say, in your high and mighty way, as our rector's son, and a gentleman who has been at college, you think you are stooping to notice my niece; so let me tell you, once for all, I don't think you are; and, what's more, it will be a far better man than you have shown yourself to be who gets my consent to make her his wife."

"I can assure you, Mr Portlock—" began Cyril; but the farmer would not hear him. He was thoroughly angry, and his face flushed up a deep red.

"And I can assure you, sir, that I want no such reckless, idling fellow seeking after my niece. We had bother enough when your brother was after Sage's sister. I tell you, then, plainly, once for all, that I won't have it; so don't show your face at my place again."

He turned sharply round and strode off, leaving Cyril mortified and angry; for, in his way, he had felt that he was stooping, and falling away from his position, in noticing the little schoolmistress, so that this sharp rebuff came like a rude shock to his feelings, and made the end at which he aimed seem less likely to be achieved.

"Confound his insolence!" he cried, as he saw the broad back of the farmer disappearing through his own gate. "It is too bad to be borne."

But in a few minutes' time, as he walked slowly homeward, he began to smile and think over his position.

"Let him talk and speak loud," he said. "I thought he was going to threaten me once. What does it matter? My father is dead against it, and he and Master Portlock will make common cause against me. But what does it matter when Aunt Portlock is on my side, and little Sage is as good as won? Then, as to madame, my poor mother? Pish! she will refuse me nothing. So, Master Churchwarden, I have three women on my side, and the game is mine, do what you like."

He walked on a little way, amusing himself the while by thinking of the divided sides, and how much stronger his must be.

"Let them fight us," he said, laughing. "We shall be four to two, and we must win; but stay, I had forgotten another enemy—Master Luke Ross. Poor fellow!" he said, contemptuously, "his chance against me is about the value of *nil*."

Part 1, Chapter XXVII.

After a Pipe.

Mrs Portlock was in the great kitchen of the farm as Sage hurried through, and she stared with astonishment at the girl's excited way.

"Why, heyday! Sage—" she began.

"Don't stop me, aunt," cried Sage, excitedly; and, running up-stairs, she shut herself in the room, threw herself upon her knees by her bed, and covered her face with her hands, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"She's been having a quarrel with him," said Mrs Portlock to herself, "or she wouldn't take on like that: They must be getting on then, or they wouldn't quarrel."

Mrs Portlock paused here to go and scold one of the maids for picking out all the big lumps of coal and leaving the small, but she came back into the kitchen to think about her niece.

"He's a deal better than Luke Ross," she said to herself, "for Luke's only a tradesman after all. There's no mistake about it, he means our Sage; and where, I should like to know, would he find a better girl?"

There was a pause here, during which Mrs Portlock indulged in a few retrospects concerning Rue, and the time when she was in such trouble about Frank.

"But Cyril is a better disposed young man than his brother, I am sure," she said, half aloud. "He is his mother's favourite too. I wonder what Mrs Mallow will say!"

Mrs Portlock said this aloud, and then stopped short, alarmed at her own words, for she called up the face of the calm, dignified Rector entering the place, looking at her reproachfully, and ready to blame her for her assumption in encouraging his son's visits.

"Oh, my gracious!" she ejaculated, half in horror, for her imagination for the time began to run riot, and she saw that, even if Cyril Mallow was very fond of Sage, and even if Sage returned his love, matters would not run quite so smoothly as she had anticipated.

"I'm sure she's as good as he," she exclaimed, by way of indignant protest to the accusations of her conscience; but, all the same, she was now brought face to face with the consequences of her tacit encouragement of Cyril Mallow's visits.

“And I’m sure we’re as well off as they are,” she added, after a pause. But, all the same, her conscience would not be quieted, and Mrs Portlock was on the point of going up to her niece’s room, when, with a fresh qualm of dread, though she hardly knew why, she saw her husband come striding up toward the house.

Meanwhile Sage’s breast was racked by conflicting emotions, chief amongst which was that suggested by a self-accusation from her wounded heart; and she knelt there, sobbing and praying for help, feeling that she was intensely wicked, and that the hopeless misery of her case was greater than she could bear.

Her mind was in a chaos, and she shuddered as she clung to the coverlet, and dragged it over her drawn and excited face, as one moment it was the stern, reproachful figure of Luke Ross asking her if this was her faith—this the meaning of her tender, loving letters—this the reward of his chivalrous determination to give up everything to the one idea of making himself a worthy suitor with her relatives; the next it was Cyril, gazing at her with despairing eyes, which seemed to say that if she cast him off he should drift recklessly through the world, and come to some bad end; while, did she bless him with her love, he would become a worthy member of society, a happy man, and one of whom she could feel so proud.

Then her heart began to plead for him so hard that she trembled, for she seemed to be awakening, as it were, into a new life, and her dread increased as she more fully realised the power Cyril Mallow had gained over her. She fought hard, and set up barrier after barrier, called up by her intense desire to be honourable and true to her trust. But as fast as she set these up they seemed to be swept away; and, as the excitement brought on by her misery increased, she felt ready to cry aloud to Luke to come back to her and protect her from Cyril Mallow and from her own weak self.

“Sage! Sage!”

It was her uncle’s voice calling up the stairs—a voice by which she could interpret every mood of his spirit; and she knew now that he was very angry.

“Sage!” came again in a voice of thunder, and so full of impatience that she was forced to cross to the door, open it, and answer.

“I want my tea,” came up in an angry roar.

It was in Sage’s heart to say she was too unwell to come down, but in her then agitated state she could only falter that she would not be a minute, and, hastily bathing her eyes and smoothing her hair, she descended, pale and trembling, to where her aunt was looking very white and startled, and her uncle walking up and down the old-fashioned parlour, impatient for his evening meal, one of which he would rarely partake unless his niece was there to attend to his wants.

The Churchwarden’s lips parted, and he was about to speak out angrily, but the woe-begone looks of the girl silenced him.

“I’ll have a cup of tea first, and do it over a pipe,” he said to himself. Then aloud—

“Come, my girl, I’m hungry; it’s past tea-time,” and he took his place at the foot of the table, the others seating themselves, after exchanging a scared glance; and then the meal went on much as usual, only that Mrs Portlock tried to calm herself by constant applications to the teapot, while, in spite of her efforts, Sage could hardly partake of a morsel, for the food seemed as if it would choke her.

“Come, come, lass, you don’t eat,” her uncle kept saying; and the poor girl’s struggles to keep back her tears were pitiable.

But at last the weary meal came to an end, and as the table was cleared both aunt and niece grew hopeful, for the Churchwarden’s brow was less rugged as he went to the ledge where his pipe lay, took the tobacco-box placed at his elbow by his niece, and calmly proceeded to fill his pipe.

“Don’t look so frightened, Sage,” whispered her aunt. “He won’t say any more now.”

“Yes, I shall,” cried the farmer gruffly, for his hearing seemed to have become preternaturally sharpened. “Wait till the rooms clear.”

The troubles of that one afternoon seemed to have wrought quite a change in Sage, for as, according to her custom, she took a folded spill from the mantelshelf, and lit it ready to hold to her uncle’s pipe, her eyes looked wild and dilated, while her usually rounded cheeks seemed quite hollowed, giving her a wild, haggard aspect, such as is seen in one newly risen from a bed of sickness.

“Yes, I’m going to talk seriously to both of you,” continued the Churchwarden; “but I’m not going into a passion, now. That’s over. Get your work, both of you, and sit down.”

The trembling women obeyed, after exchanging quick glances; Mrs Portlock’s being accompanied by a movement of her lips, which Sage interpreted to be “I can’t help it.”

The work-baskets were brought to the table, and as the Churchwarden sat placidly smoking and staring at the fire, the sharp *twit* of needle against thimble was heard in the stillness, which was not otherwise broken till the farmer took his pipe from his lips and uttered a stern—

“Now then.”

Sage started quickly back from where her thoughts had wandered after Cyril Mallow, whom in imagination she had

just overtaken and brought back from a wandering life, to bless him and make him happy, while Luke Ross had forgiven her, and every one was going to be happy once again.

“Hold your tongue, mother,” said the farmer, sharply. “I’ve given you a bit of my mind.”

“Indeed, you have,” she cried, querulously, “and, I must say, soon—”

“No, you mustn’t,” he shouted. “I’m going to talk this time. You generally do all that; but it’s my turn now.”

“Oh, just as you like, Joseph,” said Mrs Portlock, in an ill-used, protesting tone; “but I must say—”

“No, you mustn’t,” he cried again, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table with such an effect upon his wife, whose nerves were still shaken by the verbal castigation she had received before tea, that she started from her chair, hesitated a moment, and then ran sobbing out of the room.

For a moment the Churchwarden sat frowning. Then he half rose as if to call her back, but directly after he subsided into his place, and sat frowning sternly at his niece.

“Let her go,” he said. “I’ve said my mind to her. Now I want to talk to you.”

Sage hesitated, with her work in her hand; then, letting it fall, she went to the other side of the table and knelt down, resting her elbows upon her uncle’s knees, and gazing appealingly in his face.

The Churchwarden in his heart wanted to clasp her in his arms and kiss her pale, drawn face, but he checked the desire, and, putting on a judicial expression—

“Now,” he exclaimed. “So you are playing fast and loose with Luke Ross?”

“No, uncle,” she replied, softly.

“What do you call it, then? Of course there is no engagement between you, but Luke expects that some day you will be his wife.”

“Yes, uncle.”

“And as soon as his back is turned, I find you encouraging this fellow, Cyril Mallow.”

“No, indeed, uncle, I have not,” cried Sage.

“I don’t be—”

He stopped, for there was something in his niece’s eyes which checked him.

“Well, it looks very bad,” he said; “and one thing is very evident—he, after a fashion, thinks of you, and he has the impudence to say that you care for him.”

“Oh!”

It was more like a sigh than an ejaculation, and Sage’s eyes seemed to contract now with pain.

“I’ve given aunt a good talking to, for she’s more to blame than you. She thinks it a fine thing for the parson’s boy to be coming hanging about here after you, same as Frank did after Rue, and much good came of it. She had the impudence to tell me that he was a gentleman, while Luke Ross was only a tradesman’s son. As if that had anything to do with it. ‘Look here,’ I said to her: ‘whenever our girl weds, it shall be to some one with a good income, but he shall be a man.’ Gentleman, indeed! If Cyril Mallow is a gentleman, let my niece marry a man who is nothing of the sort.”

Sage’s eyes closed, and there was a pitiful, pained expression in her face that told of the agony of her heart. So troubled was her countenance that her uncle was moved to pity, and spoke more tenderly.

“I don’t like him well enough for you, my girl, even if there were no Luke Ross in the way. I’ve sent him off to work for thee, like Jacob did for Rachel, and if he’s the man I think him, some day he’ll come back in good feather, ready to ask thee to be his wife, and you’ll neither of you be the worse for a few years’ wait.”

Sage’s eyes remained closed. “I was going to scold thee,” he said, tenderly, “but my anger’s gone, and I’ll say but little more, only tell me this—You don’t care a bit for this young spark of the Rector’s.”

Sage’s face contracted more and more, and the Churchwarden cried, impatiently—“Well, girl, why don’t you answer?” She gazed up in his face with a pleading expression of countenance that startled him, and he placed his hands upon her shoulders, and looked fully in her eyes.

“Why, Sage!” he cried, “you don’t mean—you don’t say that you like him instead of Luke?”

She covered her face with her hands, and burst out into a violent fit of sobbing.

“I don’t know, uncle. I don’t know.”

“Don’t know!” he cried, angrily.

“Pray ask me no more,” she cried, as her uncle started from his seat, thrusting back the chair in the act. She crouched down upon the carpet, weeping bitterly, for she did know now, though no pressure would have torn the secret from her heart.

Part 1, Chapter XXVIII.

Jock Muses.

There was a troubled heart at the rectory as well as at the farm, where Julia Mallow, in spite of having been so far a firm, matter-of-fact girl, had found her meetings with the wheelwright’s big ruffianly brother make so strong an impression that although she made a brave effort to cast it all aside as unworthy of her, she was always living under the idea that this man was at her elbow, ready to meet her with his intent, half-mocking gaze.

Once or twice she had nervously alluded to it when chatting with her sister, but Cynthia had merrily told her not to be so silly, for papa said the man must have just come out of prison, and spoken like that out of spite.

“Depend upon it, Julie, you’ll never see him again.”

Julia said nothing, but went to the window of her room, and sat there reading, and now and then lifting her eyes to gaze out at the pleasant prospect right across the fields to the ridge about a quarter of a mile away, beyond which the land sank at once towards Kilby Farm.

The next moment with a faint cry she shrank back, for even at that distance she seemed to recognise the burly form of the rough fellow, seen boldly standing out against the sky as he appeared to be crossing the ridge. Then as she gazed at the figure with starting eyes it went over the edge of the hill and was gone.

“I shall never dare to go out alone,” she said hoarsely. “Heaven help me! What shall I do?”

This was quite a couple of months after the meeting in the lane, during all which time the poor girl felt as if she were haunted by the fellow’s presence, and his words were always ringing in her ears.

The time had slipped away, and company had come and gone. The Perry-Mortons had been down for a second visit, ostensibly for discussions with the Rector concerning the decorations of the town house, but Cynthia read it—and told Lord Artingale her reading—that it was to worm round poor Julia, and that was what papa meant. Didn’t he think it was a shame?

Lord Artingale agreed with her that it was, and between them they decided in alliance to do all they could to prevent it; but unfortunately for Julia, this pair of egotists thought of little else but themselves—thoughts that were varied by a little squabbling when Cynthia showed what a peppery temper she possessed.

Julia was looking languidly forward to the middle of May, when the town house was to be ready, and in busy London she felt that she should be free from the haunting presence which afflicted her so sorely that she even felt glad of Mr Perry-Morton’s poetical rhapsodies as a kind of protection, though there was something terrible in his presence. In fact, this gentleman showed his admiration in a way that was painful in the extreme. He said little, but he loved her with his eyes, and when Mr Perry-Morton loved he did it in a sculpturesque manner, sitting or standing in some wonderful position, at a short distance, and then gloating—no, a Philistine would have gloated—he, one of the chosen of the Raphaelistic brotherhood, dreamed over his beloved, mentally writing fleshly poems the while—wondrous visions of rapt joyousness, mingled with ethereal admiration.

But it wanted a month yet to the time for leaving the rectory, and though Julia had not seen her horror again, she felt that he was near, and that at some unexpected moment he would start up, perhaps when she was alone.

Matters there as regarded Cyril were in abeyance. He was, as he told himself, playing a waiting game. Sage would have a nice bit of money, he knew, and he thought it would be a pity to spoil his prospects by hurried play.

Besides, he was in no hurry, for he had the companionship of Frank, and together they went a great deal to the King’s Head, where there was an old billiard-table. At other times they drove over to Gatley, where Lord Artingale placed everything he possessed at their service. There was a good billiard-table there, horses, and wine, and cigars to their hearts’ content.

Then each had a little private business to attend to, about which they made no confidences, and rarely interfered with or joked each other, it being a tacit arrangement that no questions should be asked if Frank was going over to Lewby for a chat with John Berry, or Cyril had made up his mind for a stroll down by the wheelwright’s, where there were a few dace to be whipped for in the stream.

Spring had come earlier that year, and while Luke Ross thought the Temple gardens and the trees in Grey’s Inn poor dejected-looking affairs, down by Lawford everything was looking its best, for Spring’s children were hard at work striving to hide the rusty traces of the wintry storms.

Early in April the banks and the edges of the woods were, alive with flowers, glossy-leaved celandines showed their golden stars, brightly-varnished arums peered up with their purple-spotted spathes and leaves, the early purple orchids brightened the dark-green here and there. Clusters of soft pale lilac cuckoo-flowers were springing up amongst the clumps of catkin-laden hazels, oak saplings with bark like oxidised silver, and osiers with orange stems and polished silver buds, while every bank and coppice was sprinkled with sulphur yellow where the primroses bloomed. There was mating and marrying going on in feather-land to the blackbird’s fluting, and the twittering of many throats, and one soft, warm day, when the east wind had been driven back by a balmy breathing from the west

and south, Cynthia made a dash at her sister, and laughingly passed the string of her hat over her head, thrust a basket in her hand, and led her off to gather violets.

“Let’s be little children once again, Julie,” she cried. “I want a rest. It has been nothing but spooning, and nonsense lately with Cyril and the pretty schoolmistress.”

“Papa has been in sad trouble about it lately, Cynthy,” said Julia, thoughtfully.

“Yes, but let’s hope it is all over now; I think it is.”

“I don’t know,” said Julia, thoughtfully.

“I think I do,” cried Cynthia. “Papa frightened him. But how wonderfully quiet our dear brother Frank is. I hope he is not hatching some mischief.”

“Don’t be uncharitable, Cynthia,” said Julia, with a sad smile; “think the best of your brothers.”

“I do try to, Julie, but I’m afraid I’m not very fond of my brothers.”

“Cynthia!”

“Well, I’m not, dear. I feel quite ashamed of them sometimes. It’s quite shocking the way they are imposing upon Harry, and he takes it all so good-naturedly for my sake, but he don’t like it I’m sure.”

“You are making the worst of it, Cynthy.”

“No, I’m not, for Harry—there, I won’t talk about it; I’m tired of all the nonsense, spooning and flirting with Harry and that fat-featured—oh! why is it rude for a young lady to slap such a fellow’s face, Julie? If you marry that Perry-Morton I’ll never speak to you again.”

“I shall never marry Mr Perry-Morton,” said Julia, dreamily.

“No, no; we don’t want to marry any one at all,” said Cynthia, merrily. “Come and let’s be children in the wood again. It’s heavenly out of doors, dear. Come along.”

Heavenly it was, as they got out of the fields, and struck out through the woods, where the soft moss was like a carpet beneath their feet, and the air was redolent with scents and suggestions of the spring. For it was one of those days, of those very few days, that come early in the year, when the senses seem to be appealed to, and, in a delicious calm, the worries and cares of life roll away, and the spirit seems even troubled with the sweet sense of joy.

The sisters had wandered far, and filled their baskets, but still there were always fresh blossoms to pluck, odorous violets or primroses, and delicate scraps of moss or early leaf.

Cynthia was a couple of score yards away from her sister, in the budding copse, trilling a merry song, as if in answer to the birds, and Julia, with a bright, happy flush upon her face, was still eagerly piling up fresh sweets, when a clump of primroses, fairer than any she had yet gathered, drew her a few yards further amongst the hazel stems.

She was in the act of stooping down to pick them when her flushed face became like marble, her lips parted, her eyes dilated, and she stopped—leaning forward—motionless—fascinated by what she saw.

And that was the face of Jock Morrison, as he lay amongst the leaves and flowers, prone upon his chest, his arms folded before him, his chin resting upon them, and his eyes literally seizing hers, not a yard away.

He did not speak or move, only crouched there, staring at her as if he were some philosopher trying the effect of the stronger eye upon the weaker. Neither did Julia speak, but stood there bending down, her eyes fixed, her body motionless, while you might have counted twenty.

“Julie! Where are you? Coo-ee!” Cynthia’s bright young voice broke the spell, and Julia’s eyes closed as she backed slowly away for a few yards before she dare turn and run towards her sister.

“Oh, there you are, Julie. If I did not think you were in the other direction! Why, what’s the matter? Are you ill?”

“No, no,” said Julia, hastily; “I think I am hot; it is tiring out here. Let us go home; I—I want to get back.”

“Why, Julie, you don’t come out enough; you are done up directly. There, come along out into the fields, there’s more fresh air there. I say, did I tell you that we are to go to town next week?”

“No,” said Julia, who shivered at every sound in the copse, and glanced from side to side, as if she expected to be seized at any moment.

“But we are, and I don’t know but what I long to be up in London to get away from Harry Artingale.”

“To get away?” said Julia, making an effort to be composed, and wondering why she had not told her sister what she had seen.

“Yes, I want to get away; for of course,” she added, archly, “he will have to stay down here.”

She spoke loudly, and all that had been said and left unsaid appealed very strongly to the senses of the great fellow in the copse.

Julia need not have felt afraid that he was about to rise up and seize her; he remained perfectly still for a few moments, and then rolled over upon his back, laughing heartily, but in a perfectly silent manner, before having a struggle with himself to drag a short pipe and a tobacco-pouch out of his pocket.

Filling his pipe quietly, he struck a match and lit it, placed his hands beneath his head, and stared straight up through the tender green leaves at the bare sky, while a robin came and perched upon a branch close by, and kept watching the ruffian with his great round eyes.

“This is jolly,” he said, in a bass growl; “better than having places of your own, and being obliged to work.”

Then he smoked for a few minutes before musing once more aloud.

“Women arn’t much account,” he said, oracularly; “and the younger and prettier they are, the worse they are.”

There was another interval of smoking.

“What a deal a fellow sees by just doing nothing but hang around. Franky Mallow, eh? Ah, he cuts me now. If I was John Berry, farmer, I’d cut him, that’s what I’d do.”

Another interval of smoking.

“Why don’t young Serrol,” (so he pronounced it) “go after the schoolmissus now, I wonder? Tired, I spose.”

Another smoking interval.

“Hah, if it’s because he prefers going down to the ford—”

He stopped short.

“I tell you what it is; if I thought—”

Another pause, during which Jock Morrison made his short pipe still shorter by biting off a piece of the stem and spitting it out.

“Shall I tell Tom—shan’t I tell Tom? Tom don’t like me, and tells me to keep myself to myself. He’d about smash him, that’s what Tom would do, if he knowed, and then he’d be miserable for ever and ever, amen, as owd Sammy Warmoth used to say.”

Another smoking fit.

“She’s a good little lass, and the trouble she was in about her bairn was terrible.”

More smoking, and the robin looking wondering on.

“Polly don’t like me, but she’s a kind-hearted little lass, and has give me many a hunk of bread and meat unknown to Tom, and I never see but that she was as square as square.”

Another long smoke.

“Master Serrol, eh? Why, of course! She must ha’ knowed him when she lived at parson’s. I’ll tell Tom.”

More smoking, and the pipe of tobacco burned out.

“No, I won’t tell Tom,” said the big fellow. “If I did he wouldn’t believe me, and it would only make him and Polly miserable too, and I don’t want to do that. I tell you what—if I see Master Serrol go down there again when Tom’s out of the way I’ll pretty well break his neck.”

He uttered a low chuckling laugh as he lay prone there, catching sight now of the robin, and chirruping to it as it watched him from its perch.

“Pretty Dick!” he said. “Going up to London, are they? All right! Anywheres’ll do for me, parson. I wonder whether Serrol and Frank’ll go too.”

Jock Morrison did not pretty well break Cyril’s neck, for a very few days after Mr Paulby had the full management of Lawford Church again, the family at the rectory being once more in town.

“It is worse for the boys,” said the Rector, “but it will keep Cyril away from her. I must get him something to do.”

Part 1, Chapter XXIX.

Mr and the Misses Perry-Morton “At Home.”

It was a lovely and sculpturesque attitude, that which was taken up by the “stained-glass virgins,” as James Magnus called them, on the night of their first “at home” of the season, for at every opportunity, when not otherwise engaged, they joined their hands together, raised them over their left or right shoulder, as the case may be, and then drooped a head against them till an ear just touched the finger-tips, so that they seemed to be saying their prayers all on one side and writhing over the *Amens*.

Claudine and Faustine Perry-Morton were thorough types of the ladies who have of late taught society how to indulge in the reverent worship of the human form. Their hair was too fearful and wonderful to be described. The nearest approach possible is to compare it to the gum mop of some Papuan belle, who had been chivied during her toilet in the eucalyptus shade, and, consequently, had only managed to get the front part done.

Since dress is made so great a feature in a modern lady's life, no excuse is surely needed for saying a few words regarding the costume of these gifted sisters. A desire is felt to do justice to those robes, but to give a perfect idea would be extremely difficult.

As it happened, the colour was but one, and it was that of the familiar household tap-rooted vegetable botanically named *daucus*, but hight the carrot, when seen reposing in sweetness in a dish.

These dresses were, of course, ingeniously contrived to keep on the persons they enfolded, but their aspect was as if a length of many yards of this ruddy orange saffron material had been taken, and one end fastened to an ivory shoulder with a tin-tack of enormous size, the other end being held under the foot of some one far away. Parenthetically, let it be remembered that this is all surmise, as no doubt the costumes were built by one of the highest authorities in fashionable garb. But to resume.

The ends of the dress being thus secured upon the shoulder and beneath a distant foot, it seemed that the lady must then have commenced a slow movement, revolving gently and winding herself in the web till it formed a regular—or rather, irregular—spiral bandage from shoulder to ankle, leaving the long thin arms bare, and, after being secured at the feet, trailing far behind and spreading out like a fan.

Perry-Morton walked to the fireplace, laid his head sideways against a large blue plate, which gave him the appearance of a well-fed saint with an azure halo, closed his eyes like a vicious critic on varnishing day, and uttered a low sigh full of rapture, after which he seemed to bless his sisters for giving him a sensation that was perfectly new.

Of the decorations of that suite of rooms it is needless to speak. Every visitor said they were perfect. Even James Magnus told Lord Artingale they were not half bad, "only there's too much suggestion of the kitchen-dresser with the dinner-plates ranged all a-row."

Harry Artingale thought it a polished pantechnicon-inferno till the Mallows were announced, and then it seemed transformed into a paradise of delight, where every one walked on air, and the sweet essence of pretty little Cynthia pervaded all.

For Mr Perry-Morton and the Misses Perry-Morton were "at home," and the big butler was pretty well occupied in announcing the names called to him by the footman, who stood down among the azaleas with which the hall was half filled, ready to open the door and rearrange the roll of horsehair matting which would keep getting out of place.

Lord Artingale and his artist friend arrived early, Magnus to be button-holed and taken aside to see his picture hung with a gaslight and reflector before it, to show it to the best advantage; and yet he was not grateful, for when he returned to Harry Artingale he growled, as the latter, who was very light-hearted and happy, said, "like a sore tom"—cat, of course, understood.

Perry-Morton was standing with his blue china halo behind his head, and with a fleshly poetic look in his eye; and his sisters were each posed before a big Benares brown dish, etherealising her lambent curls and pallid face into virgin and martyr beauty, when the butler announced the Mallows, the girls looking very natural and charming, and Frank and Cyril creating quite a sensation with their sunburnt, swarthy faces and rugged bearing.

"Oh, Claudine," whispered Faustine, "look at Julia," and her sister uttered a tragic. "Ah!" as she advanced with her brother to receive the new arrivals.

Certainly Julia looked deadly pale, for as she descended from the carriage she had caught sight of a great burly fellow bearing a lantern, which he ostentatiously held low, so that her little pale blue satin rosetted shoes should not go astray from the carpeted path, and the sight of his dark eyes had sent the blood rushing to her heart. But this pallor rather added to than took from her beauty, as, simply dressed in the palest of pale blue satin, and her throat and arms wreathed with lustrous pearls, she seemed to stand alone amidst the throng of strangely grotesque costumes by which she was surrounded.

The sisters changed their key instanter upon seeing the effect produced upon their brother, whose eyes half closed once more as he greeted his guests. In fact, he treated the Rector with such deference, that for a moment it seemed as if he were going to sink upon his knees, and in true patriarchal style ask for his blessing.

But he did not, neither did he raise Julia's hand to his lips. He merely beamed upon her rapturously, led her to a seat after the congratulations of his sisters had had due course, and then, as a kind of hum went through the rooms, proceeded to hover over his choice.

"A melody in heaven's own azure," whispered Perry-Morton. "Julia, your costume is perfection."

The pallor on poor Julia's cheeks had been giving place to a vivid blush, but her host's words and manner once more drove the blood to her heart, and she sank back upon the lounge, glad to use her fan, for she thoroughly realised that she was looked upon by all present as the future mistress of the place.

"Magnus, my dear boy," whispered Artingale, "have you any charity in your nature?"

"Heaps. Why?"

"Because I want you to go and cut that fellow out. Julia really is a nice girl."

“Don’t be a fool,” was the answer, given with such intensity that Artingale was startled.

“Fool, be hanged! I’m in earnest. Wait a bit, and we’ll go up to her together, and then I’ll be off and leave you. You’d stand no end of a chance, for Cynthia likes you ever so.”

“Don’t be an ass, Harry,” said Magnus, “you seem to be happy enough. Let the poor little body be.”

“Well, I don’t want to quarrel,” said Artingale, “but if ever a fellow was a fool or an ass I should think it would be when he turned up his nose at the chance of winning a little woman who has not been spoiled by the world.”

“Oh, she’s nice enough,” said Magnus, gruffly. “Are those two brothers going to marry those stained-glass virgins?” he continued, as Cyril joined Frank, who was bending impressively towards Faustine.

“I wish to heaven they would,” said Artingale, earnestly. “Hang the brothers! What a thing it is that pretty girls are obliged to have brothers! At last!—I’m off. There’s the telegram.”

The message came along a beam of light, and that little bright beam stretched from Cynthia Mallow’s eye to that of the speaker; and the message was,—

“*You dear stupid old goose, why don’t you come*?”

For Artingale had held rather aloof until the fair young hostesses had withdrawn.

“Why didn’t you come before, sir?” said the lady, looking very severely at her swain.

“I was afraid,” he said.

“What, of me, sir?”

“No, no,” he whispered, “I’ve been longing to get near you, but I dared not. Oh, my little darling, how beautiful you look to-night.”

“For shame, Harry; now look here, sir; I will not permit you to be so familiar. The idea of addressing me in such a strain.”

“There,” he sighed, “now you are getting on stilts again, and we were so happy down at Lawford.”

“Yes, but that’s country, and this is town. We are in society now, sir, and we must be very proper.”

“There, my beautiful little tyrant,” he whispered, “I am your slave. I won’t rebel; only reward me sometimes for my patience with a kindly look.”

“Well, if you are very good, perhaps I will,” said Cynthia. “But you did not tell me, Harry, why you were afraid. Ah, that’s right, that tall thin ghost is going to sing, so we can talk.”

In effect, a very cadaverous-looking lady, with an exceedingly startled air, was led by Mr Perry-Morton to the piano, and after he had screwed his eyes up, glanced round the room, and held up a white finger to command silence, the thin lady, who evidently purposely lived upon an unwholesome regimen, to keep herself graceful, fixed her eyes upon one particular piece of blue china near the corner of the room, and began to sing.

“Now, sir,” whispered Cynthia, “you must not speak loud. Tell me quietly.”

“May I sit down?”

“If that is enough room for you, sir. Now go on.”

Artingale would have thought the edge of a knife room enough, so that he could be near Cynthia, so he sat down in a very uncomfortable position, and received such a merry, mischievous look that he sighed with content.

“The fact is—oh, murder!”

“Hush, Harry! What is the matter?”

“Would it look rude if I were to cork my ears with glove-fingers, Cynthy?”

“Of course, sir! For shame! You have no soul for music.”

“Not a bit,” he whispered; “only when you warble one of those little ballads of yours, I shut my eyes and wish you were a brook.”

“Wish I were a what, you foolish boy?” whispered Cynthia, looking up at the great *boy* who towered over her.

“A brook, my darling, to go on for ever,” he whispered back so earnestly, that Cynthia felt a little thrill of pleasure run through her, and her pretty face became slightly suffused.

“Now you are talking nonsense again,” she said. “Oh. I do wish that dreadful romance would end. Harry, if you speak to me again like that, I shall send you away. Now, sir, why were you frightened? Did I look so fierce and majestic?”

“No: only more beautiful than ever.”

“Harry!”

“Fact. Well, I’ll tell you: Claudine Perry-Morton was by you.”

“Well, what of that, sir?”

“And I felt as if I dared not come near in case of an accident.”

“An accident, Harry! What, to the gas? Oh fie! what a silly old joke; you mean her hair would set it alight.”

“No, I don’t; I don’t mind red hair. After yours, it’s the prettiest there is.”

“Don’t stoop to compliments, sir. Now tell me why you were afraid of an accident?”

“Why I feel sure that some time or other she’ll come undone. Look at her dress. I wouldn’t be there for the world.”

“Harry!”

There was a very genuine blush as she looked at him reproachfully; but her face softened directly as he whispered in such a low, earnest tone that it thrilled her once more—

“Forgive me, darling, it was too bad, I know; there, we won’t talk about ourselves, I only want to be near you. Let me take you down to supper.”

“Would you like to?”

“Yes.”

“Very much?”

“Darling!”

What wonderful emphasis an engaged couple can put into their words. Evidently that last noun uttered by the young fellow opened out a vista of future bliss to Cynthia, who answered him with a look which was a perfect bond in its way, engrossed in parchment, sealed, signed, witnessed, endorsed, and tied with dark-green silk in proper legal style.

“I haven’t been to dear Julie yet,” he said.

“What a shame! Go at once, sir.”

“No, no; don’t send me away at present.”

“Well, you must go presently, Harry,” she said, softly; “I’m so glad you are fond of Julie.”

“Bless her! I love her very much,” he said. “She’s the dearest, sweetest, sisterly little body I ever met. I always feel as if I should like to kiss her when I shake hands, and her pretty little lips seem to look up to one so naturally. Cynthy, darling, I often wished I had a sister, and—and now I’m to have one, am I not?”

“I don’t know—perhaps,” she said, looking down.

“I told Magnus one day I wished I had a sister for his sake. Thank goodness the song’s done. Let’s clap our hands, for joy.”

They clapped their hands, as did every one else, but of course not for joy.

“I like Mr Magnus,” said Cynthia, thoughtfully.

“He’s the best and truest-hearted fellow in the world,” cried Artingale, enthusiastically.

“And if you had had a sister, what then, sir?”

“I should have made old Magnus marry her.”

“Indeed, my lord bashaw! And suppose the lady did not approve?”

“But she would approve. No really sensible girl would refuse Magnus, if she came to thoroughly know him.”

There was silence here, during which a very-pale gentleman with a very large aquiline nose, which seemed to be his feature, the rest of his face merely representing base or pedestal, threw his long black hair behind his ears, and recited a portion of one of Rosetti’s poems.

“Harry,” said Cynthia then, “go and see Julie now.”

“Must I?”

“Please. Poor girl, she is so unhappy; I’m in great trouble about her.”

“Poor darling!” he replied.

“You know I told you about our being out in the woods collecting flowers?”

“Yes.”

“And how Julia came upon that great fellow lying amongst the moss and primroses?”

“Yes; I wish I had been there!” and the young man’s teeth gave a grit together. “But he did not say anything to her?”

“No; only stared in a way that frightened her horribly, and it seemed to have such an effect upon her when she dragged herself away, that she was quite ill, and it was hours before I found out what it was.”

“Poor child! But she must not think about it. She may never see him again.”

“But she keeps seeing him, so she says. He seems to haunt her. She saw him in the park again a few days ago.”

“But did she see him, or was it fancy?”

“Oh, no, it was not fancy; I saw him too. A great big leering fellow.”

“Oh, but it must be stopped; your brothers and I must thrash him.”

“And I half think she saw, or fancied she saw, him to-night, for she was so bright and cheerful when we started, and when we came in she seemed to have turned to stone.”

“Well, poor child, she will soon have a manly protector now,” he said, rather bitterly, as he glanced at where Perry-Morton was hovering over Julia, while the Rector stood by smiling rigid approval.

“Don’t talk like that, Harry,” said Cynthia, quietly; “you hurt me.”

“Forgive me,” he whispered, “but it makes me mad to see your people ready to sell her to that man.”

“Papa thinks it right, and for the best. And it is not selling, Harry, for papa is rich.”

“But surely Julia cannot care for him?”

“She does not say so, but she loathes him, Harry.”

“Then why in the name of common sense does she not strike against it, or fall in love with some trump of a fellow who would stick up for her and take her part?”

“I wish she would, Harry. But, there, go to her now. She is miserable. Go and stay with her. Send Mr Magnus to talk to me. No, take him with you, and let him chat to her about his pictures. Here is Mr Perry-Morton coming to beam on me, Harry.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you feel jealous?”

“Horribly,” he said, with a look that contradicted his word; and getting up, he went to where James Magnus was talking to a brother artist about their host’s last purchase, an early specimen of Burne Jones, full of wonderful realistic trees, and a group of figures, who were evidently all in pain.

“Here,” he whispered, catching him by the sleeve, “I want to take you to a lady.”

“No, no—nonsense. I don’t like ladies, Harry.”

“Don’t be stupid. I want you to come and chat with Julia Mallow, and take her down to supper. Why, what’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. There—no. Get some one else.”

“Come along, old man. Cynthia sent me. And I say, talk about your pictures to her. Poor girl, she’s miserable. They are trying to hook her on to Perry-Morton.”

“Why, of course. People say they are engaged.”

“And I say she isn’t. She hates the fellow. Why, Magnus, old fellow, why not?”

“Why not what?”

“Oh, nothing. Come along.” The artist, after a moment’s further hesitation, allowed himself to be led off, and the rest of that evening passed very pleasantly to Julia, who listened eagerly to the quiet, grave conversation of Lord Artingale’s friend.

Like all evenings, this memorable one came to a close, amidst the shouting of linkmen, for the carriage of Mr this, and my Lord that, and the clattering of uneasy horses’ feet on the paving fronting the poet’s home. At last the cry arose—“Mr Mallow’s carriage stops the way;” and the voice of a footman, like that of an archangel of fashion, came from inside the magnificent hall, where he stood amidst the flowers, with a deep-voiced “Coming down.”

There was a little craning forward of the heads of the two rows of servants and idlers running from the kerb right up into the great hall, forming a moving human wall on each side of the striped Edgington canopy put up for the

occasion. The two policemen mildly suggested something about keeping back, but the big burly fellow with a lantern stood his ground, as he had stood it ever since the party had arrived.

The carriage steps were rattled down, the host came delicately tripping like a fat faun in evening costume, and handed Cynthia in, Lord Artingale being apparently quite content. Frank and Cyril were by the door waiting for a cab, there being some talk of calling at a club.

“Why didn’t Artingale bring down Julia?” said Frank, scowling at James Magnus. “Perry-Morton ought to have handed her down.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” said Cyril, whose face was flushed with champagne. “Come along.”

The brothers were moving off, but they stayed; for just then, as Artingale’s friend was handing Julia in, softening his voice involuntarily as he bade her good night, an importunate linkman thrust himself forward, ostensibly to hold his lantern to make the carriage steps plainer, and to keep the ladies’ dresses from the wheels.

James Magnus saw it, quick as was the act in the semi-darkness, for as Julia was on the last step a great muscular, hand grasped her soft white arm.

She turned sharply, and then uttered a cry of dread as she saw a brown bearded face close to hers.

It was the work almost of a moment; then she sank back in her place in the carriage; the Rector followed; the steps had been rattled up, the door closed, the footman shouted “Home,” and the horses sprang forward, hiding from the frightened girl the struggle taking place in the little crowd, as James Magnus seized the great ruffian by the throat.

Part 1, Chapter XXX.

A Little Narrative.

“Really, Cynthy, it is not a pleasant thing to talk to you about.”

“I insist upon knowing all, sir. Please tell me, Harry.”

“That first order would have been obeyed, Cynthy; but that last appeal makes me try to tell you with all my heart.”

“Now, Harry, once for all, I won’t have it,” said the little maiden, holding up a tiny white warning finger, which, as they were alone in the drawing-room, Lord Artingale seized and kissed. “I want you to be straightforward and sensible when you talk to me, sir, and if you do really like me, don’t pay me silly, sickly compliments.”

“I’ll never pay you another, Cynthy, as long as I live,” he said, eagerly; and the light-hearted girl burst into a merry fit of laughter.

“Oh, Harry, what a dear, stupid old boy you are. There, now, that will do—well, only one more. Now be serious, and tell me, for really I am in very, very great trouble.”

“But would you like me to tell you all about it?”

“Every word, Harry,” said Cynthia, with a quiet, earnest look, as she laid her little white hand in his.

For, saving an occasional rebuff by teasing, Lord Artingale’s love affairs seemed to be progressing in the most unromantic fashion. Cynthia had made a very pretty little confession to him; the Rector had been appealed to, and had become for the moment a little less rigid; and Mrs Mallow had sighed and then smiled.

“Well, dear. No: let me hold your hand like that, I can talk so much better.”

“Oh, you foolish boy!”

It was very foolish, no doubt; but Cynthia let her hand rest where it was.

“Well, it was like this,” said Artingale. “James Magnus saw that great fellow with the lantern take hold of Julie’s arm.”

“Then you see now, sir, that it is not fancy.”

“Not much fancy about it, certainly,” said the young man, grimly, “unless it’s P.R. fancy.”

“P.R. fancy, Harry; what’s that?”

“Oh, nothing,” he replied, hastily. “It’s a term they give to fighting. Well, Magnus says he felt as if he could have killed the scoundrel.”

“That’s well,” said Cynthia, flushing scarlet, and with her eyes sparkling; “I like that.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes,” she whispered, nestling up to her companion, and letting him draw her nearer, till her shiny little head rested against his breast.

“Yes, Harry, I like it—it sounds so brave and manly of him. Harry, dear, can’t you make James Magnus fall in love with Julie?”

“No.”

“You can’t!”

“No, Cynthy. Shall I tell you a secret?”

“I thought there were to be no secrets between us, Harry,” said the maiden, archly.

“Of course not. Well, little one, I think—no, I’m almost sure—that he has fallen in love with her already, without any making.”

“Oh, Harry, dear, how delightful. Here, I must go and tell her.”

“Not for the world, darling.”

“And pray why not, sir?”

“Because, Cynthy,” he said, raising her little face so that he could gaze seriously into her bright eyes, “because, dear, I should feel as if I had been betraying the confidence of my best friend.”

“But I should tell her, not you, Harry.”

“Is there any difference?” he said, quietly. “Isn’t it all one now, Cynthy?”

There was a slight pause, during which Cynthia’s eyes drooped beneath the searching gaze. Then she raised them, and returned his look with one so frank and full of loving trust that the young man’s heart gave one great throb, and the silence seemed likely to be lasting.

“Did James Magnus tell you he loved Julie, Harry?”

“No; but I feel sure he does.”

“I’m so glad, Harry,” said Cynthia, softly; “so very, very glad. But now tell me all. I saw a sort of scuffle, and then we were out of sight, with poor Julie in a dead faint.”

“There isn’t much to tell you, Cynthy, only that Magnus seized the scoundrel by the throat as the carriage dashed off; then there was a moment’s struggle, and the fellow threw him by some clever wrestling dodge, and he fell with his bare head a most awful crash upon the kerbstone.”

“Oh!”

“That made me feel mad, and I went at the fellow, but he was off like a shot, dashed down the road through the gateway; and as I ran after him, followed by a lot of people and two policemen, I saw him cross the road, go right at the park railings, and he was over in a moment, and right into the shrubs.”

“And did you follow?” said Cynthia, excitedly.

“Didn’t I! But I couldn’t get over so quickly as he did, and when I dropped on the other side I was half hanging by one of the tails of my coat, for a spike had gone through it.”

“Oh, what fun,” laughed Cynthia; “how droll you must have looked.”

“I dare say I did,” he said, good-humouredly; “but it gave the rascal time to get a good start, and when I was free and ran on with the police and two more men, the scoundrel had gone goodness knows where.”

“And you did not catch him, then?”

“No, he had got clean away, Cynthy, and after we had been hunting for above an hour we had to give it up.”

“Oh, what a pity.”

“Yes, wasn’t it.”

“I don’t know, though,” said Cynthia, softly; “if you had caught him he might have hurt you, too, Harry.”

“I’ll give him leave to,” said Artingale, “if I can only manage to make my mark upon him.”

“Oh, Harry, don’t look like that; you frighten me.”

“Do I?—there; but don’t you be alarmed about me, little one, I can take care of myself, and I don’t mean to rest till I’ve paid that fellow my debt.”

“Paid your debt, Harry?” said Cynthia, with a look of alarm.

“Yes, little one; I owe him something for frightening you, too, down at Lawford!—if it is the same man,” he added.

“Oh, yes, Harry; I saw his face last night quite plainly,” cried Cynthia, excitedly.

“Then he has frightened little sister twice since. I say, Cynthy, I may call her little sister now?”

“Of course you may; but go on with what you are saying. Oh, Harry, dear,” she whispered, “I wish I was as big and brave as you.”

“And,” he whispered, “I wish that you were always just as you are now, so sweet and bright and loving.”

“Well, sir, go on.”

“That’s about all,” he said, “only that I owe my fine fellow for last night’s affair as well.”

“And about Mr Magnus?”

“Well, I went back, of course, to Sunflower Oil soap.”

“Went where?” cried Cynthia, in astonishment. “Oh, I see, you had made your hands dirty getting over the railings.”

“No, no,” said Artingale, laughing, “I mean I went back to Perry-Morton’s.”

“Oh, what a shame, to call him such a name,” said Cynthia, solemnly, but with her eyes sparkling with delight.

“And there was poor Magnus lying on the sofa in the dining-room, and a couple of doctors bandaging his head, after which he insisted upon being taken back to his chambers, and that’s about all.”

“But you’ve been to see him this morning, Harry?”

“I sat up with him all night, and he grew quite delirious, and talked a good deal about Julia.”

“Oh!” and a pause. “And is his hurt very bad, Harry?” said Cynthia, looking now rather white. “Will it kill him?”

“Oh, no,” said Artingale, “he was a good deal hurt, and lost a lot of blood, and—oh, what an idiot I am!”

“No, no, Harry. I’m not so silly. I’m not going to faint. Hush, here’s Julia.”

For just then the door opened, and, looking very pale and wistful, the elder sister came into the room—smiling, though, as her eyes lit on the young couple; and as Artingale jumped up to greet her, there was something very loving and sisterly in the way in which she gazed in his face, and let him lead her to the couch upon which they had been sitting.

Here she inquired very anxiously after Mr Magnus, showing that she knew a good deal about the previous night’s affair; but Artingale noted her shudder and look of horror when her assailant was mentioned.

“That fellow must be stopped,” said the young man, as he went thoughtfully away. “Poor girl! she seems thoroughly afraid of him. Oh, hang it all, it must—it shall be stopped, or he’ll drive the poor child mad.”

Part 1, Chapter XXXI.

In the Den.

You had to pass through James Magnus’s studio to get to his sitting-room, and through the latter to get to his bed-room, and the task was not an easy one. Lord Artingale knew his way by heart, but a stranger would have been puzzled from the moment he entered the lobby or hall. For the place resembled a Wardour-street old curiosity shop more than the abode of a well-known artist. A woman with the bump of order thoroughly developed would, if she had been placed in charge, have immediately invested in a dozen dusters, a turk’s-head, and a feather brush, and gone to the attack, but only to sink down in utter despair.

Chaos seemed to have come back again at the abode of James Magnus, and modern nature and art to have joined hands to cover the aforesaid chaos with dust. For there was dust everywhere; thick, black, sooty dust of that peculiar kind that affects Fitzroy-square. It was never removed, save when a picture, chair, or “property” was taken from one part of the place to another, and the dust thus set floating, floated and settled upon something else. Certainly there was some kind of order in the sitting and bed-room, where the artists man attended, but it was mostly disorder.

“I hate having my things moved,” said Magnus. “When I set to work, I like to be able to begin at once, and not have to hunt for everything I want.”

“I think the place is just perfect,” said Harry Artingale. “One can get plenty of tidiness everywhere else, Jemmy, and I like coming to the den to be a beast.”

So to make matters more comfortable Artingale, at first out of fun, later on from habit, used to carefully place all his cigar ashes and ends wherever he could find a ledge—on the chimney-pieces, on the tops of upturned canvases, on the inner parts of their frames, and balance soda-water and beer or hock corks upon the properties.

You entered the lobby or hall to be confronted by dusty busts and casts, and you went thence into the studio to be confronted by more dusty busts and casts. There were life-sized plaster figures of plenty of well-known antiques mixed up with a heterogeneous collection of artistic odds and ends. There were canvases new and old, with charcoal drawings, sketches, and half-finished paintings, costumes of all kinds, savage weapons, arms and armour, easels from the simplest to the most modern with its screws, and racks and reflectors, and tubes for gas. Rich pieces of

carpet partially covered the floor. On one side stood a large raised daïs for sitters, and for non-sitters who wished to sit down there were quaint old carven chairs.

The value of the contents of that studio must have been great, for James Magnus earned a great deal of money, and never grudged spending it upon what he called necessaries for his art. Hence it was that handsome vases and specimens of bronze and brass work were plentiful, but they were stuck anywhere, and as often as not held empty or full paint tubes, or served as supports to great palettes covered with pigments of every hue.

The sitting-room was almost a repetition of the studio, but it was thickly carpeted, and contained more furniture, with easy-chairs, a dining-table of massive oak, and had a free and easy, chaotic comfort about it that would make a bachelor feel quite at home.

The walls bore plenty of pictures, mostly from the brushes of brother artists, and these, with the great full folios, formed a most valuable collection.

It was here that Harry Artingale had taken most pains, as a very old friend and constant companion, to embellish the room with his cigar-ends. Here, too, he had at odd times shown his own love and reverence for art by improving some of the antique casts with whiskers and moustachios. There was a cast of Venus quite life-size, which, evidently for decorous reasons, he had dressed in a seventeenth-century brocade silk dress, from which she looked naïvely at a lay figure in Spanish costume and mantilla; while close by there was an Apollo Belvedere, half garbed in sixteenth-century armour, standing behind a large pair of jack boots that could not be put on.

There were, in fact, a hundred playful little relics of Lord Artingale's diversions when in idle mood; one of the latest being the boring of a hole in a plaster Clytie's lips, for the insertion of a cigar, and another the securing of a long clay pipe and a beer bock in the hands of a Diana, from which a bow and arrow had been removed.

"You see, he is sech a gent for his larks," said Burgess, a nobly bearded, herculean, ungrammatical being, who looked big and bold enough to attack a Nemsean lion, or stride to an encounter in a Roman amphitheatre, but who had about as much spirit as a mouse.

Burgess was Magnus's factotum, valet and houseman; and an excellent cook. He was not clever at cleaning, but the artist rather liked that, especially as he could admirably make a bed, and in addition was one of the noblest-looking and most patient models in London.

But now Burgess was developing a fresh facet in his many-sided character, namely that of nurse; and he had shown a sleeplessness and watchful care that were beyond praise.

"How is he, my lord?" he said, as he opened the door to Artingale, some months after the occurrences in the last two chapters.

"Well, my lord—"

"Now look here, Burgess; haven't I told you a dozen times over to say 'sir' to me when I'm here?"

"Yes, sir, but these are serious times, and I only meant it out of respect."

"I know—of course, Burgess; but isn't he better?"

"He says he is, sir; and the doctor—he's only just this minute gone, sir."

"Yes, I know. I saw his brougham."

"The doctor says he's better, sir, as he has for months; but he do keep so low, and," continued the man in a despairing tone, "it ain't no matter what I cook or make up, or try to tempt him with, he don't seem to pick a bit."

"Poor fellow!" muttered Artingale, handing his overcoat and hat to the man.

"I did think this morning that he was coming round, sir, for he has had his colours and a canvas on the bed, and I had to prop him up. I don't know, sir, I—I—"

The great Hercules of a fellow's voice changed, and he turned aside to hide the weak tears that gathered in his eyes, and began to trickle slowly down his cheeks, though they had not far to go before they were able to hide themselves in his beard.

"Oh, come, come, Burgess," cried Artingale, who felt touched at this display of affection on the part of servant towards master, "it isn't so bad as that."

The man hastily threw the light overcoat upon a chair, and turned sharply round to catch the visitors arm, and gaze earnestly in his eyes.

"Do you—do you really think, sir, that poor master will get well?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do, Burgess. I feel sure of it, my dear fellow. There, shake hands, Burgess. 'Pon my soul I like you, I do indeed."

"And him a real true lord!" thought Burgess, as he gingerly held out a great hand, which the other shook.

"Get well? of course he will, if it's only to help me break that scoundrel's neck,—a blackguard!"

“I only wish I had my will of him, sir,” cried Burgess, grinding his teeth; “I’d serve him out.”

“Would you?” said Artingale, smiling. “What would you do?”

“I’d make him stand for the old man in the Laocöon sixteen hours a day for stoodents. He wouldn’t want anything worse. But please go in gently, sir, and don’t wake master if he’s asleep.”

“All right,” was the reply; and the young man made his way carefully amongst the artistic lumber, and through the studio into the dining-room, at one corner of which was the artist’s chamber.

Artingale sighed as he went silently across the thick carpet, for that room was full of memories of numberless merry evenings, and as he paused for a moment beside his friend’s empty chair, a dull sense of pain oppressed him, and he found himself wondering whether he was not taking too sanguine a view of his old companion’s state.

“Poor old chap!” he said. “How nice it would be if that could come off. Cynthy says it shall, and I don’t see why it shouldn’t. Let’s see; I’m to give him Cynthy’s love and this rosebud. She said he would be sure to find out that it was one that Julie had worn. I wonder whether old Mag does care for her; he’s such a close old oyster, and never did make up to women. Well, for the matter of that, no more did I till I met Cynthia—not much.”

He went gently on to the door in the corner, and listened, but all was very still, and he paused for a few minutes in a state of hesitation, for which he could not account, and with one hand raised to open the door.

“He must be asleep,” he said to himself.

“Poor old boy, only to think of it. One moment bright and happy and full of life, and the next moment a helpless mass, with hardly the strength to move. Well, poor fellow, Cynthy is right. If he does care for Julie he has just gone the way to find a tender spot in her heart.”

He took hold of the handle and turned it, to find that Burgess had been so busy with a feather and the salad oil flask, that the door yielded without a sound, and he glided into the darkened room.

It was handsomely furnished, but its occupant’s profession could be seen at every turn, for the rich litter of the studio that had overflowed into the dining-room, had come in here, and covered walls and filled corners with artistic trifles.

The room had been built for a smaller studio, and was lit from the roof, blinds being contrived so as to draw like a Roman *velum* across the glass.

These were partly undrawn now, giving a weird effect to the half-dark room, across whose gloom a boldly-defined broad bar of light, full of tiny dancing motes, shone down upon the artist’s bed.

The door was by the head of the couch, and the figure of its occupant was hidden by the hangings, as well as by a carefully-arranged screen covered with fantastic Japanese designs, but Artingale felt a strange thrill run through him as he caught sight of the lower portion of the bed, and took a couple of steps rapidly forward, but only to stop short the next moment, as if paralysed by what he saw.

Part 1, Chapter XXXII.

Magnus Makes Confession.

Not many moments before, Artingale had wonderingly asked himself whether Magnus cared for her whom he regarded quite as a sister, and about whose state he was troubled in no small degree. The question was answered now without room for a doubt.

Poor fellow! It had been a terrible cut he had received upon his head in the fall that night. There had been concussion of the brain, with fever and delirium, and for a long time his state had been very serious. Then came some slight amendment, but only to be followed, for months, by a depression which seemed to master the strong man’s spirits; and this, too, in spite of the efforts of the medical men, constant nursing, and the companionship of Artingale, given to such an extent that Cynthia had pouted, and then thrown her arms round “dear Harry’s” neck, and told him she loved him ten thousand times better for his devotion to his friend.

Artingale had been with Magnus the night before, but had been kept away that morning, and it was now close upon five o’clock when he stood as it were petrified at the sight which met his eyes.

As has been said, the greater portion of the chamber was in a state of semi-obscurity; but a broad band of light fell direct from the skylight upon the bed where James Magnus had been propped up with pillows before a dwarf easel and canvas, upon which, rapidly dashed in by his masterly hand, showing in every line the inspiration that had been thrown upon the canvas by the artist’s mind, was the work upon which he had been engaged.

Had been engaged, for, palette in one hand, brush in the other, he had sunk back, his pallid face, with the hair cut closely now, giving him in the gloom wherein he lay the aspect of some portrait by Rembrandt or Velasquez, the stern lines cut by sickness softened by a contented smile.

He must have fallen back as he was raising his hand to continue his work, for the colour-charged brush in his thin white fingers had fallen upon the white sheet, making a broad smear, and as he gazed Artingale thought that he was dead.

It was but for an instant though, for the loose open collar of the shirt was rising and falling gently at each respiration, and even as the young man went over towards the bed a low sigh escaped from the invalid's lips.

Satisfied upon that point, Artingale's eyes were turned upon the canvas illumined by the soft white light; and for the moment, simple and unfinished as the portrait was, he could almost have fancied that it was Julia's self gazing up at him with a sweet pensive smile upon her lips, but with the strange nameless horror in her appealing eyes.

It was wonderful. He had often watched with interest the way in which some face would grow up beneath the pencil of his friend, but in this case there was the effort of genius at its best, and he stood there gazing in rapt admiration at the portrait.

His question was answered, for no one but a man who loved could so perfectly have reproduced those features from memory.

"I wish Cynthia could see it," he thought; and he took another step forward.

That broke the sick man's slumber, for he started into wakefulness, and made a snatch at the canvas, to hide it from his friend, two red spots burning in his pallid cheeks, and a look of anger flashing from his sunken eyes; but Artingale laid a hand upon his arm.

"Don't hide it, old fellow," he said. "Why should you?"

Magnus looked at him as if in dread and shame.

"Why should you mind?" continued Artingale. "I've never been ashamed to confess to you. But how wonderfully like."

Magnus still gazed at him in a troubled way, but he did not speak, and the two men remained looking into each other's eyes as Artingale seated himself upon the edge of the bed.

"Mag, old fellow," said Artingale at last, "I'm very, very glad."

"Why should you be?" said the other, in a low, weak voice. "It is only an empty dream."

"No, no. Nonsense, man. Why, come, with that idea in your brain you ought to be up and doing."

"What!" said Magnus, bitterly; "trying to make her life unhappy by my mad love?"

"Mad love! Is it mad to love a beautiful woman with all your heart, as I'm sure you do, with that confession before my eyes?"

"Yes, when she is engaged to be married to another."

"But that would never be if she knew of your love."

"Harry, my dear boy," said the artist sadly, "it comes very easy to you to make sketches or build castles in the air. You love little Cynthia, and your love is returned."

"Yes; of course."

"And you both think how pleasant it would be for the sister of both to become the wife of the friend."

"Yes. Well, where's the madness?"

Magnus shook his head sadly.

"Why should I tell you?" he said. "I have studied nature too long not to know something of women. Do you think I could see and converse with—with—her without knowing something of her heart?"

"Her heart is untouched. Of that I am sure," cried Artingale.

"I don't know that," said Magnus, sadly; "but this I do know—that no word I could utter, no look I could give, would ever make it throb."

"Nonsense, man," said Artingale, merrily. "Why, Mag, where's your courage? Up, lad, and try. Don't lie there and let that piece of imitation human being carry her off."

Magnus, who was very weak, lay back thinking.

"Why," continued Artingale, "you are bound to succeed. What could be better? She was insulted, and you seized the scoundrel who insulted her, and became seriously injured in her service. Nothing could be more fortunate."

"Have you found out anything more about that fellow?" said Magnus, at last.

"No: nothing; and the police have given it up. I want you to get well and help me."

"Nothing more has been seen of him, then?"

"Indeed but there has," said Artingale; "he has turned up no less than three times by the carriage when the girls have been out, and poor Julia has been frightened almost into hysterics. Come, you must get well, Mag, for if ever

poor girl wanted a stout protector, it is Julia Mallow."

"Tell me about her engagement."

"What for? To make you worse?"

"It will not make me worse, Harry. Tell me. She is engaged to Perry-Morton, is she not?"

"Hang him! Well, I suppose there is something of the kind. My respected papa-in-law-to-be seems to have run mad over the fellow, and suffers himself to be regularly led by the nose. But it can't last; it's impossible. No sane man could go on long without finding out what an ass the fellow is, with his vain conceit and pretensions to art and poetry. It is all the Rector's doing, and he is everything; poor Mrs Mallow, as you know, never leaves her couch."

"You said the other day that they were going back into the country."

"Yes, and I shall be obliged to go too."

Magnus smiled.

"Well, yes, of course," said Artingale, quickly, "I want to be near Cynthy. There, I'm not ashamed; I am very fond of the little girl. I must be, or I should never stand those brothers of hers."

"Anything fresh about them?" said Magnus, who seemed deeply interested in the conversation.

"Fresh? Yes—no—only the old game. Being so near down there, my people hear everything at Gatley, and though I don't encourage tattling, I can't help hearing a lot about my beautiful brothers-in-law, and yours too if you like."

"Don't be foolish. Go on."

"Well, 'pon my soul, Mag, they're a pair of scamps, and once I've got my little Cynthy, hang me if I don't cut them. They haven't the decency to wait till I am their brother, but are always borrowing money. Sort of blackmail for letting me court their sister," he added, bitterly. "'Pon my word, Mag, it would be a charity to get Julia away as well."

"It is a great pity," said Magnus, thoughtfully. "What an anxiety to the poor sick mother!"

"Who is quite an angel of goodness in her way, Mag, only too ready to look over those two fellows' faults. Bah! I haven't patience with them."

"Why does not the Rector get them away?"

"Get them away? Well, he has, over and over again, but they always come back. The townspeople call them *The Bad Shilling* and *The Boomerang* on that account. The Rector's a good old fellow, only obstinate and weak, and with too big an idea of his sacred prerogative, which the folks down there won't stand. Here, get well, Mag, and come down and help me rout the enemy."

"I wish I could," sighed Magnus. "Only wants will, my lad. If you are using my billiard-table and horses it will keep those fellows off, but mind they don't rook you."

"I thought you told me that Frank had made a lot of money at the gold fields?"

"So he gives it out, but I don't believe it. If he had he wouldn't be borrowing of me and getting Perry-Morton to do bills for him."

"It seems strange."

"Strange! yes. I believe it's all gammon. Hang that fellow, I don't like him at all. Of course this is all in confidence, Mag." Magnus looked up at him with a smile. "My people tell me that he is always going over to Lewby, close by my place. It's one of the farms that came to me. Nice jolly farmer fellow there. Bluff chap, John Berry, with a pretty little wife fifteen years younger; and it seems there was something on between the lady and Master Frank before he went to the antipodes."

"That's bad," said Magnus, frowning.

"Damn bad," said Artingale; "but I try to make it smooth by thinking he is interceding for his brother."

"Interceding for his brother? What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, Mrs Berry was Rue Portlock, and Cyril has been paying attentions to her sister Sage."

"Rue? Sage?"

"Yes; rum idea. Two such pretty girls. I call 'em the sweet herbs. Quaint idea of their father."

"And Cyril is paying attentions to one of them?"

"Yes; little Sage. She is the Lawford schoolmistress, and engaged to some one else."

"Humph! Better than paying attentions to a married lady, as his brother does."

“Oh, bless him, he is not perfect. Master Cyril has an affair on at the ford just outside Lawford. There is a pretty wheelwright’s wife—no, hang it, I mean the pretty wife of a wheelwright there. She used to be Julia’s and Cynthia’s maid, you know, and I hear that Master Cyril has been seen hanging about.”

“They seem to be a nice pair,” said Magnus, gruffly.

“Beauties,” said Artingale, sharply. “Hang ’em, they shall have it warmly when once I have got Cynthia away. Of course I have to swallow it all now. There, you see how badly you’re wanted. It’s an unhappy family, and you would be doing a charitable act in giving Julia a good husband.”

“Let her marry Perry-Morton,” said Magnus, changing his position with a weary sigh.

“Bah! you need not mind that, my dear boy. I feel certain that some fine morning the Rector will prick Perry-Morton and find out what a bag of wind he is. Besides, see what allies you have—Cynthia, your humble servant, and the lady’s heart.”

Magnus shook his head sadly.

“But I say you have, and that it is waiting to beat to any tune you like to teach. Come, the will has no end to do with the body. Just swear you will get well and come and help me put those big brothers in order, and thrash the big rascal who—No, I say though, Magnus, ’pon my word, I think you ought to bless that fellow, for he will frighten poor little Julie right into your arms.”

Whether it was his friend’s encouraging words, and that hopes were raised in the artist’s breast, or whether it was simply the fact that he was already mending fast, at all events James Magnus rapidly got better now, and at the end of another two months he was about once more, though still weak from his injury, and likely to be for months.

Part 1, Chapter XXXIII.

The Rector Gives Way.

Cyril Mallow was right. He had three women to fight upon his side, and he was not long in bringing their power to bear. Petted, spoiled son as he was, literally idolised by the patient invalid, to whom his presence formed the greater part of the sunshine of her life, he was not long in winning her to his side.

“It is no light fancy, dear,” he said tenderly, as he sat beside her couch. “She is to me the woman who will bless my life as you have blessed my father’s.”

The sick woman shook her head mournfully.

“I repeat my words,” he said: “as you have blessed my father’s life. Well, I have been restless and foolish, perhaps, but I am sobered down now, and I mean to marry. I cannot help it, mamma, and I am quite prepared to have plenty of opposition to my proposal, and to be told that I am marrying beneath me; all the same, I mean to marry Sage Portlock, and I ask you to help me.”

Mrs Mallow tried persuasion, pointed out how directly this would be in opposition to his father’s wishes, and how the Churchwarden had set his face against it; but all she said only seemed to strengthen her son’s desire, and the natural consequence was that very soon Mrs Mallow began to talk earnestly to the Rector, but for quite a month without any other effect than angering him more against his son, whom he accused of fighting against his sisters’ prospects.

But when the father began to find that with patient pertinacity the son was keeping up his pursuit of Sage, the words of his wife began to have more effect, and one day, during a visit to the school, the old gentleman found himself speaking to Sage with greater deference, and thoughtfully musing over the possibility of her becoming his sons wife.

“It is terrible though,” he mused; “just as his sisters are about to make brilliant matches. It is like degrading them.”

That night, however, the Rector heard something about Cyril having been seen a great deal down by the ford lately, and quick to take alarm, warned as he had been by earlier escapades, he began to think more seriously, and went down to the school a great deal more.

“Better that than disgrace,” he said; “a fresh scandal would almost kill her, poor sweet. Ah, me! she has much to bear.”

He sighed weakly and went to the school again, setting Sage Portlock in a flutter by his quiet paternal ways, and he came away at last avowing that if the object of his son’s affections had been the daughter of a brother clergyman, he would have been delighted to find in her the child his son should bring to him to take a place within his heart.

Then he began thinking about Lord Artingale and Mr Perry-Morton, and he grew angry; but again he was obliged to say to himself, It would settle Cyril perhaps. Better that than a fresh scandal.

He tried to find failings in Sage—seeing in her conduct cause of offence—but without avail, for she gave him no hold whatever, and he went away thinking of her deeply, and wondering what was to be the end.

Cyril Mallow smiled as he saw that he was right, and that it was only a matter of time. He liked Sage Portlock, and he told himself that he loved her passionately, and that without her he should die, and then he entered into pecuniary calculations.

“The old man must leave her at least half of what he has, and every one in Lawford says he is well off, so that it will be a pleasant little bit of revenge to spend the old hunks’s money for the way in which he abused me. Then there is poor mamma’s money. That must come to me, so that we shall be pretty well off. Bah! it will all come right in time. But I hope Frank is not playing the fool about little Rue.”

After the stern encounter with the Churchwarden, and the angry words with his father, Cyril thought it prudent to keep away from Kilby Farm, and ceased to watch for Sage as she was going to or leaving school; but he rearranged his seat in the rectory pew, so that he could see her where she sat in church, became more regular than ever in his attendance, and sat through his father’s sermons gazing pensively at the young schoolmistress.

People said he was growing pale and thin, which was a fact easily explicable, for he smoked from morning to night, and the healthy brown of the last sea voyage was fading away consequent upon his indoor life.

“If I kick up a row I shall do no good,” he argued, “so I may as well wait. I could persuade her to run away with me, but then we should be confoundedly short of money till the old folks forgave us, and I’m sick of that sort of thing. No, I think the injured dodge is best, for it pays all round.”

He was quite right; and while he shut himself up with his brother in the room devoted to their personal use, read *Bell’s Life in London*, and sent communications to one or two betting men in town whenever he had the necessary funds at his disposal, everything was working steadily to the end he sought to gain.

His quiet acceptance, as it seemed to the Rector and Portlock, of the commands which he had received, gave him, in the eyes of the other interested parties, an injured, martyrlike air, and, though she did not meet him now, Sage’s thoughts were none the less busy about him. His every word had impressed her deeply, and day by day, in spite of her efforts to be true to her promise, she felt that she was falling more and more away.

This was plainly shown in her letters to Luke Ross, to whom she wrote weekly, hearing from him regularly in return. But he noted the gradual change in her communications. They grew shorter by degrees; less full of chatty little paragraphs about herself and her daily life. Still she did not fail to send to him once. It had become a habit—a duty—and while she did this she told herself that she was making a brave fight against her weak heart, and hiding the truth from Luke, little thinking that her notes laid her heart quite bare to the reader.

For it is a very strange thing how the feelings of a writer at the time of writing infuse themselves in the words. A note may contain only a thousand, and those thousand words relate certain matters, but from one writer they will seem to flow with affection, from another be calm, cool, and simply matter-of-fact. The sentences shall be almost the same, the words be very little varied, and yet, even without endearing expressions, one letter shall breathe and emanate affection, the other be friendliness alone.

So, by slow degrees, it was with Sage’s letters to her lover; and at first, as the idea stole upon him that she was growing colder, Luke Ross fought back the cruel thought, telling himself that he was wrong, and that hard study was souring his disposition, making him exacting and strange.

But as time went on he was obliged to realise the truth, and he wrote reproachful letters, but only tore them up again, to write others in his old, simple, confiding strain.

He longed to go down and see her more often, but kept putting it off till she should express a wish for him to come, hinting at it, and expecting that some such invitation would be contained in the next letter; but he hoped against hope.

Then a week passed without any communication from Lawford, and Luke packed up a few things in a bag, and started for his old home, but only to return directly to his chambers.

“She is not ill,” he said to himself. “If she had been some one would have written to tell me. I’ll wait.”

He waited, and at the appointed time—at the end of another week—a letter came, very similar to the last, and in which she said that she would have written as usual, only that she was very busy.

“Very busy,” said Luke to himself, as he sat in his dingy room, gazing straight before him, through the dull window, at the smoky chimney-pots, but seeing, as in a picture, the interior of Lawford Girls’ School, with its mistress moving from class to class. “Very busy.”

He sighed deeply, and went on with his reading.

From that time Sage’s letters came fortnightly, Luke sending two for one, but he made no complaint, keeping rigidly to his old stern determination.

“I said I would place myself in a worthy position to win her,” he said. “That I will do. What is more, I will be faithful, come what may—faithful, even in my belief in her.”

He sat, hot of eye and weary of brain, thinking whether he ought not to go down and see why this gradual change was taking place, but in his stern repression of self he felt that to go down unexpectedly would be like mistrusting the woman he hoped to make his wife, and this he could not bear.

Study—hard study—was Luke Ross’s medicine for a mind diseased, and whenever doubting thoughts and mistrust came hand in hand to torture him he forced himself to attend to his studies, making, by prodigious efforts, great advances in the learned treatises he was striving to master, but only at the expense of his health.

“It is for Sage,” he said, by way of encouragement, and when doubts became very strong he held up the shield of his

faith.

“No,” he would say aloud, “writing is, perhaps, irksome to one who has so much to do, but her heart is mine, and save from her own lips I would never believe that she could let it stray.”

In his stern determination to master the profession for which he was reading, Luke Ross only allowed himself a very rare visit home; and though he had felt frequent urgings of late he fought them down, setting his teeth, and vowing that he would not go before the appointed time.

It was a terrible fight when once the dire attacks of doubt were made, and repeated from day to day, for during the weeks of the past month Sage’s letters had grown more irregular still, as if she felt emboldened to be more careless from that absence of reproach. But the truth was that every letter from London was read by Sage with bitter misery and reproach, and her replies were often so blotted with tears that they were destroyed instead of being posted, and it was only those which escaped the fire which he received.

It only wanted a week of the time he had settled in his own mind, and in spite of his efforts to be calm, it was almost more than he could do to keep on with his task. A strong feeling was urging him to go down at once, see Sage, and learn the worst, for a fortnight had again passed and no letter.

Twenty times over he threw his books aside and started up to go, but upon each occasion the indomitable power of will that helped him to make the great efforts to master his profession—a power of will that had already stood him in such good stead during his stay at Saint Chrysostom’s—came to his aid, and he fought out the miseries of that last week and won. “I will—not—show—mistrust,” he said, sternly, as if addressing an unseen accuser of Sage; “I gave—her—my—love—and—I—will—never—take—it—from—her. If—she—cast—it—away—then—the—act—is—hers—not—mine.”

This, slowly repeated, with a pause between the words, became, as it were, a formula impressed in his mind, and it seemed to him that he had become Sage’s advocate, bound to defend her against unseen accusers.

At last, having no longer any conscientious reasons for deferring his visit, he hastily packed his bag and closed up his dreary little chambers, feeling, as he went out into busy roaring Fleet-street, that the rest was absolutely necessary, for his head throbbed and seemed confused, troubled as it had been with conflicting emotions.

It was winter once more, but one of those mild seasons when balmy winds from the west tempt the wild flowers into a belief that it is spring, and sweetly-scented violets make the air redolent of their homely, heart-appealing fragrance, when from amongst the dark dead leaves the tender green of the crinkled primrose roots could be seen surrounding here and there a pale sulphur blossom.

It was such a change from the smoke-haunted, soot-dotted city region of the law, that fifteen-mile coach ride, after the run down by fast train, that as Luke gazed over the flat landscape illumined by the mellow glow of the wintry sun, and noted the silvery bronze of the young oak stems, and the ruddy birch and ashes grey, he felt a joyous elasticity of frame; his pulses throbbed with pleasure, and before they reached the town he determined to alight and follow the mossy lane to the left, two miles of whose windings would take him within a hundred yards of Kilby, the time fitting so well that he knew he should intercept Sage as she left the school, which would not break up for the holidays until the following day.

Home again, after many months’ absence—months of stern self-denial; and as he leaped down from his seat on the coach, leaving his portmanteau for delivery at the inn, he felt so boyish and light-hearted that he began to run along the lane.

“What nonsense!” he said, half aloud. “One shuts oneself up in that little hole and reads and reads till one’s brain gets clogged, and full of unwholesome fancies. What a brute I am to let such thoughts creep in, when I’ll wager anything that my darling is longing to see me back.”

He stopped to pick a primrose, then another, and a violet. Walked rapidly on again, but paused to select a couple of bramble-leaves of a most glorious deep green bronze. Then there was a beautiful privet spray, and another primrose or two, and by degrees, as he hurried on with little pauses, a goodly wild bouquet had been culled, and he smiled as he saw in imagination Sage’s delight at his present.

“Heaven bless her!” he said, half aloud, and, all unpleasant suspicions gone, he walked on with his eyes half closed, revelling in a kind of day-dream full of delights, the only jarring thought being that he was coming to see Sage before paying his duty to his father at home.

“He’ll forgive me,” he said. “He knows how I love her. Why, what a boy I feel to-day! It’s this delicious air that has not been breathed by two million sets of lungs.”

“There’s the farm,” he said. “How clean the windows must be to reflect the setting sun like that. Different to mine. I wonder how Mrs Portlock is, and what the old lady will say?”

He hurried on, eager to reach the narrow cross where the Kilby lane and the one he was in intersected, and, once there, he meant to mount the high bank, and wait by the old mossy oak pollard, watching for Sage’s steps, so as to give her a surprise by throwing the bouquet of wild flowers at her feet, and then—

And then?—Alas! how pleasant is that habit of castle-building in the air. How brightly the edifices are raised, how quickly, how dismally they fall! Luke had planned all so well, and hurried on along the soft, mossy border of the lane, heedless of the winter’s dirt, till he reached the cross, turned sharply, and then stopped short, uttering a low moan as he reeled against the hedge, clutching at the thorns for a support.

Part 1, Chapter XXXIV.

An Invitation.

Cyril Mallow's plan of playing what he called a waiting game had the effect he anticipated, and when he thought that the time was ripe he sent a very tenderly-worded letter, full of gentle reproach, to Sage, telling her that he had fought, no one knew how hard, to master his feelings, but that it was all in vain; that he could not bear his existence there, and that he was going abroad—anywhere, he said—and he wished it was out of the world.

It was just at a time when the Rector was in high glee, for there had been no parish troubles for some time. He was beginning to make the people understand him, he told the curate, who bowed and said nothing, though he did think about his efforts to preserve peace. Julia and Cynthia were staying in town with Claudine and Faustine Perry-Morton, an act of kindness those ladies said, while their dear brother was forced to be in Rome, where the new art society had invited him to be president and inaugurate their proceedings. Then, although Frank was still at home, leading a life that, if he had been a poor man's son, would have been called "loafing," there was hope for Cyril, and a chance for weaning him from this attachment for Sage Portlock. In fact, jumping at a hint from the Rector, Lord Artingale had gone to Magnus and asked his advice, which was freely given, with a good idea or two how to set about it, and the result was that he had the pleasure of writing down to the Rector that the Duke of Borwick had given him an excellent post for his friend.

"It is only five hundred a year," wrote Lord Artingale, "but I dare say something better will come."

The Rector took the letter into Mrs Mallow's room after reading it in the grape house, where he had been busy trimming special bunches intended for the invalid's use.

"He's a good fellow, Artingale, a thoroughly good fellow," he said. "Sunshine at last for that unhappy boy."

"Our son, Eli," said Mrs Mallow, reproachfully. "If he is unhappy, may not we be to blame?"

The Rector's delight was of short duration, for Cyril's next move was to tell his father flatly that he had not been consulted, and that he should decline the post.

"But you must take it, Cyril," said his father. "Why, my boy, I have been so full of hope that since our last quarrel you had seen the folly of your ways, and were becoming obedient, and willing to take your place in the duties of the world."

"I have tried," said Cyril, mournfully.

"You have, I know, my boy," cried the Rector, "and conquered."

"Conquered!" said Cyril, tragically. "No, father, I have obeyed you, and kept away from Sage Portlock, but I am more than ever her slave."

He strode out of the room, leaving the Rector wishing that the Portlocks had never come to Kilby, and that he had never made such a *protégée* of Sage, ending by going into Mrs Mallow's room to pour out his plaints in her willing ear.

"What is to be done with the boy?" he said, dolefully. "I will never get into a passion with him again. But what is to be done? He has some plan in view."

"Let me see him," said Mrs Mallow. "Give me some latitude, dear, and I will try to bring him to a better way of thinking."

"Do what you will," said the unhappy father, "only bring him to his senses. Here have I been almost on my knees to Artingale to get him this post, and now he says that he will not have it."

"He would take it if we consented to his marrying Sage Portlock."

"But we can't, my dear. It is impossible," cried the Rector.

Mrs Mallow was silent, and the Rector left the room.

Five minutes later, in obedience to her summons, Cyril was at his mother's side, talking to her in a depressed but very determined way.

"Go back with Frank, Cyril!" she said, piteously. "It would break my heart."

"You said that it would break if I were to die."

"Yes," she faltered.

"Well, I shall die naturally or unnaturally if I stop here," he said coldly. "I cannot bear it any longer. You know how I have tried."

Mrs Mallow laid her hand upon her side.

"Then you must fight against all that pain and suffering for my sake, mamma dear," he said, bending over her, and

kissing her tenderly.

“But you will take this post, Cyril?” she said, imploringly.

“What?” he cried, angrily. “No, I am going back to the other side of the world.”

He strode out of the room, and for the next two or three days there was misery in the house. Cyril was ill, and kept his bed, and his fond mother, who believed in him thoroughly, seeing nothing in his nature but a little wilfulness, was in agony till, after a series of long consultations with the Rector, the latter gave way.

“If we do consent, I am sure all will be well,” said Mrs Mallow, feebly.

“If I give way, will he promise to take the clerkship?” said the Rector. “Artingale will never forgive me if it is thrown up. He said that he had to beg for it humbly, and that he would never have done it but for me.”

“I will undertake to say that he will,” said Mrs Mallow.

Just then the Rector sniffed. “What is it, dear?” exclaimed the invalid. “I smell burning,” he said. “Fire, dear?” she exclaimed, excitedly, as she thought of her helpless condition. “No, dear,” he said: “smoke.”

“Then there must be fire,” she cried, clinging to his hands.

“No, no,” he said, trying to soothe her alarm. “It is tobacco. Surely Cyril would not smoke up-stairs?”

“Oh, no, dear; and he is too ill,” said the fond mother. “Poor boy!”

“Then it must have been Frank down-stairs,” said the Rector. “But to go back. Now, look here, dear, can you guarantee that?”

“I am sure I can.”

“But it is such a descent. Think of Lord Artingale.”

“Don’t say that, dear,” said Mrs Mallow. “I have thought over it so long. You say yourself that she is a good, sweet girl, and I am sure when I saw her I thought so, too. Well, then, why should pride stand in the way?”

“Yes, she is very nice,” said the Rector, “and I am willing to forget all about birth and position; but then there are our girls.”

“But if it is to be the winning of our boy to the life we wish him to lead? I’m sure he loves her very dearly.”

“Better than himself,” said the Rector, bitterly.

“Oh, Eli, do not talk like that,” sighed the invalid. “For my sake and his—let pride be set aside. If Henry Artingale really cares for Cynthia he will not mind, and as for Mr Perry-Morton, I heard when we were in town that his father made an immense fortune in some very low class trade. Say *yes*, and let us hope that Sage—”

“Sage!” said the Rector. “Bitter herb! A pity it is not Rue. Bitter herbs for us to eat. Heigho! nothing but troubles, I suppose. Then you quite adopt her now?”

“For my boy’s sake—yes,” said the invalid. “Then you do give way?”

“For the last time—yes.”

“And you will go and see the Portlocks?”

“Yes.”

“And I may tell Cyril this?”

“Yes.”

“God bless you, Eli! You are always good to me,” sobbed the poor woman; and the tears stood in her husband’s eyes as he knelt down and took her in his arms. At that time Mr Cyril Mallow, the sick, sat up in bed and lit a fresh cigar before comfortably rearranging himself for a good skim of the sporting papers.

About a couple of hours after, as the Churchwarden was returning from a round amongst his sheep, he caught sight of the Rector coming to meet him, when a long conversation took place, one that ended by the gate leading into the home close.

“Well, parson,” said Portlock, as they parted, “as I said before, I’ll make no promises but this—I won’t be hard. My niece’s happiness is what I wish to bring about before I die; and if she wants to have him, and he really will steady down and make her a good husband, why, I suppose it must be. Now I must go away and think.”

They shook hands and parted, the Rector going thoughtfully home with his hands behind him, and his stick whisking right and left, tail fashion, and up and down, while he talked to himself about his weakness in giving way, and wondering what was to be the outcome of an arrangement that seemed like breaking faith on his part with Luke Ross.

As he reached the gate he smelt the smoke of a cigar, and, in spite of his knowledge of his son's ways, he could not help feeling surprised at the sight of Cyril coolly walking up and down, the message he had had from his mother having apparently effected a miraculous cure.

"Better, Cyril?" he said, drily.

"Yes, sir, I'm pretty well all right now," was the reply; and the Rector sighed, and began to feel a strange sensation of regret stealing over him, as once more he asked himself what was to be the end.

Meanwhile, the Churchwarden had gone on to the farm, and entered by the kitchen door, where Mrs Portlock was busy dividing her attention between scolding the maids and mincing meat for sausages.

He gave her a short nod, and went on into the parlour, treading upon the mats so as to make no sound, and there finding Sage so preoccupied that, as she sat with her back to him, she did not notice her uncle's entrance.

Pen, ink, and paper were before her, and on her right an envelope.

This was directed in a plain, clear hand—so plain that the farmer could easily read it from where he stood.

It bore the name of Luke Ross, and she had prepared the envelope before writing her letter, for upon the sheet of paper was the date, and then came the three words, "My dear Luke."

That was all, and the marks that followed upon the paper were made by tears.

"It is like living a lie," he heard her say, with a passionate sigh; and then she started up, for she became aware of her uncle's presence in the room.

"Why, Sage, lass," he said, gently, "do you always cry over your letters to Luke Ross?"

She looked piteously in his face, but said no word.

"Is it because he is so long away, my lass? Well, well, we shall have him back these holidays, and it won't be long."

He was watching her intently as he spoke, and he saw that not only did she turn pale, but a spasm as of pain crossed her face.

"Thou dost not look well, my pet," he said, gently. "There, there, put the writing away, and come and sit by me while I have my pipe. I don't like my little one to be so dull. Why, Sage, what's come of all the songs? You used to be always singing and making the house cheery. I'm thinking you work too hard."

"Oh, no, no, uncle," she cried, forcing a smile.

"Then you think too much, child. You must have more change. Parson didn't come in here, did he, my lass?"

"No, uncle," she said, starting.

"No, I thought he wouldn't; but he came to meet me, and he brought a message for thee, my girl."

"For me, uncle?" she cried, crimsoning to the parting of her hair.

"Ay, he did. He says he has to be out a deal, and Mrs Mallow finds it lonesome at times without her girls; and he said, as a favour, would you mind going up and seeing her, and sitting with her and reading a bit?"

"Oh, no, uncle," faltered Sage, crimsoning more deeply, every trace of emotion being duly noted by him who was probing her to the quick. "But would Mrs Mallow—?"

She paused without finishing her sentence.

"Like it?" he said, finishing the sentence for her. "To be sure she would, my pet. What a one I am to deliver a message. It was her who asked the Rector to bid you come; and, as I thought you wouldn't mind, I just said that you would go."

"Oh, uncle, but I—I dare not," cried Sage, excitedly.

"Stuff! Tchah! Nonsense, my dear. What's to be afraid of! They're gentlepeople, I s'pose, but they're only human beings after all, and you've nothing to be ashamed of, I'm sure. I told parson you'd go on this afternoon, as there was no school, and he said I was not to be uneasy, for some one should see you home."

Sage's colour came and went as she sat there trembling, and painfully conscious.

Some one should see her home—some one should see her home. The words kept repeating themselves in her ears till she felt giddy.

What did it all mean? Why did her uncle speak to her in this gentle way? What more had passed between him and the Rector?

She gazed in his face at this, and a score more such questions repeated themselves, while the answers seemed far away.

“Go up to the rectory to-day, uncle?” she faltered at last. “I dare not go.”

“But I wish you to go,” he said, decidedly, and Sage’s heart gave one great joyful throb.

Had it been left to her she would have stayed away, but her uncle wished her to go—he literally bade her go.

The end of the matter was, that after being egged on by her aunt to dress herself in the showiest things she possessed, and having the good sense, in spite of the feeling of delirious joy that had taken possession of her, to attire herself with great simplicity, she walked, with fluttering heart, up to the rectory, where the Rev. Eli Mallow himself met her at the door with a paternal *empressement* of manner that was quite tender in its way, as he drew her hand through his arm, and led her up-stairs to Mrs Mallow’s room.

Part 1, Chapter XXXV.

Welcomed.

Sage trembled as she accompanied the Rector, and in her agitation everything seemed unreal and strange. A mist floated before her eyes, and the room seemed to be sailing round, till she felt herself led to a chair, and a thin, soft, cool hand take hers, drawing her forward, till she bent down, and felt a pair of lips press her cheek, and sigh gently.

“I am very glad to see you, Miss Portlock—I think I may call you Sage now.”

She answered something that was inaudible to herself, feeling angry the while at what she called her awkwardness and confusion, as she longed for confidence, and the power to be more at her ease, little thinking that her timid, modest behaviour was winning a way for her rapidly in the poor invalid’s heart; while, in spite of the pride that interfered somewhat with the Rector’s generosity of feeling, he could not help thinking that after all, with such a woman for his wife, a change for the better must follow in his son.

By degrees Sage grew more composed, especially when the Rector patted her gently on the arm, and asked her to excuse him while he wrote a letter or two for that day’s post; “to my daughters in town, my dear,” he said; and she was left alone with Mrs Mallow, whose careworn but sweetly-pensive face looked up, smiling tenderly in hers.

It was a delightful afternoon, and Sage would have been truly happy if she could have stood out fully in the sunshine instead of in the shadow cast across her thoughts by the remembrance of Luke Ross.

Nothing special was said, but it was quite patent to the visitor that all objection to Cyril Mallow’s attentions to her had been withdrawn on either side, and that she had been asked up there that Mrs Mallow might welcome her as her son’s future wife.

Sage’s heart beat fast, for she owned to it most fully now. It was wrong. She was faithless, but she did love Cyril, and giving herself up to the current of joyous thoughts, she allowed it to bear her softly on.

The interview grew more dream-like to her minute by minute as she listened to the burden of Mrs Mallow’s discourse, and fetched for her books, pictures, little drawers, and folios, whose contents the fond mother never wearied of displaying. Always the same tune, “My sons,” and ever something fresh to display. Cyril’s first copybook, his early letters to her from school, the sketches Frank had made, a little piece of poetry he had tried to write and never finished, broken toys, Cyril’s baby shoes, one after the other, an endless list of little trifles, all of which had to be carefully returned to their places in the treasured store.

Then the fond mother poured into the nowise unwilling ears anecdote after anecdote of Cyril’s goodness, the endless little attentions he had paid her, and the presents he had brought again and again—anecdote and present being of the most ordinary type, but gilded and burnished by motherly love till they shone with glowing lustre in Sage’s eyes.

It was a delicious time, and there was a soft, warm glow in her cheeks as she entered so thoroughly into the mother’s feelings, gaining confidence by degrees, but only to blush with confusion, and then turn pale with the pang she felt as Mrs Mallow drew her down into a close embrace, and whispered, softly—

“Bless you, my child! I am not surprised that Cyril should love you with all his heart.”

The tears of both were flowing, and the aching pain increased as Sage thought that Luke Ross also loved her with all his heart.

But there was no time for such thoughts, for just then the door opened softly, and the Rector entered, Sage starting up and looking confused; but she was set at ease directly, for he took her tenderly in his arms and kissed her, saying —

“God bless you, my child! We must have no half welcome now. I see you have won poor mamma’s heart, so I surrender mine. There, there, my dear; don’t cry! You have a pleasant little mission here.”

Sage looked up at him wonderingly.

“To make three people very happy, my dear, and that I am sure you are going to do.”

“And so am I,” said Mrs Mallow, fondly. “Where is Cyril? Ask him to come to us now.”

“I—I don’t know,” said the Rector, hesitatingly. “I did look round, but not seeing him, I thought he would be here.”

“He did not know. You did not tell him,” said Mrs Mallow.

“That Sage would be here? Oh, no. I left him to find that out,” said the Rector, playfully. “But I am not sorry, my dear, for I feel as if we ought to monopolise some one’s attentions ourselves to-day. The next time she comes we shall be set aside, being only the old folks.”

He smiled at Sage, and in a timid way she smiled back at him; but the same thought was in both their breasts, and each tried to read it through the other’s eyes.

The thought was of Luke Ross, which was agitating them both, for they were thinking of the day when they would have to face him, and give account of that which had been done; and as this dark shadow loomed up in the distance, the question arose—

What shall I say?

Cyril did not put in an appearance that day, and Mr and Mrs Mallow had their visitor entirely to themselves, with the result that when it was time for her to go, all thoughts of pride and differences in caste were gone, Mrs Mallow kissing her very affectionately.

“I can’t come to you, my dear; but you will come to me often—very often—promise me that.”

The answer trembled upon Sage’s lips. It was “Yes,” but she hardly dared to utter it, and it was taken from her.

“I will say it,” said the Rector. “Yes; she will come very often. Sage, my child, I never thought of this, but the future is hidden from all our eyes. You have been here to-day to see us in the character of the woman our son has chosen for his wife. Heaven’s blessing be on you, my child; he could not have made a worthier choice.”

Sage placed her hands in his, and once more he drew her to his breast, and kissed her broad white forehead.

“There,” he said cheerily, and with a smile, “kiss mamma, and then I’ll trot down home with you, for it is too dark for you to go alone. I think, mamma, dear, we’ll set aside all form and ceremony from now. What do you say?”

“Oh yes, yes. Let there be no scruples to keep you away, my dear. Of course,” she added, smiling, “you will come to see this poor invalid. Come and read to me as often as you can, for my daughters are beginning to forsake me a great deal now. Ah! you young people, you get strange fancies in your heads. You promise?”

She promised, and soon after the Rector was taking her home, chatting to her pleasantly, as if there was to be no more constraint; but all the same he could not help thinking about him who filled his companion’s thoughts, to the exclusion of Cyril.

How was Luke Ross to be met?

And at the same time, the fond mother, lying upon her couch, had her shadows to darken the happy thoughts that were brightening her life.

Was it just to Sage Portlock to let her become the wife of such a son as hers?

She trembled and grew agitated at the thoughts, which were cleared away as Cyril suddenly entered the room.

“Here, I say,” he cried, “what does this mean?”

“What does what mean?” said Mrs Mallow, smiling affectionately.

“They say down-stairs that Sage—Miss Portlock—has been here.”

“Yes, my son, and she has just gone back with your father. Come and sit down by me, Cyril.”

If her words were heard, they were not attended to, for Cyril darted down the stairs and out of the house, leaving Mrs Mallow to sigh, and, as a despondent fit came on, to wonder whether they had done right after all.

Part 1, Chapter XXXVI.

At the Turning.

Cyril had his run for nothing more than to accompany his father, whom he met returning home. But the Rector was in a most genial frame of mind, and father and son came back to the rectory in the highest of spirits, Cyril bounding up to his mother’s room without a trace of illness left.

“Take the post? That I will, and we’ll forget all about the past,” he cried. “I am glad you like her. She’s the dearest and best of girls, and I love her. There, I’m not ashamed to say so. I do love her dearly, and ten times more for her nice, modest, retiring ways. Father, I’m going to settle down with the best of wives, and—oh, hang it all, I wish I’d known you were going to bring her here. I say, what a good old fellow you are!”

And plenty more in the same strain, so that as the question was discussed the hours flew by, and Mrs Mallow, weary though she felt with extra exertion, felt that happy days were coming once again, and she went at last to her pillow to dream of the girl who was to bring peace to her home, and restore her errant boy, bringing him from a reckless, careless life to one that was to do honour to them all.

“Quite well, thank you!” said Cyril to himself, as he leaped out of bed the next morning, and, after dressing, lit a cigar for what he called a matutinal whiff, but really under the impression that he could think better under its influence.

For there was a good deal to be thought about that day, and a good deal to be done.

“I shall have to talk pretty seriously to Master Frank,” he said. “There must be no nonsense if Sage is to be my wife. Let’s see if he is up. No, I’ll leave it for the present; I don’t want him to turn nasty if I can help it.”

He knew, from the previous night’s conversation, that the Churchwarden had made no further objection to his suit, and, under the circumstances, he felt that the proper course would be for him to go straight over to Kilby Farm, and in a frank, manly way thank him, and talk to him of the future.

“Hang it all, though,” he cried, pettishly, “I hate the very idea. It makes a fellow seem such a fool. *Ask papa*! Hang papa. I don’t think I shall go.”

He went down to breakfast, and when it was over the Rector said—

“By the way, Cyril, I think I’d walk over and see Mr Portlock. He would like the attention, and it is your duty to pay him all respect.”

“Oh, yes; of course, father,” he said, impatiently.

“But don’t go down to the school, Cyril,” said the Rector, rather anxiously.

“Oh, no; of course not,” said the son.

“We need not mind what people say, but it is as well not to give them cause for chattering. There is nothing to be ashamed of, but while Sage has the school we’ll let matters go on as usual.”

“But she must not stay there, father.”

“Certainly not, Cyril. I’ll chat the matter over with Portlock, and see about a fresh mistress as soon as possible.”

“That’s right,” said Cyril; and before, his father could say more he was gone.

“Get a new mistress—get a new master,” muttered the Rector, tapping the table with his well-pared finger-nails. “Why, it is near the time when Luke Ross will be back. Tut—tut—tut! It is a most unfortunate affair.”

It was so near the time that Luke Ross was already on his way to the London terminus, and a few more hours would see him at Lawford.

“Well, well, I’ve nothing to do with that,” said the Rector, impatiently. “Sage and he must settle the matter between them. She evidently never cared for him, and—tut—tut—tut! Well, there, I’ve done all for the best.”

He went off to solace himself with a look at his flowers, and tried to forget what entanglements might ensue; while Cyril, with his hands in his pockets, smoked cigar after cigar, as he fidgeted about in his own room, trying to screw his courage up to the proper point for a visit to Kilby Farm, for, truth to tell, the nearer the necessity for an interview with the Churchwarden, the less he felt disposed to undertake the task.

“There,” he said, impatiently, “morning’s a bad time. He’s sure to be busy. I’ll go after lunch.”

Lunch-time came, and the Rector smilingly asked him how he got on with Mr Portlock.

“Haven’t been yet. Going directly after lunch,” he said shortly; and, to prepare himself for his task, he paid a good deal of attention to the sherry decanter, and, after lunch, smoked a couple more cigars, as he hesitated and hung about.

“Well, I will go now,” he exclaimed, and, rousing up his courage, he went across the fields towards Kilby Farm, but turned off before he got there, and went strolling along the lane.

“Hang the job,” he muttered. “I hate it, but I must go, though, I suppose.”

He turned back, and somehow began thinking of Luke Ross, who was speeding light-hearted enough upon his journey.

“Poor cad!” he said, half aloud. “How wild he will be!”

Once more he neared the farm, and once more he hesitated and turned off.

“I can’t face the old boy alone,” he cried, impatiently. “What does it matter? He knows nothing of etiquette. I shall go and meet Sage, and then we can go in together. It’s all nonsense to be so formal.”

He seemed to be quite relieved upon coming to this determination, and, seating himself upon a gate, he sat swinging his legs to and fro, whistling, and consulting the watch he carried from time to time, till, coming to the conclusion that it was just about the right moment for meeting Sage as she left the school, he leaped down and made off in the direction of the town.

“What a good, obedient son I am,” he said, with a mocking laugh. “Here I promised that I would not go to the school, and I have waited like a lamb until she comes out.

“Well, the trouble’s over, and I’ve won,” he said, as he walked on. “Has the game been worth the candle? She’s very nice, and the old folks will come down handsomely, of course, and I shall have to go up to town to this precious office. Hang the office! Well, it won’t be so dull as it is down here.”

“Little wench is late,” he muttered, gazing at his watch, and yawning. “Hang it, I’ve smoked too much to-day. Wonder whether she’ll smell my breath. She’s a nice little lassie after all. Ha, ha, ha! Poor old Luke Ross—what a phiz he will pull when he finds that he has been cut out! There she comes!” He hastened his steps as he caught sight of Sage, and the next minute he was at her side. “Why, Sage,” he said, “did I startle you?”

“Yes,” she said, trembling. “No, I am not startled;” and her blushing confusion made her look so charming that a good deal of Cyril Mallow’s indifference was swept away.

“If I had only known that you were coming to our place last night!” he said, tenderly.

“Didn’t you go away on purpose to avoid me?” she said, with a touch of coquetry. “Go away? For shame!” he said. “When I have thought of nothing, dreamed of nothing but you, Sage, all these long weary days. Oh, my darling, now the difficulties are all over what am I to say?”

In her happiness and excitement there was a strange mixture of yielding and confusion in Sage’s manner; she glanced at him proudly, her heart bounding with joy at his every word, and then she felt that she was being unmaidenly, and tried to be more reserved.

But she could not help his drawing her hand through his arm, and though she tried to pull it away from his grasp, he would hold it; and at last, ready to cry hysterically—ready to laugh with joy, she walked on by his side, feeling happier than she had ever felt before.

For Cyril Mallow knew how to woo, and as he lowered his voice to a low, impassioned tone, he told her of his love, and how he was coming straight on with her to the farm. That he was the happiest of men, and that if she was cold and distant to him now it would break his heart. With all this breathed tenderly in her ears by one she really loved, it was no wonder that she grew less distant, and ceased to try and draw her hand away. Indeed, somehow poor Sage did not in her agitation seem to know it when a strong, firm arm was passed round her waist in the narrow part of the lane, down between the banks, where no one was likely to see.

All was a delicious dream, full of oblivion of the past, till in one short moment, as with head drooping towards Cyril Mallow, she hung upon his words, her heart throbbing, her humid eyes soft and liquid with the light of her young love, she felt turned, as it were, to stone, and stood with parted lips, staring at Luke Ross at the turning as he reeled against the hedge.

Part 1, Chapter XXXVII.

Luke Ross’s Reception.

It was as if nature sorrowed o’er the scene, for as the encounter took place the rich, warm glow of the winter sunset passed away, and with the black clouds rising in the west came a chilling wind, and a few scattered drops of rain pattered amidst the fallen leaves where a short half-hour before there were the warmth and suggestions of spring. Now it was winter—bitter, depressing winter—all around, and in the hearts of those who stood there pale and grey as the gathering night.

Luke Ross was the first to recover himself as the giddy sensation passed away. The blood seemed to surge to his brain, and, with a cry of rage, he dashed at Cyril, and seized him by the throat.

“How dare you!” he cried. “You have insulted her.”

Almost as he spoke his hands dropped to his side, and he stood motionless, gazing, from one to the other, at Sage shrinking back, with her hands covering her face; and Cyril, who had now got the better of his surprise, standing in a menacing attitude, ready for his assailant.

For the moment, now, Luke seemed stunned; he could not realise the truth of what he saw. Either, he told himself, it was some mistake, or his eyes deceived him, and he had not seen Sage Portlock—the woman who had promised to be his wife—half embraced by Cyril Mallow, to whom she seemed to cling.

At last he found his power of speech return, but so unreal did everything seem that he hardly knew his own voice as he exclaimed—

“Sage, speak to me. What does this mean?”

Her hands fell from her face, and she started violently at the bitter tone of reproach in his words, gazing wildly in his face, her lips parting, but no sound coming from them.

“Tell me that this is not true—that I was half blind—that you do not care for him—Sage, Sage—my darling!”

There was a piteous appeal in his words that made her shiver; and her eyes seemed rivetted to his, but she did not speak.

“Tell me, Sage! For heaven’s sake speak!” he cried, in a low, hoarse moan. “Sage—I cannot bear it. Sage—come to me—my own.”

He held out his hands to her as he spoke, and took a step towards her, his anguished face working with the agony of his soul.

But as he gazed yearningly in her eyes with his, so full of love, forgiveness, and tender appeal, she covered her face once more with her hands, and seemed to cower in her abasement as she shrank away.

Cyril had been too much startled to speak at first; and the rude attack had sent a thrill through his nerves that was not the feeling experienced by the brave when suddenly moved to action; but now he began to recover his equanimity, and, taking a step in front of Sage, he made as if to take her hand.

“Really,” he said, “my good fellow, you have no right to—”

“Stop!” cried Luke, in so fierce a voice that Cyril remained for the time as if turned to stone, staring at the speaker, whose whole manner changed. He looked taller; the appealing gaze was gone, and his eyes seemed to flash, while his chest heaved, and his hands clenched, as he stood before them—no mean adversary for one who encountered him hand to hand.

“Sage,” he cried, and his voice was stern, fierce, and commanding. “A minute ago I could not believe this. Tell me I was deceived. No: not now. Come with me to the farm.”

He tried to take one of her hands, but she shrank, shudderingly, away.

“You shall speak,” he cried.

“Oh, come,” said Cyril, in a blustering tone, “I’m not going to stand by and listen to this. Sage, dear, this man has no hold whatever upon you. Come home with me.”

“No hold?” cried Luke, quickly. “Why—but no; I will not speak to him. Sage, take my arm. I will not reproach you now. Come with me.”

He caught her wrist, trembling the while with suppressed passion. But, with a quick flash of anger, she tore it away.

“Cyril,” she cried, “protect me from this man.”

Her words seemed to strike Luke Ross like blows, for he staggered back, his lips parted, his face ashy grey, and a look of despairing horror starting, as it were, from every feature; but as he saw Cyril Mallow take her hand when Sage turned from him, Luke’s whole aspect changed, and, with a cry like that of some infuriated animal, he literally leaped at Cyril’s throat.

Sage shrieked, and then staggered to the bank, cowering against the hedge, as, recovering himself from the attack, and driven to defend himself, Cyril seized his assailant, and for the next few minutes there was the sound of hard breathing, muttered ejaculations, the scuffling noise of feet upon the gravelly road, and then a heavy fall, Luke Ross being seen in the gathering gloom of the winter’s evening to be above his rival, who lay motionless, with Luke’s knee upon his chest, his hands upon his throat.

The sight before her nerved Sage to action, and she tottered to where the two men were.

“Luke,” she cried; “Luke, are you mad? Oh, help, help, help!”

“Mad? Am I mad?” he said, hoarsely, as Sage’s shrieks rang out shrilly on the evening air. “Yes, I must be mad,” he muttered, as he rose slowly to his feet, and stood gazing down at his lost love, who now threw herself frantically upon her knees, and raised Cyril’s head upon her arm.

“And I came back for this,” said Luke, in a husky whisper—“for this!”

But she did not hear him; her mind being taken up with the horror of her position.

“I came back for this,” he continued, in the same low, husky tone. “I would not believe it true. Oh, Sage, Sage!” he groaned aloud, “it is more than I can bear.”

He staggered away along the lane by which he had come, hatless, his coat torn, his throat open, and the rain, that had now begun to fall, beating upon his fevered head. Footsteps were hurrying towards the spot where he had encountered her he loved and his rival. But he heard them not; he only staggered on—on into the gathering night, with a vague feeling that he must go away somewhere to find rest for his aching brain—anywhere to be away from her.

One moment he stopped, for he heard Sage’s voice raised in a loud cry; but it was not repeated, and with a bitter laugh, he now tore on at headlong speed, running not from pursuit, but from sheer desire for action. On and on, quite heedless of the direction he took, so that he might get away—onward and onward through the wind and rain.

Part 1, Chapter XXXVIII.

A Willing Invalid.

The footsteps heard as Luke Ross hurried away were those of the Churchwarden. He had been round the farm according to his custom when his after-dinner pipe was ended, and then spent his usual amount of time over scraper and mat, getting rid of the superabundant earth that always seemed to cling to his boots.

“Shortest day, mother,” he said, entering the long parlour where Mrs Portlock was seated watching the fire, with her knitting upon her knees. “Be dusk directly. Sage come in?”

“No, not yet. It is hardly her time,” was the reply. “But you need not fidget about her.”

“Wasn’t fidgeting about her,” said the Churchwarden, shortly, for the meaning tone in his wife’s words annoyed him. All that afternoon he had been thinking of Luke Ross, and it had struck him that it was just upon the young man’s time for paying a visit home.

“And then we shall be having him up here, and he’ll learn all about Sage. Hang me if I think that I ought to have listened to parson as I did!”

These thoughts had come to him over and over again, troubling him more than he cared to own, for there was something frank and manly about Luke Ross that he had always liked, and in spite of his own uncompromising refusal to sanction any engagement, he did not feel happy in his mind about the treatment the young man had received.

“Look here, mother,” he said, sharply, after standing at the front door for a few minutes, watching for Sage’s return, “this is your doing.”

“What is my doing?” she replied; “but there, for goodness’ sake, Joseph, do come in or stop out. You’ve done nothing but open and shut that door.”

The Churchwarden shut the front door with a bang, and strode up to the fire.

“I say this is your doing about Sage, and I don’t half like it after all.”

“There, there, there!” she cried. “I wish to goodness you’d mind the farm, and leave women and their ways alone. What in the world do you understand about such things?”

“I don’t think we’ve been doing right,” he said; “and I’m afraid that no good will come of it.”

“Stuff and nonsense, dear. Why any one, with half an eye, could have seen that the poor girl was fretting her heart out about young Mallow.”

“She didn’t fret her heart out about Luke Ross,” said the Churchwarden, sturdily.

“About him!” said Mrs Portlock, in a tone of contempt. “How could she? Cyril Mallow’s worth a dozen of him.”

“Proof of the pudding is in the eating,” said the Churchwarden, kicking at a piece of blazing coal with his boot toe.

“Yes, and a very unpleasant bit of pudding Mr Luke Ross would have been to eat. There, you hold your tongue, and let things go on. You ought to be very proud that matters have turned out as they have.”

“Humph! Well, I’m not a bit proud,” he replied; “and I’m very sorry now that I have let things go on so easily as I have. You may see Luke Ross when he comes down, for I won’t.”

“Oh! I’ll see him,” she replied. “That’s easily done. Why, Joseph, you ought to be ashamed to think of them both on the same day. Our Sage will be his lordship’s sister-in-law.”

“Hang his lordship! Well, perhaps I am, wife, and it’s because I’m afraid that Luke Ross is the better man of the two. Why, look here, it’s getting quite dark, and that girl not home,” he cried, angrily, as he strode towards the front door.

“Do come and sit down,” said Mrs Portlock. “She’s all right I tell you. I’ll be bound to say that some one has gone to meet her and see her home, and, look here, Joseph, don’t be foolish when Mr Cyril comes, but make yourself pleasant to him for Sage’s sake. She quite worships him, poor girl.”

“Hah!” said the Churchwarden, with a grim smile upon his lip. “No one ever worshipped me,” and he opened the front door.

“Now don’t keep letting in the cold wind, Joseph,” cried Mrs Portlock, and then, “Gracious! What’s that?”

She heard the faint scream of some one at a distance, but almost as it reached her ears the Churchwarden had gone off at a heavy trot across the home field, in the direction from whence the sound had come, and he burst through the gate, to find Sage upon her knees, nursing Cyril Mallow’s bleeding head, as the sound of steps was heard from the side lane.

“What’s this? Who did this?” cried the Churchwarden. “Is he much hurt?”

“I—I don’t know,” faltered Sage. “Oh, uncle, uncle, is he killed?”

“Killed—no,” said the Churchwarden, going down on one knee, “cut—stunned. How was it—a fall?”

“No, uncle,” sobbed Sage, who was now half beside herself with grief—“they—they fought.”

“Who did? Who has been here?”

“Don’t—don’t ask me,” she sobbed. “But I do ask you,” cried the Churchwarden, sharply. “Why,” he cried, struck as by a flash of inspiration, “Luke Ross has come down?”

“Yes,” moaned Sage, with a sigh of misery.

“And he did this?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Humph! Then he’s a plucked un!” muttered the Churchwarden, with a low whistle. “Well, anyhow we’ve got it over.”

“Is—is he dead, uncle?” whispered Sage, hoarsely.

“Dead—no. I tell you his head’s too thick. Well, you’ve done it, young lady. There, I’ll stop with him while you run up and tell Tom Loddon and Jack Rennie to bring the little stable door off the hinges. We must get him up to the farm.”

“Can’t—can’t I carry him, uncle?” said Sage, naïvely.

“Pish! what nonsense, girl. I don’t think I could carry him myself. Let’s try.”

He placed his arms round Cyril’s chest, and raised him into a sitting posture, the act rousing Cyril from his swoon.

“That’s better. How do you feel now?” cried the Churchwarden. “He’ll be able to walk, and it will do him good. Come, Master Cyril, how do you feel?”

“Sick—faint,” he replied. “Cowardly assault on a fellow.”

He clung to the Churchwarden, for his head swam, but the sickness passed off in a few minutes, and then, leaning heavily upon the Churchwarden’s strong arm, the injured man walked slowly across the field to where Mrs Portlock was standing at the open door, Sage feeling sick and faint herself, as she followed close behind, bearing both Cyril’s and Luke Ross’s hats, that of the latter having been picked up by her without any knowledge of what she had done.

“What is it? What is the matter?” cried Mrs Portlock.

“Help with thy hands, wife, and let thy tongue rest,” said the Churchwarden, sharply; and in answer to the rebuke, Mrs Portlock did help by drawing forward the great couch near the fire, and sending Sage for some pillows, after which the latter supported Cyril, while Mrs Portlock, with a good deal of notable quickness, bathed the cut at the back of the injured man’s head, afterwards cutting away a little of the hair, and strapping it up with diachylon in quite a business-like way.

“Mother’s good as a doctor over a job like this,” said the Churchwarden, cheerily. “So am I. Here’s your physic, squire. Sip that down.”

The medicine was a good glass of brandy and water, of which Cyril partook heartily; and then, in obedience to the tender request of Sage, he lay down on the pillows, and half closed his eyes.

“Now, then,” said the Churchwarden, bluffly, “what do you say? Shall I send over and tell them at the rectory you’ve had a tumble and cracked your crown, or will you have a cup of tea with us and then walk up? You don’t want a doctor.”

Cyril opened his eyes languidly, and gazed at the Churchwarden. Then he let them rest on Mrs Portlock with a pitiful gaze, finally turning them upon Sage, who was kneeling by him holding one hand.

Cyril Mallow’s thoughts were that he should prefer to stay where he was, tended by the women, and he said, faintly—

“Doctor—please.”

“Nonsense, man,” cried Portlock, bluffly. “Why, wheres your heart? Pluck up a bit. You don’t want a doctor for a bit of a crack like that.”

“Oh, uncle, you are cruel!” cried Sage. “I am sure he is very much hurt.”

Her hand received a tender squeeze in response to this, and, in spite of her present misery, Sage felt her heart begin to glow.

“Not I, my lass,” said the Churchwarden, in his bluff way. “Perhaps some one else thinks that you are.”

Sage sank lower, and hid her face upon Cyril’s hand.

“Let us send one of the lads,” said Mrs Portlock.

“All right,” said the Churchwarden, good-humouredly. “Send word up to the rectory that Mr Cyril has had a bit of an accident—mustn’t say you’ve been fighting, eh?”

Cyril moaned softly, but did not speak.

“Say that he has had a bit of an accident, and that he won’t be home for an hour or two. Would you like him to come round by the town and tell Vinnicombe to come up?”

“Oh, yes, yes, uncle,” cried Sage, pitifully; and the messenger was sent off.

The doctor and the Rector arrived almost together about an hour later, during which interval Portlock had made

himself acquainted with the circumstances of the struggle.

“And was Luke Ross hurt?” he asked.

“I—I think not, uncle,” said Sage, colouring deeply, and then turning pale.

“Humph! Poor fellow!” said the Churchwarden. “Sage, my lass, you’ve behaved very badly to that young chap, and no good will come of it, you’ll see.”

Mr Vinnicombe did not consider that there was much the matter, that was evident; but he apparently did not care to tell his patient that this was the case, and consequently it was arranged that Cyril should stop at the farm, the best bed-room being appointed to his use; and he amended so slowly that he quite fulfilled a prophecy enunciated by the Churchwarden.

“Strikes me, mother,” he said, “that yon chap will be so unwell that he won’t go away for a fortnight; and if you let Sage nurse him he’ll stop a month.”

Sage, to Cyril’s great disgust, was not allowed to nurse him; but he stayed for a month all the same, fate having apparently arranged that, if Luke Ross’s cause was not hopeless before, it was now wrecked beyond the slightest chance of being saved.

Part 1, Chapter XXXIX.

Fullerton’s Prophecy.

In a place like Lawford, where every one knew more of his or her neighbours affairs than the individual could possibly know for him or herself, the encounter near Kilby Farm soon had its place as the chief item of news, and was dressed and garnished according to the taste of those who related it.

The principal version was that, stung by a letter sent by Sage Portlock, Luke Ross had come down from town and purposely left the coach at Cross-lane, so that he could waylay and murder Cyril Mallow with a huge hedge-stake which was picked up afterwards near the place.

For a short time the gossips were at fault for a reason, but they only had to wait patiently for a while, and then it was known throughout the place that Cyril Mallow was engaged to marry Sage—a matter so out of all reason to the muddled intellect of Humphrey Bone, the old schoolmaster, that he said it was enough to make widow Marly turn in her grave.

Why, he did not explain. It could not have been from jealous disappointment, for widow Marly had had a very fair share of matrimonial life, having married at the early age of sixteen, and being led twice afterwards to the hymeneal altar before dying at a very good old age.

“But it’s a wrong thing,” he said, at the King’s Head, during a course of potations—“a wrong thing; and no good will come. Two sorts, oil and water, and they won’t mix. Tell parson I say so, some of you, if you like. It’s his doing to get the girl’s money, and it’s a wrong thing.”

In the midst of the many discussions in Lawford it was asked why Luke Ross was not to be prosecuted for assaulting the parson’s son.

“Nice sort of fellow,” said Fullerton; “goes to learn to be a lawyer, and comes down here and breaks the law.”

“Ah! it’s been a strange bad case,” said Smithson, the tailor.

“Anybody seen owt of him since?” ventured Warton, the saddler.

There was silence for a few moments, and then Tomlinson spoke.

“I haven’t seen him down,” he said. “In fact, I know he has not been, for old Michael Ross has been up to see him and hear the rights of the case.”

“Yes?” said two or three, eagerly.

“Ah! he don’t say anything about the rights and wrongs; only that he doesn’t think Joseph Portlock’s girl behaved well to him.”

“Oh! I don’t know,” said Fullerton. “What call had a girl like that to consider herself bound to a wandering man who couldn’t settle down like a Christian? I think she did quite right to give him up.”

“And marry young Mallow?”

“But they are not married yet, my boy,” said Fullerton, shaking his head; “and it’s my belief that they won’t be. He’s a flyaway, wild, scapegrace of a fellow. It’ll come to nought, but I do think young Ross ought to be punished same as any other man. Fair play and no favour for me.”

“Very good sentiment, Mr Fullerton,” said Warton.

“Make it your own motto, then, Mr Warton,” said Fullerton, proudly. “As I says to Michael Ross, when I was talking to

him, yesterday—no, it was the day before yesterday—no, stop, it *was* yesterday. ‘I believe in fair play,’ I said.

“‘So do I, Mr Fullerton,’ he said; ‘but I don’t think my poor boy has got it here.’”

“Did he say that?” said Warton.

“Ay, that he did, and pst—here he is!”

There was a murmur in the inn room where the principal Lawford tradesmen were assembled, as old Michael Ross, the tanner, came in, looking very keen and dark, and as if close application to his trade had heightened the colour of his skin.

The old man seemed nervous, and as if he feared that he would not be counted welcome; but he soon found that if he would only discuss his son’s conduct no one would be looked upon as a more welcome addition to the weekly meeting.

There was a pause for a few minutes, during which old Ross gave his orders to the landlord, and lit his pipe, smoking afterwards in quiet consciousness that he was being furtively glanced at by all assembled, and that it was only with the expectation of hearing more that they were so quiet of tongue.

“Been having a run up to London, Master Ross, I hear,” said Warton, the saddler, at last.

“Yes, Master Warton, yes; I’ve had a run up amongst the soot and smoke,” said Michael Ross.

“And was strange and glad to get back again, I’ll be bound,” said Tomlinson, while Fullerton lay back in his armed Windsor chair, staring straight up at the ceiling, with the calm self-satisfaction of a man who knew all that was being asked.

“Well, yes, neighbour,” said Michael Ross, thoughtfully, “I must own that I was glad to get back again. London’s a wearisome place, and the din and rattle of the streets is enough to muddle any man’s brains. It was quite a relief to turn down the narrow lane to my son’s chambers, and get out of the buzz and whirr. My bark mill’s nowt to it.”

“Saw your son, did you?” said Warton. “How’s he getting on?”

“Oh, he’s getting on right enough,” said the old man, proudly. “He’s getting on.”

“Gotten to be a big loyer, eh?” said Smithson. “Why, Master Ross, sir, we shall hev to get him down here to take up our cases at County Court.”

“Nay, nay, nay,” said old Ross, chuckling. “Not yet—not yet. Theres a deal to learn to get to be a big loyer; but my sons working away hard now he’s getting a bit over his trouble.”

“Trouble?” said Fullerton, bringing his eyes down from the ceiling. “He hasn’t got into trouble, I hope?”

“Nay, nay, only about the bit o’ trouble down here.”

“Not going to hev him before the magistrates, are they, Master Ross?” said Warton.

“Magistrates? What, my son?” said the old man, firing up. “Not they. He’d a deal better right to have some one else before them. My son never did no wrong.”

“But they say he knocked young Cyril about with a hedge-stake,” said Smithson.

“Tchah! Lies?” said the old man, angrily. “I dare say he hit him. So would I if I’d been a young man, and come back and found my young lady stole away like that. Yes, I’d ha’ done the same.”

“Hah, yes,” said Tomlinson, thoughtfully, as if he were going back to past times. “It is hard on a man. But I don’t know, Master Ross; if a man’s got a bad tooth it’s best out, and it has saved your lad perhaps from many a sore and aching time in the future.”

“I’m not going to say anything against some people we know, and I’m not going to say anything for them,” said the old tanner, warmly. “All I do say is, that I don’t think my son has had justice done him down here.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Master Ross,” said Fullerton, importantly. “I’m sure the way in which he took our side over the school appointment was noble. He saw how unjust it was, and he drew back like a man.”

“I don’t know—I don’t know,” said Michael Ross, with a dry chuckle. “I’m afraid there was something more than that at the bottom of it, though he never owned it to me.”

“Ah, well,” said Fullerton; “it’s very evident that he won’t marry Sage Portlock. Poor girl, it’s a sad fall away.”

“Yes,” said Tomlinson, smoothly, “it does seem strange.”

“Well, for my part,” said Warton, “I wonder at Joseph Portlock, though I think it’s his missus as is most to blame. I don’t believe as young Cyril was much hurt.”

“Not he,” chuckled Smithson. “And there he’s been for the past month, lying on the sofa, tended by those two women. I hear the parson’s been every day, and they do say, that as soon as he gets better—”

“He’s better now,” said Warton.

“Well, then,” chuckled Smithson, drawing one leg up under him upon his chair from force of habit; “suppose we say much better—they’re to be married.”

“Well, it caps me,” said Warton; “I can’t understand what it means.”

“Money,” said Fullerton. “Some people keep up their grand houses and gardeners and grape-vines, and get laying traps baited with pretty girls for young lords and people from London, and after all are not so well off as some who pay their twenty or thirty pound rent and have done with it. Joseph Portlock, I suppose, will leave all his money to those two girls some day, and it will be a nice bit. Pity he didn’t keep Miss Rue for the other boy, and then parson would have been happy.”

“When’s Frank going back?” said Smithson, the tailor, for reasons of his own.

“I’d know; ask him,” said Fullerton. “He’s always going over to Lewby, so I hear.”

“Well,” said Warton, the saddler, “all I can say is, that if I was John Berry he shouldn’t be always coming over to my house.”

“’Tain’t our business,” said Fullerton. “I should say, though, that Sage Portlock’ll have a nice bit o’ money.”

“Ah, there’s a many things done in this life for the sake of money,” said Tomlinson, sententiously.

“But it looks bad for a young fellow to be lying about on sofas all day long, coaxed and petted up by women, just because he has got a bit of a crack on the head. Doctor said to me, he said, when I asked him about the cut, he said, laughing all the while, ‘It isn’t as deep as a well, nor as wide as a church door,’ he said; ‘but ’twill serve—’twill serve.’”

“What did he mean by that?” said Warton.

“I don’t know,” said Fullerton, sharply. “I think it was some stuff or another that he’d read in a book. You know what a fellow he is for giving you bits out of books. Don’t you remember that night at the annual dinner? He said, when they were talking about old Mrs Hagley being a bit of a witch—”

“Ah, to be sure,” said Smithson; “about the cellar.”

“Yes,” continued Fullerton; “he said, ‘I can call spirits from the vasty deep. Landlord, go down to the cellar and bring up a bottle of the best French brandy.’”

“Ah, he’s a queer fellow, is doctor,” said Warton. “They won’t live down here when they’re married, will they?”

“Who?”

“Young Cyril Mallow and Joseph Portlock’s girl.”

“Oh, dear me, no,” said Tomlinson. “Young Cyril has got a post under government, and it’s settled that Miss Cynthia is to be married to Lord Artingale, and a house has been taken for young Cyril up in Kensington.”

“Hullo, old fox,” cried Fullerton.

“Yoicks, yoicks, yoicks, gone away,” shouted several, uproariously.

“Come, out with it,” said Fullerton. “I’ll be bound to say you know all about it.”

“Well,” said Tomlinson, with the calm reticence of one who felt himself quite at home in the matter, “I did hear a little about it.”

“From Joseph Portlock’s wife, I’ll be bound,” said Fullerton. “She’s been at your place three times lately.”

“I’m not going to mention any names,” said Tomlinson, with a sly, smooth, fat smile, “but I think I may venture to say that there’ll be a wedding somewhere within six months, and that those who are married will live in Kensington.”

“Ay, parson knows how to play his cards,” said Warton. “I suppose the eldest girl will marry that stout gentleman, Perry-Morton. Parson manages things well. Fancy bagging Lord Artingale for a son-in-law. Why, all Gatley belongs to him, and he’s an uncommonly nice fellow too.”

“Yes, his lordship’s all very well; but as to young Cyril and Miss Portlock, mark my words, no good’ll come of it,” said Fullerton, emphatically. “Mark my words: no good’ll come of it.”

“I should be sorry if it did not turn out well, and so would my son be, I’m sure,” said the old tanner.

“Why?” said Fullerton.

“Because Sage Portlock is a nice, superior sort of girl,” said the old man, “and it is always grievous to see those you like come in for trouble.”

“So it is,” said Fullerton, “but trouble will come. Here’s two clergyman’s sons, who ought to be the very model of what young men should be, and has any one of you a good word to say for them?”

“Well, for my part,” said Smithson, “a man as can’t wear a honestly well-cut pair of trousers, made by a respectable tradesman, but must send to London for everything, can’t have much balance in his nature.”

“Quite right,” said Warton. “Why, when old Mallow set up the carriage, young Cyril—no, it was Frank—must go up to London to buy the harness, and it had to come to me for repairs in less than a month.”

“Well, for my part,” said Tomlinson, “I wish Sage Portlock health and happiness, and no disrespect to you, Master Ross, for every girl has a right to choose her own master for life.”

“I wish her health and happiness, too,” said Fullerton, rising, “and I wish she may get them. Good night, gentlemen; I’m for home.”

“Yes, it’s time for home,” said old Michael Ross, rising, and saying good night; and the two neighbours walked down the street together.

“Married, eh?” said Fullerton, with a sneer. “Well, just as they like; but mark my words, Michael Ross, it means trouble.”

“I hope not, I hope not,” said the old tanner, sadly, “for I liked Sage Portlock. She’s a very good girl.”

“Bah! sir; nonsense! sir; women are not much good as a rule, and she’s a very bad specimen. But, mark my words, sir, trouble, and misery, and misfortune. It will never be a happy match.”

And the prophet of evil went his way, leaving old Michael Ross to stand upon his own doorstep thinking.

“Poor lass, I liked Sage; and though she has broken with my poor boy,” he said, “she’s not a bad girl at heart. Trouble, and misery, and misfortune—and all to come upon her poor weak head. Poor child—poor child. Luke will about break his heart.

“Trouble, and misery, and misfortune,” he repeated, sadly. “I hope not, from my very heart, but I’m afraid Stephen Fullerton is right.”

Part 2, Chapter I.

Part 2 — “Forsaking All Other.”

After a Lapse.

The Lawford people were disappointed, for the Rector thought it better, and the Portlocks made no objection, that the wedding should be as simple as possible, so there were no preparations to signify, only such as were made in a quiet way, and Luke Ross read one morning in the ‘Times’ that Cyril Mallow, second son of the Rev. Eli Mallow, had espoused Sage, daughter of the late Elias Portlock, Esq, of Melby, and niece of Joseph Portlock, Esq, the Hall, Kilby, Lawford. He had a letter afterwards from his father, giving him fuller information, and saying that Lord Artingale was at the wedding, and Cyril Mallow’s sisters were the bridesmaids, and that the young married people went off directly to Paris. That Frank Mallow had not gone back to Australia, and nobody knew when he would go. That Portlock the churchwarden had been very angry at having *Esquire* put after his name in the announcements; that he was very friendly when he met the tanner in the market-place, and desired to be kindly remembered to Luke.

The letter concluded with a hope that Luke would soon come down, but he was not to come unless he felt that he did not mind a bit; that they had a very pleasant little body for schoolmistress now, and that Humphrey Bone seemed just the same as ever, and that was all at present from Luke’s affectionate father, Michael Ross.

Not quite all at present, for there was a postscript stating that the Rector was a good deal in trouble about his eldest girl, who seemed to be getting in a bad way, but all the same, both she and her sister were engaged to be married.

Luke Ross put the letter away in a drawer with a sigh, and turned to his reading working as hard as man could work, for in this he found his only relief from the troubled thoughts that oppressed him, while the change that had taken place in him in a few months was almost startling.

As the time went on the Rector, far from feeling lighter in his burdens now that he had Cyril comfortably settled down, had two new sources of trouble: in his son Frank, who had made the rectory, or the town house that had been taken and handsomely furnished, his home. He said that he was going back to Australia, but not yet. Perhaps he should take a wife back with him.

The Rector’s other trouble was Julia, who had grown so pale and weak that at last, partly in obedience to Mr Perry-Morton’s desire, it was settled that Sir Emerton Riffley should be consulted, and that eminent and fashionable physician was asked to call.

Sir Emerton did call, and after a long visit, as he saw his patient had no complaint to make, none to describe, he settled that it was want of tone.

“There is a want of heart action, my dear madam,” he said, though there were times when poor Julia’s heart beat at a fearful rate.

“But you don’t think—”

“Oh, dear me, no! Oh, de-*ar* no! A course of tonic medicine, a little alteration in diet, and a short stay at the seaside will quite restore us.”

“Do you think Brighton?” said Mrs Mallow.

“Excellent,” said Sir Emerton; “and it would benefit you as well.”

“Or Bognor?”

“Nothing could be better.”

“Perhaps Hastings?”

“My dear madam, if I had the choosing of a place for your daughter’s residence for the present, I should decidedly say Hastings,” replied the great physician, rising from the side table, where he had been writing out a prescription precisely the same as that which he had written for hundreds of other young ladies in his time; and then, after a very courtly smile and bow, he left the drawing-room. The Rector was summoned, and the next day the family was staying at the “Queen’s” Hotel.

“There, Julia,” cried Cynthia, when they had been down a few days, “I think this is delicious, though we might just as well have stayed at Lawford. I don’t know, though; I like the seaside, and we shall be as free here as at home in the dear old woods.”

Julia shuddered.

“Oh, you foolish girl! There, don’t think of that again. Let’s enjoy ourselves while we can. The Perry-Mortons will be here soon.”

“Are they coming down?” said Julia, with a look of dismay.

“Yes. Harry’s aversion wrote to papa this morning, saying that they should be at Hastings on Saturday, so we’ve three whole days clear. What did Sage say in her letter?”

“Very little,” replied Julia. “She said that Cyril had had some little trouble though at his office.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Cynthia, “but I hope he won’t lose that.”

“Hadn’t we better turn back, Cynthia?” said her sister, with an uneasy glance round. “There are no people here.”

“That’s why I came,” said Cynthia, merrily. “I like getting away to where we can be free. Come along; I’ll help you down.”

She held out her hand, but Julia did not take it, and after threading their way amongst the huge rocks and *débris* fallen from the cliffs at the eastern end of the town, they started onward, keeping close to the water where they could, but oftener upon the shingle beneath the towering cliffs, along whose giddy edges some children were playing, as if safe as the gulls that softly winged their way above their heads.

“This is just what I like,” said Cynthia. “There, I’ve made one of my feet wet. Never mind; sea water does not give colds. Isn’t it a grand bit of coast, Julie? But, I say, suppose Bogey was to pop up now from behind one of those great pieces of rock. Oh, how stupid I am. Julie: darling sister, don’t faint.”

“No, no. I am better,” exclaimed Julia, across whose face a spasm of dread had darted.

“It was dreadfully silly of me, dear, but don’t you mind what I said. Why, Julie, we are as safe here as if we were in our own rooms. Nobody could come down those cliffs, and I feel sure that you will never see that creature again. There, be a woman. He could not tell that we were down here. Now, could he?”

“Cynthia,” said Julia, after a few moments’ pause, and as she spoke she gazed straight out to sea, “shall you think me very weak and foolish if I tell you what I think?”

“No, no, of course not,” said Cynthia, glancing furtively about, “only do try to be more firm.”

“I do try,” said Julia, with a catching of the breath, “so hard—so very hard; but that man seems to be my fate, and I feel now that go where I may, or do what I may, he is always close at hand watching for me. Even now I expect to see him waiting by some of these rocks.”

“Nonsense! foolish girl,” said Cynthia.

“And that, strive as I will, he will some day take me away.”

“What!” cried Cynthia, laughing merrily, “take you away!”

“Yes, dear,” said her sister, solemnly. “I feel it. I am sure of it.”

“But oh, what nonsense, Julie! You must not let him. You give way to such thoughts. How can you be so foolish?”

“Is it foolish? I strive against the thoughts till I feel half mad, but I cannot get rid of them, and his words are ever ringing in my ears. Oh, Cynthia, sometimes I feel as if it is in vain to fight against my fate, and that I may as well be resigned.”

“Oh, Julie, Julie, Julie!” cried the spirited little maiden. “What am I to do to you—what am I to say? Shall I whip you, or scold you, or have you sent to bed without any dinner? It is too dreadful, and you shall not give way like this. Why, for shame! I know somebody who is dying of love for you.”

“Don’t name him, Cynthy dear; I detest the sight of him and his sisters.”

“No, no, I mean dear Harry’s friend, Mr Magnus.”

“Poor Mr Magnus!” said Julia, dreamily. “I am very glad he is well again.”

“But he is not quite well yet, poor dear man. I think a short stay at Hastings would do him good,” said Cynthia, archly.

“It was very brave and manly of him to do what he did,” said Julia, sadly. “I can never thank him enough.”

“Hush I walk faster; let’s get beyond those rocks, Julie,” cried her sister, excitedly. “He’s coming now.”

“Ah!”

Julia’s breath came with a spasm of agony, and her features seemed rigid.

“He hasn’t seen us yet,” whispered Cynthia, but with the same excitement in her voice. “Make haste.”

They almost ran on now, till they were obliged to pause for breath.

“Don’t look round,” whispered Cynthia, “whatever you do.”

“And we are farther than ever from the town!” moaned Julia, as she clasped her hands.

“Well, what does that matter?” cried Cynthia. “Why, Julie, how pale you look!”

“Oh, pray come on faster—faster,” whispered Julia.

“No, no, poor boy, I’ve led him dance enough. He may catch me now. Why, Julie,” she cried, “I declare I’ve frightened you. Oh, my dear sissy, I did not mean your Bogey: I meant mine. I wrote and told him we should be walking along here about four o’clock, but, of course, I never for a moment expected he would come.”

Poor Julia held one hand across her eyes as she drew a long breath of relief, and holding by her sister’s arm she walked slowly on, with her eyes closed, for they were now on a smooth stretch of sand.

“You must not be so ready to take alarm at nothing, dear. Oh, I say, Julie,” Cynthia added, piteously, “let’s turn back, or he won’t see us. No—yes. Hark! it’s all right; he has seen us. I can hear his step. Don’t look round, Julie,” she whispered, joyously. “Oh, dear, why it’s you, Harry. However did you come down?”

“Train, to be sure,” cried the young man, heartily. “Why, you both look brown already. So glad to see you looking better, Julia.”

“Well, it was very nice of you to come, Harry. But how’s poor Mr Magnus?”

“Heaps better. I persuaded him to come down with me for a week. I left him at the hotel.”

“Oh, you good boy,” whispered Cynthia; and then they strolled gently on till they were a long distance from the last houses in the town. The sun made the calm sea shimmer like damasked silver, and in the transparent pools the water was many-tinted with the reflections from the green and grey and yellow cliffs; and, as such people will, both Cynthia and Harry grew more and more selfish, taking it as a matter of course that Julia should grow fatigued and seat herself upon one of the rocks that had fallen from above, to be ground, and beaten, and polished smooth on one side, while the other was roughened with the limpets and acorn barnacles that crusted it like a rugged bark.

In fact, they forgot Julia in the intense interest of their pursuit as they wandered on, for Cynthia had to be helped from rock to rock, as they went out as far as the water would allow, and she had to make daring jumps of a few inches over rushing, gurgling streams of water that ebbed and flowed amongst the stones. Then the tiny point of her pretty shoe was always poking itself inquiringly into crevices, out of which Harry had to fish red anemones or unusually large limpets or mussels. Then *they* had a mania for gathering enough periwinkles for tea, Cynthia declaring that she would wriggle them out with a pin and eat them. But when about a dozen had been found, the search was given up for some other pursuit; perhaps it was a well-ground oyster-shell, all pearly, or a peculiar bit of seaweed; and once, close up under the cliffs where the path was very narrow, and the sea right in, the rocks were so rough and the way so awkward that Harry had to help little Cynthia very much—so much, that if a boat had been passing its occupants would have seen two handsome young faces in extremely close proximity. But no boat was passing to make Cynthia turn so scarlet as she did, hence the marvel; and they went on in their love-dream a little longer, thinking what a wonderfully bright and happy world this was, and how beautiful sea, sky, rock, and beach had become, glorified as they were by their young happy love, when Cynthia suddenly awoke.

“Oh, Harry!” she exclaimed, with the tears in her eyes, “how cruel, to be sure. Poor Julie! Let’s make haste back.”

“Oh, yes. She’ll be rested by now.”

“I was so thoughtless,” half sobbed Cynthia.

“She is so nervous, and she will be thinking she sees that dreadful man.”

“Who is not likely to be here, my darling,” said Artingale, smiling.

“No, but let’s make haste back,” cried Cynthia.

Artingale seemed disposed to loiter, but Cynthia was in earnest, and they hurried back towards where they had left Julia seated on a rock, one of the many scattered about.

It was time they did, for Artingale’s words just uttered were not the words of truth.

Part 2, Chapter II.

The Stray Lamb.

“Don’t be alarmed, Cynthia; these rocks are so much alike, and we wandered a good way.”

“But I am alarmed, Harry; I am sure it was here.”

“It does look like the place, certainly,” he said; “but there is another heap further on.”

“No, no, this must be the stone. I remember that little pool of clear water, and the patch of seaweed. Oh, we ought not to have left her!”

Artingale could not endorse those words, for he thought it very pleasant to have been alone with Cynthia for the past ten minutes—half an hour—hour—or two hours—he had not the slightest idea how long it had been; but the trouble and dread in her agitated young face were so marked that he began to throw off the good-humoured carelessness he felt disposed to show, and bestirred himself to find the missing girl.

“Give me your hand, pet,” he said, “and let’s get on to the next pile. I am sure we shall find her there.”

“No, no, Harry. The more I look the more I feel sure it was here we left her.”

“Well, perhaps it was, little one,” he said, looking down into the earnest eyes, “and she has grown tired, and begun to walk back. We shall find her sitting down waiting for us.”

Cynthia gave him her hand, and they ran for a short distance over the shingle; but it was too rough to go far save at a walk, and then, reaching another of the little wildernesses of masses of rock, the result of a fall from the towering cliffs, they searched about for a few minutes without result, and then walked a little way down towards the sea, so as to command a view back towards the battery and the works at the east end of the town.

There was a man tramping along with a shrimping net over his shoulder, an old lady seated on the shingle under an umbrella, a girl with a yellow-covered book perched upon a stone, and about twenty yards out an elderly gentleman with his trousers tucked up, standing in the water reading a newspaper; not a soul besides on that unfrequented part.

“Oh, Harry!” gasped Cynthia, who was ready to burst into tears.

“Why, you little goose,” he said tenderly; “there’s nothing to be afraid of. She isn’t along here, that’s certain.”

“And yet you say there’s nothing to be afraid of,” half sobbed Cynthia.

“Why, of course not. She hasn’t gone back, or we should see her somewhere. We must have passed her. I know she must have gone close up to the cliff, so as to find a shady place. All along here is so much bigger and wilder than any one would think.”

“She must have gone up on the cliff, Harry.”

“Well, dear,” he said, laughing, “you and Julie are the nearest approach to little angels I ever knew, but even you two have no wings, and I don’t think Julie would get up the face of that cliff without.”

“Oh, pray, Harry, don’t talk so, now,” she cried; “I’m afraid—I don’t know what to think.”

“Don’t be afraid, little one,” he said, encouragingly, “we’ll find her directly.”

“Is it possible that any of the cliff has fallen, and crushed her?” said Cynthia, piteously.

He started, but spoke the next moment decisively.

“No. Such a fall would have made a noise like thunder. Depend upon it she has changed her place, and we shall find her fast asleep: unless the Red Rover, or some other dashing pirate, has landed, and carried her off in his yacht.”

“Oh, Harry, you make fun of it all,” cried Cynthia, with a stamp of her little foot, which crushed a tender, young, and unoffending mussel; “and I feel now quite a chill of horror lest that dreadful man—Oh, look, look, Harry! Who is that?”

She grasped his arm convulsively, and pointed at a part of the cliff, about a couple of hundred yards farther away from the town, where a figure could be seen cautiously climbing from ledge to ledge along the face of the stones, and in a position where a false step or a slip must have meant his falling a battered and bleeding mass upon the shingle beneath.

There was a fascination in the scene that held them breathless, and as Cynthia's hand glided into his, and clung to him convulsively, Artingale felt the little palm grow wet and cold.

It was a most daring proceeding, and such as none but the most reckless would have attempted; but the man seemed to be coolly climbing on, apparently without effort, though every here and there he had to cling to the face of the rock, and remain motionless, as if to gather breath.

"By George!" exclaimed Artingale at last, as the man climbed nearer and nearer to where the grass was just visible on the topmost edge, "he's a plucky fellow, Cynthy. I wouldn't do that for a good deal."

"But, Harry—don't you see—don't you see?"

"Only that he is close to the top, dear. There, don't look if it makes you giddy. I'll tell you. He's close up now, and he has got hold of the grass and stuff. Now he's over the top edge. He's safe enough. And, yes—there, you can look up now. He's all right, and out of sight."

"But, Harry, Harry," panted Cynthia, "didn't you see? It was that man."

"What man?"

"The man who follows poor Julie."

"By Jove!" cried Artingale; and he started as if to try and follow the man up the cliff.

"No, no," cried Cynthia, clinging to him; "don't leave me, Harry, don't try to climb that dreadful cliff; come and find poor Julie. Oh, Harry, why did we go away?"

For answer, Artingale ground his teeth, and hurried his companion along until they were in front of the rock on which they had left Julia seated.

Mass after mass lay singly here; and nearer to the cliff huge pieces were piled one upon the other in confusion just as they had fallen from time to time on splitting off from the face of the precipice.

Helping his companion over some of the rough blocks, and threading his way amongst others, Artingale uttered a cry of satisfaction.

"Here she is, Cynthy!" he exclaimed; and then he stopped short in alarm, so strange and haggard did Julia appear.

She was seated upon a piece of rock at the foot of a large shelly mass, her cheek resting on the stone, and her hands pressed to her face.

"Julie, dear Julie!" cried her sister, springing to her side; and as Julia heard her voice she slowly lowered her hands, and displayed a countenance alternately flushed and deadly pale, while her eyes looked wild and strange.

"Has he gone?" she whispered, giving a frightened glance round.

"Oh, Julie, tell me, has that man been here—has he dared to speak to you?" cried Cynthia, passionately.

"Yes; he came directly you had gone. He was there, there," she whispered, pointing towards the cliff. "Take me away: please take me away."

Her words and looks were those of some frightened child, and on Artingale taking one of her hands she clung to him convulsively.

"But, Julie dear, tell me," cried Cynthia, whose face was flushed and angry; "tell me—"

"No, no. Not now. Not now. Let us get back to the hotel. I dare not stay here."

Artingale and Cynthia exchanged glances, as they led the frightened girl out from amidst the piled-up rocks into the broad sunshine, and then slowly along the sandy portions of the beach, with the result that she gradually became more calm, but she checked at once the slightest effort made by her sister to gain any information. Even when, at a sign from Cynthia, Artingale drew back, she did not speak, but turned timidly and waited for him to come alongside.

"Don't leave me, Harry," she said plaintively; so he joined them again, and walked with the sisters right up to the hotel, where Julia now seemed to have grown more herself; but there was that in her countenance which set Artingale thinking very deeply, and as soon as he had parted from the sisters, he went straight to James Magnus, whom he found in his room seated by the open window, and gazing out to sea.

Part 2, Chapter III.

Playing Detective.

"I say, old fellow, I've got some news for you that ought to make you well in half-an-hour," exclaimed Artingale.

"What's that?" said Magnus, eagerly.

"That scoundrel who gave you the ugly cut on the head is down here."

“Down here!” cried Magnus, with his pale face flushing.

“Yes; and he has seen and insulted Julia Mallow.”

A deadly pallor came over the countenance of the artist once more, as he rose from his chair, and caught his friend by the shoulder.

“Harry,” he said hoarsely, “you found out my secret when I thought it was hidden deeply away. You are right; your news does give me strength, and I shall live to kill that man.”

“Well, old fellow, I would rather, for everybody’s sake, that you were not hung; but I don’t wonder at what you say, for I feel just now as if I could shove the beggar over the cliff. But set aside talking, we must act. What is to be done?”

“Let us see Mr Mallow at once.”

“Bah! He would hem and haw, and look rigid, and say we had better leave the matter to the police.”

“Very well, then, in Heaven’s name let us speak to the police.”

“What about, my dear fellow? What are we to say? Don’t you see that we are helpless. The man has kept outside the pale of the law; and besides, suppose we have him caught—if we can—think of the unpleasant *exposé*, and how painful it would be to both of those poor girls. No, we can’t do that. It would be horrible, my dear fellow. Suppose the scoundrel is trapped, and—I only say suppose—gets some sharp, unscrupulous lawyer to defend him. It would be painful in the extreme.”

Magnus began to walk up and down the room, looking agitated.

“What would you do?” he said at last.

“Well,” said Artingale, after a pause, “I feel greatly disposed to take the law in my, or our, own hands.”

“Why do you say *our*?” asked Magnus, hoarsely.

“Because I look upon it as your case as much as mine. Look here, old fellow, Cynthia and I both think you are the man who would make Julia happy, and if you don’t win her it is your own fault.”

“And Perry-Morton?”

“Hang Perry-Morton! Confound him for a contemptible, colourless bit of canvas—or, no, I ought to say brass, for the fellow has the impudence of a hundred. A man without a pretension to art in any way pretending to be a patron and connoisseur, and, above all, to be my brother-in-law. Hang the fellow! I hate him; Cynthia hates him; and we won’t have him at any price. No, dear boy, we want you, and if you don’t go in and win and wear Julia, why, it is your own fault.”

Magnus turned to the window, and stood looking out dreamily.

“Faint heart never won fair lady, Mag,” cried Artingale, merrily; “and how you, who have always been like a Mentor to this wandering Telemachus, can be such a coward about Julia, I can’t conceive. Not afraid of the brothers, are you?”

“Pish! Absurd! How can she help her brothers!”

“Well, then, what is it?” Magnus turned upon him slowly, and gazed at him fixedly.

“Harry,” he said, “you love Cynthia?”

“By George! yes, with all my heart,” cried the young man, enthusiastically.

“Yes,” said Magnus, “I am sure you do. Then it should be the easier for you to think of a love where a man looks up so to the woman he worships that he would sooner suffer than cause her a moment’s pain, when, knowing that she does not—that she cannot return his affection—”

“Hold hard. Now look here, my dear Magnus, don’t let sentiment take the bit in its teeth and bolt with you, or else we shall have a smash. Now I say, look here, old man, why cannot Julia return your love?”

“It is impossible. She is engaged.”

“Bah! what has such an engagement to do with it? I tell you I believe that poor little Julia is perfectly heart-whole, and that the flower of her affection—I say, that’s pretty, isn’t it?—I told you not to let sentiment bolt with you, and I am talking like a valentine! But seriously, old fellow, I am sure that Julia detests Perry-Morton.”

“How can you be sure?” said Magnus, gloomily.

“Very easily, my cynical old sage. Don’t sisters indulge in confidences, and when one of the confidential sisters has a young man, as people in the kitchen call it, doesn’t she confide things to him?”

Magnus looked at him for a moment or two excitedly, but a gloom seemed to settle upon him directly after, and he shook his head.

“No,” he said, “it is hopeless; but all the same, Harry, we must, as you say, put a stop to this annoyance. What do

you propose?”

“There are two courses open, as Parliamentary people say.”

“Yes; go on. You are so slow; you torture me.”

“Well, not to torture you then, my dear boy, one course is to get a private detective.”

“No, no; absurd. I’d sooner employ the genuine article.”

“The other is to make private detectives of ourselves, and quietly keep watch and ward over our treasures—eh? ‘Our treasures’ is good.”

“Yes, that seems the wiser plan,” said Magnus, thoughtfully. “But it will be hard to manage.”

“Where there’s a will there’s a way, my dear boy. You join with me, and we’ll manage it.”

“You would not speak to Mr Mallow first?”

“No, my boy, we must take the matter in our own hands.”

“And if we find this fellow annoying—the—the ladies?” said Magnus, in a curiously hesitating way.

Artingale set his teeth hard, and spoke through them.

“The blackguard’s too big to treat like a black beetle. But let that rest, and remember the saying attributed to the celebrated Mrs Glasse of cookery fame—a saying, by the way, that I’m told is not to be found in her book—let us first catch our hare, which in this case is a fox, or rather I ought to say a wolf. We’ll decide afterwards how we will cook him.”

Magnus nodded, and walked up and down the room in a quick, nervous fashion.

“That’s right! that’s capital,” cried Artingale, merrily. “I thought my news would make that sluggish blood of yours begin to move. By George, there’s nothing like a genuine love to make a man of you.”

“Or a woman,” said Magnus, gloomily.

“Get out! Rubbish! Come, come, no retrograde movements: forward’s the word. Now the next thing is for the knight to meet the lady in whose defence he was wounded. I’ll manage a meeting, or Cynthy will, and if you don’t make good use of your time I’ll never forgive you. We’ll speak to the Rector after you have won a little on poor Julia. He’s a good fellow, and wants his girls to be happy. But by Jove, Magnus, there’s nothing like a rattling good crack on the head.”

“Why?”

“Excites sympathy. Young lady finds out your value. Why, my dear old boy, you look a hundred pounds better. Here, take your hat, and let’s go and have a ramble. The sea air and a bit of exercise will beat all the doctor’s tonics.”

Magnus said nothing, but taking the cigar offered to him, he lit up, and the two young men strolled off together, along by the sea.

“Show me the place where you left Miss Mallow,” said Magnus at last.

“All right,” was the reply; “but wouldn’t it be better if we went up the cliff and walked along the edge? I want to see where that scoundrel came up; and we might meet him.”

James Magnus looked intently in his friend’s countenance, and could not help noticing how hard and fixed the expression had become.

“It would not tire you too much?” he said.

“Oh no,” replied Magnus, hastily, “let us do as you say.”

Artingale noted the flush that came into his companion’s face, and he could see that it was more due to excitement and returning health than to fever. And then, saying little but thinking a great deal of their plans, they strolled on and on, leaving town and castle behind, and having the glistening, ever-changing sea on one side, the undulating spread of well-wooded hills and valleys in the Sussex weald upon their left; but far as eye could reach no sign of human being.

“These cliffs are much higher than I thought for,” said Artingale at last, as he stopped for a moment to gaze down at the beach. “How little the people look. See there, Mag, those stones lying below, you would not think they were as high as you? Some of them weigh tons.”

“Was it on one of those you left Miss Mallow seated?” said Magnus, eagerly.

“Oh no, quite half a mile farther on, more or less. I don’t know, though, seashore distances are deceitful. That was the pile, I think,” he continued, pointing, “there, below where you see that dark streak on the face of the cliff.”

“I see,” said Magnus. “Come along.”

“All right, but don’t walk so close to the edge. You know, of course, that a false step means death.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” replied Magnus, going close to where the weathered cliff suddenly ceased and there was a perpendicular fall to the rough stones beneath. “It looks an awful depth,” he continued, gazing down as if fascinated.

“Awful!” cried Artingale, “but hang it all, Mag, come away. You give a fellow the creeps. You are weak yet; suppose you turn giddy.”

“No fear,” said Magnus, quietly; “but do you know, Harry, whenever I look over from a height I quite realise how it is that some people end their wretched lives by jumping down. There always seems to be a something drawing you.”

“Yes, I dare say,” cried Artingale, with a shudder, “but if we are to play amateur detectives here goes to begin. Now then, young fellow, move on. It’s agin the law to jump off these here places.”

He spoke laughingly, and in supposed imitation of a constable, as he took his friend by the wrist, and pulled him away from the giddy edge of the cliff. But the next moment he was serious.

“Why, you wretched old humbug,” he cried, “what are you talking about? I’ve a good mind to go back.”

“No, no, let’s go on,” said Magnus smiling, “I was only speaking scientifically.”

“Indeed,” said Artingale, gruffly; “then don’t talk scientifically any more.”

They walked on for some little distance in silence, Artingale keeping on the dangerous side, as if he doubted his friend’s strength of mind, and looking down from time to time for the spot where they had found Julia, and the head of the cliff where Jock Morrison had made his ascent.

“What should we do if we met the fellow?” said Magnus suddenly.

“I don’t know quite,” said Artingale, shortly. “Let’s find him first. Here, look here, Magnus, those are the stones! No, no, those—the grey blocks; and that is where the blackguard got up. By George, however did he manage it? The place is enough to make one shudder—Eh? What?”

Magnus had laid his hand upon his friend’s shoulder, and was pointing to where, about fifty yards away, a figure was lying, apparently asleep on the short turf, not ten yards from the edge of the cliff; and in an instant Artingale had sprung forward, recognising as he did the man of whom they were in search.

Part 2, Chapter IV.

Let Sleeping Dogs Lie.

The two young men had no thought of the consequences that might ensue, as they hurried over the short elastic turf towards where, almost a giant among his kind, Jock Morrison lay prone upon his broad back, his powerful arms crossed upon his chest, and his battered old soft felt hat drawn over his face to shade it from the sun—rather a work of supererogation, for the god of day would have had to work hard to tan it of a richer brown.

Artingale was first, but Magnus was close behind, and as they saw the man before them who had caused so much annoyance to, and so insulted those they loved, the feeling of indignation in their breasts bubbled up rapidly, and overflowed in hot passion before which that better part of valour known as discretion was swept away. Artingale looked upon the great fellow as something to be soundly thrashed, but Magnus, in spite of his weakness, seemed as if his rage had regularly mastered him. He saw in those brief instants, degrading as was the idea, a rival as well as an enemy, and panting and excited he strove to be there first, so as to seize the fellow by the throat, his weakness and suffering from his late illness being forgotten in the one stern desire to grapple with this man, and look at him face to face.

But Artingale was there first, and shouted to the fellow to get up, but without eliciting any reply.

“Do you hear? Get up!” cried Artingale.

Still the man did not stir, but Magnus noted a slight motion of the hairs of his thick beard, as if his lips had twitched slightly. In other respects he was motionless, his arms folded across the deep chest and the cap over his face.

“He’s not asleep, he’s shamming,” cried Artingale angrily; and bending down he snatched the hat from the fellow’s face and sent it skimming over the cliff, revealing a pair of fierce dark eyes glaring at him like those of some wild beast.

“Now then, young gentlemen! what’s the matter?” came now in a deep voice like a growl.

“You scoundrel!” began Magnus, but he had over-rated his strength. His illness had told upon him terribly, and he could neither speak, move, nor act, but pale and haggard stood there holding his hand pressed upon his breast.

“Who are you calling names?” said the fellow fiercely.

“Leave him to me,” cried Artingale. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Oh, two of you, eh?” exclaimed Jack; “two of you to a man as is down. Well, as I said before, and I say again, what’s the matter?”

“Look here, you dog!” cried Artingale, planting his foot upon the man’s broad chest, but without eliciting a movement, “I know everything about you, and where you come from.”

“Oh, do you?” said the fellow with a chuckle. “And so do I know you. You’re a game preserver from Lincolnshire.”

“Never mind who or what I am,” cried Artingale, who felt in his excitement as if he had never spoken worse in his life; “but just you listen to me, you scoundrel. I know how you have followed and insulted those two young ladies.”

“What two young ladies? I don’t know anything about two young ladies.”

“I know that you have watched for their coming, and, knowing that they were unprotected, you have tried to alarm them into giving you money, I suppose, and so far you have escaped the police.”

“Ho!” said the fellow, making Artingale’s foot rise and fall, as he indulged in a rumbling chuckle; “it’s a police case, then, after all? Lawford magistrates?”

“No, not now,” cried Artingale, angrily. “Keep back, Magnus, I’ll manage him,” he cried; “you’re not fit. I say, it is not a police case now.”

“Oh!” growled the fellow, laughing defiantly, “what may it be, then?”

“A thrashing, you dog, for if ever there was a time when a gentleman might dirty his hands by touching a blackguard it is now.”

“Ho! it’s a leathering is it, your lordship!”

“Yes,” cried Artingale, “it’s a thrashing now, you great hulking brute; and after that, if ever you dare approach those ladies again—if ever you speak to them, or look at them, or annoy them, directly or indirectly, either here or down at home, I’ll half kill you, and hand you over afterwards to the police.”

“Ho, you will, will you?” said the fellow, mockingly.

“And I—I—” cried Magnus, bending down and approaching his pale, passion-distorted face to that of the great robust scoundrel at his feet.

“Yes, I see there’s two,” growled the fellow. “And what’ll you do?”

“*I’ll shoot you like a dog*!” There was something horrible in the intensity of hatred and passion contained in the low, hissing voice in which these few words were uttered; and as he lay there and heard them the great ruffian’s brown face became of a dirty grey. But the look of dread was gone on the instant, and his chest heaved as he indulged in a mocking burst of laughter.

“All right,” he said; “fire away, and if you do kill me, I’ll come when I’m a ghost and see you hung. There, be off both of you. This is free land. This isn’t Lawford, and I haven’t been taking any of your lordship’s rabbuds this time.”

“What are you doing here?” said Artingale.

“Doing here!” said Jock, musingly; “why don’t you know I’m a Lawford man?”

“Yes; I know that,” cried Artingale.

“Well, my parson’s down here; I miss him when he comes away.”

“Get up, you scoundrel!” cried Artingale, throwing off the brown velvet coat he was wearing, and taking off his watch and chain.

“Not I,” growled the fellow. “There’s lots o’ room for you to pass, man, and ’taint your path. That’s the gainest road back.”

“Get up?” roared Artingale, rolling up his sleeves over his white arms. “Do you hear?”

“Oh, ah! I can hear,” growled the fellow.

“Get up, then.”

“Not I. It’s comfortable here.”

“You cowardly ruffian, get up!” roared Artingale.

“Nay, it’s not me as is the coward,” said Jock, coolly. “You’re two to one. Besides, I don’t want to hurt your lordship.”

“Get up!” roared Artingale again, but Jock did not move, only lay there gazing mockingly in his face, making the young man’s blood seem to seethe with rage.

“Get up!” he roared once more.

“Weant!”

As the word left the ruffian’s lips, Artingale’s passion knew no bounds, and before his companion realised what he

was about to do, he had given Jock Morrison a tremendous kick in the ribs.

The effect was instantaneous.

With a roar like that of an angry bull, the fellow scrambled to his feet, and as Magnus sprang forward to seize him, he struck the artist full in the chest, sending him staggering back to fall heavily, *hors de combat*, for he was as weak almost as a child.

It was the work of moments, for even as he struck Magnus he turned upon Artingale, receiving two heavy, well-directed blows, dealt in good scientific style right in the jaw and cheek, but making no more of them than if they had been slaps from the open hand of a boy, as he caught the young man in a tremendous grip like that of a wrestler, and swayed and struggled with his adversary to and fro, roused now to a pitch of rage that was murderous.

Artingale knew it. He read it in the fierce eyes so close to his, as he felt himself crushed against the great fellow's chest. He read it in the grinding teeth, and felt it in the hot breath that came full in his face, and he put forth all his strength and all the cultured activity gained in lessons of the best athletic school. But it was all in vain, for he felt as helpless as a boy in the giant's grip.

It was but the work of moments; a few struggles here and there, and the knowledge forced upon him of the scoundrel's murderous aim before Artingale felt himself swung from his feet as they neared the cliff, and then, in spite of his manhood, he felt his blood turn cold.

He roused himself though for a supreme effort, and clutching his adversary with all his might, he strove to recover his foot-hold.

But no—he was mastered. He could do nothing but hold on with all his might, as he mentally swore that Jock Morrison should share his fate.

Vain oath, vain effort! There was a swing, a jerk, and what seemed to be a paralysing blow upon his muscles, as he was forced away from his hold, and the next instant he was falling headlong from the cliff-edge into the void beneath.

End of Volume Two.

Part 2, Chapter V.

What Plan Next?

James Magnus had just struggled to his knees, feeling half mad with rage at his impotence, for it was only now that he fully realised how terribly he had been reduced by his illness. Here before him was the man whom he had to thank for his sufferings, and against whom for other reasons as well he nourished a bitter hatred; and yet, instead of being able to seize him by the throat and force the scoundrel to his knees, he was as helpless as a child.

"Dog! villain!" he panted, as he staggered up, and made at the fellow; but Jock Morrison gave him a contemptuous look for answer, and turned to him, but seemed to alter his mind, and as if alarmed at what he had done, started off at a brisk trot; while after vainly looking round for help, Magnus tottered towards the edge of the cliff, his eyes starting and the great drops of perspiration gathering upon his face.

For a few moments he dared not approach the extreme verge, for everything seemed to be swimming before his eyes, but at last, horror-stricken, and trembling in every limb, he went down on hands and knees, crept to the spot where Artingale had gone over, and peered down, expecting to see the mangled remains of his poor friend lying upon the stones beneath.

"Ahoy!" came from below, in the well-known voice of Artingale; and then, as Magnus saw his friend some twenty feet below, trying to clamber back, he uttered a low sigh, and sank back fainting upon the turf.

For in spite of Jock Morrison's murderous intent, fate had been kind to Harry Artingale, who had been hurled over the edge in one of the few places where instead of going down perpendicularly, the friable cliff was broken up into ledges and slopes, upon one of which the young man had fallen and clung for his life to the rugged pieces of stone, slipping in a little avalanche of fragments some twenty or thirty feet farther than his first fall of about ten. Here he managed to check himself, while one of the largest fragments of stone that he had started in his course went on, and as he clung there he saw it leap, as it were, from beside him, and a few seconds after there came up a dull crash from where the stone had struck and splintered, two hundred feet below.

"I shall lose my nerve," he thought, "if I stop here;" and rousing himself into action, he began to climb back, and was making his way up the steep slope without much difficulty, when he saw his friend's ghastly face for a moment, peering over the edge, and then it disappeared.

"Poor old fellow, it has made him giddy," muttered Artingale, as he drew himself up higher and higher, clinging close to the face of the slope and placing his feet cautiously till he found himself with his hands resting upon a ledge only a few feet below the top of the cliff.

If he could only get upon this ledge the rest would be easy, but unless he could draw himself up by the strength of his muscles, he felt that he must wait for help, and the task was one of no little difficulty, for there was no firm hold for his hands.

He knew that if he waited for help he must lose his nerve by thinking of his perilous position, while if he tried to draw himself up and did not succeed in reaching the ledge he felt that he must fall.

He dared not pause to think of the consequences of that fall, for though he had escaped so far, it was not likely that he would be so fortunate again.

He was standing now with his feet on a piece of crumbling sandstone, which was likely enough to give way if he tried to make a spring upwards.

Still, there was nothing else to be done, and drawing in a deep breath, he remained perfectly motionless before making the supreme effort.

His hands were only a few inches above his head, and he began searching about with them now for a crevice into which he could thrust his fingers, but the blind search was vain, and feeling that this was hopeless, he let his eyes fall to scan the surface of the rock below his chest for some fresh foothold; but there was none, unless he cut a niche in the soft sandstone, and he had no knife. If he climbed to the right he would be in no better position; if to the left, he would be in a worse; so once more drawing a long breath, he began cautiously to draw himself up higher and higher by sheer force of muscle, till his eyes were level with the edge of the shelf; then an inch or two higher, and then he felt that his hands were giving way—that he was falling—that all was over, and that he must dashed to pieces, when, in his agony, he saw an opening, a mere crack, across the shelf, but it was sufficient for him to force in the fingers of one hand with a desperate effort, and then, how he knew not, he placed the other beside it.

He could cling here and force feet and knees against the face of the rock, and in the struggle of the next few moments he raised himself higher, scrambled on to the ledge, rose panting and with every nerve in his body quivering, seized hold of a stone above him, thrust his feet into a niche or two, gained the top of the cliff, and, unable to keep up the tension longer, he loosed the strain upon his nerves and sank down beside his friend, trembling in every limb.

This, however, did not last many moments, for, shaking off the feeling of his own horror, Artingale rose, drew down and buttoned his wristbands, looking pityingly the while at his friend, and then caught up his coat and threw it on.

The next moment he was kneeling beside Magnus, who soon after opened his eyes.

“Ah, Harry,” he said, feebly, “you didn’t know what a miserable reed you had for a friend.”

“Nonsense, man! How are you? Did the blackguard hurt you?”

“No, scarcely at all. I’m weak as a rat. But you!”

“Oh, I’m all right. Only a little skin off my elbows and varnish off my toes. Which way did the brute go?”

“Over the hill yonder,” said Magnus. “Where he may go,” said Artingale, “for hang me if I go after him to-day. Why, confound him, he’s as strong as a bull. I couldn’t have thought a man could be so powerful. But let’s get back, old fellow. Can you walk?”

“Oh yes, I’m better now,” said Magnus feebly; “but I shall never forgive myself for failing you at such a pinch.”

“Never mind the failing, Jemmy: but pinch it was; the blackguard nearly broke my ribs. One moment: let me look down.”

He walked to the edge and looked over the cliff, realising more plainly now the terrible risk he had run, for his escape had been narrow indeed, and in spite of his attempt to preserve his composure, he could not help feeling a peculiar moisture gathering in the palms of his hands. But he laughed it off as he took Magnus’s arm, and drew it through his own, saying,—

“It’s a great blessing, my dear boy, that I took off this coat. It would have been completely spoiled.”

“You had an awfully narrow escape.”

“Yes; and it is almost a pity the brute did not kill me,” said Artingale, coolly.

“Harry!”

“Well, if he had, the police would have hunted the scoundrel down, then he would have been hung, and little Julie could have rested in peace.”

“And Cynthia?” said Magnus, with a sad smile.

“Ah, yes! poor little darling, she would have broken her heart. But I say, old fellow, it’s a pity the scoundrel got away. What are we to do?”

“He must be taken,” exclaimed Magnus, “at any cost. It was a murderous attempt on your life.”

“Humph! yes, but he might swear that I tried to throw him over first. It was a fight, old fellow, and I got the worst of it.”

“But he must be taken.”

“No,” said Artingale, “I think not, old fellow; his is a peculiar case, and we can’t be going into witness-boxes and

answering all sorts of questions. After to-day's adventure down below on the beach, I don't see that we can move. No, Magnus, there are things that must be hushed up, and this is one of them. But we must do something. I declare I'll mount a revolver, and have a shot at the brute if he annoys them again, legal or illegal."

"Impossible," said Magnus, bitterly.

"By Jove; if he'd only go down home again and get up to some of his poaching tricks. I tell you what, Magnus, old man," he said, setting his teeth, "I hope fate will never place me with my men down at Gatley, going to meet a poaching party led by Jock Morrison. If she does—well—"

"Well what?"

"I hope I sha'n't have a gun in my hand."

"You must persuade Mr Mallow to leave here."

"What I just as he has come down for Julia's health. No, my dear fellow, you might just as well try to move a rock. But I say, our first attempt at playing detectives don't seem to have been much of a success."

"No," said Magnus, dreamily. "Let's get back."

"What are you thinking about, old man," said Artingale, after a pause.

"I was thinking whether the fellow could be bribed to go away."

"Oh, yes, easily," said Artingale, "and he'd go and come back next week, and levy blackmail wherever the family went, while the very fact of his having been paid off would give the affair an ugly look if ever we had occasion to drag the scoundrel before the judge."

"Then what is to be done?" said Magnus, angrily, "the police must be consulted."

"No: won't do," said Artingale, decisively. "Wait a bit, Jemmy, and I'll hit upon some plan. Unfortunately, we live in these degraded times when that fine old institution the press-gang is no more."

"This is no time for levity, Harry," said Magnus, bitterly.

"Levity! My dear boy, my feelings towards that fellow are full of anything but levity. He nearly killed me, and that is no joke; and—oh! horror of horror! I did not expect this—here's Perry-Morton."

He was quite right, for the idol of the early masters' clique was advancing to meet them after failing to see poor Julia, who with throbbing pulses and cheeks now pale, now burning with fever, was sobbing in her sister's arms.

Part 2, Chapter VI.

Unselfish Proceedings.

"Frightened away? Not a doubt about it," said Artingale. "I feel as if I had been a martyr, and offered myself up as a sacrifice."

"Martyr—sacrifice!" cried Cynthia, looking at the speaker keenly, and with her bright little face flushing. "Now, Harry, I'll never forgive you. I'm sure you've been keeping something back. There, see how guilty you look! Oh, shame! shame!"

Artingale protested that he had been silent only from the best motives, was accused of deceit and want of confidence, and ended by making a full confession of the whole incident, after which he had to take Cynthia and show her the exact spot before his shuddering little companion condescended to forgive.

"And when was this, sir?"

"This day month," said Artingale, humbly, "and we have not seen him since. Magnus and I have watched, and searched, and hunted, and done everything possible; but, as I say, I think I have been the sacrifice. He believes he killed me, and is afraid to show."

"Perhaps he has committed suicide out of remorse," said Cynthia.

"Just the sort of fellow who would," replied Artingale, with a dry look.

"Now you are laughing at me," cried Cynthia, pettishly. "I declare, Harry, I believe you are tired of me, and want to quarrel. I've been too easy with you, sir, and ought to have kept you at a distance."

More protesting and pardoning took place here, all very nice in their way, but of no interest to any save the parties concerned.

"You must get Julie to come out more now," said Artingale. "Tell her there is nothing to mind."

"I can't make poor Julie out at all," said Cynthia thoughtfully. "She seems so strange and quiet. That man must have frightened her dreadfully."

“Did she tell you about it?”

“Very little, and if I press her she shudders, and seems ready to burst out sobbing. Then I have to comfort her by telling her that I am sure she will never see him any more, and when I say this she looks at me so strangely.”

“What does mamma say?”

“Oh, only that Julie is foolish and hysterical. She doesn’t understand her at all. Poor mamma never did understand us girls, I’m sure,” said Cynthia, with a profound look of wisdom upon her little face.

“And papa?”

“Oh, poor dear papa thinks of nothing but seeing us married and—Oh, Harry, I *am* ashamed.”

“What of?” he cried, catching her in his arms and kissing her tenderly. “Why, Cynthy, I never knew before what a fine old fellow the pater is. He is up to par in my estimation now.”

“Is that meant for a joke, sir?” said Cynthia mockingly.

“Joke?—joke? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Never mind now; but you need not be so pleased about what papa says. I think it’s very cruel—wanting to get rid of us.”

“I don’t,” exclaimed Artingale, laughing.

“Then you want to see poor Julie married to that dreadful Perry-Morton?”

“No, I don’t; I want her to have dear old James Magnus. I say, Cynthy. We won’t be selfish, eh? We won’t think about ourselves, will we? Let’s try and make other people happy.”

“Yes, Harry, we will.”

It was wonderful to see the sincerity with which these two young people spoke, and how eagerly they set to making plans for other people’s happiness—a process which seemed to need a great deal of clinging together for mutual support, twining about of arms, and looking long and deeply into each other’s eyes for counsel. Then Artingale’s hair was a little too much over his forehead for the thoughts of Cynthia to flow freely, and it had to be smoothed back by a little white hand with busy fingers. But that hair was obstinate, and it was not until the little pinky fingers had several times been moistened between Cynthia’s ruddy lips and drawn over the objecting strands of hair that they could be forced to retain the desired position.

After the performance of such a kindly service Artingale would have been ungrateful if he had not thanked her in the most affectionate way his brain could suggest, a proceeding of which, with all due modesty, the young lady seemed highly to approve.

Then Harry’s tie was not quite right, and the new collar stud had to be admired, and a great deal more of this very unselfish *eau sucrée* had to be imbibed before Julia again came on the *tapis*, her entrance being heralded by a sister’s sigh.

“Poor Julie!” said Cynthia.

“Oh, yes; poor Julia. Now, look here, pet, I dare say it’s very shocking, and if it were known the Rector would be sure to give me my *congé*.”

“Oh, I would never think of telling him, Harry.”

“That’s right. Well, as I was saying, if she marries Perry-Morton she will be miserable.”

“Horribly,” assented Cynthia. “And if she marries old Magnus she will be very happy.”

“But are you sure that Mr Magnus really loves her?”

“He worships her. I’m sure of it.”

“Then it would be wicked, wouldn’t it, Harry, to keep them apart?”

“I should think it as bad as murder to keep us apart.”

“Should you, Harry?”

“Yes.” And more unselfish proceedings.

“Then, as papa and mamma have made a mistake, don’t you think we ought to help them?”

“Yes,” said Artingale, “but how? Magnus hangs back. He says he is sure that Julia does not think of him in the slightest degree. What do you say?”

“I don’t know what to say,” cried Cynthia thoughtfully, “only that I am sure she hates Perry-Morton. She says she does.”

“But does she show any liking for Magnus?”

“N-no, I’m afraid not. But does that matter, dear?”

“Well, I should think not,” replied Artingale thoughtfully. “Magnus loves her very much, and I’m sure no girl could help loving him in return. I almost feel jealous when he talks to you.”

“No, you don’t, Harry,” retorted Cynthia, recommencing operations upon the obstinate lock of hair.

“Then what is to be done?” said Artingale, at last, after another long display of unselfishness.

“I’m sure I don’t know, Harry. It almost seems as if Julia was ready to let herself go with the stream. She is so quiet and strange and reserved. I don’t know what to make of her. She keeps fancying she sees that man.”

“But she don’t see him.”

“Oh no: it is impossible; but she is so changed. I find her sometimes sitting and thinking, looking straight before her as if she were in a dream. Bring Mr Magnus here more often.”

“Here?”

“Well, no; to Lawford. I’ll coax papa into asking him. Oh, I say, what a capital idea!” cried Cynthia, clapping her hands. “I have it. Her portrait!”

“Her portrait!” exclaimed Artingale, starting, as he recalled the scene in his friend’s studio.

“Yes; the very thing. You take him down to Gatley, and papa shall ask Mr Magnus over to Lawford to paint Julia’s portrait, and then there will be such long sittings, Harry; and Mr Magnus will have to look at her so patiently, and move this hand there and that hand here, and get her into quite the correct pose. Oh, Harry, what fun!”

“Why, you cunning little witch,” he exclaimed; “if Magnus does not jump at the idea, he deserves to lose her.”

Then there came a little more unselfishness and a little disinterested proceeding, which was interrupted by the entrance of Julia herself, looking very pale and sad. There was a far-off, distant aspect about her eyes, as of one who was thinking deeply of some great trouble, but she smiled affectionately when Cynthia spoke, after which the conspirators exchanged glances, and Artingale went away.

Part 2, Chapter VII.

An Offer Declined.

They were to be busy times at the Rectory that winter, for the servants left in charge heard that there was to be a great deal of company.

The Gatley domestics too had to make preparations, for Lord Artingale intended to entertain that season. A room was set apart for Mr Magnus the great artist. Miss Mallow’s brothers were expected to come over from the Rectory to shoot, and Mr Cyril Mallow, it was anticipated, would be asked to bring his young wife and stay there at the fine old house—a fact, for Sage was a member now of the Mallow family, and Harry Artingale liked her as much as he disliked her husband.

There was plenty of gossip rife in Lawford, and on the strength of old Michael Ross saying, when he was told that Mr Magnus the painter was coming down, that his son Luke knew him, having met him at a London club, the report ran through the place that Luke Ross was getting to be quite a big man, and had become a friend of Lord Artingale.

“Not that that’s much,” said Fullerton, at the King’s Head, “for the young lord isn’t what his father was. Old Lord Artingale wouldn’t have married one of Mallow’s girls, I know, nor yet made boon companions of those two sons and Luke Ross.”

“I don’t think you need put them all together,” said Tomlinson, with a sly laugh; “Luke Ross wouldn’t be very good friends with the man who stole his lass. If he would he’s not the Luke Ross that he was when he was down here.”

In due time the blinds went up at Gatley and at the Rectory, and the tradespeople who had been ready to discuss the shortcomings of the Rector were obsequious enough in soliciting his orders now the family had returned.

They had made a long stay at Hastings, for the Rector fancied it did Mrs Mallow good. She seemed to smile more, and to look brighter, he told himself, and he would stand and beam at her as he wheeled her couch to the open window when it was fine, and watch her gazing at the sea with the greatest of satisfaction.

Frank had made journeys to and from London, making at the latter place Cyril’s house at Kensington his head-quarters, and frequently being his companion away from home.

Julia was no better, in spite of the opinion of the doctor, who said that she had decidedly gained tone, and that the change now to her native air would complete the cure; so the family returned to Lawford as the winter drew near, and, as a matter of course, Lord Artingale soon found his way back to Gatley.

There was some preparation too at Kilby, for Portlock said that it was his turn to have the young folks to stay.

“They may go to the rectory as much as they like, mother,”—a title he invariably gave Mrs Portlock, on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle,—“but I mean to have them stay here; not that I’m particularly fond of Master Cyril; but there, he’s the little lassie’s husband, and it’s all right.”

“But you asked John Berry and Rue to come and bring the little ones,” said Mrs Portlock.

“Well, I know that, old lady. Isn’t Kilby big enough to hold the lot? Let’s have the place made a bit cheerful; I like to hear a good hearty shout of laughter now and then, and you’ve taken to do nothing else lately but grumble softly and scold.”

“It’s a wicked story, Joseph, and you know it,” cried Mrs Portlock, as the Churchwarden turned away from her and winked at the cat; “and as for noise, I’m sure you make enough in the house without wanting more.”

“Never mind, let’s have more; and Cyril Mallow can shoot down the rabbits, for they’re rather getting ahead.”

As he spoke he had been filling his pipe, and he now took out a letter, read it, and slowly folded it up for a pipe-light, saying to himself—

“He’s no business to want me to lend him a hundred pound after what I so lately did for them as a start.”

James Magnus had been invited to take Julia’s portrait, the Rector, artfully prompted thereto by Cynthia, accompanying the commission by a very warm invitation to stay at the rectory as much as he could while the portrait was in progress, as he heard that Mr Magnus was coming down to Gatley.

Artingale dropped in at his friends studio on the very day that he received the Rector’s letter—of course by accident, based upon a hint from Cynthia; and found Magnus sitting thoughtfully by his easel, pretending to paint, but doing nothing.

“Why, Mag, you look well enough and strong enough now to thrash Hercules himself, in the person of our gipsy friend.”

“Yes, I feel myself again,” was the reply. “By the way, Harry, I’ve had an invitation to Lawford.”

“Indeed! I’m very glad. I go down to-morrow.”

“The Rector wishes me to paint his daughter’s portrait.”

“Not Cynthia’s?”

“No, that of his daughter Julia.”

“Why, Magnus,” said Artingale, smiling to himself and laying his hand upon his friend’s arm, “could you wish for a greater pleasure?”

Magnus looked at him so fixedly for a few moments that Artingale felt that he must be suspected; but it was not so, the artist only shook his head, and there was a bitter look in his face, as he spoke again.

“Pleasure!” he said; “how can it be a pleasure to me? Harry, my boy, how can you be so thoughtless. Do you think I could be guilty of so dishonourable an act?”

“Dishonourable?”

“Yes,” cried Magnus passionately. “Should I not go there on false pretences to try and win that poor girl from the man to whom she is engaged?”

“But, my dear fellow, it is a folly of her father’s invention; she detests this Perry-Morton, as every right-thinking, matter-of-fact girl would. Why, the fellow dances attendance upon every woman of fashion, and deserves to be encountered with any weapon one could seize. Tell me, do you think it right that she should marry such a man?”

“No: certainly not. No more right than that she should be deluded into marrying another man she did not love.”

“But she would love you, Mag. My dear fellow, don’t refuse to go. Accept the offer for Julia’s sake—for Cynthia’s and mine, if you like. Don’t be scrupulous about trifles. I tell you she is a dear, sweet girl, and I know your secret. She is heart-whole now, but if she began to learn that there was some one who really loved her, she would fly to him like a young bird does to her mate.”

“Very pretty sophistry, Harry Artingale. When you have bad your fling of life I should advise you to turn Jesuit.”

“Don’t talk stuff, my dear fellow. Take my advice. Go down with me at once to Gatley, and make your hay while the sun shines. I guarantee the result.”

“What, that I shall be kicked out as a scoundrel?”

“Nonsense! kicked out, indeed! That you will win little Julia’s heart.”

“As I should deserve to be,” continued Magnus, without heeding his friend’s words. “No, Harry, I am not blind. I can read Julia Mallow’s heart better, perhaps, than I can read my own, and I know that, whoever wins her love, I shall not be the man. As to her marriage with this wretched butterfly of the day, I can say nothing—do nothing. That rests with the family.”

“James Magnus,” cried Artingale, angrily, “sophistry or no, I wouldn’t stand by and see the woman I loved taken from before my eyes by that contemptible cad. The world might say what it liked about honour and dishonour, and perhaps it might blame you, while, at the same time, it will praise up and deliver eulogies upon the wedding of that poor girl to Perry-Morton. But what is the opinion of such a world as that worth? Come, come—take your opportunity, and win and wear her. Hang it all, Jemmy! don’t say the young Lochinvar was in the wrong.”

“You foolish, enthusiastic boy,” said Magnus, smiling, “so you think I study the sayings or doings of the fragment of our people that you call the world? No, I look elsewhere for the judgment, and, may be, most of all in my own heart. There, say no more about it. I have made up my mind.”

“And I have made up mine,” cried Artingale, sharply, “that you have not the spirit of a man.”

He left the studio hot and angry, went straight to his chambers, and soon after he was on his way to Gatley, having determined to see Cynthia at once for a fresh unselfish discussion upon Julia’s state.

Part 2, Chapter VIII.

A Visit from Brother Jock.

“Well,” said Smithson, the tailor, as he looked up from a square patch that he was inserting in the seat of a fellow-townsman’s trousers, “the parson has his faults, and as a family I don’t like ’em, but when they’re down it do make a difference to the town.”

This was as the cobble stones of the little place rattled to the beating of horses’ hoofs, while a bright-looking little equestrian party passed along the main street; Cynthia mounted on a favourite mare belonging to Lord Artingale, one which she was always pleading to ride, and one whereon her slave loved to see her, though he always sent her over to the rectory in fear and trembling, ordering the groom who took her to give her a good gallop on the way to tame her down.

Not that there was the slightest disposition to vice in the beautiful little creature, she was only spirited, or, as the people in his lordship’s stable said, “a bit larky,” and when Cynthia was mounted there was plenty of excuse for the young man’s pride.

“I shall never have patience to ride an old plodding, humble-stumble horse again, Harry,” the little maiden used to say. “It’s like sitting on air; and she is such a dear, and it’s a shame to put two such great bits in her mouth.”

“It is only so that you might check her easily, Cynthy,” said Artingale, anxiously. “You need not mind; with such a hand as yours at the rein they don’t hurt her mouth.”

“But I’m sure they do, Harry,” cried Cynthia; “and look how she champs them up, and what a foam she makes, and when she snorts and throws up her head it flies over my new riding-habit.”

“Never mind, my beautiful little darling,” he whispered; “you shall have a new riding-habit every week if you like, only you must have the big curb for Mad Sal. Oh, I’d give something if Magnus could reproduce you now with one instantaneous touch of his brush, and—”

“Hush! you silly boy,” she whispered reprovingly, as the mare ambled on. “This is not the time and place to talk such nonsense.”

Nonsense or no, it produced a very satisfactory glow in the little maiden’s heart—a glow which shone in her soft cheeks, and made her eyes flash as they rode on.

These riding parties were very frequent, Cyril and Frank joining; sometimes John Magnus, but never upon the days when Julia was prevailed upon to mount.

For Cyril was supposed to be staying with his young wife at the farm, but he passed the greater part of his time at the rectory, when he was not at Gatley with his brother.

It was a pleasant time, for the roads were hard that winter, the air crisp and dry, giving a tone to the nerves and muscles, and an elasticity to the mind, that made even quiet James Magnus look more like himself, while there were times when Julia looked less dreamy and pale, and as if the thoughts of her persecutor were less frequent in her breast.

Sage and she had grown more intimate, as if there were feelings in common between them, the quiet toleration of Cyril’s wife ripening fast into affection, so that, as Cynthia’s time was so much taken up by Lord Artingale, Julia and Sage were a good deal together, the latter being her sister-in-law’s companion in her visiting rounds, when, to the Rev. Lawrence Paulby’s satisfaction, she tried to counteract some of the prevalent ill-feeling against the Mallow family by calls here and there amongst the parishioners.

One place where they often called was at the ford of the river, to have a chat with little Mrs Morrison, where somehow there seemed to be quite a magnetic attraction; Cyril’s wife sitting down in the neatly-kept little place to gaze almost in silence at the wheelwright’s pretty young wife, while, as if drawn there against her will, Julia would stop and talk.

The river was very pretty just there even in winter, brawling and babbling over the gravel before settling down calm and still as it flowed slowly amongst the deep holes beneath the willow pollards, where the big fish were known to lie.

And more than once sister and sister-in-law came upon Cyril in one or other of the fields, trying after the big jack that no one yet had caught.

“I know he’s about here somewhere,” said Cyril, over and over again. “He lies in wait for the dace that come off the shallows, and I mean to have him before I’ve done.”

That was an artful jack though, for it must have understood Cyril Mallow and his wiles, obstinately refusing to be caught.

Julia used to look very serious when she saw him there again and again, but she felt afraid to speak, for the confidence that had existed between her and her old maid seemed to have passed away, and when their eyes met at times there was a curious shrinking look on either side; and so the time went on.

One day Tom Morrison was busily at work at a piece of well-seasoned ash with his spoke-shave. The day was bright and keen and cold, but he was stripped to shirt and trousers, the neck unfastened, sleeves rolled up, and a look of calm satisfaction in his face as his muscles tightened and he drew off the thin spiral shavings from the piece of wood.

In old days the workshop used to resound with snatches of song, or his rather melodious whistling; but of late, since the loss of his little one, he had grown cold and grave, working in a quiet, subdued manner; and those who knew him said that he was nursing up his revenge against the parson.

Fullerton gave him several jobs that should by rights have gone to Biggins the carpenter, and he once went so far as to say—

“They tell me you never go to church now, Tom Morrison.”

“Would you like it painted stone-colour or white, Mr Fullerton?” said Tom Morrison, quietly.

“Oh—er—white,” replied Fullerton, and he said no more upon that occasion.

It was about a month later, over another job, that Fullerton ventured another advance, and this time he said, as he was leaving the workshop, and holding out his hand—

“Good-bye, Morrison. Oh, by the way, we’ve got Samuel Mumbey, D.D., at the chapel on Sunday. Preaches twice. We’ll find you good seats if you and Mrs Morrison will come. Ours is a nice woshup, Morrison, a very nice woshup, as you would say if you was to try.”

“Thankye, sir,” said Tom Morrison, stolidly, and again Fullerton said no more till he was some distance away, when he rubbed his hands softly and smiled a satisfied smile, saying to himself—

“I should like to save Tom Morrison and his wife from the pit.”

Tom Morrison was hard at work, thinking sometimes of his pretty little wife in the cottage, and how thin and careworn she had grown of late. He wondered whether it was his fault, and because he had been so hard and cold since he had lost his little child and quarrelled with the Rector; whether, too, he ought not to try and bring back some of the brightness to her face, when it seemed as if so much light as usual did not shine in upon his work.

He raised his head, and found that there were a pair of thick arms leaning on the window-sill, and a great bearded face resting upon them, the owner’s eyes staring hard at him.

“Hallo, Jock!” he said, quietly.

“What, Tommy!” was the deep-toned reply; and then there was a pause, as Tom Morrison felt angry as he thought of his brothers ne’er-do-well life, and then of his having been hard and cold of late, and this seemed the time for beginning in another line.

“Long time since I’ve seen you, Jock,” he said, quietly.

“Ay, ’tis, Tommy. Working hard as usual.”

“Ay, working hard, Jock,” said Tom, resting his spoke-shave. “Thou used to be a good workman, Jock. Why not take to it again?”

“Me? Work? Wheer?”

“I’ll give you plenty to do, Jock, and find wage for it, lad, if thou’lt drop being a shack and sattle down.”

Jock Morrison laughed in a deep and silent manner.

“Nay, lad, nay,” he said at last. “Thankye kindly, Tom, all the same. What’s the good o’ working?”

“To be respectable and save money.”

“I don’t want to be respectable. I don’t want to save money, lad. There’s plenty do that wi’out me.”

“But how will it be when thou grows old and sick, lad?”

“Why then, Tommy, I shall die; just the same as you will. I’m happy my way, lad. Thou’rt happy thy way. Folk say I’m a shack, and a blackguard, and a poacher. Well, let ’em; I don’t keer.”

“Nay, don’t say that, lad,” said Tom Morrison; “I don’t like it. I’d like to see thee tak’ to work and be a man.”

“Ha, ha, ha, Tom! Why, I’m a bigger and a stronger man than thou art anyways. Nay, I don’t keer for work. Let them do it as likes. I don’t want boxing up in a house or a shed. I want to be in the free air, and to come and go as I like. I see no good in your ways. Let me bide.”

Tom looked at him in a dull, careworn way.

“Why, look ye here, lad,” cried Jock. “Here am I as blithe and hearty as a bird, and here are you, plod, plod, plod, from day to day, round and round, like old Michael Ross’s blind horse in the bark mill. I look as hearty as a buck; you look ten years older, and as if life warn’t worth a gill o’ ale.”

“I wean’t argue with you, Jock,” said Tom, quietly. “You must go your own gate, I suppose, and I’ll go mine.”

“Ay, that’s it, Tommy.”

“But if ever you like to try being an honest man again, lad, I’m thy own brother, and I’ll give thee a lift best way I can for the old folks’ sake.”

Jock Morrison left the window, and came like a modern edition of Astur of the stately stride round to the door, walked in amongst the shavings and sawdust, gave his brother a tremendous slap on the back, and then seized his hand and stood shaking it for a good minute by the old Dutch clock in the corner.

He did not speak, but half sat down afterwards upon the bench, watching his brother as Tom resumed his work.

“How’s little wife?” said Jock at last.

“Not hearty, Jock,” said Tom Morrison. “She’s pined a deal lately. Never got over losing the bairn.”

There was a spell of silence here, and then Tom said quietly—

“Go in and have a crust o’ bread and cheese, Jock, and a mug of ale. The little lass has been baking this morning.”

“Ay, I will,” said Jock, and thrusting his hands down into his pockets, he rolled like a great ship on a heaving sea out of the workshop, along the road, and then through the little garden, and without ceremony into the cottage, stooping his head as he passed in at the low door.

Part 2, Chapter IX.

A Cruel Charge.

Polly was busy at needle-work, and as the great fellow strode in and stood staring at her, she started up and seemed as if about to run away.

“You here, Jock, again?” she faltered.

“Ay! here I am again,” he said, in a deep growl, as he fixed her with his eye, while she trembled before him and his fierce look.

“I’m glad—to see you, Jock,” she said, faintly, and she glanced towards the door.

“That’s a lie,” he growled, and then he laughed grimly, but only for his face to darken into a savage scowl. “Tom said I was to come in, lass.”

“Oh, you’ve seen Tom!” she said, as if relieved.

“Ay, and he said I was to have some bread and cheese and beer.”

“Yes, Jock,” she cried; “I’ll get it out.”

She had to pass him, and he caught her hand in his, towering over her and making her shiver, as if fascinated by his gaze, as Julia Mallow had been a score of times.

“Stop!” he said, in a low, deep voice. “Wait a bit. I don’t want the bread and cheese. Look here, Polly.”

“Yes, Jock, yes,” she panted; “but don’t hurt me.”

“Hurt ye!” he growled; “I feel as if I could kill thee.”

“Jock!”

“Look here, Polly. I came to see Tom to-day to jump upon him, and call him a fool, and give him back what he’s given me for not settling down and marrying and being respectable. I was going to laugh at him, and show him what his respectable married life was.”

“I—I don’t understand you, Jock,” she said, faintly.

“It’s a lie,” he growled. “I was going to laugh at him, but, damn it, he’s so good a chap I hadn’t the heart to mak’ him

miserable any more than he is about that poor bairn he thinks was his, and I—”

“How dare you!” cried Polly, flaming up, and trying to tear away her hand; but he held it fast, and, in spite of her indignation, she cowered before his fierce, almost savage looks.

“How dare I?” he growled. “Didn’t young Serrol run after you at the house when you were at Mallow’s? Hasn’t he been after you ever since? Isn’t he every day nearly hanging about the river there fishing, so as to come and talk to thee? Curse you!” he growled. “This is a wife, is it? But, by God, it shan’t go on, for I’ll take him by the neck next time he’s fishing yonder by the willow stumps, and I’ll howd him underwater and drownd him as I would a pup.”

“Oh, Jock, Jock, Jock,” she cried, sinking on her knees.

“I will—I will, by God!” he cried, in a fierce growl; “and then you may go and say I did it, when they find his cursed carcase, and get me hung for drownding thy lover.”

“It’s a lie!” cried Polly, springing up and speaking passionately. “Cyril Mallow is no lover of mine. I hate and detest him, but never dared tell poor Tom how he came and troubled me. But I’ll tell him now; I’ll confess all to him. I’d sooner he killed me than you should insult me with such lies.”

She made a rush for the door, and had reached it, but, with an activity not to be expected in his huge frame, Jock swept round one great arm, seized her, and drew her back, quivering with indignation.

“Let me go,” she cried, passionately. “Tom! Tom!”

“Howd thy noise,” he growled, and once more she shrunk cowering from his fierce eyes. “Now then, say that again. S’elp your God, Serrol Mallow is nothing to thee, and never has been.”

“I won’t,” she cried, passionately, and she flashed up once more and met his gaze. “How dare you ask me such a thing?”

“Say it, lass—say it out honest, lass—is what I say true?”

“No,” she cried, gazing full in his eyes. “It’s a cruel, cruel lie. Let me go. I’ll tell Tom now—every word—everything that man has said, and—”

Jock let his great hand sink from Polly’s little arm to her wrist, and led her to a chair, she being helpless against his giant strength.

“Nay,” he said, “thou shan’t tell him. It would half kill him first, and then he’d go and kill parson’s boy.”

“Yes, yes; he would, he would,” sobbed Polly. “I dared not tell him, and it’s been breaking my heart. But I won’t bear it. Go away from here. How dare you say such things to me?”

“Howd thy tongue, lass,” said Jock, in a deep growl, and his strong will mastered hers. “Hearken to me, Polly. I beg thy pardon, lass, and I can read it in thy pretty eyes that all I said was a lie. I beg thy pardon, lass.”

“How could you—how dare you?” sobbed Polly. “Tom, Tom! come here—come here!”

“Hush! he can’t hear thee, lass,” growled Jock. “I’ve seen so much that I thought thou wast playing a bad game against Tom; but I was wrong, my little lass, and I say forgive me.”

“Let me go and tell Tom all now,” she sobbed. “I shan’t be happy till I do.”

“Dost want to mak’ thyself happy,” growled Jock, sinking into his old Lincolnshire brogue, after losing much by absence in other counties—“happy, half breaking. Tom’s heart, and getting murder done? If thou dost—go!”

Polly bounded to the door to seek her husbands help, and tell him all, Jock watching her the while; but as she reached the door her courage failed, and she turned away with a piteous wail.

“Oh, God help me!” she cried; “what shall I do?”

“Come and sit down, lass, and dry thy eyes,” said Jock, kindly. “Say thou forgives me. I’m very sorry, lass. I’m a down bad un, but I like owd Tom. He’s a good ’un, is Tom.”

“The best, the truest of men.”

“And I’m glad he’s got a good little true wife,” growled Jock. “There, it’s all right, ain’t it, Polly?” he said, taking her little hand in his and patting it. “Say thou forgives me.”

“But—but you don’t believe me,” sobbed Polly.

“But I do,” he said, kissing her little hand in a quiet, reverential way that ill accorded with his looks. “Say thou forgives me, lass.”

“I do forgive you, Jock,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Now let’s call dear Tom in and tell him all.”

“Nay,” said Jock, “he mustn’t be told. He’s troubled enough as it is. I’ll mak’ it reight.”

“No, no, Jock,” cried Polly, with her checks turning like ashes.

“What, are you afraid I shall drownd him?” he said, sharply.

“Yes! Oh, it is so horrible!”

“Nay, I wean’t drownd him if he’ll keep away,” said Jock, fiercely, “but I’ll hev a word wi’ him when he least expects it.”

“I—I thought,” faltered Polly, “that when he was married he would keep away.”

“Nay, not he,” growled Jock; “but I heven’t done wi’ him and his yet.”

“But, Jock!”

“Get me some bread and cheese, lass,” he growled, and she rose in a timid way, and gazing at him fearfully, spread a cloth, and placed the food before him.

“Now go and bathe thy pretty eyes,” he said, as he sat down; “but stay a moment, lass.”

He took both her hands in his, and drew her to him, and kissed her forehead.

“I beg thy pardon, Polly,” he said once again; “and now go, and I promise that he shall never trouble thee again.”

“But, Jock!”

“Howd thy tongue, lass. I wean’t drown him, but if I don’t scar him from this lane my name’s not Jock.”

Polly left the kitchen, and the great fellow sat there eating heartily for a time, and then Polly came back.

“Sometimes, lass,” he said, “I think thou ought to hev towd Tom all; sometimes I don’t. Wait a bit till that Serrol Mallow’s gone again, and then tell him all. Hah! he’s a nice ’un, and his brother too. They’re gentlemen, they are. I’m on’y a rough shack. It mak’s me laugh though, Polly, it do. I don’t work, they say. Well, I don’t see as they do, and as owd Bone used to mak’ us read at school, nobody can’t say as Jock Morrison, bad as he is, ever goes neighing after his neighbour’s wife. Theer lass, theer lass, it’s all put away, and I’m down glad as I was wrong.”

“And you will frighten him away, Jock?” said Polly, who looked very bright and pretty now.

“That I will, Polly,” said the great fellow, draining his mug; “and, my lass, I don’t know but what Tom’s reight to sattle down wi’ such a pretty little lass as thou. Mebbe I shall be doing something of the sort myself. Good-bye, lass, good-bye.”

“When—when shall we see you again?” said Polly, in a timid way.

“Don’t know, my lass, but I may be close at hand when no one sees me. I’m a curus, hiding sort of a fellow. Theer, good-bye.”

He stooped and left the house, and Polly saw him go towards the workshop, stop talking for a few minutes, and then go slowly rolling along the lane.

“I’m afraid Jock’s after no good, Polly, my little woman,” said Tom quietly that night. “Ah, well, there’s worse fellows than he.”

“I like Jock better than ever I liked him before,” cried Polly, with animation.

“I wish you could like him into a better life,” said Tom, thoughtfully. “I wonder where the poor old chap has gone.”

On a mission of his own. That very afternoon Cynthia had tempted her sister out of the solitude she so much affected now, by proposing a ride; for Lord Artingale had sent the horses over with a note saying that he had been called away to the county town, but would come over in the evening.

Julia took some pressing, but she agreed at last, the horses were brought round, and soon after the sisters mounted, and were cantering along the pleasant sandy lanes, followed some fifty yards or so behind by a well-mounted groom.

The sun shone brightly, and there was a deliciously fresh breeze, just sufficient to make the exercise enjoyable. The swift motion, with the breeze fanning her face, seemed to brighten Julia’s eyes and send a flush into her cheeks, as they cantered on, Cynthia being full of merry remarks, and gladly noticing her sister’s change.

“Oh, if she would only pluck up a little spirit,” thought Cynthia; and then she began to wonder whether Artingale would bring over Magnus.

Then she began to make plans as to how she would bring them together, and leave them pretty often alone.

One way and another, as they rode on and on, Miss Cynthia mentally proved herself a very female Von Moltke in the art of warfare, and so wrapt was she in her thoughts, that she paid no heed to the fidgeting of the beautiful creature she was riding.

“Isn’t your mare very tiresome, Cynthia?” said Julia.

“Only fresh, dear; I don’t mind,” was the reply. “I can manage her.”

They were now in one of the winding, hilly lanes running through a series of the shaws or little woods common in that part of the country, and intersected by narrow rides for the convenience of the shooting parties and those who hunt. Everything looked very beautiful, and with her troubled breast feeling more at rest than it had for weeks, Julia was really enjoying her ride.

“Why, this is what we ought often to do,” thought Cynthia. “Quiet, mare! Julia seems to feel safe from the ogre now she is well mounted. How pretty she looks!”

Julia certainly did look very beautiful just then, though she might have reciprocated the compliment. Her dark blue habit fitted her to perfection, her little glossy riding-hat was daintily poised upon her well-shaped head, and she rode her mare gracefully and well.

“Shall I take up a link or two of her curb, ma’am?” said the groom, cantering up, as Mad Sal seemed to be growing excited.

“Oh no, Thomas; she’ll quiet down. It would only make her more fidgety. I’ll give her a gallop.”

If she had not decided to give it, Mad Sal would have taken it; for as she spoke and loosened her rein, the graceful creature sprang off at a gallop, and after a few strides began to go like the wind.

“Oh, Thomas, Thomas,” cried Julia; “gallop!”

“Don’t you be frightened, Miss,” said the groom, smiling. “Miss Cynthia won’t hurt. I never see a lady as could go like her. Shall I gallop after her, miss?”

“Yes, yes, quickly,” cried Julia, excitedly; and, knowing the country, the groom turned his horse’s head, put him at and leaped a low hedge into a field between two patches of coppice, and went off hunting fashion, to cut off a long corner round which he knew his young charge would go.

Julia hesitated about following, and then kept on at an easy canter along the road, following her sister’s steps, till suddenly she turned ghastly pale, as, about fifty yards in front, she saw a man force his way through the low hedge, and then, evidently hot and panting with a long run, come towards her.

She had but to lash her mare and dash by him. She could have turned and cantered off with ease. But she did neither, merely sitting paralysed, as it were, with her eyes fixed upon the great dark-bearded fellow, who came boldly up, laid his hand upon the rein, and the mare stopped short.

“Why, my beauty,” he said, in a low deep voice, as he passed his arm through the rein, and placed his great hands upon the trembling girl’s waist, “I thought I was never going to see you again.”

Julia did not answer, though her lips parted as if to utter a cry.

“There,” he said, “don’t look frightened. I wouldn’t hurt you for the world. I’ve got you safe, and the mare too. I don’t know which is the prettiest. There, you’re all right; they won’t be back this half-hour. I’ve got you safe; jump?”

As he spoke he lifted her out of the saddle, and the next moment she was clasped tight in the fellow’s arms—the dove quite at the mercy of the hawk.

Part 2, Chapter X.

At Kilby.

Winter came in early that year, but none the less fiercely. Cyril and his young wife stayed on, Sage eagerly agreeing to her aunt’s proposal that the visit should be prolonged, and consequently the rabbits on the farm had a very hard time, especially when the snow came, and their footprints could be tracked with ease.

John Berry brought his young wife and children, to the great delight of the Churchwarden, of whom they made a perfect slave, for he was never weary of petting them.

Lord Artingale came over once, and won golden opinions of Mrs Portlock by what she called his condescension; and as to his nominee at the next election, the Churchwarden was ready to support him through thick and thin for the interest he took in Rue Berry’s little children.

Harry Artingale was not the only gentleman visitor who found his way to the farm, for Frank Mallow came one evening soon after the Berrys had arrived, and that night, when Sage had gone up with her sister to her room, Rue suddenly burst into a hysterical fit of weeping.

“Why, Rue, darling,” exclaimed her sister, “what is it?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” she cried hastily, wiping her eyes and cheering up. “Only one of my foolish fits, Sagey. There, there, good night.”

“But you are ill,” said Sage, anxiously.

“Ill, dear? No; it is only a little hysterical feeling that I have sometimes,” and wishing her sister good night in the most affectionate manner, Sage left her bending over the little bedstead where her children slept, and as Sage closed the door she saw Rue sinking down upon her knees.

It was not a pleasant time, for Cyril had grown short and sulky whenever Frank came, and seeing this, Frank laughed, and became unpleasantly attentive to his brother's young wife.

"If he won't be polite to you, Sage, I will," he cried. "I want you to have pleasant memories of me when I am gone."

"But are you going soon?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I shall go soon," he replied; "I'm tired of this narrow country. Ah, Portlock, you should come with me."

"No, no," exclaimed Mrs Portlock, excitedly. "My husband could not think of such a thing."

The Churchwarden, who was puffing away at his pipe when this was said, gave Frank Mallow a peculiar look, to which that gentleman nodded and stroked his dark beard.

"Well, I don't know, mother," he said; "farming's getting very bad here, and those who emigrate seem to do very well."

"Oh, no, Joseph; I don't believe they do," cried Mrs Portlock, plaiting away at her apron, so as to produce the effect since become fashionable under the name of kilting.

"Why, look at young Luke Ross," said the Churchwarden; "he's emigrated to London, and they say getting on wonderful."

"Home's quite good enough for me, Joseph," said Mrs Portlock, "and I wouldn't go on any consideration."

Frank Mallow took up the ball here, but the Churchwarden saw that Sage had turned pale and was bending over her work, so he stopped, and Frank went on painting the pictures of Australian life in the most highly-coloured style.

This visit became an extremely painful one to Sage, for, to Cyril's great annoyance, Frank came more and more, bantering his brother on his ill-humour, taking not the slightest notice of Mrs Berry, who had turned very cold and reserved to him now, and evidently trying to pique her by his attentions to Sage.

The latter began to look upon him with horror, and dreaded Cyril's absences, which were very frequent, there always being something to shoot over at Gatley, or a trip to make somewhere; and at last it became almost a matter of course, as soon as Cyril had gone, for Frank to come sauntering in to have a chat with the Churchwarden upon sheep.

As a rule the Churchwarden would be absent, and Mrs Portlock would begin to exert herself to make the visitor's stay comfortable, always contriving a little whispered conversation with him in the course of his visit, and begging him not to induce Portlock to emigrate. For it would be such a pity at his age, she whispered. And then, as soon as he got free, he would begin chatting to Sage, who sat there afraid to seem cold, but all the time being ill at ease, for a horrible suspicion had come over her, and fight against it how she would, she could not drive it away.

A great change had come over Rue, and it seemed to Sage so horrible, that she reproached herself for harbouring the idea that her sister's affection had come back for her old lover; that he was trying all he could to win her from her duty as a wife and mother; and that she, Sage, was being used as a blind to hide the real state of the case from her aunt and uncle. As for John Berry, there was no need to try and blind him, for in his simple, honest fashion he had the fondest trust in his wife; and if any one had hinted that she was falling away from him, if it had been a man, he would have struck him down.

A fortnight passed, and the frost still lasted. The Churchwarden, in his genial hospitality, said that it was a glorious time, but to Sage it was one of intense mental pain. Cyril had gone back to London, but was to come back and fetch her; but even if he had been there, Sage would have shrunk from speaking to him, seeing what a horrible accusation she would be making against her own sister and his brother; and she shrank from it the more from a dread of saying or doing anything to estrange Cyril, who had certainly been of late colder than his wont.

"Should she tell Julia?"

No, she seemed ill, and to avoid her now, and Sage was too proud to attempt to force herself upon her sister-in-law if she wished to keep away.

It was a terrible time for her, as she realised more and more, from various little things she saw, that Frank Mallow had, from old associations, regained his old power over Rue, and to her horror she felt certain that they had had stolen interviews.

"What should she do?" she asked herself; and now she wished that Cyril was back, for suddenly, just as Sage was praying that John Berry would make up his mind to go home, he announced his intention of going alone.

"It's bitter cold there after the place has been shut up, Churchwarden, and if thou does not mind I'll leave Rue and the little ones, and come over and fetch them in about a week's time."

Frank glanced at Sage, and their eyes met, sending a thrill of horror through the latter, as she felt more and more sure that her sister was growing weaker; and Sage closed her eyes, and bitterly reproached her husband for leaving her alone at such a time.

She formed a dozen plans, but rejected them all, and tried to invent others. She felt that she could not speak to her uncle and aunt; she dared not accuse her sister, for she was not sure, and hour after hour she was praying that she might have been deceived; but all the same she felt bound to act, and finally she determined that she would never leave Rue alone when Frank Mallow was in the house.

Sage's plan was good, but she could not keep to it; and one day, as she was about to enter the dining-room, where she had left her sister alone for a few moments, she heard her say, in a piteous voice—

"Oh, Frank, spare me! I cannot—I dare not?"

"It is too late now," he said. "All is arranged. You must!"

Sage did not enter the room, but stood there trembling as she heard her aunt go in by the farther door, and begin chattering to them both; but, with her blood seeming to run cold, she hurried up to her own room, and threw herself on her knees to pray for strength and wisdom at this crisis.

If she told her uncle or her aunt, the consequences seemed to be terrible. If she spoke to Rue, she foresaw that her sister would deny all.

She now determined what to do. She would attack Frank himself, and insist upon his leaving the house at once, never to return; but on going down to put her plan into effect, she found that he was gone, and he did not return.

To her surprise, Rue seemed to have grown calmer now, and as the evening wore on she was almost cheerful, as if a load was off her mind.

Her equanimity almost disarmed Sage, and about eight o'clock, as they were sitting with their aunt and uncle, listening to the roaring of the wind, the precursor of a snow-storm, Sage sat quite still as her sister rose and said that she wanted to go up and see if the children were asleep.

Taking a candle, Rue lit it, and her face seemed very bright as she stood for a moment looking at the little party in the room.

"Let me see," said the Churchwarden; "I forgot to tell you, my dear. I saw the parson this afternoon. He had had a letter from Cyril."

"From Cyril?" cried Sage, eagerly.

"Yes, my dear; and he said it was just possible that he might be down to-night."

"And he did not write and tell me," thought Sage, as her sister left the room.

"It will be a roarer to-night," said the Churchwarden, as the wind howled in the broad chimney, and the soft dull patting noise of falling flakes could be heard upon the window-panes. "Shouldn't wonder if we had a power o' snow."

"And he did not write and say he was coming," thought Sage again, as a curious pang seemed to be followed by a dull aching in her breast.

"Ah!" continued the Churchwarden, tapping his pipe on the great dog-irons, and meditatively putting the burning wood together with his boot, "I thought it was coming, mother. We shall be snowed up safe. If Cyril Mallow is under a good roof anywhere, he'll stay there for the night, if he's got the brains I give him the credit for."

Just then a curious wailing noise made by the wind fell upon Sage's ear, and it seemed to her as if she had received a sudden shock, for from old associations with this her youthful home she knew what caused that sound—the side door had been opened and softly closed.

Sage sat there for a few moments motionless, and felt as if turned to stone, for she knew, as surely as if she had seen it all, that her sister had opened that door and had gone to join Frank Mallow somewhere close at hand.

The terrible nightmare-like feeling passed off as quickly as it had come, and, how she hardly knew, Sage left the room, went straight to the side door, catching down her hat and cloak from the pegs, and passed out into the bitter night.

The wind nearly snatched the cloak from her as she flung it on, and then ran along the path towards the lane, for there were fresh footprints in the newly-fallen snow; and so quickly did she run that at the end of ten minutes she was within sight of a dark figure hurrying on before her with bended head, and the driving snow rapidly making it invisible as it hurried on.

The storm was rapidly increasing, and the wind and drifting snow confused her; but she ran on now, and with a despairing cry flung her arms round the figure, crying—

"Rue—sister! Where are you going? Oh, for heaven's sake, stop!"

"Sage!" she cried, hoarsely, and she struggled to free herself; but Sage clung to her tightly, and she stumbled, slipping on the hard ground beneath the snow, and sinking to her knees.

Sage knelt beside her upon the snow, and, clasping her waist, she sobbed—

"Yes, yes, upon your knees, Rue—sister, pray, pray with me—for strength. God hear our cry, and save my sister from this sin!"

For a few moments, as she heard the passionate cry, Rue knelt there trembling, but she began to struggle again.

"Don't stop me. It is too late now. I cannot help it, Sage; I must go."

“You shall not go. I know all. He has tempted you to do this wrong, and you are mad; but think—for God’s sake, think. It will break John’s heart.”

“Oh, hush, hush!” Rue cried, with a shiver. “Hush, hush! I must go now!”

“You shall not; I will never leave you. Rue, dear, there are two little children lying there in their bed, silently calling you to come to them and avoid this sin. Sister—mother—wife, will you leave them for that cruel, reckless man?”

“Oh, hush!” cried Rue, struggling with her fiercely. “You do not know. You cannot tell. He’s waiting for me, and I must —I will go.”

“Never while I have breath,” Sage panted, and then she uttered a shriek of affright, for Rue made an effort to escape her, running for some distance, and then falling heavily in the snow.

This was her last struggle, for as Sage overtook her, the weak woman rose, and, trembling and moaning, to herself, she allowed her sister to lead her back towards the farm.

How Sage managed to get her sister along she never afterwards knew, but by degrees she did, and up to her room unheard, hiding away all traces of the snowy cloaks and boots before summoning Mrs Portlock to her help, for as soon as Rue reached the bedroom she threw herself upon her knees by her sleeping children, moaning, sobbing, speaking incoherently, and passing from one terrible hysterical fit into another that seemed worse.

“Go and tell uncle she’s better now,” said Mrs Portlock, at last; “I can hear him walking up and down like a wild beast. There, there, now, my child,” she said soothingly to Rue, “try and be calm.”

Sage went down to find the Churchwarden buttoned up and with the old horn lanthorn lit, ready to walk over to the town and fetch Doctor Vinnicombe.

“I’m afraid it’s no use to put a horse to, my dear,” he said; “the snow’s drifting tremendously.”

“I don’t think you need go, uncle,” said Sage, and here she stopped short and clung to him, for there was a sharp knocking at the front door, and in her confused, excited state Sage’s heart sank, for she felt that it was Frank Mallow grown impatient, and come to insist upon Rue keeping her word.

“There, there, my pretty, don’t you turn silly too,” said the Churchwarden. “By jingo, what a night!” he cried, as the outer door was opened, and a rush of snow-laden wind swept into the hall and dashed open the big parlour door.

The sound of a rough voice gave Sage relief, for it was John Berry who had arrived.

The relief was but momentary, for Sage’s conscience said that the husband had gained some inkling of the intended flight, and had come to stop it.

Just then the broad-shouldered, red-faced farmer entered the room.

“How are ye?” he cried in a bluff tone that set Sage’s heart at rest for the moment. “I scarcely thought the mare would have got me through it,” he continued. “It’s a strange rough night, master, and if you’ve any sheep out, I’d have ’em seen to. Eh? what? My darling ill?” he cried, as he heard the Churchwarden’s announcement. “Then thank the Lord I did come.”

“No, no; don’t go to her now,” panted Sage, as John Berry took off his coat and threw it out into the hall.

“Not go up to her? Nay, lass, that I will,” he cried, and Sage followed him up-stairs.

“Why, Rue, my lass,” he cried, tenderly, “what’s wrong wi’ you?”

At the sound of his voice Rue started from the bed and flung herself into his arms.

“Jack, Jack!” she cried, “take me—hold me—husband, dear. God have mercy on me! I must be mad.”

Sage stayed with them in obedience to a sign from John Berry, and stood there trembling as she saw her sister’s fair brown hair tumbled upon her husband’s breast, to which she clung in an agony of remorse.

Over and over again Rue kept raising her head, though to gaze piteously at her sister, and then hide her face again.

A couple of hours went on like this, but when at last Sage found her opportunity, and clasping her sister to her breast, whispered—“Rue, may I trust you now?”

“Yes, oh, yes,” she sobbed. “I pray God I may never see his face again.”

“Then that is our secret, Rue,” Sage whispered. “It is for ever buried in our breasts.”

She left them after some hours, Rue lying upon the bed, sobbing at times, and seemingly asleep, while John Berry sat beside her, holding her little white hands.

Sage went down softly, but began to tremble as she heard voices in the room; but summoning up her courage, she entered, to find Morrison, the wheelwright, standing there, with the Churchwarden placing a glass of hot spirits and water in his hand.

“Go back, go back, my darling,” cried Mrs Portlock, excitedly.

“No, no, my dear,” said the Churchwarden, firmly; “Sage is no coward, and she must know. My darling, try and be firm, and hope for the best. The cart will be here directly, and were going to force our way through and bring him in. Yes, there it comes.”

“What—what is it?” panted Sage. “Is—is Frank—”

“Oh, pray be silent, Joseph,” sobbed Mrs Portlock.

“Why?” said the Churchwarden, firmly. “She must know the worst. Get hot water and blankets ready, my dear, and we’ll soon bring him round. Come, Morrison,” and hurrying out, the door was pushed to, forcing back with it a quantity of the soft white snow.

“For heaven’s sake tell me, aunt!” sobbed Sage.

“But am I to?” said the old lady, trembling before her niece.

“Yes, yes,” cried Sage. “I must know. Is he dead?”

“No, no, my darling,” said Mrs Portlock, piteously. “Tom Morrison was going home, but he could not get round by the ford. The cutting in Low Lane was full, so he came round our way; and—oh, dear me! oh, dear me!”

“For heaven’s sake, aunt, go on,” cried Sage, half fiercely now.

“Yes, my darling,” sobbed Mrs Portlock; “and they’ll be here directly, I hope and pray. And he came upon Cyril.”

“Cyril!” shrieked Sage.

“Lying buried in the snow, just at the corner where he fought Luke Ross.”

Sage stood gazing at her with a blank white face, shivering violently as her aunt went on in a voice choked with tears.

“Tom Morrison tried to carry him on here, but he could not get him through the snow, so he came for help, and—heaven be thanked, here they are!”

The room seemed to swim round Sage as she heard the sound of voices above the roaring of the wind, and going with her aunt and the two affrighted servants to the door, they stood their ground in spite of the beating and driving snow, till a stiffened white figure was borne into the great parlour and laid before the fire, the Churchwarden giving orders in all directions.

“We could never get Vinnicombe across to-night, so we must bring him round ourselves. Quick, every one. Hot blankets, and let’s get these snowy things away. Why in God’s name don’t some one shut that door?” he roared, as the wind and snow followed them into the room, making the fire roar furiously and the sparks stream up.

“Don’t be downhearted,” cried the Churchwarden, setting the example, as John Berry came in to see what was the matter.

“Hey, and what is it?” he said, laying his hand upon the wheelwright’s arm.

“Mr Cyril Mallow, Master Berry; we found him in the snow.”

It was just as Sage’s heart gave a great bound of relief, for as the mist cleared from her eyes and the giddiness passed away, she found herself kneeling beside her husband’s brother, frozen stiff where he had been waiting for hours at the trysting-place. And as Sage gazed with a strange feeling of awe at the stern white features set in death, the Churchwarden said softly, “Nay, Morrison, thou’rt wrong, my lad; it is Mr Frank. He must have been coming here.”

Part 2, Chapter XI.

Lovers’ Words.

Time flies.

Not an original remark this, but perfectly true.

Decorous mourning had been worn for Frank Mallow, the invalid mother had grown more grey, and the lines in her forehead deeper, while as the Rector thought of the fate of his firstborn, and shut his ears to little bits of scandal that floated about, he sighed, and turned more and more to his daughters, for Cyril, fortunately for himself, had quite forsaken Lawford since his brother’s death, having troubles of his own to contend with, while his wife had hers.

Rue Berry’s adventure remained a secret between the sisters, and though at the weekly-meetings at the King’s Head there were a good many nods and shakes of the head as to the reason why, on the night of his death, Frank Mallow had engaged a fly and pair of horses, such matter was never openly discussed, Tomlinson sagely remarking that when a man died there was a thick black mark ruled across the page of his ledger, and it was not worth while to tot up an account that there was no one to pay.

Then, as time went on, the inquest was forgotten, and the tablet placed in the church by the Rector, sacred to the memory of Frank, the beloved son, etcetera, etcetera, only excited notice during one weekly meeting, when Fullerton wondered what had become of the fortune Frank Mallow had made in Australia.

His fellow-tradesmen wondered, and so did Cyril Mallow to such an extent that he borrowed a hundred pounds from Portlock the churchwarden to pay for investigations and obtain the money.

“Seed corn, mother,” said Portlock, grimly; “seed corn for Cyril Mallow to sow; but hang me, old lady, if I believe it will ever come to a crop.”

As soon as possible after the terrible shock Mrs Mallow had received, the Rector took her abroad, and for eight months they were staying at various German baths, changing from place to place, the Rector now and then—handsome, grey-bearded, and the very beau ideal of an English clergyman—drawing large congregations when he occupied the pulpit of the chaplain at some foreign watering-place.

It was a pleasant time of calm for him, and he sighed as he thought of returning to England; but this return was fast approaching for many reasons. One reason was the Bishop. Certainly the Rev. Lawrence Paulby was indefatigable with the business of the church, but the Bishop seemed to agree in spirit with the meeting at the King’s Head, that it was not quite right for one clergyman to draw fifteen hundred a year from a parish and not do the duty, while another clergyman only drew ninety pounds a year and did do the duty, and did it well.

Another reason was, both Lord Artingale and Perry-Morton had been over again and again, and after a decent interval had pressed hard for their marriages to take place.

The last visit had been to a popular place of resort, where poor Mrs Mallow was, by the advice of the German physician, undergoing a process of being turned into an aqueous solution; at least she was saturated daily with an exceedingly nauseous water, and soaked in it hot for so many hours per week as well. The same great authority recommended it strongly for Julia, who drank the waters daily to the sound of a band. He also advised that the Fraulein Cynthia should take a lesser quantity daily also, to the strains of the German band, at intervals of promenading; but Cynthia merely took one sip and made a pretty grimace, writing word afterwards that the “stuff” was so bad that if the servants at home had been asked to use it to wash their hands there would have been a revolt.

There were other reasons too for calling back the Rev. Eli Mallow, and he sighed, for it was very pleasant abroad, and he foresaw trouble upon his return—parish trouble, the worry of the weddings, contact with Cyril, with whom he had quarrelled bitterly by letter, refusing to furnish him with money, a fact which came hard upon Churchwarden Portlock, who bore it like a martyr, and smoked more pipes as, for some strange reason, he raked up and dwelt strongly upon every scrap of information he could obtain about the progress of Luke Ross in London, even going over to the marketplace occasionally to have a pipe and a chat with old Michael his father.

There was no help for it, and at last the luggage was duly packed, and after poor Mrs Mallow had been carefully carried down, the family started for home, and settled for the time being in one of a handsome row of houses north of the park.

“Yes, my dear, it is—very expensive,” said the Rector, in answer to a remark, almost a remonstrance, from the invalid; “but we must keep up appearances till the girls are married. Then, my dear, we shall be alone, and we will go down to the old home, and there will be nothing to interfere with our quiet, peaceful journey to the end.”

Mrs Mallow turned her soft pensive eyes up to him as he leaned over the couch, and he bent down and kissed her tenderly.

“Well, my darling, who can say?” he whispered. “If more trouble comes, it is our fate, and we will try and bear the burden as best we can.”

“But you will go down now and then to Lawford, Eli?” she said, and the Rector sighed.

“Yes, my dear, I will,” he said; “but at present we must stay in town.” And he placed his hands behind him and walked up and down the room, wishing that he could understand the Lawford people, or that they could understand him, and looking forward with anything but pleasurable anticipations to his next visit.

Just then Julia, looking very pale and dreamy in her half-mourning, entered the room, to come and sit with and read to the invalid, a visitor being below, and her presence not being in any way missed.

Henry, Lord Artingale was the visitor, and as soon as she had left the room Julia became one of the principal topics, for she had seemed of late to have fallen into a dreamy state, now indifferent, now reckless, and Cynthia declared pettishly that she gave her sister up in despair.

“I don’t know what to make of her, Harry,” said Cynthia one morning after they had been back in town some time; “one day she will be bright and cheerful, another she seems as if she were going melancholy mad.”

“Oh, no; come, that’s exaggeration, little one.”

“It is not,” cried Cynthia, “for she is wonderfully changed when we are together.”

“How changed? Why, she looks prettier than ever.”

“I mean in her ways,” continued Cynthia. “We used to be sisters indeed, and never kept anything from one another. Why, Harry, I don’t believe either of us had a thought that the other did not share, and now I seem to be completely shut out from her confidence; and if it were not for you, I believe I should break my heart.”

Of course Harry Artingale behaved as a manly handsome young fellow should behave under such circumstances. He comforted and condoled with the afflicted girl, who certainly did not look in the slightest degree likely to break her heart. He offered his manly bosom for her to rest her weary head, and he removed the little pearly tears from under

the pretty fringed lids of her large bright eyes. There were four of them—tears, not eyes—and Harry wiped them away without a pocket-handkerchief, the remains of one damaged tear remaining on his moustache when the process was over, and poor little Cynthia seemed much better.

“Well,” said Artingale, “there is one comfort, Cynthy: we did scare away the big bogey. She has not seen him any more?”

“No—no!” said Cynthia softly, “I suppose not. She has never said anything about him since we were at Hastings. I have fancied sometimes that she has seen him and been frightened; but she never mentions it, and I have always thought it best never to say a word.”

“Oh, yes, far the best,” said Artingale, who was examining Cynthia’s curly hair with as much interest as if it was something he saw now for the first time. “Didn’t you say, though, that you thought she saw him that day the mare bolted with you?”

“Nonsense! she did not bolt with me, Harry. Just as if I should let a mare bolt with me. Something startled her, and she leaped the hedge, and as we were off the road, and it was a chance for a gallop, I let her go across country. But you know; I told you.”

“Yes, dear,” said Artingale, one of whose fingers was caught in a sunny maze. “But now, Cynthy, my pet, *revenons à nos moutons*.”

“Very well, sir,” she said shyly, “*revenons à nos moutons*.”

“So the wedding is to be on the fourth?”

“Yes,” said Cynthia, with a sigh, “on the fourth—not quite a month, Harry. Where’s James Magnus?”

“Shut up in his studio, splashing the paint about like a madman. He never comes out hardly. He has cut me, and spends most of his time with that barrister fellow who was to have married Sage Portlock.”

“Luke Ross! Oh! Are they friends?”

“Thick as thieves,” said Artingale. “I suppose they sit and talk about disappointed love, and that sort of thing.”

“Do they?” cried Cynthia.

“Oh, I don’t know, of course. By Jove, though, Cynthy, that Ross is a splendid fellow; no one would ever have thought he was only a tanner’s son.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes whose son a man is,” said Cynthia, demurely. “I’ve always noticed though that poor people’s sons are very clever, and noblemen’s sons very stupid.”

“Horribly,” said Artingale, laughing. “Why, you saucy little puss!”

Matters here not necessary for publication.

“I don’t want to say unkind things,” said Cynthia, pouting now, “but I’m sure poor Sage Portlock would have been a great deal wiser if she had married Luke Ross; and if you were in your right senses, Harry, you would never think of marrying into such an unhappy family as ours.”

“Oh, but then I’ve been out of my mind for long enough, Cynthy. The wise ones said I ran mad after the Rector’s little daughter.”

“When you might have made a most brilliant match or two, I heard,” cried Cynthia.

“Yes, pet, all right,” he said, laughing; “but you’re in for it. I won’t be pitched over.”

“I’m sure the state of Cyril’s home is disgraceful.”

“I dare say, my darling; but we are not going to live there.”

“Don’t be so stupid,” cried Cynthia. “But tell me, Harry, has James Magnus cut you?”

“No. Oh, no; only I am so much away now that instead of being regular chums we don’t often meet. Hah! what jolly times I used to have with him, to be sure!”

“I hate him,” cried Cynthia, angrily. “He’s a great stupid coward.”

“No, you don’t, Cynthy; and you don’t think he is a coward.”

“Well, perhaps I don’t hate him very much, and perhaps I don’t think him a very great coward; but, oh! Harry, if I had been a man, do you think I would have allowed that miserable—miserable—”

“Design for a wall-paper or fresco?” suggested Artingale.

“Yes, yes, yes,” cried Cynthia, laughing and clapping her hands with childlike delight. “That’s it: what a grand idea! Oh, Harry, how clever you are!”

She looked up at him admiringly, and he smiled, and—Well, of course, that was sure to follow. Young lovers are so very foolish, and it came natural to them to tangle one another up in their arms, and for Cynthia's nose to be hidden by Artingale's moustache.

Then they grew *sage*, as the French call it, once more, and Artingale spoke—

"That's right, little pet, think so if you can; but I wish, for your sake, I were—"

"Were what, sir?"

"Clever. Do you know, Cynthy, I often think what a good job it was that nature had the property valued before I was launched."

"Why, you dear stupid old boy, what do you mean?"

"What I say, pet: had me valued. Then he said, 'Well, he's got no brains, and he'll never do any good for himself if he is left alone; so I'll make him a lord and give him an income.'"

"Oh, Harry, what nonsense!"

"And then, to help me on a bit farther when I had grown to years of indiscretion, she gave me, or is about to give me, the dearest and best and sweetest and most beautiful of little women to be my wife."

Which was, of course, very stupid again; and more resulted, after which Artingale said quietly—

"Cynthy, dear, you believe in me thoroughly?"

"Thoroughly, Harry."

"You know I love you with all my heart?"

"Yes, Harry," she replied, with her hands in his.

"Then you will not think me strange if I say to you I don't want to be married yet?"

"N-no," said Cynthia, with just a suspicion of hesitation.

"Then I'm going to speak out plainly, darling. I'm stupid in some things, but I'm as sharp as a needle concerning anything about you, and I couldn't help seeing that the Rector and mamma thought that our wedding might take place at the same time as Julia's."

"Ye-es," faltered Cynthia.

"Well, then," said Artingale, "I would rather for several reasons it did not."

He waited for a few moments, but Cynthia did not speak.

"I'm not going to talk nonsense about being like brothers," he continued, "and loving James Magnus; but, Cynthy, dear, I never yet met a man whom I liked half so well, and—and I'd do anything for poor old Jemmy. Well," he continued, "for one thing, it seems horrible to me to make that the happiest day of my life which will be like that which kills his last hope."

Cynthia did not speak, but nestled closely to him.

"Then it gives me a sensation like having a cold douche to think of going up the church with that fellow, for I know he'll be dressed up like a figure in an old picture, with his sisters and friends like so many animated pre-Raphaelites in an idyllic procession attending the funeral of a fay."

"I say, Harry," cried Cynthia, "that's not your language, sir. Where did you pick it up?"

"Oh, out of Perry-Morton's new poems, as he called them. 'Pon my word, you know, I should feel as if it was a sort of theatrical performance. Oh, Cynthy, I should like to have you in white, and take you by the hand, and walk into some out-of-the-way little church in the country, where there was a nice, pleasant old parson, who'd read the service and say God bless us both; and then for us to go away—right away, where all was green fields and flowers, and birds singing, and all the confounded nonsense and fuss and foolery of a fashionable wedding was out of my sight; and Cynthy, darling, let's make a runaway match of it, and go and be married to-morrow—to-day—now; or let's wait till poor Julia has been sold. There, pet, hang it all! it makes me wild."

He jumped up and began to pace the room, and Cynthia went up to him and put her arm through his.

"Harry, dear," she said softly, "you've made me very happy by what you have told me. Let's wait, dear. I should not like to be married then. I should like—should like—" she faltered, with her pretty little face burning—"our wedding to be all happiness and joy; and on the day when Julia is married to Perry-Morton, I shall cry ready to break my heart."

Part 2, Chapter XII.

Lambent Love.

A certain small world, of which Mr Perry-Morton was one of the shining lights, was deeply agitated, moved to its very volcanic centre, and gave vent to spasmodic utterances respecting the approaching marriage of their apostle to Julia, eldest daughter of the Rev. Eli Mallow, Rector of Lawford. There were no less than four paragraphs in as many papers concerning the bride's *parure* and *trousseau*, and the presents she was receiving.

"But I thought it would have excited more notice," said the Rev. Eli, mildly, after a discussion with the invalid, wherein he had firmly maintained his intention not to invite Cyril and his wife to the wedding.

The papers devoted to art gave a description of the interior of Mr Perry-Morton's new mansion in Westminster, and dwelt at great length upon the artistic furnishing, and the additions being made of art tapestry, carpets, and curtains manufactured by the well-known firm of Gimpsley and Stough, from the designs of Smiless, A.R.A., and the wealthy bridegroom himself. The golden beetle conventionally treated was the leading *motif* in all the designs, and a yellow silk of a special orange-golden hue had been prepared for the purpose, the aniline dye being furnished by Judd, Son and Company. The carpets were so designed that on at-home nights the guests would be standing in the midst of gorgeous bugs, as an American friend termed them—beetles whose wings seemed to be moving beneath the feet of those who trod thereon. But the great feature of the salon was the central ottoman, which was a conventional rendering of a bank of flowers supporting golden beetles, amidst which were a few places upon which the so-inclined might rest and fancy the insects were alive.

Columns of chat were written in praise of Perry-Morton and his place, and copies of the papers in which they were, somehow found their way into a great many houses through the length and breadth of the land.

There was only one drawback to the joys of the stained-glass sisters, as they showed their friends through the house, and posed in graceful attitudes all over the carpets and against the hangings, in whose folds they almost wrapped themselves in their sweetly innocent delight—there was only one drawback, and that was, that another season was gliding by, and they were still on the matrimonial house-agents' books—these two eligible artistic *cottages ornées* to let.

Stay: there was another drawback. When dear Perry was married they would have to go, for unless dearest Julia pressed them very, very much indeed to continue their residence there, of course they could not stay.

These were busy times for Perry-Morton, who, in addition to the almost herculean labours which he went through in planning and designing, so as to make his home worthy of his goddess, had to beam every evening in Parkleigh Gardens.

This beaming was a very beautiful performance. Some men love with their eyes and look languishing, dart passionate glances, or seem to ask questions or sympathy from the fair one of their worship. Others, more manly and matter-of-fact, love with their tongues, and if clever in the use of this speaking organ, these generally woo and win, for most women love to be conquered by one who is their master in argument and pleading. There are others, again, who do not woo at all, but allow themselves to be fished for, hooked, and—and—what shall we say? There—cooked, for there is no more expressive way of describing their fate.

But Perry-Morton was none of those. He was like the Archduke in the French comic opera, nothing unless he was original; and it was only reasonable to suppose that he would bring his great artistic mind to bear upon so important a part of his life as the choice of an Eve for his modern-antique paradise. He did his wooing, then, in a way of his own, and came nightly to beam upon the object of his worship.

This he did in attitudes of his own designing, while Cynthia felt as if, to use her own words, she should like to stick pins in the man's back.

For Perry-Morton's love seemed to emanate from him in a phosphorescent fashion. He became lambent with softly luminous smiles. His plump face shone with a calm ethereal satisfaction, and of all men in the world he seemed most happy.

He did not trouble Julia much, only with his presence. He would lay a finger on the back of her chair, and pose himself like a sculptor's idea of one of the fat gods in the Greek Pantheon—say Bacchus, before too much grape-juice had begun to interfere with the proper working of his digestive organs. Or before the first wanderings of his very severe attacks of D.T., which must have caused so much consternation and dismay in Olympus' pleasant groves, and bothered Aesculapius, who applied leeches, because he would not own to his ignorance of the new disease.

He never kissed Julia once, so Cynthia declared. It is open to doubt whether he ever pressed her hand. His was the kiss-the-hem-of-the-lady's-garment style of love, and he once terribly alarmed Julia by gracefully reclining at her feet, with one arm resting upon a footstool, and gazing blandly in her face.

At other times he seemed to love her from a distance—getting into far-off corners of the room, and gazing from different points of view, standing, sitting, lying on sofas—always gracefully and in the most sculpturesque fashion. In fact, Artingale in great disgust wondered why he did not try standing on his head: but that was absurd.

As the day fixed for the wedding drew near, Perry-Morton was most regular in his visits—most devoted, and his lambent softness seemed to pervade the parental drawing-rooms.

Meanwhile Julia went about like one in a dream. She was less hysterical and timid than she had been for many weeks past, and finding that her lover troubled her so little, she bore his presence patiently, delighting him, as he confided to Cynthia, by her "heavenly calm."

"I don't think she's well," said Cynthia, shortly.

“Not well?” he said, with a pitying smile. “My sweet Cynthia, you cannot read her character as I read it. Do you not see how, for months past, our love has grown, rising like some lotus out from the cool depths of an Eastern lake till it has reached the surface, where it is about to unfold its petals to the glowing sun. Ah, my sweet child, you do not see how I have been forming her character, day by day, hour by hour, till she has reached to this sweet state of blissful repose. Look at her now.”

This conversation was going on in the back drawing-room, on the evening preceding the wedding-day, every one being very tired of the visitors and congratulations, and present-giving, the Rector especially, and he confided to Mrs Mallow the fact that after all he would be very glad to get away back to Lawford and be at peace.

“Yes,” said Cynthia, rather ill-humouredly, for Harry had not been there that evening, “I see her, and she looks very poorly.”

“Poorly? Unwell? Nay,” said Perry-Morton serenely, “merely in a beatific state of repose. Ah, Cynthia, my child, when she is my very own, and Claudine has imparted to her some of the riches of her own wisdom on the question of dress, I shall be a happy man.”

Cynthia seemed to give every nerve in her little body a kind of snatch, but the lover did not perceive it; he only closed his eyes, walked to the half-pillar that supported the arch between the two rooms, leaned his shoulder against it, crossed his legs, gazed at poor listless Julia for a few moments from this point of view, and then turning his half-closed eyes upon Cynthia, beckoned to her softly to come.

“Oh,” whispered the latter to herself, as she drew a long breath between her teeth, “I wish I were going to be married to him to-morrow instead of Julia. How I would bring him to his senses, or knock something into his dreadful head, or —there, I suppose I must go. Julia must be mad.”

“Yes,” she said, as she crossed to where her brother in prospective stood.

“There,” he said; “look now. Could there be a sweeter ideal of perfect repose? Good—good night, dear Cynthia, I am going to steal away without a word to a soul. I would not break in upon her rapturous calm; and the memory of her sweet face, as I see it now, will soothe me during the long watches of the peaceful night. Good night, Cynthia. Ah, you should have changed names. Yonder is Cynthia in all her calm silvery beauty. Good night, sweet sister—good night—good night.”

There was something very moonlike in his looks and ways as he softly stole from the room and out of the house, leaving Cynthia motionless with astonishment.

“I want to know,” she said to herself at last, “whether those two are really going to be married to-morrow, or whether it is only a dream. But there, I wash my hands of it all; I feel to-night as if I hate everybody—papa, mamma, Harry for not killing that horrible jelly-fish of a creature. Oh, he’s dreadful! And Julia, for letting herself be led as she is, when she might have married dear James Magnus, and been happy. No! poor girl, I must not blame her. She felt that she could not love him, and perhaps she is right.”

“Good night, Julia darling; I’m going to bed,” she whispered, and, seating herself by her sister, she clasped her waist, and placed her lips against her cheek.

“To bed? so soon?” said Julia, dreamily.

“Soon! It is past eleven. Will you come and sit with me in my room, or shall I come to you?”

Julia shook her head.

“Not to-night—not to-night,” she said softly; and she clasped her sister in her arms. “Good night, Cynthia dear. Think lovingly of me always when I am gone.”

“Lovingly, Julie, always,” whispered Cynthia; “always, dear sister.”

“Always—whatever comes?” whispered Julia.

“Always, whatever comes. Shall I come and sit with you, Julie; only for an hour?”

“No,” said Julia, firmly, “not to-night. Let us go to our rooms.”

They went out of the drawing-room with their arms round each other’s waists, till they were about to part at Julia’s door, when the final words and appeals that Cynthia was about to speak died away upon her lips, and she ran to her own chamber, sobbing bitterly, while, white as ashes, and trembling in every limb, Julia entered hers.

“Poor, poor Julie!” sobbed Cynthia; and for a good ten minutes she wept, her maid sniffing softly in sympathy till she was dismissed.

“Go away, Minson,” cried Cynthia; “I don’t want you any more.”

“But won’t you try on your dress again, miss?” said the maid in expostulation.

“No, Minson, I only wish it was fresh mourning, I do,” cried the girl, passionately; and the maid withdrew, to meet Julia’s maid on the stairs, and learn that she never knew such a thing before in her life—a young bride, and wouldn’t try on her things.

Cynthia sat thinking for a few minutes, and then a bright look came into her eyes.

“He didn’t come to-night,” she said. “He was cross about Julie. I wonder whether I could see the bright end of a cigar if I looked out over the gardens. Oh, the cunning of some people, to give policemen half-sovereigns not to take them for burglars, and lock them up.”

As she spoke, Cynthia drew up her blind softly, and holding back the curtain, ensconced herself in the corner, so that she could look down into the gardens, her window being towards the park.

It was a soft, dark night, but the light of a lamp made the objects below dimly distinct, and she rubbed the window-pane to gaze out more clearly, saying laughingly to herself—

“I wonder whether Romeo will come!”

Directly after she pressed her face closer to the glass.

“There he is,” she said, with a gleeful little laugh. “No it isn’t, I’m sure. What does it mean? What is he doing there?”

Part 2, Chapter XIII.

An Eventful Night.

“I can’t go, and I won’t go,” said Artingale. “It’s bad enough to have to be at the church to-morrow and see that poor little lass sacrificed, with everybody looking on smiling and simpering except, the bridesmaids, who are all expected to shed six tears.

“Six tears each, and six bridesmaids; that’s thirty-six tears. I’d almost bet a fiver that those two pre-Raphaelite angels will each be provided with an antique lachrymatory designed by their dear brother, and they’ll drop their tears therein and stopper them up.

“Oh, dear! This is a funny world, and I’m very fond of my pretty Cynthy, who’s a regular little trump; but I’m getting deuced hungry. I’ll go and hunt up old Mag, and we’ll have a bit of dinner together, and then go to the play. Liven him up a bit, poor old man. Hansom!”

A two-wheeled hawk swooped down, and carried him off to the studio of James Magnus, where that gentleman was busy with a piece of crayon making a design for a large cartoonlike picture, and after a good deal of pressing he consented to go to the club and dine with his friend.

“I’m afraid you’ll find me very dull company,” said Magnus, sadly.

“Then I’ll make you lively, my boy. I’m off duty to-night, and I feel like a jolly bachelor. Champagne; coffee afterwards, and unlimited cigars.”

“What a boy you are, Harry!” said the artist, quietly. “How you do seem to enjoy life!”

“Well, why shouldn’t I? Plenty of troubles come that one must face; why make others?”

“Is—is she to be married to-morrow, Harry?” said Magnus, quietly.

“I say, hadn’t we better taboo that subject, old fellow?” said Artingale, quickly.

“No. Why should we? Do you think I am not man enough to hear it calmly?” Artingale looked at him searchingly. “Well, yes, I hope so; and since you have routed out the subject, I suppose I must answer your question. Yes, she is, and more blame to you.”

“We will not discuss that, Harry,” said the other, sadly. “I know well enough that it was not in me to stir a single pulse in Julia Mallow’s veins, and I have accepted my fate. Are you going to the wedding?”

“Yes: I feel that I must. But I hate the whole affair. I wish the brute would break his neck. Ready?”

“Yes,” was the reply; and going out to the waiting hansom, they were soon run down to the club, where the choicest little dinner Artingale could select was duly placed before them.

But somehow, nothing was nice. Artingale’s hunger seemed to have departed, and he followed his friend’s example, and ate mechanically. The dry sherry was declared to be watery, and the promised champagne, though a choice brand and from a selected *cuvée*, was not able to transmit its sparkle to the brains of those who partook.

Artingale talked hard and talked his best. He introduced every subject he could, but in vain, and at last, when the time had come for the claret, he altered his mind.

“No, Mag,” he exclaimed, “no claret to-night. We want nothing calm and cool, old fellow. I feel as if I had not tasted a single glass of wine, but as if you, you miserable old wet blanket, had been squeezing out your drops into a tumbler and I had been drinking them. What do you say to a foaming beaker of the best black draught?”

“My dear Harry, I’m very sorry,” said Magnus, laughing. “There, I’ll try and be a little more lively.”

“We will,” exclaimed Artingale, “and another bottle of champagne will do it.”

Magnus smiled.

“Ah, smile away, my boy, but I’m going to give you a new sensation. I’ve made a discovery of a new wine. No well-known, highly-praised brand made famous by advertisements, but a rich, pungent, powerful, sparkling champagne, from a vineyard hardly known. Here, waiter, bring me a bottle of number fifty-three.”

The wine was brought, and whether its virtues were exaggerated or no, its effects were that for the next two hours life seemed far more bearable to James Magnus, who afterwards enjoyed his coffee and cigar.

Then another cigar was partaken of, and another, after which it was found to be too late for the projected visit to one of the theatres, and Magnus proposed an adjournment to his own room.

To this, however, Artingale would not consent, and in consequence they sat till long after ten, and then parted, each to his own chambers.

Artingale’s way of going to his own chambers was to take a hansom, and tell the man to drive him to the Marble Arch, and then along the Bayswater-road until told to stop.

This last order came before Kensington Gardens were reached, when the man was dismissed, and the fare wandered down the nearest turning, and along slowly by the backs of the Parkleigh Gardens houses—or their fronts, whichever the part was termed that faced north.

Up and down here he paraded several times—not a very wise proceeding, seeing that he might have come sooner in the evening, and the doors would have flown open at his summons. But it has always been so from the beginning. A gentleman gets into a certain state, and then thinks that he derives a great deal of satisfaction in gazing at the casket which holds the jewel of his love. When the custom first came in it is of course impossible to say, but it is extremely probable that Jacob used to parade about in the sand on moonlight nights, and watch the tent that contained his Rachel, and no doubt the custom has followed right away down the corridors of time.

When Artingale had finished the front of the house he went round to the back, made his way by some mysterious means into the garden, where he fancied he saw some one watching; and concluding that it would not be pleasant to be seen, he beat a retreat, and after a glance up at Cynthia’s window, where he could see a light, he contented himself by walking slowly back, so as to get to the other side of the lofty row of houses.

“Just one walk up and down,” he said to himself, “and then home to bed.”

It was some distance round, and as he went along he made the following original observation:—“This is precious stupid!” And at the end of another fifty yards—“But somehow I seem to like it. Does one good. ’Pon my soul, I think the best thing a fellow can do is to fall in love.”

He sauntered on from gas-lamp to gas-lamp, till he was once more at the front, or back, of the great houses, with their entrance-doors on his right, and a great blank-looking wall on his left.

He went dreamily on along the pavement, past the furnished house that the agent assured the Rector he had obtained dirt cheap, which no doubt it was, but it was what a gold-miner would call wash dirt. When about midway, Artingale passed some one on the other side, close to the wall, and walking in the opposite direction.

But the presence of some one else in the street did not attract Artingale’s attention, and he sauntered along until he reached the end, and stopped.

“Now, then,” he said, “home? or one more walk to the end and back?”

He hesitated for a moment, and then turned beneath the lamp-post, with a smile at his own weakness, and walked slowly back.

“I should have made a splendid *Romeo*,” he said. “What a pity it is that the course of my true love should run so jolly smooth. Everything goes as easy as possible for me. Not a single jolly obstacle. Might have been married to-morrow morning if I had liked, and sometimes I wish I had been going to act as principal; but it is best as it is.”

He was nearing the Rector’s residence once again.

“Now with some people,” he continued, half aloud, “how different it is. Everything goes wrong with them. Look at poor old Magnus— The deuce! Why, Mag!”

“I thought you had gone home!”

“I thought you had gone home!”

“I thought I would have a walk first,” said Magnus, quietly.

“So did I, old fellow. But oh, I say!”

“Don’t laugh at me, Harry,” said the artist, sadly. “It is like saying good-bye. After to-morrow I shall settle down.”

“I don’t laugh at you, old fellow,” said Artingale, taking the other’s arm. “It’s all right. I might just as well ask you not to laugh at me. Have a cigar?”

Magnus nodded, the case was produced, and they both lit up, and instead of going straight back east, continued to promenade up and down, and then right round the great block of houses over and over again, for quite an hour,

saying very little, but seeming as it were attracted to the place, till coming to the front, for what Artingale vowed should be the last time, he saw a couple of figures apparently leave one of the doors, and go right on towards the other end.

“Somebody late,” he said, feeling a kind of interest in the couple that he could not account for.

“Yes,” said Magnus, quickly, “very late. Come along.”

Artingale involuntarily quickened his steps, and they followed the two figures without a word, seeing them sometimes more, sometimes less, distinctly, according to the position they occupied relative to the lamps.

Why they took so much interest in them was more than they could have explained, for a couple of figures going late at night along a London street is no such very great novelty; but still, they quickened their steps, feeling ready at the slightest hint to have increased the pace to a run.

There seemed no sufficient reason though for such a step, and they continued to walk on fast, till they came to the end of the row of houses; and turning sharply they were just in time to hear the jangling noise of the door of a four-wheeled cab slammed to, then what sounded like a faint wailing cry.

“There’s something wrong, I think,” said Artingale; but as he spoke the glass was dragged up, the horse started off at a rapid trot, the cab turned into the road by the Park railings, and was gone.

The two friends stood hesitating, and had they been alone, either would have run after the cab. But as they hesitated from a feeling that such a proceeding would have been absurd, the vehicle was driven rapidly away.

“What made you say there was something wrong?” said Magnus at last, in a hoarse voice.

“I don’t know, I can’t tell: where did those people come from? I hope no one’s ill.”

“From one of the houses near Mr Mallow’s,” said Magnus.

“I think so; I couldn’t be sure. Let’s walk back.”

They hurried back past the series of blank doors, till they were about half way along, when as they reached the Rector’s they found that a policeman had just come up, and he made them start by flashing his lantern in their faces.

“Oh, it’s you, sir,” he said to Artingale. “Were you coming back here?”

“No. Why?”

“Because you left the door open.”

“Then there is something wrong, Magnus. Here, let’s run after the cab.”

“It’s half a mile away by now,” said the other hoarsely. “You’d better see, constable.”

“It’s a crack,” said the policeman, excitedly, “and the chaps must be in here. Will you gents keep watch while I get help, and put some one on at the other side in the Gardens?”

“Yes—no—yes,” exclaimed Artingale. “I’m afraid some one’s ill. We saw two people come away hurriedly and take a cab at the end.”

“They wouldn’t have took a cab,” said the constable. “There’s a doctor at the end there close by. We’re too late, for a suverin. Or no; stop. There’s something else up. Look here, sir, I’ve had you hanging about here and on the other side ever since the family has been in town. Now then, who are you?”

“There is my card, constable,” said Artingale, shortly. “You know why I came.”

“Yes, sir—my lord, I mean. But why did that big hulking rough chap, like a country gamekeeper, come? He’s been hanging about—”

“Stop!” cried Artingale. “Was it a big black-bearded fellow above six feet high?”

“That’s the man, sir. I set him down as from the country house, and after one of the maids.”

“When—when did you see him last?” cried Magnus.

“To-night, sir.”

“To-night?”

“Yes, m’lord. But while I’m stopping here they may be getting out at the other side and be off.”

“I’ll watch here,” said Artingale.

“Right, sir. I’ll soon have some one on at the other side. You, sir, watch at the area,”—to Magnus. “If any one comes out and tries to run, you lay hold and stick to ’im. I’ll soon be back.”

“Quick, then; for heaven’s sake, quick!” cried Artingale; and the man went off at a run.

“Let’s go after the cab, Harry,” cried Magnus, excitedly.

“Let’s run after the moon, man. It would be madness. If anything is wrong they are far away by now. But we don’t know yet that anything is wrong. Wait a few minutes. We shall soon find out.”

“And meantime?” panted Magnus.

“We can do nothing but act like men, and remain calm. Go to your post,” exclaimed Artingale; and he spoke in a sharp, decisive way, that showed that the service had missed a good officer.

Five minutes—ten minutes—a quarter of an hour of torture, during which all inside was as still as death. Then as Artingale stood in the open doorway he fancied he heard a slight sound, and as he stood upon the *qui vive*, ready to seize the first man who presented himself, he heard steps outside, and saw that a policeman was coming.

Steps inside, too, and then from the hall a bull’s-eye lantern flashed upon him.

“All right, sir,” said a familiar voice; and he saw that it was the first policeman. “The dining-room window was open facing the Park. I come in there. I’ve got a man watching. That you, sergeant?”

“Yes. You stop here with this gentleman; get out your truncheon, and don’t miss ’em, whatever you do. Roberts will be along here directly.”

“What are you going to do first?” said Artingale.

“Rout up the butler and one or two more, sir, directly,” said the sergeant, opening his lantern; and as they entered the hall he made the light play about the perfectly orderly place, before going softly into the great dining-room.

“Don’t quite understand it yet, sir,” he said. “The dining-room shutters here had been opened from the inside. Window was open. Seen anything?” he said to some one in the shadow. “No.”

“There’s plate enough on that sideboard,” continued the sergeant, “to have made a pretty good swag, if it ain’t ’lectrer.”

“No, no, those are all silver. It is a presentation set.”

“Then we’re in time,” whispered the sergeant. “I expect the servants are in it.”

A terrible dread was oppressing Artingale, but he did not speak, only followed the sergeant as he tried the breakfast-room door, to find it fast and the key outside; the library the same.

“All right there,” he said softly. “Joe, here. Stand inside and keep your eye on the staircase; we’re going below.”

The constable at the entrance obeyed his orders, and softly opening a glass door, the sergeant, who seemed quite at home in the geography of the place, led the way down a flight of well-whitened stone steps to the basement, the bright light of his lantern playing upon a long row of bells, and then upon a broad stone passage and several doors.

“Butler’s pantry,” he whispered, after a good look round. “You stop here, sir.”

Artingale stopped short, guarding the foot of the steps, and the sergeant tried the door, to find it fast, but as the handle rattled a man’s voice exclaimed, “Who’s there?”

“Police! Open quickly.”

There was a scuffling noise, then the striking of a match, and a light shone out from three panes of glass above the door. The hurried sound of some one putting on some clothes, and then a peculiar monitory *click-click*!

“Mind what you’re at with that pistol,” said the sergeant gruffly. “I tell you it’s the police. Open the door.”

“How do I know it’s the police?” said the butler firmly.

“Come and see then, stupid.”

“Open the door, Thompson,” said Artingale. “I’m here too.”

“Oh, is it you, my lord?” said the butler, and he unlocked the door, to be seen in his shirt and trousers, with a cocked pistol in his hand. “I’ve got the plate here, my lord, and I did not know but what it was a trick. For God’s sake, my lord, what’s the matter?”

“Don’t know yet,” said the sergeant. “But the plate’s right, you say?”

“Yes; all but the things in the dining-room.”

“They’re safe too. We found the front door open. Now then, who sleeps down here?”

“Under-butler, footman, and page,” said the butler quickly; and taking a chamber candlestick, he led the way to a smaller pantry where the light showed a red-faced boy fast asleep with his mouth open.

“Where are the men?” said the sergeant laconically; and the butler led the way to a closed door, which opened into a long stone-paved hall, in the two recesses of which were a couple of turned-up bedsteads, in each of which was a

sleeping man, one of whom jumped up, however, as the light fell upon his eyes.

“Get up, James,” said the butler. “Have either of you fellows been up to any games?”

“No, sir. We came to bed before you,” was the reply.

“You’d better get up,” said the butler.

Then following the sergeant the basement was searched, and they reascended to the hall.

“I’ve been all about here,” said the sergeant quietly. “They must have meant the jewels and things up-stairs. Next thing is to go up and wake your guv’ner.”

“What, alone?” said the butler blankly.

“Come along, then, and I’ll go with you.”

“I’ll come too, sergeant,” said Artingale. “Don’t alarm the ladies if you can help it.”

And together they mounted the thickly-carpeted stairs.

Part 2, Chapter XIV.

Gone! Where?

If one could but bring oneself to the belief, there is only a slight difference between day and night, and that difference is that in the latter case there is an absence of light—that is all; but, somehow, we people the darkness with untold horrors. We ignore it, of course; we should ridicule the impeachment, but the fact remains the same, that probably nineteen people out of every twenty are afraid of being in the dark—perhaps more so than they were when children.

Possibly we grow more nervous than when we were young, or gas may have had something to do with it; certainly more people seem to burn lights in their bedrooms than used to be the case before a gas-burner or two had become the regular furniture of a well-ordered bedroom in town.

In our fathers’ days, people who were invalids burned long, thin, dismal rushlights in shades, with the candle itself in the middle of a cup of water; or else they had a glass containing so much oil floating on water, and a little wick upon its own raft, sailing about like a miniature floating beacon in the oil. But still these were the exceptions, and a light in a bedroom was an uncommon thing. At the same time, though, it must be allowed that there is something fear-exciting about the dark rooms, and that sounds that are unnoticed in the broad daylight acquire a strange weirdness if heard when all else is still. People have a bad habit of being taken ill in the night; burglars choose “the sma’” hours for breaking into houses; sufferers from indigestion select the darkness for their deeds of evil known as sleep-walking; and the imps attendant on one’s muscles prefer two or three o’clock in the so-called morning for putting our legs on that rack known as the cramp. It is perhaps after all excusable then for people to indulge, in moderation, in a little nocturnal alarm; and it may also, for aught we know, be good for us, and act as a safety-valve escape for a certain amount of bad nerve-force. No doubt Priam was terribly alarmed when his curtains were drawn in the dead of the night—as much so, perhaps, as the mobled queen; and therefore it was quite excusable for the Rector to answer the summons of the head of his wedding staff of servants in a state of no little excitement.

“Dreadful! extraordinary! most strange?” he faltered. “You were passing, Henry, eh?”

“Yes: Mr Magnus and I were going by, and we found the policeman had discovered that the door was open.”

“Then the place has been rifled,” exclaimed the Rector; “and many of the things are hired,” he cried piteously. “Everything will be gone! What is to be done?”

“Hush, Mr Mallow! we shall alarm the whole house,” said Artingale, hastily. “I fancy I saw some one leave the place as we came up. Will you send and see if—if—”

He hesitated, for he saw Magnus with a face like ashes, standing holding on by the balustrade.

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed the Rector. “Speak out, please. Do you mean see if all the servants are at home?”

“I don’t know—I scarcely know what to say,” whispered Artingale, going close up to him. “We want to avoid exposure, sir. Go and knock at Cynthia’s door, and send her to see if her sister has been alarmed.”

“There is no occasion to frighten her. Let the place below be well searched, and the servants examined.”

Just then Mrs Mallow’s voice was heard inquiring what was the matter, and the Rector thrust his head inside the door to tell her that she was not to be alarmed.

“Is any one ill?” said a voice just then, which made Artingale thrill, and he ran to the door from which the voice had come.

“Dress yourself quickly, Cynthy,” he whispered, “and go and tell Julie not to be alarmed. We—we are afraid there has been a burglary.”

The door closed, and just then the Rector, who had been compelled to go back to his room to quiet Mrs Mallow's fears, came back.

"I will speak to the young ladies," he said, looking pale and troubled, and going along the landing, he tapped lightly at Julia's door.

"Julia, my dear! Julia!"

He tapped again.

"Julia, my child! Julia!"

Still no answer.

He tapped a little louder, a little louder still—but no answer; and Artingale and Magnus exchanged glances.

"Dear me, it is most embarrassing. How fast she sleeps," said the Rector, looking round apologetically. "Really, gentlemen, I do not think we ought to disturb her."

All the same, urged by a strange feeling of alarm, he tapped again, but still without result; and once more he looked round at the strange group gathered upon the broad landing—the police in great-coats, and lantern-bearing; the butler with his candlestick and pistol; the two gentlemen in evening dress, with their light overcoats and crush hats in hand.

Just then a door opened, and every one drew back to allow the pretty little vision that burst upon their sight to pass them by.

The figure was that of Cynthia, with her crisp, fair hair lightly tied back, so that it floated down loosely over the loose wide *peignoir* of creamy cashmere trimmed with blue, which formed a costume, as it swept from her in graceful folds, far more becoming than the most ravishing toilet from a Parisian *modiste*. She held a little silver candlestick, with bell glass to shade the light, and as she came forward, looking very composed and firm, though rather pale, Artingale felt for the moment as if he could have emulated Perry-Morton, and fallen down to kiss her pretty little slipper-covered feet.

"Ah, my dear!" exclaimed the Rector, "I am glad you have come. I cannot make Julia hear."

Cynthia darted a quick glance at Artingale, full of dread and dismay, and then without a word she passed on and laid her hand upon the china knob of Julia's door. Then she hesitated for a moment, but only for a moment, before turning the handle and going in, the door swinging to behind her.

Cynthia held her candle above her head and gave one glance round, the light falling on Julia's wedding dress and veil; the wreath was on a table, side by side with the jewels that had been presented to her. Over other chairs and in half-packed trunks were travelling and other costumes, with the endless little signs of preparation for leaving home.

Cynthia gave one glance round her with dilating eyes; ran into the dressing-room and back looked at the unpressed bed, and then she let fall the candlestick as she sank on her knees uttering a loud cry, and covering her face with her hands.

It was no time for ceremony, and at the cry the Rector rushed in, followed by Artingale, Magnus stopping at the door to keep back the police and the servants, who would have entered too, both the men from below having now joined the group.

As the Rector ran in with Artingale, Cynthia started up once more.

"Oh, papa! oh, Harry!" she cried, piteously, "Julie has gone!"

"Gone!" gasped the Rector. "Gone! Where? Are you mad?"

"Mad? no, papa, but she is. Oh, Harry! I saw that dreadful man to-night outside in the garden, after we had gone to bed; but I thought she would be safe; and now I know it—I am quite sure. Oh, Harry, Harry! what shall we do? He has taken her away!"

Part 2, Chapter XV.

The Bird and the Serpent.

Unmistakably. There could be no doubt of the fact; Julia Mallow had fled from her home that night—half willingly, half forced, always drawn as it were by the strange influence that the man who had been the evil genius of her life had exercised over her.

For months past she had fought against it, and striven to nerve herself to conquer the force that seemed to master her; but always in vain. For often, unseen except by her, Jock Morrison was on the watch, turning up where least expected; and when not present in the flesh, seemingly always there in spirit, and haunting her like her shadow. Again and again he had come upon her alone, taken her in his arms, and in his coarse fashion told her that he loved her, and that she should belong to him alone. Nothing, he told her, should keep them apart, for if he could not get her by fair means he would by foul; laughingly showing her the great spring-bladed dagger-knife he carried, and saying

that he kept it sharp for any one who got in his way.

Julia trembled at the thought of seeing him; she shuddered and closed her eyes when he appeared before her, and then grew nerveless and weak, fascinated, as it were, like some bird before a serpent; and the scoundrel knew it. He felt the power of his words, and he repeated them to his shivering victim, glorying the while in the power he felt that he exercised over her.

Sometimes she had fancied that she was mastering her fear, but as she overcame that dread, she found, to her horror, that there was another occult influence at work which refused to be overcome; for as in the solitude of her own chamber she strove with it, she found that she was only riveting her chains more stoutly. It was not love for him. No, that was impossible; for she shuddered and shrank from him as from some monster. But, to her horror, she found that her feelings towards the great overmastering ruffian were something near akin. The thoughts of his great muscular figure, his bold bearing, and brown picturesque face were always before her; and even when her own were closed, his fierce black piercing eyes were fixed upon hers, reading her weakness, insisting upon his mastery over her more powerfully even than his words, though they were burned into her memory; and at last, after fighting with all her mind against the current of what she felt to be her fate, she had begun to drift.

Once she had allowed that terrible idea—that it was her fate—to obtain entrance, and she was lost, for it produced a weak submission that stifled every hope. Drift, drift, drift—resigning herself to what she thought was the inevitable. Some day, she told herself, Jock would come and order her to leave home and all she loved, and follow him wheresoever he willed; and she would have to go. He was her master, her fate; and mingled with her horror of him there was that inexplicable fascination that exercised upon her will the power of the mesmerist upon his patient, and she could fight no more. When it would be she knew not, thought not; only she knew that the time would come, and when it did she could no more resist, no more battle with it, than against that other inevitable point that would end her weary life—when the angel of death would overshadow her with his heavy wings, touch her with icy finger, and bid her away.

Always brooding now over these two fixed points in her career—the coming of Jock Morrison and the coming of the end; and so she drifted on. She heard the talk of the wedding that she knew would never be; for if the day did come, and she were taken to the church, she felt that her fate would pluck her from the very altar, or even from her husband’s arms.

She knew of the love of James Magnus, and she felt a curious kind of pity for one whom she liked and esteemed; but she closed her eyes with a weary smile as she thought of him, for she knew that she was drifting away, and that even to look at him was to give him pain.

Drifting still when taken to see the talked-of home, asked opinions upon decorations, and taken by father and sister where she was prepared to be decked for the sacrifice. Drifting, too, at party or ball, where she met Perry-Morton, who always seemed to her like some nebulous mist, that was absorbed and died away in the presence of the giant ever filling her imagination.

Go where she would, she felt that she would see him somewhere, though often it was but imagination. Still it kept Jock Morrison always in her mind, and he knew that he was secure of his prize, waiting patiently till she came back from abroad.

At first she had felt a kind of sorrow for Perry-Morton, and wanted to warn him of what her fate would be; but the pity gave place to contempt, the contempt to disgust, the disgust to dread; for she felt that if she warned him he would take steps to assert himself, and if he did, she knew in her heart that her fate, as she called him, would not stop at taking his life.

And so by slow degrees Julia drifted from active opposition into a morbid belief that resistance was vain, nursing her horror in her own racked breast, and waiting for the fulfilment of her fate. As Cynthia had complained, she had grown reticent, and made no confidante of her sister; in fact, there were times, after seeing Morrison, when she felt with a sigh that she should be glad when all was over, and she need think no more. For she was weary of thinking, weary of this keeping up appearances, weary of Perry-Morton, of his sisters, of home, of her own life.

There were times when she looked from her window longingly towards where she knew the long lake lay in the hollow of the Park, and wondered whether it would not be better to flee from the house some evening, go down to the bridge, and throw herself in. She shuddered as she formed the idea; not from dread of death, which would have been like rest to her; but because she felt that she would be only hastening her fate, and that she did fear. For so surely as she left the house to cross the Park, so surely she knew that Jock Morrison would start up from the grass and take her away.

And so it had come to the wedding-eve, and the great burly form had shown itself in the garden. She had seen it early in the evening, and she had felt that it was there hour after hour, till Perry-Morton had left, and she had gone to the window, drawn there in spite of herself. Later on she had obeyed Jock’s signals, feeling as if he were speaking to her—telling her that the time had come, and dressing herself in her plainest things, she had sat down and waited by the open window, acting mechanically, till the deep voice came up to where she sat, bidding her come down now.

She felt no emotion, for it was all as if she were in a dream. She obeyed, however, going out on to the landing, after closing her window, to find that all was very silent in the house. Then for a moment she went and kneeled down upon the mat by her sister’s door, laid her cheek against it, sighed heavily and kissed the panel that separated them, and slowly descended the stairs, entered the dining-room, and, still as if drawn by her fate, unfastened the shutters and window, which latter was thrown open, and Jock Morrison stepped boldly into the room.

“Good girl!” he said, clasping her in his embrace. “I’ve got a cab waiting, for you shall ride to-night. Didn’t you think it was time I came?”

She did not answer, but acted still like one in a dream, as he watched from the door, withdrawing more than once with a muttered oath as Artingale and Magnus kept parading about the place.

He was about to start again and again, but he always seemed to hesitate till their steps were heard once more, when he would close the door and stand listening, with the trembling girl clasped tightly in his arms.

At last he seemed to be satisfied that the ground was clear, and with a smile of triumph on his lip he stepped out, drawing Julia after him; but as he reached the pavement he heard the steps of the two gentlemen once more, and uttering a fierce oath he hurried his prize along faster and faster, as he felt that their evasion had been seen.

“Quicker, my lass, quicker!” he said, gruffly; and she had to obey him. But she was growing faint. She held up, though, till she reached the cab, into which he hurried her. And now for the first time the reality of her position seemed to force itself upon her, and she started up with a wild cry.

Too late! With one hand he thrust her back into the seat as with the other he drew up the window, and her next feeble cry was drowned by the noise of the jangling panes.

In his agony of grief and horror the Rector could hardly believe in the possibility of that which Artingale reluctantly told; for when he appealed to his child he could not get a word from her, but hysterical cries for her sister, whom she accused herself of having neglected and allowed to go.

It was impossible, the Rector declared, and after a long discussion he insisted upon the matter being kept quiet, refusing to take any steps in the way of pursuit till he had seen his son.

It would all come right, he was sure, he said; and finding that nothing could be done, Artingale left the house, after hearing from the doctor, who had been sent for, that he need be under no apprehension concerning Cynthia.

“What next?” he said to Magnus.

“To find her,” said the artist, “wherever she is, and to bring her back—poor lost lamb! Oh, Harry, they have driven the poor girl mad!”

“I’m with you, Magnus,” said Artingale, “to the end. Come on; we have lost much valuable time, but I could not stir till I saw what her father intended to do.”

He hailed a cab.

“Scotland Yard!” he shouted, and the man drove on. “If it costs me all I’ve got I’ll have her back. I look upon her as a sister. Poor girl! poor girl! she must have been mad indeed.”

“Harry,” whispered Magnus, “what are you going to do?” and his voice sounded hoarse and strange.

“Put the best dogs to be had upon the trail to run them down.”

“And then?”

“Get the scoundrel transported for life. And you?”

“I’m going with you to-night, or this morning, or whatever it is; to-morrow I’m going to buy a pistol.”

“And blow out your brains?” cried Artingale. “Bah! what’s the use of that?”

“No,” said Magnus, turning his haggard face to his friend, “to shoot him as I would a rabid dog.”

“And be put on your trial for murder. No; my plan’s best.”

“Your plan!” said Magnus, fiercely. “What can you do? You forget the circumstances of the case. Before we can reach them the scoundrel will have married her. You cannot touch him.”

Artingale ground his teeth as he seemed to realise the truth of what was said. Then, turning, he urged the man on to greater speed.

All was quiet and orderly in the great office at Whitehall, and a quiet, thoughtful official heard their business, raised his eyebrows a little, and then made a few notes.

“You will keep the matter as quiet as possible,” said Artingale, “for the sake of the young lady’s family; but at all costs she must be brought back.”

“We’ll soon find the scoundrel, my lord; but from your description he is not a London man.”

“London, no; he is one of those scoundrels who live more by poaching than anything.”

“All right, sir. I’ll take your address—and yours, sir. Can I find you here—at what time?”

“Time!” cried Artingale; “I have no time but for this affair. I’ll stay here with you and your men—live here—sleep here. Damme, I’ll join the force if it will help to bring the poor child back. It is horribly bad! She was to have been married this morning.”

“All that can be done, sir, shall be done,” said the officer, quietly. “And now, gentlemen, if you’ll take my advice you’ll

go home and have a good sleep."

"What!" cried Artingale. "Go and sleep? No, I want to be at work."

"Exactly, sir; then go and have a rest, and be ready for when I want you. If you stop here you can do no good—only harm, by hindering me."

"But, damn it all!" cried Artingale, furiously, "you take it so coolly."

"The only way to win, sir—my lord, I mean. But we are wasting time. By now I should have had the telegraph at work, and the description flying to every station in London."

"In God's name, then, go on," cried Artingale, "take no notice of us, only let us stay."

The officer nodded, and in an incredibly short space of time it was known all over London and the districts round of the elopement or abduction, and a couple of the keenest officers were at work to track the fugitives down.

It took some time; but a clever net was drawn all over London. The early morning trains were watched, the yards where the night cabs were housed were visited; the various common lodging-houses had calls, and every effort was made to trace Jock Morrison, and had he been a known London bird the probabilities are that the police would have placed their hands upon him; but they had to deal with a man whose life had been one of practised cunning, and he had so made his plans that the police were at fault.

They found the cabman in a very short time, and he testified to having driven the great fellow and the lady with him to Charing Cross.

That was all.

The net spread over London missing that which it was intended to catch, its meshes were lessened, and it was stretched out wider, and from every police-station in the country, and in every provincial town, the description of the fugitives went forth; but still they were not found. So cleverly had the scoundrel made his plans that no tidings whatever were obtained, and by degrees the pursuit waxed less hot. First one and then another *cause célèbre* took the attention of the police. Then Artingale grew less keen, for the months were gliding by, and he had devoted himself heart and soul to the cause for long enough without result.

Then more months passed, and still no news. The strange disappearance of Julia Mallow became almost historical, and it was only revived a little as a topic of conversation, when it was announced that Mr Perry-Morton had returned with his sisters from their long sojourn in Venice, and soon after it was rumoured in paragraphs that the talented leader of a certain clique was about to lead to the altar the daughter of a most distinguished member of the artistic world.

Luke Ross had been consulted by Magnus and Lord Artingale, and had helped them to the best of his power, counselling the enlistment of Tom Morrison and his wife upon their side; but he could do no more, and the matter was pushed from his mind by the hard study and work upon which he was engaged, till he read in the morning papers the announcement of Cynthia's marriage to Lord Artingale, quite two years after Julia's disappearance, the Mallows having again been a long time abroad.

Then, saving to a few, Julia was as one that is dead.

Part 2, Chapter XVI.

A Meeting—and Parting.

Three years passed away, and Julia's disappearance remained a mystery to all, and it was calmly put away upon the dusty shelves of the past—by all save one.

Father had mourned for her, and time had somewhat assuaged his grief; mother had wept in silence upon her weary couch; sister talked less often now of 'poor Julia'; brother, when he was seen, never mentioned her name. The whole matter had grown misty and pale in the distance of the bygone to all save James Magnus, and from that night he had never rested. Detectives had grown cold; other affairs had taken their attention; but nothing had checked the cold, stern, haggard man whose one aim in life now was to stand face to face with the ruffian who had made his life a wreck. Had Julia married Perry-Morton, he would have borne it in silence; but this was an outrage to his feelings that he could not bear, and taking sketching materials as an excuse, he had started off to find them, though he rarely put brush to paper now, for he was incessant in his searchings, and every likely nook and corner in London and the great cities was visited by him in turn.

Now he was wandering in the country, having had news that seemed to promise success; now away off to some out-of-the-way spot in the New Forest, or Herefordshire, where gipsies made their home; always on the scent, but never successful. He had tracked out scores of burly ruffians, but they were none of them the man he thought to meet.

Back again in London in the east, in the lowest purlieus of the south, in common lodging-houses, on waste grounds where caravans were drawn up for the winter; off to racecourses and fairs, and great markets where such men as Jock Morrison were to be found, but always in vain.

Once he heard of him, as he thought, at Horncastle, at another time at Newmarket, and again on Epsom Downs, but it was always some great idle ruffian bearing a slight resemblance to Jock Morrison, never the man himself.

And in all those solitary wanderings, James Magnus carried the pistol he had bought, and practised with it in his lonely walks. Hundreds upon hundreds of times those chambers were discharged, his marks being trees, fingerposts, saplings rising out of hedges; and though the artist seemed day by day to grow thin, careworn, and weak, his nerves were as if of steel, and each bullet flew upon its course with unerring aim.

“The law cannot touch him,” he muttered, with a strange smile; “perhaps a bullet can.”

It was on a bright afternoon in May that, seeing no beauty in the verdant spring and the return of sunny days, James Magnus, heartsick and worn out, crawled back to his chambers to find Burgess anxiously expecting him, for he had been away longer than was his wont.

“Oh, I am glad to see you back, sir,” he said. “Set down, sir, and let me take off your dusty boots. You look worn out. Lord Harry has been here—not an hour ago.”

A faint smile came upon the face of Magnus, as he heard the name of his friend, and taking up the card he rose to go.

“Going, sir, so soon?” exclaimed his man.

“Only to see Lord Artingale,” said Magnus, wearily. “I’ll soon be back.”

On reaching his friend’s house in Lowndes-square, the servant told him that his lordship had gone into the Park with her ladyship. They were in the open carriage; and wondering at his own weariness, Magnus followed, unconsciously walking straight to the very spot where, what seemed a lifetime back, he and Artingale had leaned over the rail, and first seen poor Julia’s fate.

He did not recall the fact at first, but stood watching the carriages, thinking how much he would like to meet his old friend; and his face lit up with a smile that had been a stranger to it of late.

For a long time it seemed as if his journey had been in vain, and he was listlessly scanning the long lines of vehicles, when suddenly he heard his name uttered, and a carriage was drawn up close to the rails, with Artingale and Cynthia therein, both looking, if not so young, as bright and happy as ever.

“My dear old fellow,” cried Artingale, grasping his friend’s hand, as Cynthia possessed herself of the other, “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you. But jump in, and we’ll go home at once. We’ll have such a dinner, and those dining-room curtains shall be incensed, and no mistake, to-night.”

“No, no, not now,” said Magnus; and in spite of all his friend’s pressure he declined.

“Then I shall come with you,” cried Artingale. “Cynthy, may I go?”

“I suppose you must,” she said merrily. “Mr Magnus, you are the only gentleman to whom I would give him up.”

Then there was a pleasant chat for a time, the carriage drove on, and Artingale and his friend were left standing by the Park rails.

“Not one word,” said Magnus to himself; “Julia is indeed dead.”

“Why, Mag, old man, this is the very spot where—”

“Hush! Look!” cried Magnus, grasping his friend’s arm. “God, I thank Thee. At last—at last!”

Artingale followed the direction of his eyes, and started, for there, on the other side of the drive, was the great picturesque ruffian, slowly sauntering along, quite unchanged, and with the same defiant air.

Artingale restrained his friend, who was about to leap over the railings.

“No, no,” he whispered, “let’s follow him, and see where he goes. We shall find her then.”

It was a slow task, for Jock Morrison went first out on to the grass and lay down for an hour, but the watchers did not quit their post for a moment, but tracked him when he rose, step by step, and along the great highway due east, till he turned up Grey’s-inn-lane, and then up one of the narrow courts.

It was as ill-favoured and vile as any there, and for the moment Magnus thought he had missed his man, but as, in spite of the scowling looks around, he hurried down the court, a heavy step on one of the staircases acted as his guide; and, closely followed by Artingale, he bounded up to the second landing, which he reached just as a door was slammed to, and he turned a countenance upon his friend that made him shudder.

“At last, Harry,” he said in a low whisper. “At last! God of heaven, how I have prayed for this time!”

“Stop,” cried Artingale, excitedly; “you shall not go in. Give me that pistol, Magnus. You shall not go.”

He clung to his friend’s arm, but Magnus threw him off.

That there was no mistake was evident, for from beyond the filthy paintless door came the hoarse bullying tones of the fellow’s voice, and, unable to contain himself longer, Magnus dashed open the door, and stepped in.

He was greeted by a volley of oaths, and the great ruffian started up from a bed upon the floor where he had evidently thrown himself down, and as he did so, with a face like ashes and his teeth set, Magnus covered him with his pistol.

Artingale was in the doorway, and saw it all, but stood paralysed at his friend's act. But another moment, and the bullet would have sped upon its deadly errand, when, with a cry, a woman threw herself between them, placing herself with her back against Jock's breast, and her arms thrown up to screen his face, as, with flaming eyes, she faced the intruders upon her home.

"Stand aside, Ju, I'm not afraid of his barker," roared the great ruffian, with a blasphemy; but the woman clung to him and held him back as the pistol dropped upon the floor, and Magnus staggered against his friend.

The recognition was mutual, but the woman's face remained unchanged. It was filled with the passionate desire to protect the ruffian who treated her a little worse than he would have treated his dog; and as he read the history of her life in what he saw, Artingale stood speechless for a few moments, while Jock swung his defender on one side, strode forward quickly, and picking up the pistol, put it in his pocket.

"Julia," exclaimed Artingale, recovering himself and advancing, "do you not know me?"

She looked at him fixedly for a few moments. Her face began to quiver, and her hand was slightly raised to take the one he extended; but she became rigid directly after, and turned away to cling to Jock Morrison, who, with his hands in his pockets, looked mockingly on.

"No," she said, in a sharp, harsh voice, as changed as was her thin, worn, piteous face from that Artingale had known in better days. "No," she said, "I do not know you; the Julia you knew is dead."

"Well," said the great fellow, roughly, "have you any more to say to my wife? Because if not, go."

Artingale felt like one in a dream, as he fell back, and the door slammed to; then slowly descending, careless of the curious eyes and scowling looks directed at them, he joined his friend, and they went back to the studio, where Magnus threw himself wearily down and closed his eyes.

"But I must do something," exclaimed Artingale; and, rushing out, he had himself driven to Great Scotland Yard.

"What can you do, my lord?" said the officer he saw. "From what you say, the fellow has married her, and we can't undo that. I'll take what steps you like, my lord, but—"

But! There was a volume in that one word, for when afterwards effort after effort was made to win the wanderer back by father, mother, sister, all was in vain. She had spoken truly. The Julia whom Harry Artingale had known was dead.

It was close upon twelve that same night that, sick at heart, Artingale returned to his friend's chambers, to find that Burgess had been busy preparing supper, feeling sure that he would return.

"Where is your master?" said Artingale.

"He said he would go and lie down, sir, till you came. He thought you would be sure to come back to-night. But oh, my lord—oh sir," cried the poor fellow piteously, "can't you do something to make poor master what he was? This is weary work indeed!"

"I don't know, Burgess. I can't say. I'll try, but I hope he will be better now."

"I hope and pray he may, sir," said the man, fervently; and Artingale went on into the bedroom, to see that his friend had placed Julia's picture on the easel at the farther side of the bed in full sight from where he lay; and as the young man's eyes lighted upon the prostrate figure, he uttered a cry which brought in the man.

"Quick, Burgess, quick! The nearest doctor."

A fruitless errand: James Magnus, after his long and weary pilgrimage, was resting peacefully where there is no dreaming of revenge.

Of a broken heart! So it was said, for the secret was well kept. There are men who dare to make the rush headlong from this world.

Part 3, Chapter I.

Part 3 — The Barrister's Day.

In Chambers.

"With a rum-tum, tum-tum, tiddy-iddy tum, tiddy-rum-tum, tiddy-iddy bang!"

This was sung in a low-pitched, not unmusical voice, by a stunted, thickly-set lad of seventeen or eighteen, being his version of the well-known "March of the British Grenadiers"; and as he puffed forth the air in imitation of a wind instrument, the musical youth paraded the well-furnished office he occupied, with an enormous ebony ruler over his shoulder, held sword-fashion, and the stove poker in his left hand carried like a scabbard.

He was so far on the alert that he kept one eye upon a green baize-covered inner door, evidently leading into a private room, but not sufficiently watchful to see that another door had been opened, for as he got through a second strain of the march he called, softly, in imitation of a commanding officer, "Halt!—right about face. Band to the front!" Then his jaw dropped, and he made a bound to his desk.

The reason of this change was that a stern, dry-looking, well-dressed man stood there, with an umbrella in one hand, a blue bag in the other, and he did not smile, but showed his teeth slightly, as he saw the lad's confusion.

"Drilling, eh?" he said, shutting the door close behind him. "Going to join the army?"

"No, sir," said the boy, smartly.

"Of course not," said the visitor. "Much too short."

"Please, sir, I can't help that," said the boy, whose face was now scarlet; "and I shall grow."

"Only wiser, boy," said the visitor, "not taller. Wiser; and then you won't go and be shot at for a few pennies a day. Mr Ross in?"

"Don't know, sir. I'll see," said the boy.

"Yes, you do know," snarled the visitor; "and he is in, or else you wouldn't have gone about on tiptoe. Take in my card."

"Mr Swift, Cripple and Swift," read the boy.

"Yes, and be quick. Time's money, boy."

"Yes, sir. Take a chair, sir," said the lad, whose martial ardour had cooled into business; and he opened the baize door, let it close behind him, and knocked at the panel of an inner door, the knock sounding muffled and distant to the visitor.

"Come in!"

The boy entered a handsomely-furnished room, in the middle of whose Turkey carpet was a large, well-drawered writing-table, covered with papers tied up in red and green tape. On one side was a handsome, polished wardrobe, half open, displaying, hanging from pegs, a couple of barrister's gowns, looking in the dim interior like a couple of old-fashioned clergymen hung up to dry, or for some other reason.

In another polished-wood cupboard, with glass doors partly covered with blinds, were apparently a couple of stuffed barristers in their wigs, gazing mournfully through the glass at the opening door of the office, till a second inspection showed them to be wig-blocks, with their legal horsehair burdens grey and stiff.

Cases full of thick volumes, a couple of busts of famous judges in their wigs, and here and there an almanack, a pale blue sheet of paper, printed with the dates of various judges' circuits, and, lastly, a tall oaken case full of pigeon-holes stuffed to overflowing with legal papers, formed the surroundings of him who said "Come in."

The speaker was in a dressing-gown and slippers, seated at the writing-table, with his head resting upon his hands, evidently studying intently the contents of certain sheets of paper, closely written in a clear round hand, but with a broad margin, whereon from time to time the reader made notes, by means of a gold pencil-case.

His face was bent so low that nothing but the broad forehead was visible when he set one hand at liberty to write; but it could be seen that this broad, open brow was lined by study, and the dark hair was cut off closely to the reader's head.

He did not look up when the boy entered, but said, in a quick, decided voice—

"Well, Dick?"

"Gentleman to see you, sir," said the boy; and he placed a card upon the writing-table, at which card the reader glanced, but without changing his position.

"H'm, Mr Swift," he said. "Show him in."

The visitor needed scarcely any showing, for as the boy went back he was ready to step in at once, and his stern, harsh, rather unpleasant face seemed to wear a satisfied air as he took all in at a glance.

"Good morning, Mr Ross," he said, as the reader rose and showed the face of Luke Ross, twelve years older, and pale and thin, but with his dark eyes, rather deeply set, now full of vigorous intelligence, as he seemed to look his visitor through and through, and motioned him to a seat with a wave of a thin, delicate white hand, upon which shone a heavy unornamented signet ring.

"I think you know our name, Mr Ross," said the visitor, with an air of self-satisfaction, as he laid his blue bag across his knees.

"Perfectly well, Mr Swift," said Ross, quietly. "I was against you in that shipping case last week."

"Yes, sir, you were," said the visitor, with a smile that looked like a snarl; "and you beat us, sir—beat Philliman—and that's why I have come."

"Mr Philliman worked very hard for your client, Mr Swift," said Luke, quietly. "I presume that you bear no malice?" he added, with a smile.

"Malice, sir—malice, Mr Ross? Ha, ha, ha! That's very good, sir—uncommonly good. I'll tell Cripple as soon as I

return."

"I know you'll excuse me, Mr Swift," said the young barrister, glancing at his watch, "if I tell you that my time is very much occupied."

"Of course! To be sure. Yes, my dear sir," said the visitor, busily opening his blue bag. "I know it is. But as it was our first affair with you, I thought I would come on myself instead of sending our clerk. There, sir," he exclaimed, drawing out a folded packet of papers, tied up with tape, "I have come to show you how we bear malice, sir—our first brief."

As he spoke he handed the papers to Luke Ross with the triumphant smile of one who is conferring a great favour, and then, throwing himself back in his chair, he looked quite disappointed as the barrister just glanced at the endorsement on the brief, which, among other words, bore certain hieroglyphics in a crabbed hand—"15 *gs*."

"I am sorry to have troubled you to come, Mr Swift," said Luke, in a quiet, grave voice, that was very impressive, and, though low, seemed to fill the room, "but I really must decline."

"Decline!" exclaimed the solicitor, flushing. "Do you know, Mr Ross, that this may mean an enormous number of briefs from our firm, sir—a very fortune?"

Luke bowed.

"You are a young man, Mr Ross—excuse me for saying so, sir—just making a name in your profession. Do I understand you aright, sir? Our firm, sir, stands high."

"Perfectly aright, Mr Swift," replied Luke, in a voice that quite seemed to silence the solicitor, who refreshed himself with a hastily-taken pinch of snuff, and shut the lid of his box with a loud snap. "I know your firm well, sir; but, as you are aware," he added, with a grave smile, "there are limits to even an enterprising barrister's powers, and the profession has been kind enough to give me more than I care to undertake."

"Ah, exactly, sir—of course—yes," said Mr Swift, smiling, and nodding his head. "Exactly so, my dear sir. Will you allow me?"

Luke bowed, and before he had quite realised his visitor's intentions, he had caught up a quill pen, and, rapidly dipping it, altered the fifteen on the back of the brief with a couple of touches into twenty-five, blotted it, and handed it to the young barrister, who raised his hand not to take the brief, but to decline.

"I am sorry, Mr Swift," he said, "but I have sent back a couple of briefs this morning marked precisely as you have endorsed that. I am obliged to decline. Try Mr Norris, or Mr Henrich, on this staircase. I am sure they will be glad to accept the brief."

The solicitor stared in astonishment, took out his snuff-box, put it back again, and then exclaimed sharply—

"But I want *you*, sir, you."

"Then," said Luke, smiling, "I am afraid you will have to double the fee upon the brief, Mr Swift. So much work has come to me of late, that I have been compelled to make that my fee."

"And with a refresher, sir?" said the solicitor, dropping the patronising air for one of increased respect.

"And with a refresher, sir," replied the young barrister.

Mr Swift glanced from him to the brief he had been studying and back.

"Why, you are not in Regina *versus* Finlayson, sir?" he said. "Morley and Shorter told me that they had given the brief to some one, endorsed fifty."

"I am the humble individual, Mr Swift," said Luke, who in his calm, grave way seemed to be amused.

Without another word the solicitor snatched up the quill, dipped it, and dashing out the twenty-live guineas, rapidly wrote above it "50 *gs*."

"There, sir," he said, blotting it with a bang upon the writing-table, "we must have you, sir. We want to have you, Mr Ross. You will take this for us—it's for the prosecution, sir,—a most important case. It is, really, sir."

"It is astonishing how often the case is most important in the eyes of the firm of solicitors, and how very ordinary it turns out, Mr Swift, when it comes into court. But there, Mr Swift, I'll do my best for your client," and he rose.

The solicitor took the hint, and picked up his hat and blue bag.

"Thank you, Mr Ross; thank you, sir. I am very, very glad. Our first brief, Mr Ross. The first, sir, of many. Good morning."

He shook hands with a look of the most profound veneration for the eminent young legal light, whose brilliancy was beginning to be discussed a good deal, both in and out of court.

"Good morning, Mr Swift," said Lake. "I'll try and get you a verdict."

"You will, sir; I'm sure you will," said the solicitor, bowing as he reached the door, and then hurrying back. "One moment, Mr Ross—a word from an old limb of the law, sir. You are a young man, and not above listening to advice."

“Certainly not,” said Luke, smiling, “if it be good.”

“’Tis good, sir. Take it. Do away with that boy, and have a quiet, elderly clerk, sir. Gives dignity to your office. Good morning.”

He nodded this time, and shut the door after him, carefully opened the baize portal, and passed through that, to change his whole aspect as he found a very tall, thin, cadaverous-looking man, in glossy black, and with a heavy gold eyeglass swinging outside his buttoned-up surtout.

The countenance of the tall, thin man changed a little, too; but they shook hands warmly.

“Won’t do, Hampton, if you’ve come about the Esdaile case,” he said.

“Never you mind what I’ve come about,” said the tall man, with asperity.

“Oh, I don’t, my dear sir, for we’ve got Ross for the prosecution.”

“Con—Tut, tut, tut. Oh, hang it, Swift, this is too bad.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed the solicitor.

“But, look here, honour bright?”

“Honour bright, my dear sir. Go and ask him.”

“I’ll take your word, Swift. Give me a pinch of snuff. What, have you endorsed the brief, eh?”

The solicitor whispered.

“Have you, though? Well, I should have done the same. It will be silk one of these days.”

“Safe, sir, safe,” said the other; and they went out together, just as a cab stopped at the end of the narrow lane, and, looking very thin and old, and dry, but bright and active still, old Michael Ross stepped out; and then, with a very shabby, long old carpet bag in one hand, and a baggy green umbrella, with staghorn handle, in the other, trotted down the incline into the Temple till he reached the staircase, at the foot of which, on one of the door-posts, was painted a column of names.

“Hah!” said the old man, smiling, as he set down his bag, and balanced a clumsy pair of glasses on his nose, holding them up with one hand. “This is it. Number nine. Ground floor, Mr Sergeant Towle; Mr Barnard, Q.C. First floor, Mr Ross.”

“Hah!” he muttered, with a chuckle, “first floor, Mr Ross. I wonder whether he’s at home.

“No,” he ejaculated. “That’s wrong. Should be, ‘I wonder whether he’s in court.’”

The old man stopped short in the entry, with the door leading to Mr Sergeant Towle’s chambers before, and that leading to the chambers of Mr Barnard, Q.C., behind, and drew forth his washed-out and faded red cotton handkerchief.

“I wonder whether he’ll be glad to see me,” he said. “I’m only a shabby-looking old fellow, and I dare say I’ve brought the smell of the tan-pits with me; and they tell me my son is getting to be quite a famous lawyer—quite the gentleman, too. Ah, it’s a great change—a great change. And I didn’t tell him I was coming; and p’raps it isn’t right to take him so by surprise. He mightn’t like it.”

The old man rubbed his damp fingers on his handkerchief, and looked about him in a troubled, helpless way.

“I feel always so mazed-like in this noisy London,” he said, weakly; “and if he was hurt about my coming it would about break my heart, that it would.”

The handkerchief was on its way up to his eyes, where the weak tears were gathering, when there was the sound of voices in the chambers of Mr Sergeant Towle, and, snatching up his bag, the old man trotted, pretty nimbly, up the stone stairs to the first floor, where, upon the pale drab door, there was the legend, “Mr Ross.”

“Mr Ross,” said the old man, chuckling to himself. “Mr Ross. That’s my son. God bless him! My son; and I’d have given a hundred golden pounds if my dear old wife had been alive, and could have stood here and seen his name writ large and famous on a door in London town like that.”

He stood admiring it for some minutes, and then hesitated, as if overcome by the importance of his son; but at last he raised the big umbrella, and tapped gently with the staghorn beak.

It was a very modest knock, and it was not answered, so at the end of five minutes he knocked again.

This time Mr Richard Dixie—Dicky Dix, as he was familiarly called—verified the words of Mr Swift, the solicitor (Cripple and Swift, of Gresham-street), by staring hard at the shabby-looking little old man and his bag, and then coming a little way out to stare at the doorpost, to the surprise of old Ross.

“It ain’t broke,” said the boy.

“What isn’t broke, sir?” said the old man, humbly.

That ‘sir’ was like so much nerve to one who did not need it; and, turning sharply to the old man, he gave another glance at the shabby bag.

“Then what do you want to come a banging at the door with your old umbrelly for?”

“I didn’t see the bell, sir,” said the old man, humbly. “Is—is your master in?”

“Got anything to sell?” said the boy, sharply.

“To sell, sir? Yes; a good deal. The market’s been very bad lately. Is your master, Mr Ross, in?”

“No, he ain’t,” said the boy, sharply. “Don’t want any. Take your bag somewhere else. We gets ours at the stationer’s.”

The old man stood aghast, for the boy gave his bag a kick and shut the door to sharply, without another word.

“He’s a quick, sharp boy,” said the old man; “very impudent though. A regular London boy; and Luke’s out. Well, well, well, I’ve come a long way to see him, and I can wait,” and without another word, the old man seated himself patiently at the foot of the next flight of stairs, placing his bag beside him, and his green umbrella across his knees.

Part 3, Chapter II.

In Trouble.

“Sage? What—down-stairs?” cried Mrs Portlock. “Don’t say they’re in trouble again, Joseph.”

“Why not?” said the Churchwarden, slowly. “Come along down, and make the poor girl some warm tea. She’s been travelling all night, and has brought the two little ones with her.”

“I’ll be down directly,” said Mrs Portlock; “but what is the matter?”

“Trouble, trouble, trouble,” said the Churchwarden, slowly. “Hang the laws. I’d give something if I could take her away from him, and keep her at home, children and all. It would come a deal cheaper, old lady.”

“Oh, but you are too hard on him, Joseph, indeed you are. Cyril is very, very fond of her and his children.”

“Bah! I never knew him fond of anything but himself, and what money he could get.”

“There, if you are in that kind of temper, Joseph, it is of no use for me to speak to you. I’ll be down directly; but won’t Sage come up?”

“No, I’ve made her lie down on the sofa by the fire. She’s worn out, and the little ones are fast asleep. I’ve told the girls to hurry on the breakfast.”

“But how foolish of her to travel in the night. How did they come from the station?”

“A man brought them in a cart. Poor things! they are half perished.”

“Dear, dear, dear, dear me,” said Mrs Portlock, hastily dressing. “What troubles there are in this world.”

“Yes, if people make ’em.”

“But what is wrong with Cyril?”

“Oh, nothing particular,” said the Churchwarden, bitterly, “only he’s in trouble again.”

“In trouble?”

“Yes, in trouble. Don’t shout about it and frighten the poor girl more.”

“But what does it mean?”

“Oh, some trouble over old Walker’s affairs. Sage says she is sure he is innocent. Heaven knows I hope he is.”

“But what made her come down?”

“What made her come down, old lady? Why, what was the poor wench to do, a woman with a couple of little children? There, it seems a sin to say so, but it’s a blessing the others died.”

“Oh, for shame, Joseph!” cried Mrs Portlock, whose trembling old fingers were in great trouble over various strings.

“I don’t care,” said the Churchwarden, whose hair was white now, but who looked as sturdy and well as ever; “I wish she had never seen the scoundrel.”

“Joseph, if you talk like that, you’ll break the poor girl’s heart.”

“I’m not going to talk to her like that, but I suppose I may to you. Here have they been married close upon twelve years, and what have they been but twelve years of misery?”

“There has been a deal of trouble certainly,” sighed Mrs Portlock. “What time is it now?”

“Half-past six. Make haste. He was held to be all that was steady and right at that Government appointment, and six months after his marriage they kicked him out.”

“But Sage always said, dear, that they behaved very ill to Cyril.”

“Of course she did, and she believed it, poor lass; but if half that I heard of him was true, I’d have kicked him out at the end of three months instead of six.”

“It’s very, very shocking,” sighed Mrs Portlock, getting something in a knot.

“Then he gets his mother’s money; poor soul, she’d have sold herself for that boy.”

“Yes; she’s very, very fond of him.”

“There was enough for them to have lived in comfort to the end of their days, if he hadn’t bet and squandered the property all away.”

“I’m afraid he was a little reckless,” sighed Mrs Portlock.

“Reckless? He was mad. Then, when it was gone, it was money, money, money: never a month passing but there was a letter from poor Sage, begging for money.”

“But she couldn’t help it, dear.”

“Think I don’t know that,” cried the Churchwarden, striding to and fro. “He forced her to write, of course; and we sent it, but not for him. If it hadn’t been for her and the bairns, not a penny of my hard savings would he ever have seen.”

“But he has been better lately.”

“Better? Ha, ha, ha! So it seems. Wait till we know all. Five thousand pounds gone in that wine merchant’s business.”

“Well, but, Joseph, dear, you would have left it to them after we were dead. Wasn’t it better to give it to them at once?”

“Yes, if it was for their good,” said the Churchwarden. “What is it? Four years ago, and Mallow said, ‘No,’—I remember his words as well as if it were only yesterday—‘No,’ he said, ‘I think we’ve done enough. My wife’s money has all gone to him, and I will not impoverish myself further. I think it is your turn, now.’”

“Well, Joseph,” said Mrs Portlock, who had nearly arrived at the stage of dressing that calls for a cap, “that was only fair.”

“Oh, yes, it was fair enough; and I wouldn’t have grudged it if Cyril had been like other men. Five thousand pounds hard savings I paid down that he might go into partnership with old Walker in that wine trade.”

“Well, and I’m sure they seem to have done well for some time, Joseph; and see what a nice present of wine Cyril sent you every Christmas. Yes, for five Christmas presents, Joseph.”

“Every one of which cost me a thousand pounds, old lady, and the interest. Dear presents—dear presents.”

“But he was getting on well, Joseph, and he seemed so steady; and I’m sure he was very fond of Sage.”

“Fond of Sage!” cried the old farmer, bitterly. “Don’t tell me. How can a man be fond of his wife when he spends every penny he can get on himself, and then turns the woman he swore to protect into a begging-letter writer?”

“But what does it all mean? Only the other day, dear,” said Mrs Portlock, whose hands trembled, and who seemed sadly agitated, “we heard that old Mr Walker had died, and I thought it meant that now Cyril would have the business all to himself.”

“Yes, and he has had it all to himself,” said the Churchwarden, bitterly. “But come down, and speak gently to her, poor darling. Let’s do all we can to make the best of things.”

The Churchwarden had let the angry excitement escape in the presence of his wife, and there was a notable change in his manner as he softly followed her down into the old parlour, where a bonny fire was blazing, and Sage Mallow had changed her position to the easy-chair, so that her little ones might enjoy the comfort of the broad old sofa, drawn, as it was, before the glow.

They were fast asleep, the two pretty little girls, with their tangled hair, in a close embrace, and warmly covered with a great rug, while their mother lay back in the chair, looking twenty years older than on the day she accompanied Cyril Mallow to the church. Her face was pinched and pale, and about her lips there was that strange compression that tells of suffering, weariness, and an aching heart.

A sigh broke involuntarily from the Churchwarden’s breast, as with tender solicitude he went down on one knee, and drew a shawl over the sleeping mother’s arms.

It was softly done, but Sage started into wakefulness, and then, seeing who was there, her dilate and frightened eyes softened with tears as she threw her arms round his neck, and hid her face in his breast, sobbing hysterically, but in a low, weary way.

“Oh, uncle, uncle!”

“My poor bairn, my dear bairn,” he whispered, drawing her closer to his breast, and softly caressing her hair. “There, there, there, don’t cry, don’t cry. As long as there’s a roof at Kilby, and we’re alive, there’s a home for you, my darling, and the little ones. So come, come, come, cheer up!”

“But my husband,” she said, wildly, as she looked up, and, for the first time, saw that Mrs Portlock was present. “Oh, auntie, auntie,” she wailed, almost in a whisper, as she cast an anxious glance at the sleeping children, “I’m in such trouble, and such grief. What shall I do?”

She quitted her uncle’s embrace now, to lay her head, with the weariness of a sick child, upon the old lady’s breast.

“There, there,” whispered her aunt, with all the sharp jerkiness of manner gone. “Cheer up a bit, and well see what’s to be done. You did quite right to come down. Uncle and I will take care of you and the bairns.”

“But I must go back directly,” said Sage, sitting up and smoothing her hair. “I came down to ask uncle and Mr Mallow to help us, but Mr Mallow is so angry with Cyril that I am almost afraid to go.”

“Oh, I’ll go and have a talk to him, my darling,” said the Churchwarden; “and we’ll see if we can’t set things a bit right. Ah, that’s better,” he cried, as one of the maids entered with a hot cup of tea. “There, my dear, drink that. Don’t wait, Anne.”

The girl, who was staring open-mouthed, left the room, and, after some persuasion, Sage drank the tea.

“I want to tell you, uncle,” she cried, after holding her hands for a few moments to her temples, as if her head was confused, and her thoughts wandering away. “I want to tell you all, but I seem to be hearing the rattle of the train in my head, and jolting over the road in that cart, with the children crying with the cold.”

“But they are fast asleep, and comfortable now, my girl,” said the Churchwarden, soothingly. “Suppose you have a nap, and tell us all your trouble later on.”

“No, no,” she cried, “I must tell you now, for I want to get back to Cyril.”

She stared about so wildly that the Churchwarden and his wife exchanged glances.

“Is Cyril at home, then?” said Portlock, as if to help her regain the current of her thoughts.

“Home?” she cried. “No: we have no home. Everything has been seized and sold; and we have been changing about from lodging to lodging, for Cyril did not wish to be seen.”

“Not wish to be seen?”

“No, uncle, dear. He said the failure of the firm was so painful to him since Mr Walker’s death; and that the representatives of the poor old man had forced the estate into bankruptcy, and were behaving very badly to him.”

“Humph!”

“People have behaved so very, very cruelly to him, and set about such dreadful stories; but you will not believe them, dear? He is my husband, and he has been very, very unfortunate.”

“Very, my dear,” said her uncle, drily.

“He has tried so hard,” cried Sage, excitedly, “and fought so bravely to make a fortune; but the world has always been against him, do what he would.”

“Hah, yes,” said the Churchwarden, with a sigh. “But if people would be content with a good living, and not want to make fortunes, what trouble would be saved.”

“Oh, don’t: pray don’t you turn against him, uncle, dear,” sobbed Sage, piteously.

“No, my child,” said the Churchwarden, gazing tenderly in her sad, thin face. “I shall not turn against him for your sake. But you had better tell me all. You say he is in trouble, but innocent?”

She gazed wildly from one to the other.

“I dare not,” she moaned, as she covered her face with her hands, and shuddered.

“Dare not?”

“Yes, I dare,” she cried, proudly throwing up her head. “It is not true. Cyril has his faults, but it is a cruel invention of spiteful enemies. It is a lie.”

She stood up proudly defiant, ready to fight the world on her husband’s behalf, and seemed half angry with her uncle’s want of enthusiasm as he said, quietly—

“Tell me then, my dear. What do they say?”

“That he has committed forgery, and robbed poor old Mr Walker, who, they say, died of a broken heart at the disgrace of the failure.”

“And where is Cyril, now?” said the Churchwarden, whose forehead had grown full of deeper lines.

“Oh, uncle,” Sage cried, throwing herself upon her knees, and shuddering as she covered her face with her hands. “He was sitting with me last night, and—Oh, I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it,” she wailed—“the police came. They said it was a warrant, and—oh, uncle, help me, pray help me, for I have but you to cling to. My husband is in prison now. What shall I do?”

Part 3, Chapter III.

Luke Ross Hears News.

Old Michael Ross sat very patiently outside his son’s chambers, watching the door, and finding enough satisfaction in reading over the name, ‘Mr Ross,’ again and again.

“It’s not a grand place to look at,” he said to himself; “but they tell me he’s growing quite a big man. I read for myself what he says to the judges in court sometimes; and it’s a very great thing for my son to be allowed to talk to them.”

Then he had to move to allow some one to pass up, and soon after he had again to move for some one to pass down, and each time he rose those who passed looked keenly at the countrified old gentleman, with his carpet bag and umbrella, but no one spoke.

“I did see how many people there are in London,” said the old man to himself. “Three millions, I think it was; and yet what a strange dull place it is, and how lonesome a man can feel. Ah!” he said, sadly, “if my son was to be vexed because I have come up, and not be glad to see me, I think I should seem to be all alone in the world.”

Just then the door opened, and the little clerk came out with a felt hat stuck very much on one side of his head.

He started as he saw the old man seated patiently waiting, and after closing the door he said, sharply—

“Now then, old chap, what are you stopping for?”

“I was waiting to see my—to see Mr Ross,” said the old man, who seemed quite humbled by the greatness of his son.

“Didn’t I tell you he wasn’t at home?” said the boy.

“Yes, sir; and I was going to wait till he returned.”

“It’s of no use to wait; he don’t want to see you.”

“Do you think not?” said the old man, humbly.

“I’m sure he don’t. What have you got to sell?”

“Skins, sir, skins, principally sheep,” said the tanner, respectfully.

“Well, look here: just you be off. The governor buys all his skins when he wants ’em at the law stationers, but he hardly ever uses one. It’s the solicitors who do that. Now then, off you go.”

Just then the door opened, and a well-known voice called “Dick” loudly, the speaker coming out on to the stone landing, and then starting with surprise.

“Why, father!” he exclaimed. “You here? I am glad to see you. Really, I *am* glad to *see* you.”

The grave, stern way of speaking was gone, and it was Luke Ross of a dozen years before who was shaking the old man by the hands, and then patting him affectionately on the shoulders, the old man dropping umbrella and bag, and the tears starting to his weak old eyes, as he saw his son’s genuine pleasure at the encounter.

“Come along in, father,” continued Luke.

“Here, Dick, pick up those things and bring them in.”

Dick screwed up his face and stared.

“I—I’ll pick them up, Luke, my boy,” quavered the old man, glancing at the young clerk.

“No, no; he’ll bring them in, father,” said Luke, drawing the old man into the office and into his private room, where he thrust him into the most comfortable chair, and then stood over him smiling with pleasure, seeming as if he could hardly make enough of the little, shrunken old man.

“Just come up, I suppose?” cried Luke.

“Yes, my boy, yes,” said old Michael, wiping his eyes; “but I’ve been sitting out there on the stairs these two hours.”

“Sitting out there! Why didn’t you ring?”

“I did knock, my boy, and that lad of yours said you were out, and told me to go away; and if I had known you were in all the time, my boy, I should have gone away thinking you didn’t want to see your old father. Did you tell him to say

you were out, Luke?”

“The young scoundrel! no,” cried Luke.

“I’m afraid he’s a very wicked boy, then,” piped the old man, “a very wicked boy. But are you glad to see me again, Luke?”

“Glad to see you, my dear old father? Why, yes, yes, you know I am. Come, come, come, or you’ll make me weak too.”

“Ye-ye—yes, my boy, it is weak,” quavered the old fellow, wiping his eyes hastily; “but I’m getting very old now, Luke. I was a middle-aged man when I married your dear mother, and I’m seventy-nine now, and not so strong as I was, and—and I got fancying as I came up that now you had grown to be such a great man you wouldn’t want to see such a shabby old fellow as I am at your chambers.”

“For shame, father!” cried Luke, reproachfully. “What cause have I ever given you for thinking that?”

“None at all, my boy, none at all. God bless you! You’re a good lad, and I’m very proud of you, Luke, very proud of you, and—and I am so glad to see you again. Luke, my boy,” he said, rising, and his tremulous old hands played caressingly about his son’s shoulders, “I’m a very old fellow now, and I dare say this is the last time I shall come to town.”

“Oh, no, no, no, father, you’ll make plenty of journeys up yet.”

“No, my boy, no,” said the old fellow, calmly; and he shook his head. “It can’t be; my next journey may be the long one, never to come back again, my boy.”

“Oh, father, come, come,” cried Luke, “don’t talk like that.”

“Why not, my boy?” said the old man, smiling; “it must come to that soon, and it never seems to trouble me now; but, Luke, my boy, would you—would you mind this once if—if I—if I—you were a little boy once, Luke, and I have always been so proud of you, and though you—you have grown to be such a great man, you seem only my boy still, and I should like to once more before I die.”

“Like to what, father?” cried the young man, smiling at his elder’s affectionate earnestness.

“I should like to kiss you, my boy—for the last time,” faltered the old man, humbly.

“My dear old father!”

It was all that was heard save a muffled sob, as Luke strained the old man to his breast, and position—the present—all was forgotten, as father and son stood there feeling as if five-and-twenty years had dropped away.

“Now,” said Luke, as the old man, with a happy smile upon his face, resumed his chair, the younger half seating himself upon the writing-table before him. “Now then, father,” said Luke, merrily, “am I glad to see you?”

“Yes, yes, my boy, I know you are;” and the old man took one of the delicate white hands in his, and gazed round the room. “I like your new chambers, my boy. Much better than the old ones. The furniture’s very nice; but you never wrote to your poor old father for fifty or a hundred pounds to buy it,” he said, reproachfully.

“There was no need, father,” said Luke, smiling. “I am making a good deal of money now.”

“Are you though? I’m glad of it. You ought to: you’re so clever; but you never come down, my boy.”

Luke’s brow clouded.

“I haven’t the heart, father,” he said, after a pause. “Come and see me instead; and if I don’t write so often as I should, it is really because I spend so much time in study and hard work.”

“Yes, of course, my boy, so you must. But—but you haven’t asked me why I came up.”

“To see me, of course,” said Luke.

“Well, yes, my boy, I did; but you—you haven’t the heart to come down?”

Luke shook his head.

“Do you—do you think,”—the old man held his son’s hand in both his own, and looked timidly in his face, “do you think about her still, my boy?”

“Every day, father,” said the young man, sternly. “I always shall.”

“Yes, yes, my boy. That is why I came up. I came to tell you, my boy: she’s in very great trouble.”

“Trouble!” said Luke, quickly; and his voice sounded hoarse and strange—“again?”

“Yes, yes, my boy. I knew you would like to know.”

Luke snatched his hand away, and paced up and down the room several times before stopping in front of the old man

once more. “Has—has she been down, father?”

“Yes, my boy, she came down with her two little girls.”

“Did you see her?” said Luke, hoarsely. “Yes, my boy. I had to go to Churchwarden Portlock about some skins, and he took me into the room where she was, and she shook hands. Poor girl, poor girl, she’s strange and changed.”

“Changed, father?”

“Yes; old and careworn, and as if she’d suffered a deal of trouble.”

Luke Ross’s head went down upon his breast, and his voice was almost inaudible as he said—

“What is her trouble now?”

“You have heard nothing, then, my boy?”

“No, father, nothing.”

“Not that the wine merchant’s business has all come to bankruptcy?”

“No, father; but I am not surprised. He will always be a beggar. That is her trouble, then. She is back home?”

“Oh, no, my boy; she is in London. She would not leave her husband. Churchwarden Portlock came up with her, for it is a terrible trouble this time.”

“Indeed, father! Why?”

“They say he has committed forgery, my boy, and done no end of ill, and—and—”

“And what, father?” cried Lake, whose eyes were flashing with eagerness.

“He has been cast into prison, my boy, and they say it is a terribly bad case.”

Part 3, Chapter IV.

An Important Brief.

Luke Ross sat on the edge of his table for a few minutes gazing into vacancy, and at times it was with a look akin to triumph that he pondered upon the fall of the man who had been his one enemy—him who had seemed to turn the whole current of his life.

But as the old man watched his countenance, a sadder, softer mood came over it, and he said, as he turned once more to meet his father’s eyes—

“Poor girl! It is terrible, indeed.”

“Very, very terrible, my boy; and they say poor Mrs Mallow is dying. Surely our poor parson has much to bear—much, indeed, to bear.”

There was a few minutes’ silence, and then Luke turned to his father, and his lips moved to speak, but no words came for a time. At last he said—

“Do you know where Mrs Cyril Mallow is staying, father?”

“Yes, my boy. Portlock told me, and asked me to go and see them if I came up.”

“Go, then, father, and if you can help him, do so. I cannot go, but you—you could. Help Mr Portlock if you can, and come to me for what you require. Poor girl,” he added, to himself, “what a fate it is. Poor girl—poor girl!”

“I—I didn’t think you would take on about it quite so much, my boy; but I thought I ought to tell you about it all.”

“Yes, yes, father; it was quite right. I am glad you came up.”

“It’s—it’s all about money, my boy, that Cyril Mallow has got into trouble.”

“Yes, father, I suppose so,” said Luke, whose thoughts were evidently in another direction.

“I liked Sage Portlock—I always did like her, my boy; and as you are getting on so well, and don’t want the money I’ve scraped up for you, I wouldn’t mind helping her in her trouble.”

“It’s very good of you, father,” said the young man, smiling sadly.

“But it would be like pouring money into a well if her husband gets hold of it.”

“If it is a case such as you describe, father,” said Luke, thoughtfully, “I doubt whether money would be of much good.”

The old man looked very anxiously at his son, even with a kind of awe, as if he were afraid of him.

“I don’t like to ask him,” he muttered, “I don’t like to ask him;” and he took out his old faded handkerchief and began nervously wiping his hands upon it, till Luke, in his abstraction, turned his eyes upon him with a vacant look that gradually became intense, as his father grew more nervous and troubled of mien.

As the old man shrank and avoided the gaze which drew him back, as it were, to look appealingly in the stern, searching eyes of his son, Luke spoke to him with the sharpness of one trying to master an evading witness, so that the old man started as the young barrister exclaimed—

“What is it, father? You are keeping something back.”

“I—I hardly liked to say it, my boy. Don’t be angry with me.”

“Angry with you! What nonsense, father. But speak out. What is it? You want to say something to me.”

“Ye-es, my boy, I do. But give me your hand, and don’t speak so sharp and angrily to me. I’m—I’m getting old and nervous now, and a very little seems to upset me. I don’t even like to walk amongst the tan-pits now, where I used to run without being a bit afraid. Thank you, my boy, thank you,” he continued, nervously, as Luke caught and held his hand.

“It’s a way I have of speaking, father,” he said. “Angry? With you? Why my dear father, how could I be?”

“I—I don’t know, my boy; but you promise me that you won’t be angry?”

“Not a bit, father,” cried Luke, with assumed cheeriness. “There, dad, I promise you I won’t even be cross if you have been and married a young wife.”

“Me? Married a young wife? Ha! ha! ha! That’s very funny of you, my boy, very funny; but I haven’t done that, Luke; I haven’t done that. I married at eight-and-thirty, Luke, and once was enough. But you won’t be angry?”

“No, no, not a bit. Now come, confess. What is it? I hope you haven’t been investing in some shaky company.”

“Oh no, my boy, not I. My bit of money has all been put in land, every hundred I could spare out of the business. But you said, my boy, you—you wanted to help Mrs Cyril.”

Luke’s countenance changed again, but he nodded, and said hastily—

“Yes, father, of course. What can I do?”

“She—she said—”

“Who? Mrs Cyril Mallow?”

“Yes, my boy,” said the old man, clinging to him. “Mrs Cyril, she—she asked me to come and see you.”

“Sage—Mrs Mallow did?” cried Luke, sharply.

“You promised me, my boy, that you would not be cross with me,” quavered the old man.

“No, no, father, I am not cross, but you startled me by your words. Did she tell you to come to me?”

“Yes, my boy, she—she’s sadly altered, Luke, and so sweet and so humble. She wanted to go down on her knees to me, my boy, but I wouldn’t let her.”

“Tell me all, father,” cried Luke. “Why are you keeping this back?”

“I—I daren’t tell you, my boy, at first; I dare not, indeed.”

“Tell me now, quickly.”

“She told me to come to you, my boy; she said she had heard what a great counsel you had become.”

Luke made an impatient movement.

“And she said that she had no one to appeal to in her sore distress.”

“I am not her friend,” said Luke, coldly.

“But you will be, my boy, when I tell you that, sobbing bitterly, she asked me to come to you, and if you had one spark of feeling for her left, to try and save her husband.”

“She bade you come and say this, father?” cried Luke, with the beads of perspiration standing upon his brow.

“Yes, my son, for the sake of old times when you were girl and boy together.”

Luke drew his hand away, and leaping from the edge of the table where he had been sitting, began to pace the room once more, while the old man sat rubbing his hands up and down his knees and gazing at him aghast.

Just then there was a sharp knock, and the boy entered.

“Engaged,” said Luke, angrily. “I can see no one;” and the boy disappeared as if in alarm.

“I’m very, very sorry, my boy,” faltered old Michael; “but—”

Luke stopped before him in his hurried walk.

“Tell me again, father. Did Sage Mallow say those words?”

“Yes, my boy, almost word for word. She said she was in despair, that money could not help her, she wanted some one to save her husband.”

“Not to help her,” said Luke, bitterly, “but to save that man.”

“Yes, my boy. It’s very shocking, for I’m afraid he’s a dreadful scamp; but you know what women are.”

“Yes,” said Luke, with a laugh that startled his father, “I know what women are.”

“The bigger scamp a man is the more they hold by him. Perhaps it’s quite right, but it’s very shocking.”

“Help her to save him,” muttered Luke. “I can’t do it. I can—not do it.”

The old man had now rolled his handkerchief up into a ball, and was pressing it and kneading it between his hands, as he gazed helplessly in his son’s face.

“I think if she had seen you, and asked you herself, you would have done it, Luke, my boy. She said that she believed you could save her husband, and that if he was condemned—”

“I tell you if he were ten times condemned,” cried Luke, “I could not do it, father. It is madness to ask me, of all men, to fight on his behalf.”

“He—he did behave very badly to you, my boy. He’s a bad one, I’m afraid; but he is that poor creatures husband.”

“The only enemy I ever had, and you ask me to save him. It is not in human nature to do it. Why do you come and ask me such a thing?”

“You said you would not be angry with me, Luke; and she begged of me so hard, for the sake of the very old times, she said; and then she broke down, and said that if anything happened to her husband she should die.”

Luke walked to the window, and stood gazing out at the narrow lane below, with a great struggle going on in his breast. In his heart there was still left so tender an affection for Sage that he was ready to save her. For her sake he had given no thought to another of her sex, eschewing society, and devoting himself constantly to his profession; and now that his father had raised up before him, as it were, the face of the suffering wife, piteous and appealing, as she sent to him her message, asking, for the sake of old days, that he would come to her help, he felt that he must go—must devote his powers to saving the man she loved.

But it was impossible. He could not. He would not. He was but a man, he told himself, and this would be the work of an angel. No; he hated Cyril Mallow intensely, as the man who had robbed him of all he held dear, at the same time that he despised him in his honourable heart as a contemptible scoundrel who would sacrifice any one to gain his own ends.

Luke was not surprised to hear of Cyril being in fresh difficulties; he was ready, also, to believe that he was guilty, and he was asked to become this man’s advocate, to bring to bear his twelve years’ hard study and self-denial to try and save him from some richly-merited punishment. It was too much.

As he stood there, gazing out of the window, he seemed to see Cyril’s mocking, handsome, triumphant face, as he made him also his slave—one of those whose duty it was to try and drag him from the slough as soon as ever he thought proper to step in—one of those who were to lie down, that he might plant his foot upon the bended neck, step out into safety, and leave the helper in the mire.

On the other hand, strive to exclude it as he would, there was Sage’s appealing face, not the sweet girlish countenance he knew, but a face chastened by suffering, full of trust in him as in one who could and would help her in this supreme time of her trouble.

He fought against it, but in vain. He told himself that he should be mad to take up such a cause; that men would sneer and say evil things of him—that it was from no disinterested motives that he had done this thing; but there was ever the appealing face, the soft pleading eyes seeming to say to him, “I was weak and foolish, as well as cruel, in choosing as I did, but I humble myself now into the very dust, and ask you to forgive me and come to my help.”

Her very words seemed to say as much, and a strange thrill of triumph ran through him, as his eyes flashed, and for the moment he gloried in Cyril Mallow’s disgrace.

He put away the thoughts, though, as a shame unto him, and folding his arms, he tried to master himself, to get his mental balance once again, for it was terribly disturbed by the strange access of emotion that he felt.

No, he said, when he went down to Kilby Farm on that never-to-be-forgotten day, Sage Portlock’s life and his own, that had run on together for so long, had suddenly diverged, and they had been growing farther and farther apart ever since. He could not do this thing. It was impossible. It was a fresh act of cruelty on Sage’s part, and come what might he would not degrade himself by fighting Cyril Mallow’s cause, only afterwards, if he saved him, to reap the

scoundrel's contempt.

"And I should deserve it," he said, half aloud.

"Yes, my boy," quavered old Michael, eagerly, as he caught his son's words and interpreted them to his own wishes. "God bless you, my boy, I knew you would, and she said she knew your good and generous heart, and that night by night she would teach her little ones to love and reverence your name, as they knelt down and prayed for God's blessing on him who saved their father from disgrace."

Luke Ross had opened his lips to stop his father's enthusiastic words, when his excited fancy pictured before him the soft, sweet, careworn face of Sage, his old love, bending over her innocent children, and teaching them, as she held their little clasped hands, to join his name in their trusting prayers, and he was conquered.

He dared not turn, for his face was convulsed, but, sinking sidewise into a chair, he rested his head upon his arm, and, hearing his father approach, motioned with the hand that was free, for him to keep back.

But the old man did not heed the sign. He came forward and laid his trembling hand upon his son's head.

"God bless you, my noble boy!" he said, fervently. "I knew you would."

Neither spoke then for a time, and when Luke raised his face once more, it was very pale, as if he were exhausted by the fight.

"Why, father," he said, cheerfully, "I'm behaving very badly to you. You must want something to eat."

"No, my boy, I had something before I came in, for fear I should put you out. I don't want anything else."

"Till dinner-time, father," said Luke, smiling. "You and I will dine together and enjoy ourselves."

"But that poor woman, Luke?"

"We'll settle all that, father, after dinner. You shall give me the address, and I will either get a fresh solicitor to take the matter up or consult with theirs."

"But won't you fight for them, my boy?"

"To be sure I will, father, and do my best. But you don't understand these matters; an attorney has to draw up the brief."

"Of course, yes, of course, my boy."

"He brings it to me like this," said Luke, taking up the one he had been studying, "with all the principal points of the case neatly written out, as a sort of history, giving me the particulars necessary, so that I can master them in a quick, concise way."

"Yes, I see, my boy."

"A good lawyer will, in consultation with his client, clear away all superfluous matter, leaving nothing but what is necessary for the counsel to know."

"Yes, my sod, same as we first of all get rid of the refuse from a skin."

"Exactly, father," said Luke, smiling; "for clients often think matters of great moment that are worthless in a court of law."

"To be sure, yes; people will talk too much, my boy, I know," said the old man. "Why, Lukey, how I should like to hear you laying down the law in your wig and gown, my boy. How you must give it to 'em. I've read about you in the newspaper. Old Mr Mallow always brings one to me when he sees your name in, and shakes hands with me; and the tears come in the old fellow's eyes as he says to me with a sigh, 'Ah, Mr Ross, I wish I had had such a son.'"

"Why, father," said Luke, smiling, and seeming himself once more, "it is a good job that you don't live near me."

"Don't say that, my boy," said the old man, looking quite aghast. "I—I was thinking how nice it would be if I could get nearer to you."

"You'd spoil me with flattery," said Luke.

"Nay, nay, my boy," said the old man, seriously. "I never told you aught but the truth, and if I saw a fault I'd out with it directly."

"You always were the best of fathers," cried Luke, clasping the old man's hand.

"And—and I thank God, my boy, for His blessings on my old age," quavered the old man, with the weak tears in his eyes—"You were always the best of sons."

They sat hand clasped in hand for a few moments, and then the old man said softly—

"God will bless you for your goodness to that poor woman, my boy. I know it has been a hard fight, but you have won. It is heaping coals of fire on your enemy's head to do good to him, and maybe afterwards Cyril Mallow may

repent. But, Luke, my boy," he cried, cheerfully, "I'm a stupid old man, only you must humour me."

"How, father?"

"Let me see you, just for a minute, in your wig and gown."

"Nonsense, father!"

"But I should like it, my boy." Luke rose to humour him, putting on wig and gown, and making the old man rub his hands with gratification as he gazed at the clear, intelligent face, with its deeply set, searching eyes.

"I'll be bound to say you puzzle and frighten some of them, my boy," said the old man. "And that's a brief, is it?"

"Yes, father," said Luke, smiling down on the old man, so full of childlike joy.

"Ah, yes," said the old man, putting on a pair of broad-rimmed spectacles, and then reading—"Jones *versus* Lancaster."

"Hah! yes, nicely written; better than this fifty gs. What does that mean?"

"Fifty guineas, father."

"Indeed! And which was it, Jones or Lancaster, who stole the fifty guineas?"

"Neither, father. That is a common-pleas case of some importance, and the fifty guineas is my fee."

"Your fee?" cried the old man. "You don't mean to tell me that you get fifty-two pounds ten shillings, my boy, for your fee?"

"Yes, father, I do now," said his son, smiling.

"Bless my soul! Why, Luke, you ought to grow rich."

"Well, I suppose so, father; but I don't much care. I should like to grow famous, and make myself a name."

"And you will, my boy—you will," cried the old man, as Luke slipped off his legal uniform, and replaced the wig and gown.

"Time proves all things, father."

"And may I look? I won't tell. Is this another brief?"

"Yes, father; I get plenty now."

"But—but—you are not paid fifty guineas a-piece for them, my boy?"

"Yes, father, I take nothing below that fee now, and even then I get more than I can undertake."

The old man threw himself back in his chair, and, after a struggle, drew out of his trousers pocket a reddish canvas bag, and untied the string around the neck.

"Why, what are you going to do, father?" said Luke.

"I'm going to pay my son the fee for the brief in Cyril Mallow's case, and I'm as proud as proud to have it to do."

"No, no," cried Luke; "that must not be."

"But I will, my boy, I will," said the old man.

"No, no, father, I could not take it. You would hurt me if you pressed it."

"But I've plenty of money, my boy."

"So have I, father, and I could not do my duty in that defence if it was a matter of payment. If I take that brief," he said, solemnly, "my payment is Sage Mallow's thanks and her children's prayers."

The old man sat thinking for a few moments.

"You are right, my boy, you are right," he said, replacing his bag. "And, of course, all I have is yours. But you will take the brief, Luke, my boy?"

"Yes, father, if I can I will."

"Then you will," cried the old man, joyously.

"Hah, let's look at that. It's a big one, Luke;" and he picked up, with his eyes sparkling with paternal pride, the brief brought in that morning by Mr Swift. "Hah! this has been altered," said the old man. "It was twenty-five guineas, and that's crossed out, and they've written fifty. I'll bet twopence they offered you twenty-five first, and you wouldn't take it."

“Quite right, father,” said Luke, upon whom his father’s enjoyment came like so much sunshine in a dull life.

“Quite right, my boy, quite right. Let ’em know your value. You’re a man of business, Luke. Now, what’s this, my boy?”

“I really don’t know, father, only that it is for the prosecution in an important criminal case.”

“Criminal case, eh? And you haven’t studied it, then?”

“Not yet. I was going to finish Jones *versus* Lancaster first.”

“And this is *re* Esdaile, eh? What’s that? Esdaile, Esdaile, and Co. Why, that’s the name of the wine-merchants’ firm where Cyril Mallow was partner.”

“*What*?” roared Luke.

He snatched the brief from his father’s hand, tore it open, and as the leaves fluttered in his trembling hand he sank back in a chair, looking like one who had received some deadly blow.

Part 3, Chapter V.

A Hard Duty.

Old Michael Ross was at his son’s side on the instant.

“Are you ill, my boy? Tell me what it is! You frighten me, Luke!—you frighten me!”

“I shall be better directly, father,” panted Luke, with a strange look in his face.

“But you are ill. Let me send for brandy.”

“No, no; I am better now! It is nothing. But tell me, father, I thought that man became partner with a Mr Walker?”

“Yes, my boy; I believe it was a very old firm, trading as Esdaile and Co. No other names appeared.”

“Good heavens!” muttered Luke, who kept glancing at the brief and turning over its leaves.

“Why, Luke!” exclaimed the old man, excitedly, as the state of the case flashed upon him. “You are not already engaged in this affair?”

“I am, father,” he said, with a strange pallor gathering in his face. “I have undertaken the prosecution of Cyril Mallow on behalf, it seems, of Mr Walker’s executors, and I shall have to try and get him convicted.”

Father and son sat gazing blankly in each other’s eyes, thinking of the future; and as Luke pondered on the position into which he had been thrown by fate, he saw that he should be, as it were, the hand of Nemesis standing ready to strike the heartless spendthrift down—that he was to be his own avenger of the wrongs that he had suffered from his enemy, and that no greater triumph could be his than that of pointing out, step by step, to the jury, the wrongdoings of this man, who would be standing in the felon’s dock quailing before him, looking in his eyes for mercy, but finding none.

He shuddered at the picture, for soon fresh faces appeared there—that of Sage, standing with supplicating hands and with her tearful, dilated eyes, seeming to ask him for pity for her children’s sake. Then he saw the white-haired rector gazing at him piteously, and the suffering invalided mother who worshipped her son. Both were there, asking him what they had done that he should seek to convict him they loved.

He looked up, and saw that his father was watching him with troubled face.

“This—this is very terrible, my boy,” he said. “I ought to have been sooner. But—but—must you take that side?”

“I have promised, father. I would give anything to have been under the same promise to you. But I cannot, I will not stand up and accuse Cyril Mallow. Strive how I would, I should fight my hardest to get a verdict against him, and I could not afterwards bear the thought. I will get off taking this brief. Stay here while I go out.”

He took his hat, and was driven to his solicitors, where he had an interview with Mr Swift, and proposed that that gentleman should retire the brief from his hands.

Mr Swift smiled, and shook his head.

“No, Mr Ross,” he said; “I have given you your price, and after a chat with my partner, he agreed that I had done right. The matter is settled, sir! I could not hear of such a thing.”

Luke was in no mood to argue with him then, but went back to his chambers, dined with his father, and then sat up half the night studying the brief, not with the idea of being for the prosecution, but so as to know how Cyril Mallow stood.

It was a long brief, and terrible in its array of charges against Sage’s husband. As he read on, Luke found that the executors of Cyril’s partner, the late Mr Walker, were determined upon punishing him who had wrought his ruin. The

wine business had been a good and very lucrative one until Mr Walker had been tempted into taking a partner, whose capital had not been needed, the object really being to find a junior who would relieve the senior from the greater part of the anxiety and work.

Cyril then had been received into the partnership, and a great deal of the management had after a short time been left to him, a position of which he took advantage to gamble upon the Stock Exchange with the large sums of money passing through their hands, with just such success as might have been expected, and the discovery that Cyril had involved the firm in bankruptcy broke Mr Walker's heart, the old man dying within a week of the schedule being filed.

Worse was behind: the executors charged Cyril with having forged his partner's name to bills, whereon he had raised money, signing not merely the name of the firm, but his own and his partner's name, upon the strength of which money had been advanced by two bill discounters, both of whom were eager to have him punished.

In short, the more Luke Ross studied, the more he found that the black roll of iniquity was unfolding itself, so that at last he threw down the brief, heartsick with disgust and misery, feeling as he did that if half, nay, a tithe of that which was charged against Cyril were true, no matter who conducted prosecution or defence, the jury was certain to convict him of downright forgery and swindling, and seven or ten years' penal servitude would be his sentence.

It needed no dull, cheerless morning for Luke's spirits to be at the lowest ebb when he met his father at breakfast, the old man looking very weak, careworn, and troubled, as they sat over the barely-tasted meal.

Luke hardly spoke, but sat there thinking that he would make a fresh appeal to Mr Swift to relieve him of so terrible a charge, and expecting each moment that his father would again implore him to retire from the prosecution and take up the defence. At last the old man spoke.

"I've been lying awake all night, thinking about that, my boy," he said, "and I'm very, very sorry."

"Father," said Luke, "it seems almost more than one can bear."

"I said to myself that my boy was too noble not to forgive one who had done wrong to him in the past, and I said, too, that it would be a fine thing for him to show people how he was ready to go and fight on his old rival's behalf."

"And I will, father, or retire from the case altogether," said Luke, eagerly.

"No, my son, no," said the old man; "I have not long to live, and I should not like that little time to be embittered by the thought that I had urged my son to do a dishonourable act."

"Oh, no," cried Luke, "I will press them, and they will let me retire."

"But if they refused again, my boy, it would be dishonourable to draw back after you had promised to do your best. No, my boy, there is the finger of God in it all, and you must go on. Poor girl, poor girl! it will be terrible for her, but we cannot fight against such things."

"But I could not plead my cause with her eyes reproaching me," said Luke, half to himself.

"But you must, my boy," cried the old man. "I lay awake all last night, Luke, and I prayed humbly for guidance to do what was right, and it seemed to me that the good counsel came."

"Father!" exclaimed Luke, gazing in the old man's face.

"It will be painful, my boy, but we must not shrink from our duty because it is a difficult one to perform. I am a weak old fellow, and very ignorant, but I know that here my son will be a minister of justice against a bad and wicked man. For he is a bad—a wicked man, my boy, who has stopped at nothing to gratify his own evil ends."

"But how can I proceed against him, father?"

"Because it is your duty; and, feeling what you do against him, you will guard your heart lest you should strike too hard; and it is better so. Luke, my boy, you will be just; while, if another man prosecutes him, he will see in him only the forger and the cheat, and fight his best to get him condemned."

It was true, and Luke sat back thinking.

"Yesterday, my boy, I prayed you to undertake this man's defence; I withdraw it all now: take back every word, and I will go and tell poor Sage Mallow why."

"No, no, father," cried Luke; "if I cannot defend, neither will I prosecute."

"You must, my boy—you have given your word. If you drew back now I should feel that it would go worse against this man."

"But mine, father, should not be the hand to strike him down," cried Luke.

"We are not our own masters here, my boy," said the old man, speaking in a low and reverent tone. "My Luke has never shrunk from his duty yet, and never will."

Luke sank back in silence, and for a long time no word was spoken. Then he suddenly rose and rang the bell.

"See if Mr Serjeant Towle is in," he said to the boy, and upon the report being received that the serjeant was within, Luke descended and had ten minutes' conversation with that great legal luminary, who, after a little consideration,

said, as Luke rose to go—

“Well, yes, Ross, I will, if it’s only for the sake of giving you a good thrashing. You are going on too fast, and a little check will do you good. If I take the brief I shall get him off. Send his solicitors to me.”

Five minutes later Luke was with his father.

“Go and see Mrs Mallow at once, father,” he said, “and bid her tell her solicitors to wait upon Mr Serjeant Towle.”

“Yes, my boy—Mr Serjeant Towle,” said the old man, obediently.

“He will require an enormous fee, father, which you will pay.”

“Yes, my boy, of course. Is—is he a great man?”

“One of the leading counsel at the bar; and if Cyril Mallow can be got off, Serjeant Towle is the man for the task.”

“But, my boy—” began the old man.

“Don’t hesitate, father, but go,” cried Luke; and the old man hurried off.

Part 3, Chapter VI.

The Case for the Prosecution.

It was a strange stroke of fate that, in spite of several attempts to evade the duty, circumstances so arranged themselves that Luke Ross found himself literally forced, for his reputation’s sake, to go on with his obnoxious task, and at last the day of trial came.

Luke had passed a sleepless night, and he entered the court, feeling excited, and as if all before him was a kind of dream.

For a few minutes he had not sufficient self-possession even to look round the well of the building; and it was some time before he ventured to scan the part that would be occupied by the spectators. Here, however, for the time being, his eyes remained riveted, as a choking sensation attacked him, for, seated beside the sturdy, well-remembered figure of the Churchwarden, was a careworn, youngish woman, so sadly altered that Luke hardly recognised her as the Sage whose features were so firmly printed on his memory.

She evidently did not see him, but was watching the jury-box, and listening to some remarks made to her from time to time by her uncle.

Luke turned over his brief, and tried to think of what he could do to be perfectly just, and yet spare the husband of the suffering woman before him, and at whom he gazed furtively from time to time.

He saw her as through a mist, gazing wildly at the judge, and then at the portly form and florid face of Serjeant Towle, who was now engaged in an eager conversation with his junior; and the sight of the famous legal luminary for the moment cleared away the misty dreaminess of the scene. Luke’s pulses began to throb, and he felt like one about to enter the arena for a struggle. He had had many legal battles before, from out of which, through his quickness in seizing upon damaging points, he had come with flying colours; but he had never before been opposed to so powerful an adversary as the Serjeant, and, for the moment, a strong desire to commence the encounter came over him.

But this passed off, and the dreamy sensation came back, as he sat gazing at Sage, thinking of their old childish days together, their walks in the wold woodlands, flower-gathering, nutting, or staining their hands with blackberries; of the many times when he climbed the orchard trees to throw down the ripening pears to Sage, who spread her pinafore to receive them. In these dreamy thoughts the very sunshine and sleepy atmosphere of the old place came back, and the sensation of remembrance of the old and happy days became a painful emotion.

It must be a dream, he felt. That could not be Sage seated there by the sturdy, portly, grey-haired man, her uncle. Even old Michael Ross seemed to be terribly changed, making it impossible that the little, thin, withered man seated behind Churchwarden Portlock could be the quick, brisk tradesman of the past.

“Was it all true?” Luke kept asking himself, “or was it, after all, but a dream?”

Cyril Mallow’s was the first case to be taken that morning, and the preliminaries were soon settled; but all the while the dreaminess of the scene seemed to Luke to be on the increase. He tried to bring his thoughts back from the past, but it was impossible; and when Mr Swift the solicitor who had instructed him spoke, the words seemed to be a confused murmur from far away.

Then the clerk of arraigns called the prisoner’s name, and as Cyril Mallow was placed at the bar, and Luke gazed at the face that had grown coarse and common-looking in the past twelve years, the dreaminess increased still more.

Luke was conscious of rising to bow to the court and say, “I am for the prosecution, my lord”; and heard the deep, rolling, sonorous voice of Mr Serjeant Towle reply, “I am for the defence, my lord”; and then Luke’s eyes rested upon Sage, who for the first time recognised him, and was now leaning forward, looking at him with wild and starting eyes that seemed to implore him to spare her husband, for the sake of their childhood’s days; and her look fascinated him

so that he could not tear his gaze away.

It must be a dream, or else he was ill, for there was now a strange singing in his ears, as well as the misty appearance before his eyes, through which he could see nothing but Sage Portlock, as his heart persisted in calling her still.

“Was he to go on?” he asked himself, “to go wading on through this terrible nightmare, planting sting after sting in that tender breast, or should he give it up at once?”

He wanted to—he strove to speak, and say, “My lord, I give up this prosecution,” but his lips would not utter the words. For he was in a nightmare-like dream, and no longer a free agent.

And yet his nerves were so overstrung that he was acutely conscious of the slightest sound in the court, as he rose now, the observed of all present.

He heard the soft, subdued rustle made by people settling in their places for the long trial; the catching, hysterical sigh uttered by the prisoner’s wife; and a quick, faint cough, or clearing of the throat, as the prisoner leaned against the dock, and sought to get rid of an unpleasant, nervous contraction of the throat.

Luke stood like one turned to stone, his eyes now fixed on vacancy, his brief grasped in his hand, and his face deadly pale. The moment had arrived for him to commence the prosecution, but his thoughts were back at Lawford, and, like a rapid panorama, there passed before his eyes the old schoolhouses, and the figure of the bright, clever young mistress in the midst of her pupils, while he seemed to hear their merry voices as they darted out into the sunshine, dismissed for the day.

Then he was studying for the mastership, and was back at the training college. That was not the judge seated on his left, but the vice-principal, and those were not spectators and reporters ranged there, tier above tier, with open books and ready pencils, but fellow-students; and he was down before them, at the great black board, helpless and ashamed, for the judge—no, it was the vice-principal—had called him down from his seat, and said—“In any right-angled triangle the square of the sides subtending the right angle is equal to the square of the sides containing the right angle. Prove it.”

Prove it! And that forty-seventh problem of the first book of Euclid that he knew so well had gone, as it were, right out of his memory, leaving but a blank.

There was a faint buzz and rustle amongst the students as it seemed to him in this waking nightmare, and the vice-principal said—“We are all ready, Mr Ross.” Still not a word would come. Some of the students would be, he knew, pitying him, not knowing how soon their own turn might come, while others he felt would be triumphant, being jealous of his bygone success.

He knew that book so well, too; and somehow Sage Portlock had obtained a seat amongst the students, and was waiting to hear him demonstrate the problem, drawing it with a piece of chalk on the black board, and showing how the angle ABC was equal to the angle DEF, and so on, and so on.

“We are all ready, Mr Ross,” came from the vice-principal again. No, it was from the judge, and it was not the theatre at Saint Chrysostom’s, but the court at the Old Bailey, where he was to prosecute Cyril Mallow, his old rival, the husband of the woman he had loved, for forgery and fraud; and his throat was dry, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, and his thoughts were wandering away.

And yet his senses were painfully acute to all that passed. He knew that Serjeant Towle had chuckled fatly, after fixing his great double eyeglass to gaze at him. Then, as distinctly as if the words were uttered in his ear, he heard one of the briefless whisper—

“He has lost his nerve.”

There was an increase in the buzzing noise, and an usher called out loudly, “Silence.”

“Ross, Mr Ross! For heaven’s sake go on,” whispered Mr Swift, excitedly; and Luke felt a twitching at his gown.

But he could not master himself. It was still all like a nightmare, when he turned his eyes slowly on the judge, but in a rapt, vacant way, for the old gentleman said kindly—“I am afraid you are unwell, Mr Ross.” Luke was conscious of bowing slightly, and just then a hysterical sigh from the overwrought breast of Sage struck upon his ear, and he was awake once more.

The incident had been most painful, and to a man the legal gentlemen had considered it a complete breakdown of one of the most promising of the young legal stars, those who had been so far disappointed seeing in the downfall of a rival a chance for themselves.

But the next minute all that had passed was looked upon as a slight eccentricity on the part of a rising man. Mr Swift, who had begun to grind his teeth with annoyance, thrust both his hands into his great blue bag, as if in search of papers, but so as to be able to conceal the gratified rub he was giving them, as he heard Luke Ross in a clear incisive tone, and with a gravity of mien and bearing beyond his years, state the case for the prosecution in a speech that lasted quite a couple of hours. Too long, some said, but it was so masterly in its perspicuity, and dealt so thoroughly with the whole case, that it was finally declared to be the very perfection of forensic eloquence.

How his lips gave utterance to the speech Luke himself hardly knew, but with his father’s words upon his duty ringing in his ears, he carried out that duty as if he had neither feeling against the prisoner, nor desire to save him from his well-merited fate. With the strict impartiality of one holding the scales of justice poised in a hand that never varied in

its firmness for an instant, he laid bare Cyril Mallow's career as partner in the wine firm, and showed forth as black an instance of ingratitude, fraud, and swindling as one man could have gathered into so short a space.

There was a murmur of applause as Luke took his seat. Then his junior called the first witness, and the trial dragged its slow length along; while Luke sat, feeling that Sage would never forgive him for the words that he had said.

Witness after witness, examination and cross-examination, till the prosecution gave way to the defence, and Serjeant Towle shuffled his gown over his shoulders, got his wig awry, and fought the desperate cause with all his might.

But all in vain. The judge summed up dead against the prisoner, alluding forcibly to the kindly consideration of the prosecution; and after stigmatising the career of Cyril Mallow as one of the basest, blackest ingratitude, and a new example of the degradation to which gambling would lead an educated man, he left the case in the jury's hands, these gentlemen retiring for a few minutes, and then returning with a verdict of guilty.

Sentence, fourteen years' penal servitude. And, once more, as in a dream, Luke saw Cyril Mallow's blotched face gazing at him full of malice, and a look of deadly hatred in his eyes, before he was hurried away.

He was then conscious of Mr Swift saying something to him full of praise, and of Serjeant Towle leaning forward to shake hands, as he whispered—

"You beat me, Ross, thoroughly. We'll be on the same side next time."

But the dreaminess was once more closing in Luke Ross as with a mist, and in it he saw a pale, agonised face gazing reproachfully in his direction as its owner was being helped out of the court.

"God help me!" muttered Luke. "I must have been mad. She will think it was revenge, when I would sooner have died than given her pain."

Part 3, Chapter VII.

After the Sentence.

There was nothing farther to detain Luke Ross, but he remained in his seat for some time, studying the next case people said, but only that he might dream on in peace, for in the midst of the business of the next trial he found repose. No one spoke to him, and he seemed by degrees to be able to condense his thoughts upon the past.

And there he sat, trying to examine himself searchingly, probing his every thought as he sought for condemnatory matter against himself.

He felt as if he had been acting all day under some strange influence, moved by a power that was not his own, and that, as the instrument in other hands, he had been employed to punish Cyril Mallow.

"They will all join in condemning me," he thought, "and henceforth I shall go through life branded as one who hounded down his enemy almost to the death."

At length he raised his eyes, and they rested upon the little, thin, wistful countenance of his father, and there was a feeling of bitter reproach for his neglect of one who had travelled all the previous day so as to be present at the trial.

He made a sign to him as he rose, and the old man joined him in the robing-room, where Mr Dick eyed him askance as he relieved his master of his wig and gown; and then they returned to the chambers, where Luke threw himself into a chair, and gazed helplessly at his father, till the old man laid a hand, almost apologetically, upon his son's arm.

"You are tired out, my boy. Come with me, and let us go somewhere and dine."

"After I have disgraced myself like this, father?" groaned Luke. "Are you not ashamed of such a son?"

"Ashamed? Disgraced? My boy, what do you mean? I never felt so proud of you before. It was grand!"

"Proud!" cried Luke, passionately, "when I seem to have stooped to the lowest form of cowardly retaliation. A rival who made himself my enemy is grovelling in the mire, and I, instead of going to him like an honourable, magnanimous man, to raise him up and let him begin a better life, have planted my heel upon his face, and crushed him lower into the slough."

"It was your duty, my boy, and you did that duty," cried the old man, quickly. "I will not hear you speak like that."

"And Sage—his wife," groaned Luke, not hearing, apparently, his father's words. "Father, the memory of my old love for her has clung to me ever. I have been true to that memory, loving still the sweet, bright girl I knew before that man came between us like a black shadow and clouded the sunshine of my life."

He stopped, and let his head rest upon his hand.

"My love for her has never failed, father, but is as fresh and bright now as it was upon the day when I came up here to town ready for the long struggle I felt that I should have before I could seek her for my wife. That love, I tell you, is as fresh and warm now as it was that day, but it has always been the love of one suddenly cut off from me—the love of one I looked upon as dead. For that evening, when I met them in the Kilby lane, Sage Portlock died to me, and the days I mourned were as for one who had passed away."

“My boy, my boy, I know. He did come between you, and seemed to blight your life, but he is punished now.”

“Punished? No,” said Luke, excitedly; “it is not the man I have punished, but his wife. Father, that sorrowing, reproachful look she directed at me this morning will cling to me to my dying day. I cannot bear it. I feel as if the memory would drive me mad.”

He started up, and paced the room in an agony of mind that alarmed old Michael, who sought in vain to utter soothing words.

At last, as if recalled to himself by the feeling that he was neglecting the trembling old man before him, Luke made an effort to master the thoughts that troubled him, and they were about to go out together, when the boy announced two visitors, and Luke shrank back unnerved once more, on finding that they were the Reverend Eli Mallow and his old Churchwarden.

“I did not know his father was in town,” said Luke, in a low voice.

“Yes, my boy, he sat back, poor fellow. He looks very old and weak,” said Michael Ross, in a quiet patronising way. “He is a good deal broken, my boy. Speak kindly to him, pray.”

“What do they want?” said Luke. “Oh, father, what have I done that fate should serve me such an ugly turn?”

“Your duty, my boy, your duty,” whispered the old man; and the next minute the visitors were in the room, finding, as they entered, that old Michael was holding his son’s arm in a tender, proud way that seemed to fix the old Rector’s eyes.

He was, indeed, old-looking and broken; sadly changed from the fine, handsome, greyheaded man that Luke knew so well.

“I met Mr Mallow almost at your door,” said Portlock, in his bluff, firm way. “We did not come together, but we both wanted to call.”

Luke pointed to chairs, but the old Rector remained standing, gazing reproachfully at Luke.

“Yes, I wanted to see you,” he said; “I wanted to see and speak to the man I taught when he was a boy, and in whom I took a great deal of pride. I was proud to see you progress, Luke Ross. I used to read and show the reports to your father when I saw them, for I said Luke Ross is a credit to our town.”

“And you said so to me often, Mr Mallow,” cried old Michael.

“I did—I did,” said the Rector; “and to-day in court I asked myself what I had ever done to this man that he should strike me such a blow.”

“Be just, for heaven’s sake, Mr Mallow,” cried Luke. “I did not seek the task I have fulfilled to-day.”

“And I said to myself, as I saw my only son dragged away by his gaolers, ‘I will go and curse this man—this cold-blooded wretch who could thus triumph over us.’ I said I would show him what he has done—bruised my heart, driven a suffering woman nearly mad, and made two little innocent children worse than orphans.”

“Mr Mallow, is this justice?” groaned Luke.

“No,” said the old man, softly. “I said it in mine haste, and as I hurried here mine anger passed away; the scales dropped from mine eyes, and I knew that it was no work of thine. Truly, as Eli’s sons of old brought heaviness to their father’s heart, so have my poor sons to mine; and, Michael Ross,” he cried, holding out his trembling hands, “I was so proud of that boy—so proud. He was his mother’s idol, and, bad as he would be at times, he was always good to her. Can you wonder that she loved him? Oh, God help me! my boy—my boy!”

“It has been an agony to me ever since the brief was forced upon me, Mr Mallow,” said Luke, taking the old man’s hand. “Believe me, I could not help this duty I had to do.”

“God bless you, Luke Ross!” said the old man, feebly. “Like Balaam of old, I came to curse, and I stop to bless. If I have anything to forgive, I forgive you, as I hope to be forgiven. You have been a good son. Michael Ross, you have never known what it is to feel as I do now. But I must go back; I must go back to her at home. She waits to know the worst, and this last blow will kill her, gentlemen—my poor, suffering angel of a wife—it will be her death.”

“Will you not come and see Sage first?” said Portlock, with rough sympathy.

“No, no, I think not. The sight of my sad face would do her harm. I’ll get home. Keep her with you, Portlock. God bless her!—a true, sweet wife. We came like a blight to her, Portlock. Luke Ross, I ought not to have allowed it, but I thought it was for the best—that it would reform my boy. My life has been all mistakes, and I long now to lie down and sleep. Keep her with you, Portlock, and teach her and her little ones to forget us all.”

He tottered to the door to go, but Luke stepped forward.

“He is not fit to go alone,” he cried. “Mr Portlock, what is to be done?”

“I must take him home,” he replied, sadly. “I’d better take them all home, but I have a message for you.”

“For me?” cried Luke. “Not from Mrs Cyril?”

“Yes, from Sage. She wants to see you.”

“I could not bear it,” cried Luke. “Heavens, man! have I not been reproached enough?”

“It is not to reproach you, I think, Luke Ross,” said Portlock, softly. “She bade me say to thee, ‘Come to me, if you have any sympathy for my piteous case.’”

Part 3, Chapter VIII.

A Forlorn Hope.

“Come to me if you have any sympathy for my piteous case!”

Sympathy! In his bitter state of self-reproach, he would have done anything to serve her. He felt that he could forgive Cyril Mallow, aid him in any way, even to compromising himself by helping him to escape. But he shrank from meeting Sage: he felt that he could not meet her reproachful eyes.

“You will come and see her?” said the Churchwarden. “Ah, my lad, if we could have looked into the future!”

His voice shook a little as he spoke, but he seemed to nerve himself, and said again—“You will come and see her?”

“If it will be any good. Yes,” said Luke, slowly; and they proceeded together to the hotel, where Sage was staying with her uncle, in one of the streets leading out of the Strand.

The old Rector was so broken of spirit that he allowed Portlock to lead him like a child, and, satisfied with the assurance that to-morrow he should return home, he sat down in the room set apart, with old Michael Ross, while, in obedience to a sign from Portlock, Luke followed him to a room a few doors away.

The place was almost in shadow, for the gas had not been lit, and as Luke entered, with his heart beating fast, a dark figure rose from an easy-chair by the fire, and tottered towards the old farmer, evidently not seeing Luke, who stayed back just within the door.

“He would not come,” she cried. “It was cruel of him. I thought he had a nobler heart, and in all these years would have forgiven me at last.”

“Mr Ross is here, Sage,” said Portlock, rather sternly. “Shall I leave you to speak to him alone?”

“No, no,” she cried in a hoarse whisper, instead of her former high-pitched querulous tone. “I cannot—I dare not speak to him alone.”

“If forgiveness is needed for the past, Mrs Mallow,” said Luke, in a grave, calm voice, for he had now mastered his emotion, “you have mine freely given, and with it my true sympathy for your position.”

She burst into a passionate fit of weeping, which lasted some minutes, during which she stood hiding her face on her uncle’s breast; then, recovering herself, she hastily wiped away her tears, and drawing herself up, stood holding out her hand for Luke to take.

He hesitated for a moment, and then, stepping forward, took it and raised it to his lips, just touching it with grave respect, and then letting it fall.

“I wished to say to you, Mr Ross, let the past be as it were dead, all save our boy and girlhood’s days.”

“It shall be as you wish,” he said, softly.

“You do not bear malice against me?”

“None whatever; but is not this better left, Mrs Mallow? Why should we refer so to the past?”

“Because,” she said, “I am so alone now, so wanting in help. You have become a great and famous man, whose word is listened to with respect and awe.”

“This is folly,” he said.

“Folly? Did I not see judge, jury, counsellors hanging upon your lips? did not your words condemn my poor husband this dreadful day?”

“I am afraid, Mrs Mallow,” he said, sadly, “that it needed no advocate’s words to condemn your unhappy husband. I would gladly have avoided the task that was, to me, a terrible one; but my word was passed, as a professional man, before I knew whom I had to prosecute. Speaking now, solely from my knowledge of such matters, I am obliged to tell you that nothing could have saved him.”

“Hush! Pray do not speak to me like that,” she cried. “He is my husband. I cannot—I will not think that he could do so great a wrong.”

“Far be it from me,” said Luke, gently, “to try and persuade you to think ill of him. I should think ill of you, Sage,” he added, very softly, “if you fell away from your husband in his sore distress.”

“Heaven bless you for those words, Luke Ross!” she cried, as she caught one of his hands and kissed it. “God will reward you for what you have done in coming to me now, wretched woman that I am, a miserable convict’s wife; but you will help me, will you not?”

“In any way,” he said, earnestly.

She uttered a low sigh of relief, and stood with one hand pressed upon her side, the other upon her brow, as if thinking; while Portlock sat down by the fire, and, resting his elbows upon his knees, gazed thoughtfully at the warm glow, but intent the while upon what was going on.

“My uncle is very good to me,” said Sage, at length, “and is ready to find me what money is required for the object I have in hand; but I can only obtain paid service, whereas I want the help of one who will work for me as a friend.”

She looked at him to see the effect of her words.

Luke bowed his head sadly.

“I want one who, for the sake of the past,” she continued, speaking excitedly, “and on account of his generous forgiveness of my cruelty and want of faith, will strain every nerve in my behalf.”

She paused again, unable to continue, though fighting vainly to find words.

“I think I understand you,” he replied. “You want me, on the strength of the legal knowledge you credit me with, to make some new effort on your husband’s behalf?”

“It is like madness to ask it,” she said, “and I tremble as I say the words to you whom he so injured; but, Luke, have pity on me. He is my husband,” she cried, piteously, as she wrung her hands, and then, before he could stay her, flung herself upon the carpet, and clung to his knees. “He is the father of my innocent children; for God’s sake try and save him from this cruel fate.”

He remained silent, gazing down at the prostrate figure, as, after an effort or two on his part to raise her, she refused to quit her grovelling attitude, save only to shrink lower, and lay her cheek against his feet.

“Mrs Mallow?” he said, at last.

“No, no!” she cried, passionately. “Call me Sage again. You have forgiven the past.”

“Sage Mallow!” he said, in a low, measured voice.

“You are going to retract your words,” she cried, frantically, as she started up. “You are going to draw back.”

“I have promised you,” he said, quietly, “and my hands, my thoughts, all I possess, are at your service.”

“And you will save him?” she cried, joyously.

He remained silent.

“You will work for him—you will forgive him, and bring him back to me?” she cried, piteously. “Luke—Luke Ross—you will save him from this fate?”

“I did not seek this interview,” he said, sadly. “Mrs Mallow, I would have spared you this.”

“What do you mean?” she cried. “Will you not try?”

“It would be an act of cruelty,” replied Luke, “to attempt to buoy you up with promises that must crumble to the earth.”

“You will not try,” she cried, passionately. “I will try. I will try every plan I can think of to obtain your husband’s release, Mrs Mallow,” said Luke, gravely. “Or get him a new trial?”

“Such a thing is impossible. The most we dare hope for would be some slight shortening of his sentence; but candour compels me to say that nothing I can do will be of the slightest avail after such a trial as Cyril Mallow has had.”

Just then the old Churchwarden had thoughtfully raised the poker and broken a lump of coal, with the result that the confined gas burst into a bright light, filling the room with its cheerful glow, and Luke saw that Sage was looking at him with flashing eyes, and a couple of scarlet patches were burning in her cheeks.

She raised one hand slowly, and pointed to the door, speaking in a deep husky voice, full of suppressed passion.

“And I believed in you,” she said, wildly, “I thought you would be my friend. I said to myself, Luke Ross is true and noble, and good, and he loved me very dearly, when I was too weak and foolish to realise the value of this love. I said I would beg of you to come to me and help me in my sore distress, that I would humble myself to you, and that in the nobleness of your heart you would forgive the past.”

“As I have forgiven it, heaven knows,” he said, gravely.

“And then,” she cried, excitedly, “you come with your lips full of promises, your heart full of gall, ready to cheer me with words of hope, but only to fall away and leave me in despair.”

“Do not misjudge me,” he said, appealingly.

“Misjudge you!” she cried, with bitter contempt. “How could I misjudge such a man as you? I see now how false you can be. I see how you laid calmly in wait all these years that you might have revenge. You hurled my poor husband to the earth that afternoon in the lane; now you have crushed him down beneath your heel.”

“Can you not be just?” he said.

“Just?” she cried, “to you? I thought to teach my children to bless and reverence your name as that of the man who had saved their father. I taught them to pray for you with their innocent little lips, and I sent to you and humbled myself to ask you to defend my husband in his sore need, but you refused—refused forsooth, because you were gloating over the opportunity you would have for revenge. The trial came, he was condemned through your words, but I still believed you honest, and trusted in you for help. I sent to you once again to pray you to try and restore my husband to me, but you coldly refuse, while your lips are yet hot with promises and lies.”

“Sage,” he cried, passionately, “you tear my heart.”

“I would tear it,” she cried, fiercely, in her excitement, “coward that you are—cruel coward, full of deceit and revenge. Go: leave me, let me never see you again, for I could not look upon you without loathing, and I shudder now to think that I have ever touched your hands.”

“Sage, my girl, Sage!” said the Churchwarden, as he rose and took her hands, “this is madness, and to-morrow you will be sorry for what you have said.”

“Uncle,” she cried wildly, as she clung to him, “I cannot bear his presence here. Send him from me, or I shall die.”

She hid her face upon her uncle’s shoulder, and he held out his right hand, and grasped that of Luke.

“God bless you, my boy!” he said, with trembling voice. “She is beside herself with grief, and knows not what she says.”

Luke returned the warm pressure of the old farmer’s hand, and would have gone, but Portlock held it still.

“I thank you for coming, Luke Ross,” he said; “and I know you to be just and true. Would to heaven I had never made that great mistake!”

He said no more, but loosed their visitors hand, Luke standing gazing sadly at the sobbing woman for a few moments, and then leaving the room to seek old Michael, with whom he was soon on his way back to chambers, faint and sick at heart.

Hardly had the sound of his footsteps passed from the stairs than, with a wild cry, Sage threw herself upon her knees, sobbing wildly.

“Heaven forgive me!” she cried. “What have I said? Uncle, uncle, a lying spirit has entered into my heart, making me revile him as I have—Luke—so generous, and good, and true.”

Part 3, Chapter IX.

Back Home.

In obedience to his promise, Luke. Ross set earnestly to work to try and obtain an alleviation of the stern sentence passed upon Cyril Mallow.

It was an exceedingly awkward task to come from the prosecuting counsel, but Luke did not shrink, striving with all his might, offending several people high in position by his perseverance, and doing himself no little injury; but he strove on, with the inevitable result that his application came back from the Home Office with the information that the Right Honourable the Secretary of State saw nothing in the sentence to make him interfere with the just course of the law, adding, moreover, his opinion that it was a very proper punishment for one whose education and antecedents should have guided him to a better course.

These documents were sent by Luke, without word of comment, to Kilby Farm, where he knew from his father that Sage was residing with her children; and by return of post came a very brief letter from the widowed wife, thanking him for what he had done, and ending with the hope that he would forgive the words uttered during an agony of soul that without some utterance would have driven the speaker mad.

“She did not mean it,” said Luke, sadly, as he carefully folded and put away the letter. “She knows me better in her heart.”

Then time went on, till a year had passed. Luke had not been near Lawford, for the place, in spite of its being the home of his birth, was too full of sad memories to induce him to go down. Besides, there was the fact that Sage Mallow had, in defiance of looks askance from those who had known her in her earlier days, permanently taken up her residence there.

“I’d like to hear any one say a slighting word to thee, my bairn,” said Portlock, fiercely. “It’s no fault of thine that thy husband got into trouble. I’d live here, if it was only out of defiance to the kind-hearted Christians, as they call themselves, who slight thee.”

So Sage remained a fixture at the farm, settling down quite into her former life, but no longer with the light elasticity of step, and the rooms no more echoed with the ring of her musical voice. Time had given her an older and a sadder look, but her features had grown refined, and there was a ladylike mien in every movement that made her aunt gaze upon her with a kind of awe.

“Let her come back to the old nest again, mother,” said Portlock. “There’s room enough for the lass, and as for the little ones—My word, mother, it’s almost like being grandfather and granny.”

Many a heartache had Sage had about her dependent position, and the heavy losses that had occurred to her uncle in the money she and her husband had had; but Portlock, in his bluff way, made light of it.

“I dare say I can make some more, my bairn, and it will do for these two young tyrants. Hang me, what a slave they do make of me, to be sure!”

It was the faint wintry sunshine of Sage Mallow’s life to see the newly-born love of the old people for her children, whom they idolised, and great was the jealousy of Rue whenever she came across to Kilby. But it was no wonder, for they were as attractive in appearance as they were pretty in their ways. One was always out in the gig with the Churchwarden, while the other was seriously devoting herself to domestic duties and hindering Mrs Portlock, who bore the infliction with huge delight.

“I never saw such bairns,” cried the old lady.

“Nor anybody else,” said Portlock, proudly. “Let’s see, mother, there’s a year gone by out of the fourteen. Bless my soul, I wish it had been twenty-one instead.”

“For shame, Joseph!” cried Mrs Portlock. “How can you!”

“Well, all I can say is that it’s a blessing he was shut up where he could do no further mischief.”

“But it’s so dreadful for the bairns.”

“Tchah! not it. They can’t help it, bless ’em. See how they’ve improved since they have been down here.”

“Well, yes, they have,” said Mrs Portlock, “and Sage’s a deal better.”

“Better, poor lassie! I should think she is. Of course, she frets after him a bit now and then, and feels the disgrace a good deal, but, bless my soul, mother, she’s like a new woman compared to what she was. For my part, I hope they’ll never let him out again.”

“For shame, Joseph!” said Mrs Portlock. “Mr Mallow was over here this morning.”

“Was he? Ah, I’ll be bound to say he wanted to take the bairns over to the rectory.”

“Yes, and he took them.”

“Hah!” said the farmer, sharply. “I’m very sorry for the poor old lady, but I am glad that she is so ill that she can’t bear to have them much.”

“What a shame, Joseph!” cried Mrs Portlock, indignantly. “How can you say such a cruel thing! Glad she is so ill!”

“I didn’t mean I was glad she was ill,” said the Churchwarden, chuckling. “I meant I was glad she was too ill to have the bairns.”

“But it sounds so dreadful.”

“Let it. What do I care! I don’t want for us to be always squabbling over those children. They’re my Sage’s bairns, and consequently they’re ours.”

“But they’re Cyril Mal—”

“Tchah! Don’t mention his name,” cried the Churchwarden.

“Fie, Joseph! you do make me jump so when you talk like that.”

“Shouldn’t mention that fellow’s name then. I told you not.”

“Well, then, they are Mr and Mrs Mallow’s children just as much as ours, Joseph,” said the old lady.

“No they ain’t; they’re mine, and there’s an end of it. I say, though, old Michael Ross is ill.”

“Ah! poor man. I’m sorry; but he’s very old, Joseph.”

“Not he. Young man yet,” said the Churchwarden, who was getting touchy on the score of age. “I don’t call a man old this side of a hundred. Look at the old chaps in the Bible, as Sammy Warmoth used to say.”

“Yes, Joseph, but they were great and good men.”

“Oh, were they?” said the Churchwarden. “I don’t know so much about that. Some of ’em were; but others did things that the Lawford people wouldn’t stand if I were to try ’em on.”

“But what is the matter with Michael Ross?”

“Break up. I went in to see him, and the old man got me to write a letter to Luke, asking him to come down and see him.”

“And did you, Joseph?”

“Did I? Why, of course I did. Do you suppose I’ve got iron bowels, woman, and no compassion in me at all?”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk such nonsense, Joseph,” said Mrs Portlock, sharply. “And do you think Luke Ross will come down?”

“Of course he will.”

“He hasn’t been down for a very long time now. I suppose he has grown to be such a great man that he is ashamed of poor old Lawford.”

“Who’s talking nonsense now?” cried the Churchwarden. “Nice temptation there is for him to come down here, isn’t there? Bless the lad, I wonder he even cares to set foot in the place again.”

“It would be unpleasant for him, I suppose, after all that has taken place. But you think he will come?”

“Sure to. I told him it was urgent, and that I’d drive over to Morbro and meet the train, so as to save him time. He’s a good man, is Luke Ross, as old Michael said with tears in his eyes to-day, and he wants to see him badly.”

“Poor old man!”

“Tchah! don’t call him old,” cried the Churchwarden. Then calming down after a whiff or two of his pipe, “Luke Ross will be down here to-morrow afternoon as sure as a gun. Eh? Why, Sage, my gal, I didn’t see you there.”

“Did—did I hear you aright, uncle?” she said, faintly. “Is old Mr Ross ill?”

“Very ill, my dear,” said the Churchwarden, sternly, “and Luke Ross is coming down to see him, I should say.”

Part 3, Chapter X.

Down at Lawford.

Portlock was right in saying that Luke would be down the next day, for, reproaching himself for his neglect of his father, he hastened down to find him somewhat recovered from the sudden attack that had prostrated him, and the old man’s face lit up as his son entered the room.

“Yes, my boy, better; yes, I’m better,” he said, feebly; “but it can’t be for long, Luke; it can’t be for long. I’m very, very glad you have come.”

“But you are better,” said Luke; “and good spirits have so much to do with recovery.”

“Well, yes, my boy, yes,” said the old man; “and the sight of you again seems to have given me strength. You won’t go back again yet, Luke?”

“I was going back to-morrow, father,” he said; “but,” he added, on seeing the look of disappointment in the old man’s face, “I will stay a little longer.”

“Do, my boy, do,” cried the old man; “and when I go off to sleep, as I shall soon—I sleep a great deal now, my boy—go and look round, and say a word to our neighbours. I often talk to them about you, Luke, and tell them that though you have grown to be a great man you are not a bit proud, and I should like them to see that you are not.”

“That is soon done,” said Luke, laughing. “Why should I be proud?”

“Oh, you might be, my boy, but you are not. Go and have a chat with Tomlinson and Fullerton. And, Luke, if you wouldn’t mind, when you are that way, I’d go in and see Humphrey Bone.”

“Is he still master?” said Luke, thoughtfully, as the old days came vividly back.

“No, my boy, not for these two years; and he’s quite laid by. An old man before his time, Luke, and it is the drink that has done it. I don’t judge him hardly though, for we never know what another’s weakness has been, and it is not for us to sit in judgment upon our brother’s faults. Will you go and see him, Luke?”

“I will, father,” said the younger man, smiling and feeling refreshed, after his arduous daily toil and study of man’s greed, rapacity, and sin, with the simple, innocent kindness of his father’s heart.

“That does me good, my boy, indeed it does,” said the old man, pathetically; and he held his son’s hand against his true old breast. “I’m very sorry for a great deal that I have done, my boy, and I like to see you growing up free from many of the weaknesses and hard ways that have been mine. What I am obliged to leave undone, Luke, I want you to do, for my time is very short, and I often lie here and think that I should like to go before the Master feeling that I had tried to do my best, and taught you, my boy, according to such knowledge of good as in me lay.”

“My dear old father!” cried Luke, tenderly; and the hard, worldly crust that was gathering upon him seemed to melt away as he leaned over and carefully smoothed and turned the old man’s pillow with all the gentleness of a woman’s hand. “Why, what is it?” he said, as the old man uttered quite a sob, and the weak tears gathered in his eyes.

“Nothing, my boy, it is nothing,” he said. “It only made me think of thirty years ago, when I was ill, and your mother used to turn my pillow like that—just like that, my boy—and you are so much like her, Luke; and as I lie here, a worn-out, trembling old man, and you come down—you, my boy, who have grown so great, and who, they tell me, will some day be Queen’s Counsel, and perhaps Attorney-General, and then a Judge, such a great man as you’ve become, Luke—I lie here thinking that you can come down and tend to me like this, it makes me thank God that I have such a son.”

“Why, what have I done more than any other son would do? And as to becoming great, what nonsense!”

“But it isn’t nonsense, Luke, my boy,” quavered the old man. “I’ve heard all about it; and, Luke, when you are Queen’s Counsel, nay boy, give her good advice, for kings and queens have much to answer for, and I should like her—God bless her!—to have a very long and happy reign.”

“Indeed I will, father,” said Luke, laughing, “if ever it falls to my lot to be her adviser. But there, you are getting too much excited. Suppose you try and have a nap?”

“I will, my boy, I will, and you’ll go round town a bit, and walk up and see the parson. He’ll be strange and glad to see thee, and if you see Mrs Cyril, say a kind word to the poor soul; she’s been very good to me, my boy, and comes and sits and talks to me a deal. Don’t think about the past, my boy, but about the future. Let’s try and do all the kindness we can, Luke, while we are here. Life is very short, my boy—a very, very little span.”

“Father,” said Luke, bending over the old man’s pillow, “for your sake and your kindly words, I’ll do the best I can.”

“Thank you, my boy, God bless you, I know you will,” said the old man. “For life is so short, Luke, my son. Good-bye, my boy. Do all the good you can. I’m going to sleep now. God bless you, good-bye.”

He closed his eyes, and drew a long breath, dropping off at once into a calm and restful slumber, Luke staying by his side for a while.

Then taking out a blue official-looking document from his pocket, he looked at it for a few moments before replacing it in his breast.

“Poor old man!” he said, softly. “I wish I had told him what I was about to do, it would have pleased him to know.”

He got up and went softly down-stairs, to pause for a few minutes in the homely, comfortably furnished room with its well-polished furniture, every knob and handle seeming like familiar friends. There was his father’s seat, his mother’s, and the little Windsor arm-chair that had been his own, religiously preserved, and kept as bright as beeswax and sturdy country hands could make it.

“He has gone off to sleep,” Luke said to the matronly housekeeper, who never ventured to speak to him without a curtsey.

“No, Mr Luke, sir—I mean yes, Mr Luke, sir, I’ll keep going up and peeping at him, and take him his beef tea when he wakens. Your coming, sir, begging your pardon for taking the liberty of saying so, sir, have done him a power of good.”

Luke smiled and nodded—“so condescending and kind-like,” the woman afterwards told a neighbour—and walked out across the marketplace, stopping to shake hands here and there with the tradesmen who came to their doors, and at last making his way down towards the schools.

“They seem to esteem me a very great gun,” he said, half in jest, half bitterly, as he walked slowly on, passing men whom he remembered as boys, and responding constantly to the salutations he received.

He had not intended to go that way, thinking he would send his missive over to Kilby by post, and asking himself why he had not mentioned the matter to Portlock as he drove him in that day; but somehow his footsteps turned in the direction of the farm, and he had nearly reached the turning indelibly marked in his memory as the one along which he had come that cruel eve, when suddenly a merry shout from a childish voice fell upon his ear.

He did not know why it should, but it seemed to thrill him as he went on, to come in sight of two bright, golden-haired little girls, each with her pinky fingers full of flowers, and her chubby face flushed with exercise.

They stopped and gazed at him for a moment, and then ran back.

“I’m not one whom young folks take to,” he said, bitterly; and then his heart seemed to stand still, for he saw them run up to a pale, graceful-looking woman, who bent down, and evidently said something to the children, both of whom hesitated for a moment, and then came running back.

“Sage,” he said to himself, as he involuntarily stopped short. “How changed!”

Then, as he saw the children approach, an involuntary feeling of repugnance came over him, and his heart seemed to shrink from the encounter.

His children. So pretty, but with a something in their innocent faces that reminded him terribly of their father.

He would have turned back, but he was spell-bound, and the next moment the little things were at his side, the elder to take his hand and kiss it, saying in her silvery, childish voice—

“I can’t reach to kiss you more, for being so good to poor mamma.”

“And I’ll dive you my fowers, Mitter Luke,” said the other little thing. “Sagey pick all hertelf.”

An agony of shame, of love, of regret and pleasure commingled seemed to sweep across Luke Ross, as, with convulsed face, he went down on one knee in the road and caught the little ones to his breast.

“My darlings!” he cried, hoarsely, as he kissed them passionately.

Then, with his eyes blinded by the hot tears of agony, he caught the blue envelope from his breast and pressed it into the youngest little one’s hands.

“Take it to mamma, my child, and say Luke Ross prays that it may make her happy.”

Then, unable to command his feelings, he turned and walked away.

Part 3, Chapter XI.

Luke Visits an Old Friend.

“Life is very short, my boy, a very little span,” seemed to keep repeating itself to Luke Ross’s ears, as he walked briskly across the fields trying to regain his composure, hardly realising that he was going in the direction of the rectory, till he had nearly reached the gates, when he paused, not daring to enter.

“It would be almost an insult after the part I was forced to play,” he said to himself, and he set off towards the town.

But somehow his father’s words seemed to keep repeating themselves, and he altered his mind, turned back, and went in.

“I go in all kindliness,” he said to himself; “and perhaps the poor old man would like to know what I have done.”

The next minute he stopped short, hardly recognising in the bent, pallid figure, with snowy hair, the fine, portly Rector of a dozen years ago.

“I beg your pardon; my sight is not so good as it was,” said the old man apologetically, as he shaded his eyes with a hand holding a trowel.

“It is Luke Ross, Mr Mallow. I was down here for the first time for some years, and I thought I would call.”

The old man neither moved nor spoke for a few moments, but stood as if turned to stone.

Then recovering himself, but still terribly agitated by the recollections that the meeting brought up, he held out his hand.

“I am glad you came, Luke, very glad,” he said. “I—I call you Luke,” he continued, smiling, “it seems so familiar. Your visit, my boy, honours me, and I am very, very glad you came.”

There was a thoroughly genial warmth in the old man’s greeting as he passed his arm through that of his visitor, and led him into one of the glass-houses that it was his joy to tend.

“I hear a good deal about you, Mr Ross, and go and chat with your father about you. But—but, my boy, you have seen him, have you not?”

“I was with him till he went to sleep, not an hour ago.”

“That is well, that is well,” said the Rector, who had fallen into the old life habit of repeating himself. “Stay with him awhile if you can, Luke. Life is very uncertain at his age, and I have my fears about him—grave fears indeed.”

“He is a great age, Mr Mallow,” said Luke, “but he quite cheered up when I came.”

“He would,” said the Rector, with his voice trembling, “he would, Luke Ross, and—and I cannot help feeling how hard is my own lot compared to his. Luke Ross,” he said, after an effort to recover his calmness, “I have no son to be a blessing to me in my old age; three of my children have quite passed away.”

It seemed no time for words, and Luke felt that the greatest kindness on his part would be to hold his peace.

The old Rector appeared to recover from his emotion soon after, as Luke asked after Mrs Mallow.

“It would be foolish,” said the Rector, “if I said not well. Poor thing; she is a sad invalid, but she bears it with exemplary patience, Luke Ross. See,” he continued, pointing to a waxy-looking, sweet-scented flower, “this is a plant I am trying to cultivate for her. She is so fond of flowers. It is hard work to get it to grow though. It requires heat, and I find it difficult to keep it at the right temperature.”

Luke kept hoping that the old man would make some fresh allusion to his son, and give an opportunity for introducing

something the visitor wished to say.

“I grow a great many grapes now,” continued the Rector, “and I have so arranged my houses that I have grapes from June right up to March.”

“Indeed, sir,” said Luke, as he noted more and more how the old man had changed. He had become garrulous, and prattled on with rather a vacant smile upon his lip, as he led his visitor from place to place, pointing out the various objects in which he took pride.

For a time Luke felt repelled by the old man’s weakness, but as he found that one idea ran through all this conversation, a sweet, tender devotion for the suffering wife, respect took the place of the approach to contempt.

“You will not mind, Luke Ross,” he said, “if I stop to cut a bunch of grapes for my poor wife, will you?”

“Indeed, no, sir,” said Luke, narrowly watching him.

“She does not know that I have one in such a state of perfection,” he said, laughing, “for I’ve kept it a secret. Poor soul! she is so fond of grapes; and, do you know, Luke Ross, I’m quite convinced that there is a great deal of nutriment and support in this fruit, for sometimes when my poor darling cannot touch food of an ordinary kind she will go on enjoying grapes, and they seem to support and keep her alive.”

“It is very probable that it is as you say, sir.”

“Yes, I think it is,” said the old Rector, slowly drawing forward a pair of steps, and planting them just beneath where a large bunch of grapes hung, beautifully covered with violet bloom. “There,” he said, taking a pair of pocket scissors from his vest, and opening them. “Look at that, Luke Ross, eh! Isn’t that fine?”

“As fine as we see in Covent-garden, sir.”

“That they are, that they are, and I grow them entirely myself, Luke Ross. Nobody touches them but me. I dress and prune my vines myself, and thin the bunches. No other hand touches them but mine. Now for a basket.”

He took a pretty little wicker basket from a nail whereon it hung, and then, with a pleasant smile upon his face, he snipped off half-a-dozen leaves, which he carefully arranged in the bottom of the basket, so as to form a bed for the bunch of grapes.

“So much depends upon the appearance of anything for an invalid, Luke Ross,” he said, smiling with pleasure as he went on. “I have to make things look very attractive sometimes if I want her to eat. Now, then, I think that we shall do.”

“Shall I cut the bunch for you, Mr Mallow?” said Luke, as he saw, with a feeling of apprehension, that the old man was about to mount the frail steps.

“Cut—cut the bunch?” said the Rector, looking at him aghast, “Oh, dear no; I could not let any one touch them but myself. No—no disrespect, my young friend,” he said, apologetically, “but she is very weak, and I have to tempt her to eat. My dear boy—I mean my dear Mr Ross—if she thought that any hand had touched them but mine she would not eat them; and it is by these little things that I have been able to keep her alive so long.”

He sat down on the top of the steps as he spoke, and smiled blandly from his throne.

“You will not feel hurt, Mr Ross?” he said, gently. “I appreciate your kindness. You are afraid that I shall fall, but I am very cautious. See how much time I take.”

He smiled pleasantly as he went on with his task, rising carefully, taking tightly hold of the stout wires that supported the vine, and steadying himself on the top of the steps till he felt quite safe, when, letting go his hold, he placed the basket tenderly beneath the perfect bunch of grapes, raising it a little till the fruit lay in the bed of leaves prepared for its repose, and then there was a sharp snip of the scissors at the stalk, and the old man looked down with a sort of serene joy in his countenance.

“Are they not lovely?” he said, as he carefully descended, until he stood in safety upon the red-brick floor.

He held up the basket of violet-bloomed berries for his visitor to see, smiling with pleasure as he saw the openly-displayed admiration for the beautiful fruit.

“They make her so happy,” said the old man, with tears standing in his eyes. “Don’t think me weak, Mr Ross. It is a sad thing, all these many years, sir, to be confined to her couch, helpless, and dependent on those who love her,” said the old man, again dreamily, as he gazed down at the grapes.

“Think you weak, Mr Mallow,” cried Luke, with energy. “No, sir; I thank God that we have such men as you on earth.”

The old man shook his head sadly.

“No, no—no, no,” he said. “A weak, foolish, indulgent man, Mr Ross, whom his Master will weigh in the balance and find wanting. But I have tried to do my best—weakly, Mr Ross, but weakly. I fear that my trumpet has given forth but an uncertain sound.”

Just then an idea seemed to strike the old man, who smiled pleasantly, set his basket down, took another from a nail, and then snipped more leaves, and gazed up at his bunches for a few moments, his handsome old face being a study

as his eyes wandered from cane to cane.

Suddenly his face lit up more and more, and he turned to Luke.

“You shall move the steps for me,” he said. “Just there, under that large bunch.”

Luke obeyed, wondering, and the old man then handed him the basket and scissors.

“You shall cut that bunch for me, Mr Ross, please.”

“Really, sir,—” began Luke.

“Please oblige me, Mr Ross. You saw how I did it. I will hold the steps; you shall not fall.”

Luke smiled as he thought of the risk; and then, to humour the old man, he mounted, the Rector watching him intently.

“You will be very careful, Mr Ross,” he said. “Let the bunch glide, as it were, into the leaves. A little more to the right. Now then cut—cut!”

The scissors gave a sharp snip, and the second bunch reclined in its green bed.

“I didn’t think of it before,” said the Rector, whose face glowed with pleasure as Luke descended. “They are not quite so fine as this bunch,” he said, apologetically.

“Really, I hardly see any difference, Mr Mallow,” replied Luke.

“Very little, Luke Ross. Will you carry them home with you? Your father will be pleased with them, I know. He likes my grapes, Mr Ross.”

Luke’s answer was to grasp the old man’s hand, which he retained as he spoke.

“I thank you, Mr Mallow,” he said. “It was thoughtful and kind of you to the poor old man. Now, may I say something to you? Forgive me if I bring up painful things.”

“It is something about Julia, or about my son,” gasped the Rector. “Tell me quickly—tell me the worst.”

“Be calm, Mr Mallow,” said Luke, quietly; “there is nothing wrong.”

“Thank God!” said the old man, fervently, with a sigh that was almost a groan. “Thank God!”

“After some difficulty and long trying, I obtained a permit for two visitors to see Cyril Mallow at Peatmoor, and that permit I have placed this afternoon in Mrs Cyril’s hands.”

“Permission—to see my son?” faltered the old man.

“Yes, sir. I thought that you would accompany your daughter-in-law to see him.”

The old man stood with his hands clasped, gazing sadly in his visitor’s face, but without speaking.

At last he shook his head sadly.

“No,” he said, “I cannot go. I should dread the meeting. I think it would kill me, Luke. But if it were my duty, I would go. I have one here, though—one I cannot neglect. It would take three or four days, at least, to go and return. I could not leave my dear wife as many hours, or I should return and find her dead. Go for me, Luke. Take that poor, suffering woman, and let her see him once again.”

“I—I take her?” cried Luke, starting. “Mr Mallow!”

“It would be an act of gentle charity,” said the old man, “and I would bless you for your love. But I must go now, Luke Ross,” he said, half vacantly. “My head is very weak now. I am old, and I have had much trouble. You will give your father the grapes—with my love?”

He took up his own basket, and the sight of the soft violet fruit appeared to soothe him, for he began to smile pleasantly, seeming quite to have forgotten the allusion to the permit; and in this spirit he walked with Luke to the gate, shook hands almost affectionately, and they parted.

Part 3, Chapter XII.

A Long Sleep.

If the Rector was placid and calm once more, so was not Luke Ross, whose pulses still throbbed more heavily than was their wont, as he thought of the old man’s words, and then, as it were to weave itself in with them, came the recollection of that which his father had said—that life was very short, and begging him to do all the good he could.

“It is impossible,” he cried at last. “I, too, could not bear it.”

He strode onward, walking more rapidly, for a strange feeling of dread oppressed him, and as he seemed to keep

fighting against the possibility of his acceding to the Rector's request, the words of the weak old man he had left asleep kept recurring, bidding him try to do all the good he could, for life was so very short.

"But he will forget by to-morrow that he asked me," said Luke, half aloud. "It is a mad idea, and I could not go."

As he reached the town, first one and then another familiar face appeared, and more than one of their owners seemed disposed to stop and speak, but Luke was too preoccupied, and he hurried on to his old home to find the housekeeper waiting for him at the door.

"How is he?" he cried, quickly, for his conscience smote him for being so long away.

"Sleeping as gently as a baby, sir," the woman said. "Oh, what lovely grapes, sir. He will be so pleased with them. The doctor came in soon after you had gone out, and went and looked at him, but he said he was not to be disturbed on any account, so that he has not had his beef tea."

Luke found the table spread for his benefit as he crossed the room to go gently up-stairs and bend over the bed, where, as the housekeeper had said, old Michael Ross was sleeping as calmly as an infant. So Luke stole down once more to partake of the substantial meal prepared on his special behalf, the housekeeper refusing to seat herself at the same table with him.

"No, sir," she said, stiffly, "I know my duty to my betters too well for that. Michael Ross is an old neighbour, and knew my master well before he died, poor man."

"Do you think one of us ought to sit with my father?" said Luke, quickly, as the woman's last words seemed to raise up a fresh train of troublous thought.

"I'll go and sit with him, sir, if you like," said the woman, "but both doors are open, and the ceiling is so thin that you can almost hear him breathe."

"Perhaps it is not necessary," said Luke, quickly. "You'll excuse my being anxious."

"As if I didn't respect you the more for it, Mr Luke, sir," said the woman, warmly; "but as I was saying, I always had my meals with your dear father, sir."

"Then why not sit down here?"

"Because things have changed, sir. We all know how you have got to be a famous man, and are rising still, sir; and we are proud of what you've done, and so I'd rather wait upon you, if you please."

Luke partook of his meal mechanically, listening the while for any sound from up-stairs, and twice over he rose and went up to find that the sleep was perfectly undisturbed.

Then he reseated himself, and went on dreamily, thinking of the old man's words.

"Life is very short, my boy. Do all the good you can."

Over and over again he kept on repeating old Michael's words, when they were not, with endless variations, repeating themselves.

Then came the possibility of his going down with Sage to see Cyril Mallow.

"No; it is impossible," he said again. "Why should I go? What right have I there? I cannot—I will not—go."

He rose, and went up-stairs to rest himself by the old man's bed, finding that he had not moved; and here Luke sat, thinking of the past, of the change from busy London, his chambers, and the briefs he had to read. Then he went back again in the past, seeming to see in the darkness of the room, partly illumined by a little shaded lamp, the whole of his past career, till a feeling of anger seemed to rise once more against Cyril Mallow, against Sage, and the fate that had treated him so ill.

Just then the housekeeper came up and looked at the old man, nodding softly, as if to say, "He is all right," and then she stole out again on tiptoe.

Again the interweaving thoughts kept forming strange patterns before the watcher's eyes, as hour after hour calmly glided by till close on midnight. Misery, despair, disappointment, seemed to pervade Luke's brain, to the exclusion of all thought of his great success, and the troubles that must fall into each life, and then came a feeling of calm and repose, as he thought once more of the words of the patient old man beside whose bed he was seated.

"I'll try, father," he suddenly said, "I'll try. Self shall be forgotten, for the sake of my promises to you."

He had risen with the intention of going down on his knees by the old man's bed, when the housekeeper entered the room.

"I've brought you a cup of tea, sir," she whispered. "It's just on the stroke of two, sir, and I thought if you'd go to bed now I'd sit up with him."

"I mean to sit up with him to-night," said Luke, quietly; "but ought he to sleep so long as this at once?"

"Old people often do, sir, and it does 'em good. If you lean over him, sir, you can hear how softly he is a breath—Oh, Mr Luke, sir!"

“Quick! the doctor,” cried Luke, excitedly. “No; I’ll go,” and he rushed to the door.

There was no need, for old Michael Ross was fast asleep—sleeping as peacefully and well as those sleep who calmly drop into the gentle rest prepared for the weary when the fulness of time has come.

Part 3, Chapter XIII.

Sounds in the Fog.

A week had passed since old Michael Ross had been conveyed to his final resting-place, followed by all the tradesmen of the place, and a goodly gathering beside, for in the Woldshire towns a neighbour is looked upon as a neighbour indeed. While he lives he may be severely criticised, perhaps hardly dealt with; but come sickness or sorrow, willing hands are always ready with assistance; and when the saddest trial of all has passed, there is always a display of general sympathy for the bereft.

On this occasion pretty well every shop was closed and blind drawn down.

And now the quaint country funeral was past, the cakes had been eaten, and after seeing, as well as he could, to his father’s affairs, Luke had said his farewells to those who were only too eager to manifest their hearty goodwill.

The vehicle that was to take him to the station was waiting at his door, and he stepped in with his portmanteau, Portlock being the driver; and then, with a rattle of hoofs and a whirr of wheels, they crossed the marketplace, followed by a hearty cheer, while at door after door as they passed there were townspeople waving hands and kerchiefs, till the dog-cart was out of sight.

Luke could not help feeling moved at the manifestations of friendliness, though, at the same time, he smiled, and thought of how strange these quaint, old-style ways of the people, far removed from the civilising influence of the railway, seemed to him after his long sojourn in the metropolis.

As he thought, he recalled the solemn processions of hearses and mourning coaches, with velvet and plumes, and trampling black, long-tailed horses, common in London; and in his then mood he could not help comparing them with the funeral of the week before, when six of his fellow-townsmen lifted old Michael Ross’s coffin by the handles, and bore it between them, hanging at arm’s length, through the town, with the church choir, headed by their leader, singing a funeral hymn.

There seemed something far more touching and appealing to the senses in these simple old country ways; and as Luke Ross pondered on them his spirit was very low.

The Churchwarden respected his silence, and did not speak save to his horse, a powerful beast that trotted sharply; and so they went on till Luke was roused from his reverie by the sudden check by the roadside.

He might have been prepared for it if he had given the matter a thought, but he had been too much wrapped up in his troubles to think that if they were to pick up Mrs Cyril Mallow on the road it would probably be at the end of this lane.

It came to him now, though, like a shock, as Portlock drew rein, and Luke recalled like a flash how, all those years ago, he had leaped down from the coach light-hearted and eager, to follow the course of the lane, picking the scattered wild flowers as he went, till he came upon the scene which seemed to blast his future life.

But there was no time for further thought, and he drove away these fancies of the past as he leaped down and assisted Sage Mallow, who was waiting closely veiled with her aunt, to mount into the seat beside her uncle, while he took the back.

Then a brief farewell was taken, all present being too full of their own thoughts to speak, and almost in silence they drove over to the county town, where one of the old farmer’s men had preceded them with the luggage, and was in waiting to bring back the horse.

It was on a brilliant morning, a couple of days later, that the party of three reached the old West of England city, from whence they would have to hire a fly to take them across to the great prison at Peatmoor. The journey had been made almost in silence, Sage being still closely veiled, and seeming to be constantly striving to hide the terrible emotion from which she suffered.

At such times as they had stopped for refreshment Luke had seemed to have completely set aside the past, treating her with a quiet deference, and attending to her in a gentle, sympathetic way which set her at her ease, while in her heart she thanked him for his kindness.

Their plans had been that Portlock was to-be their companion to the prison gates, where he would wait with the fly while Luke escorted the suffering woman within, of course leaving her to meet her husband.

As they drove on with the battered old horse that drew the fly, surmounting slowly the successive hills that had to be passed before they reached the bleak table-land overlooking the far-reaching sea where the prison was placed, Luke Ross could not help thinking how strange it was that, with all around so bright and fair in the morning sun, they alone should be moody and sorrowful of heart. He glanced at the Churchwarden, who returned the gaze, but did not speak, only sank back farther in his corner of the shabby vehicle. He turned his eyes almost involuntarily upon Sage, but there was no penetrating the thick crape veil she wore, and had he met her gaze, the chances are that he would have felt it better not to speak.

Sage was bearing up bravely, but Luke could see that from time to time some throb of emotion shook her frame, and on one of these occasions he softly opened the door of the fly, and, without stopping the driver, leaped out to walk beside the horse up the steep moorland hill they were ascending.

“Hard work for a horse, zir,” said the man; “and these roads are so awful bad. Gove’ment pretends to make ’em wi’ convict labour, but the work is never half done.”

“They might break the stones a little smaller,” said Luke, absently.

“Smaller, zir!” said the driver, as the fly jolted on, “why they arn’t broke at all. Fine view here, zir,” he said as he stopped to let the panting horse get its wind.

“Splendid,” said Luke, as he gazed at the wide prospect of moorland and sea. There was scarcely a tree to be seen, but the great expanse was dotted with huge blocks of grey granite, weather-stained, lichened, and worn by centuries of battling with the storm. The prevailing tint was grey, but here and there were gorgeous patches of purple heather, golden broom, and ruddy orange-yellow gorse, with creamy streaks of bog moss, heath pools, and green clumps of water plants glistening in the sun.

On his left was the deep blue sea, dotted with white-sailed yachts and trawlers, with luggers spreading each a couple of cinnamon-red sails, and seeming to lie motionless upon the glassy surface, for the ripple and heave were invisible from the great height at which they were.

“Ay, it’s a fine view from up here, zir, and though I don’t know much about other counties, I don’t s’pose there’s many as can beat this.”

“It is fine,” said Luke, whose thoughts were changed by the brightness of the scene, and the brisk, bracing air sent a thrill of pleasure through his frame.

“They do say, zir, as you can zee a matter of forty mile from a bit higher up yonder on a clear time,” continued the man, who appeared glad of a chance to talk; “but we shan’t zee that, nor half on it, to-day, zir, for there’s a zea-fog coming on, a reg’lar thick one. Look, zir, you can zee it come sweeping along over the zea like zmoke.”

“It is curious,” said Luke, watching the strange phenomenon, as by degrees it blotted out boat after boat, ship after ship, till it reached the land, and seemed to begin ascending the slopes.

“Much as we shall do to reach the prison, zir, before it’s on us,” said the man. “You zee it’s all up-hill, zir, or we could get on faster.”

“But it will not matter, will it?” said Luke, “You know the road?”

“Oh, I know the way well enough, zir, but it comes on zo thick sometimes that all you can do is to get down and lead the horse, feeling like, to keep on the road.”

“But they don’t last long, I suppose?”

“Half-an-hour zome of ’em, zir, zome an hour, zome for a whole day. There’s no telling when a fog comes on how long it’s going to be. All depends on the wind, zir.”

“They are only inconvenient, these fogs, I suppose?” said Luke, as they went on; “there is nothing else to mind.”

“Lor’, no, zir, nothing at all if zo be as you’ve brought a bit o’ lunch with you. When I get into a thick one I generally dra’ up to the zide of the road and put on the horse’s nose-bag, to let him amuse himself while I have a pipe.”

“And where does the prison lie now?” said Luke, after a pause.

“That’s it, zir,” said the man, pointing with his whip, “just where you zee the fog crossing. They’ll be in it before us, and p’raps we shall be in it when they’re clear. Perhaps you’ll get inside, zir, now; I’m going to trot the horse a bit.”

“I’ll get up beside you,” said Luke, quietly; and he took his place by the driver.

“Fine games there is up here zometimes, zir,” said the man, who was glad to find a good listener. “The convicts are out in gangs all over the moor, zir, working under the charge of warders. Zome’s chipping stone, and zome’s making roads; and now and then, zir, when there’s a real thick fog, zome of ’em makes a run for it, and no wonder. I should if I had a chance, for they have a hard time of it up there.”

“And do they get away?”

“Not often, zir,” said the driver, as, with a half-repressed shudder, Luke listened to the man’s words, for like a flash they had suggested to him the possibility of Cyril Mallow trying to effect his escape. “You zee the warders look pretty zharp after them, and their orders are strict enough. Once they catch sight of a man running and he won’t surrender, they zhoot him down.”

“So I have heard.”

“Yes, zir, they zhoot un down like as if they were dogs. They’re bad uns enough, I dessay, and deserves it, but zomehow it zeems to go again the grain, zir, that it do, to zhoot ’em.”

“Then you would not shoot one if you were a warder?” said Luke, hardly knowing what he spoke.

“I wouldn’t if I was a zojer, sir. Poor beggars’ liberty’s sweet, and may be if they got away they’d turn over a new leaf. No, zir, I wouldn’t zhoot ’em, and I wouldn’t let out to the warders which way a runaway had gone. I’d scorn it,” said the man, giving his horse a tremendous lash in his excitement.

“It does seem a cowardly thing to do.”

“Cowardly, zir? It’s worse,” said the man, indignantly. “I call it the trick of a zneak; but the people about here do it fast enough for the zake of the reward.”

“There, zir, I told you so,” continued the man, after a quarter of an hour’s progress, during which he had been pointing out pieces of scenery to inattentive ears. “The fog’ll be on uz in vive minutes more.”

They were descending a sharp hill as the man spoke, and in half the time he had named they were in the midst of a dense vapour, so thick that Luke fully realised the necessity for stopping if they wished to avoid an accident.

“I think we can get down here, zir, and across the next bit of valley, and then it will perhaps be clearer as we get higher up. Anyhow we’ll try.”

Keeping the horse at a walk, he drove cautiously on, finished the descent, went along a level for a short distance, and then they began once more to ascend.

“I’ll try it for two or three hundred yards, zir,” said the man, “and then if it don’t get better we must stop and chance it.”

What he meant by chancing it the driver did not explain, but as with every hundred yards they went the fog seemed thicker, he suddenly drew the rein and pulled his horse’s nose-bag from beneath the seat.

“If you’ll excuse me, zir, I’d get inside if I was you, and wait patiently till the wind springs up. These fogs are very raw and cold, and rheumaticky to strangers, and you arn’t got your great-coat on.”

“Hush! man, what’s that?” said Luke, excitedly, as just then came the dull distant report of some piece.

“Zhooting,” said the man, coolly, as he took out the horse’s bit and strapped on his nose-bag.

“Do you mean that shot was fired at a convict?” said Luke, hoarsely.

“Safe enough,” said the man.

Luke leaped down.

“I think I’d draw up the windows, Mr Portlock,” he said. “The fog is very dank and chilly now.”

“Won’t you come in?”

“Thanks, no. Draw up the windows. I’ll stop and chat with the man. I dare say the mist will soon pass away.”

As the windows were drawn up, Luke uttered a sigh of relief, for it was horrible to him that Sage should hear what was going on, and just then there was another report, evidently nearer.

“I thought they’d be at it,” said the man. “Mind me smoking, zir?”

“No: go on; but don’t speak so loudly. I don’t want the lady inside to hear.”

“All right, zir. Beg pardon,” said the man, lighting his pipe. “They’re sure to make a bolt for it on a day like this. Hear that, zir? I hope they won’t zhoot this way, for a rifle ball goes a long way zometimes.”

“Yes, I heard,” said Luke, feeling an unwonted thrill of excitement in his veins. “That shot could not have been far off.”

“Half a mile, or maybe a mile, zir,” replied the man. “It’s very hard to tell in a fog. Zounds is deceiving. There goes another. It’s hot to-day, and no mistake.”

Just then they heard a distant shout or two answered in another direction, and once more all was still.

“Let’s see, zir,” said the driver, who stood leaning against his horse, and puffing unconcernedly away, perfectly cool, while Luke’s blood seemed rising to fever heat; “it’s just about zigs months since that I was driving along here after a fog, and I come along a gang carrying one of their mates on a roughly-made stretcher thing, with half-a-dozen warders with loaded rifles marching un along. The poor chap they was carrying had made a bolt of it, zir, but they had zeen and fired at him; but he kept on, and they didn’t find him for three hours after, and then they run right upon him lying by one of the little ztreams. Poor chap, he was bleeding to death, and that makes ’em thirsty, they zay. Anyhow, they found him scooping up the water with his hand, and drinking of it, and as he come up alongside of me he zmiled up at me like, and then he zhut his eyes.”

“Did he die?” asked Luke, hoarsely.

“There was an inquest on him two days after, zir. Lor! they think nothing of shooting down a man.”

The fog was now denser than ever—so thick, that from the horses head where Luke stood the front of the fly was hardly visible. He was thinking with a chill of horror of the possibility of any such incident occurring that day, when

once more there was a shout and a shot, followed by another; and, to Luke's horror, the window of the fly was let down.

"Why, what do they find to shoot here?" said the Churchwarden, sharply; "hares or wild deer?"

"Men, zir," said the driver, quickly; and as he spoke there was a loud panting noise, and a dimly-seen figure darted out of the mist at right angles to the road and dashed heavily against the horse, to fall back with a heavy groan.

Part 3, Chapter XIV.

The Convict's Escape.

The quiet, half-asleep horse, dreamily hunting for grains of corn amidst a great deal of chaff, threw up its head and made a violent plunge forward, but was checked on the instant by the driver.

"What is it?" cried Portlock, leaping from the fly, as Sage uttered a cry.

By this time Luke was trying to lift the man, who had fallen almost at his feet, and drawing him away from the horse's hoofs, where he lay in imminent danger of being kicked.

As far as Luke could see, he was a tall, gaunt, broad-shouldered fellow, and it needed not the flyman's information for him to know that it was a convict—his closely-cropped hair and hideous grey dress told that more plainly than words could tell.

"What does it mean?" said the Churchwarden again. "Some one hurt?"

As he spoke, Luke Ross, who had laid the man down, uttered an exclamation of horror. His hands were wet with blood.

"He is wounded!" said Luke, in a whisper, as he drew out his handkerchief, and sank upon one knee. "Don't let Mrs Mallow come near."

His words of warning were too late, for just then the figure of Sage Mallow seemed to loom out of the fog, coming timidly forward with outspread hands like a person in the dark.

"He's hit hard," said the driver. "Poor chap! there's no escape for him."

"Let his head rest upon your arm," said Luke, hastily. "Mr Portlock, tear my handkerchief into three strips, and give me yours. The poor fellow is bleeding horribly."

"Who's that? Where am I? Stand back, cowards! Fire, then, and be damned."

A low, wailing cry of horror checked him, and Sage Mallow flung herself upon her knees beside the injured man.

"Cyril! Husband!" she cried, wildly. The convict started violently, and drew himself back.

"Sage!" he panted. "You—here?"

"Yes—yes!" she cried. "What is it? Are you hurt?"

"Hurt? Ha—ha—ha!" He laughed a strange, ghastly laugh. "I made a bolt for it. The brutes fired at me—shot me like a dog."

"Don't speak," said Luke, quickly. "Lie still, and let me try to stop this bleeding."

"Yes; stop it quick!" gasped the injured man. "Yes, that's it—in the chest—it felt red hot; but it did not stop me running, doctor. Lucky you were here."

Luke raised his face involuntarily, and the men were face to face.

"Luke Ross!" gasped Cyril; and for a few moments, as Sage and Luke knelt on either side of the wounded man, he gazed from one to the other.

"Got a divorce?" he said, with a harsh laugh. "Are you married?"

"No," cried Portlock, in a loud, emphatic voice. "Sage was coming to see you with me."

"Then—then," panted the wounded man, fiercely, "what does he do here?"

"I came at your father's wish, Cyril Mallow," said Luke, softly, for somehow his own father's words seemed to be repeating themselves in his ear. "I obtained the order."

"For my release?" cried Cyril, wildly. "For a visit," replied Luke. "Now, take my advice. Be silent; exertion makes your wound bleed more."

"Curse them! no wonder," groaned the unhappy man; and he drew his breath with a low hiss. "God! it's awful pain."

"Help me to lift him into the fly," whispered Luke to Portlock and the driver.

“Cyril—speak to me,” whispered Sage, piteously. “You are not badly hurt?”

“Murdered,” he groaned. “Oh, if I had but a rifle and strength.”

“Hush!” said Luke, sternly, “you are wasting what you have left. Are you ready, driver?”

“There’ll be no end of a row about it when the warders come, but I’ll chance it, zir. Stop a moment, and I’ll open the farther door. It will be easier to get him in.”

“Who said warders?” panted Cyril, in excited tones. “Are they here?”

“No, no. Pray be silent,” whispered Luke. “Mrs Mallow, you must rise.”

“No, no, I will not leave him,” cried Sage.

“We are going to try and get him down into the town, Sage dear,” said her uncle, gently; “to a doctor, girl.”

She suffered her uncle to raise her up, and then the three men bent down over Cyril to bear him to the carriage.

“Stop!” he said, faintly. “I am not ready. Something—under—my head—the blood—”

Luke raised his head, and he breathed more freely, but lay with his eyes closed, the lids quivering slightly, as Sage knelt beside him once again, and wiped the clammy dew from his brow.

“It don’t matter at present, gentlemen,” said the driver. “I couldn’t drive through this fog. We should be upset.”

Just then shouts were heard close at hand, and the injured man opened his eyes and fixed them in the direction of the sound.

“Demons!” he muttered, just as there was another shot, and a loud shriek as of some one in agony.

“Another down,” panted Cyril, with great effort, as he seemed to be listening intently.

“How long will it take us to get back to the town?” said Luke, quickly.

“Two hours, sir, if the fog holds up. If it goes on like this no man can say.”

“Mr Portlock,” said Luke, as he motioned to Sage to take his place in supporting the wounded man’s head, “what is to be done? I am no surgeon, and my bandaging is very rough. He is bleeding to death, I am sure,” he whispered. “We must have a surgeon. Had I not better summon help?”

“Where from?”

“From the prison. A shout would bring the warders.”

“I hear what you say,” cried Cyril, fiercely. “Sage, that man is going to betray me to those blood-hounds.”

“Luke!” cried Sage, who was almost mad with grief.

“There is no surgical help to be got but from the prison,” said Luke, calmly. “I proposed to send for it by the warders.”

“Too late,” said the injured man, in a low voice. “Fifty surgeons could not save me now. Let me be.”

“What shall I do?” whispered Luke.

“Poor fellow! We had better call the men.”

“It would kill him,” groaned Luke; and he stood hesitating, Cyril watching him the while with a sneering laugh upon his lips.

“It’s a sovereign reward, lawyer,” he said, faintly. “Are you going to earn it?”

For answer Luke knelt down there in the mist, and poured a few drops of spirit from his flask between the wounded man’s lips.

He was about to rise, but Cyril uttered a painful sob and caught at his hand.

“I didn’t mean it,” he whispered, “I’m a bad one, and the words came. I’d say God bless you—but—no good—from me.”

Luke’s cold thin hand closed upon the labour-hardened palm of the wounded man, and he remained there kneeling with Sage, who held the other hand between both of hers, and gazed helplessly, and as if stunned, at her husband’s face.

“Glad—you came, Sage, once more,” he said. “Poor little widow!” he added, with a curious laugh.

“Had we not better get the prison doctor to you, Mallow?” said Luke.

“No good,” he replied. “The game’s up, man. I know. Sage—tell the old lady I thought about her—a deal. Have they found poor Ju?”

She stared at him still, for there was not one loving word to her—not one question about his children.

“Poor thing! Always petted me,” he gasped—“poor mother!”

Just then there were voices heard close at hand, the trampling of feet; and Cyril Mallow’s eyes seemed to dilate.

“Hallo, here!” cried a rough voice, as four men seemed to appear suddenly out of the cold grey mist. “Seen anything of—Oh, here we are, Jem; one of the wounded birds.”

The speaker, who was in the uniform of a warder, strode up, and, bending down, roughly seized Cyril by the shoulder.

“Didn’t get off this time, ’Underd and seven,” he said. “Nice dance you’ve—”

“Hands off, fellow!” cried Luke, indignantly. “Do you not see that he is badly hurt?”

“Who are you?” cried the warder, fiercely. “Don’t you resist the law. Now then, ’Underd and seven, up with you. No shamming, you know.”

He caught the dying man’s arm, as Cyril gazed defiantly in his face, and made a snatch, as if to drag him up, when, exasperated beyond bearing at the fellow’s brutality, and on seeing Sage’s weak effort to shield her husband, Luke started up, and struck the ruffian so fierce a blow, full on the cheek, that he staggered back a few steps, and nearly fell.

He was up again directly, as his three companions levelled their pieces, and the sharp click, click of the locks were heard.

“Down with him, lads!” cried the warder. “It’s a planned thing. They were waiting with that fly.”

The warders came on, but Luke did not shrink.

“You know,” he said, firmly, “that your man exceeded his duty. Here is the Home Secretary’s order for us to see this prisoner. I shall report to-day’s proceedings, you may depend.”

“We’ve got our duty to do, sir,” said one of the men roughly. But he took the paper, and read it.

“Seems all right,” he whispered. “Keep quiet, Smith. They couldn’t get away if they wanted.”

“How long would it take to fetch the surgeon?” said Luke, sternly; “or could we get him to the prison through the fog?”

“I think we could lead the horse,” said the warder addressed, who began to feel some misgivings about the day’s work, as he truly read Cyril Mallow’s ghastly face.

“Luke—Luke Ross,” said a faint voice that he did not seem to recognise, and he turned and knelt down once more by the wounded man, the warders closing in, to make sure that it was no trick.

“Ross—my hand,” panted Cyril. “Fog’s—getting thick—and dark. Smith—you fired—but—do you hear—I’ve got away.”

There was a terrible pause here, and, to a man, the warders turned away, for they saw what was coming now.

“Luke Ross—good fellow,”—panted the dying man—“Sage—my wife—little ones.”

His eyes seemed to give the meaning to his words, as, still heedless of his wife’s presence, he gazed in those of the man whose life he had seemed to blast.

“Wife—little ones. God for—”

”—Give you, Cyril Mallow,” whispered Luke, bending lower, “as I do, from my soul.”

Part 3, Chapter XV.

Widowed Indeed.

“Better take the lady away, sir,” said the warder whom Luke had last addressed, and who had shown some rough feeling, as he beckoned him aside. “There’ll be an inquest, of course, and I must have your card and the names of the others. There’s sure to be a row, too, about your hitting Smith.”

Luke took out his card-case without a word.

“Lady his wife, sir?” said the man.

“Yes, and her uncle,” replied Luke, giving the name of the hotel where they were staying. “I think we’ll come on to the prison and see the governor.”

“As you like, sir,” said the warder; “but if I might advise, I’d say take the lady away at once, and cool down yourself before you come. You could do no good now.”

“You are right, warder,” said Luke, quietly, as he slipped a couple of sovereigns into the man’s hand. “Send for the

proper help, and—You understand me. He was a gentleman."

"You leave it to me, sir," said the warder; "I know he was, and a high-spirited one, too. Ah, there goes the fog."

And, as if by magic, the dense cloud of grey mist rolled away, and the sun shone down brightly upon the little white cambric handkerchief wet with tears, spread a few moments before over the blindly-staring eyes looking heavenwards for the half-asked pardon.

Portlock was standing there, resting his hands upon his stout umbrella, gazing at where his niece knelt as if in prayer by her husband's corpse, and he started slightly as Luke laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Let us go back," he whispered, and he pointed to Sage.

The old farmer went to her and took her hand.

"Sage, my child," he whispered, "come: let us go."

She looked up at him with a blank, woebegone aspect, and clung to his hand.

"Not one loving word, uncle," she said, slowly, but in a voice that reached no other ears. "Not one word for me, or for my little orphans. Oh, Cyril, Cyril," she moaned, as she bent over him, raising the kerchief and kissing his brow, "did you love me as I loved you?"

She rose painfully as her uncle once more took her hand to lead her to the fly, where he seated himself by her side, Luke taking his place by the driver; and as they drove sadly back to the old cathedral town, the fog that had been over the land appeared to cling round and overshadow their hearts.

It seemed to Luke as he sat there thinking of Sage's sufferings that Nature was cruel, and as if she was rejoicing over Cyril Mallow's death, for the scene now looked so bright and fair. He wished that the heavens would weep, to be in unison with the unhappy woman's feelings, and that all around should wear a mourning aspect in place of looking so bright and gay. Upon his right the deep blue sea danced in the brilliant sunshine. Far behind the grey fog was scudding over the high lands, looking like a veil of silver ever changing in its hues. Here and there the glass of some conservatory flashed in the sun-rays and darted pencils of glittering light. The tints upon the hills, too, seemed brighter than when they came, and he gazed at them with a dull, chilling feeling of despair.

It seemed to him an insult to the suffering woman within the fly, and with his heart throbbing painfully in sympathy with her sorrow, he thought how strangely these matters had come about.

For the past three months this idea had been in his head: to obtain the order for Sage to see her husband; but he had had great difficulty in obtaining that he sought, and now that he had achieved his end, what had it brought? Sorrow and despair—a horror such as must cling even to her dying day.

The driver respected his companion's silence for a time, but finding at last that there was no prospect of Luke speaking, he ventured upon a remark—

"Very horrid, zir, warn't it?"

"Terrible, my man, terrible," said Luke, starting from his reverie.

"I shall be called at the inquest, I s'pose. This makes the third as I've been had up to, and all for convicts zhot when trying to escape, I don't think it ought to be 'lowed."

Luke was silent, and the man made no further attempts at conversation on their way to the hotel.

The inquest followed in due course, and in accordance with the previous examinations of the kind. The convict who attempted to escape did it at his own risk, his life being, so to say, forfeit to the laws, and after the stereotyped examinations of witnesses, the regular verdict in such cases was returned, the chaplain improving his discourse on the following Sunday by an allusion to the escaped man's awful fate, and the necessity for all present bearing their punishment with patience and meekness to the end.

The warning had such a terrible effect upon the men that not a single attempt to escape occurred afterwards for forty-eight hours, that is to say, until the next sea-fog came over the land, when three men from as many working parties darted off, and of these only one was recaptured, so that the lesson taught by Cyril Mallow's death was without effect.

There was some talk of a prosecution of Luke for striking the warder, but on the governor arriving at a knowledge of the facts, he concluded that it would be better not to attack one so learned in the law; besides which, the authorities were always glad to have anything connected with one of their judicial murders put out of sight as soon as possible, lest people of Radical instincts should make a stir in Parliament, and there should be a great call for statistics, a Committee of Inquiry, and other troublesome affairs. Consequently no more was said, and Luke Ross, after seeing Sage and her uncle to the station, returned to his solitary chambers, and laboured hard at the knotty cases that were thrust constantly into his hands.

For work was the opiate taken by Luke Ross to ease the mental pain he so often suffered when he allowed his thoughts to dwell upon the past. He found in it relief, and, unconsciously, it brought him position and wealth.

He had not revisited Lawford, but from time to time the solicitor there who had the settlement of his father's affairs sent him statements, accompanying them always with a little business-like chat, that he said he thought his eminent

fellow-townsman would like to have.

Luke used to smile at that constantly-recurring term, “eminent fellow-townsman,” which the old solicitor seemed very fond of using; but he often used to sigh as well when he read of the changes that took place as time glided on. How that Fullerton had ceased to carp at church matters, and raise up strife against church rates, being called to his fathers, and lying very peacefully in his coffin when the man he had so often denounced read the solemn service of the church, and stood by as he was laid in that churchyard.

The Rector, too, Luke learned, had grown very old and broken of late, and it was expected, people said, that poor Mrs Mallow could not last much longer, for she had been smitten more sorely at the news of the death of her erring son, the paralysis having taken a greater hold, and weakened terribly her brain.

> “Old Mr Mallow goes a good deal to Kilby Farm,” the solicitor said in one of his letters, “and the little grandchildren go about with him in the woods. Portlock talks of giving up his farm and retiring, but he’ll never do it as long as he lives, and so I tell him.
>
> “If there’s any farther news I will save it, and send it with my next,” he continued. “But I should advise you to take Warton’s offer for the house in the marketplace on a lease of seven (7), fourteen (14), or twenty-one (21) years, determinable on either side. He will put in a new plate-glass front, and do all repairs himself. He is a substantial man, Warton, and you could not do better with the property.—I am, dear sir, your obedient servant,
>
> “James Littler.
>
> “P.S.—I have directed this letter to your chambers in King’s Bench Walk. I little thought when I drew up the minutes of meeting deciding on your appointment as Master of Lawford School—an arrangement opposed, as you may remember, in meeting, by late Fullerton—I should ever have the honour of addressing you as an eminent counsel.”

Luke wrote back by return:—

> “Dear Mr Littler,—Thank you for your kind management of my property. I hold Mr Warton in the greatest respect, and there is no man in Lawford I would sooner have for my tenant. But there are certain reasons, which you may consider sentimental, against the arrangement. I wish the old house and its furniture to remain quite untouched, and widow Lane to stay there as long as she will. She was very kind to my father in his last illness, and she has had her share of trouble. I am sure he would have wished her to stay.
>
> “Very glad to hear of any little bits of news. Yes, certainly, put my name down for what you think right for the coal fund and the other charity.—Very truly yours,
>
> “Luke Ross.”

Part 3, Chapter XVI.

After Four Years.

Four years in the life of a busy man soon glide away, and after that lapse there were certain little matters in connection with his late father’s property, that Luke seized upon as an excuse for going down to Lawford once again.

He had one primary object for going, one that he had nursed now for these four years, and had dwelt upon in the intervals of his busy toil.

In spite of all bitterness of heart, he had from time to time awakened to the fact that the old love was not dead. There had always been a tiny spark hidden deeply, but waiting for a kindly breath to make it kindle into a vivid flame.

His position |had led him into good society, and he had been frequently introduced to what people who enjoyed such matters termed eligible matches, but it soon became evident to all the matchmakers that the successful barrister, the next man spoken of for silk, was not a marrying man; in short, that he had no heart.

No heart!

Luke Ross knew that he had, and from time to time he would take out his old love, and think over it and wonder.

“Four years since,” he said, one evening, as he sat alone in his solitary chambers. “Why not?”

Then he fell into a fit of self-examination.

“Cyril Mallow seemed to ask me to be protector to his wife and children, and I would have done anything I could, but Portlock and Cyril’s father have always met Littler with the same excuse. ‘There is plenty for them, and the offer would only give Mrs Cyril pain.’”

But why not now?

He sat thinking, gazing up at the bronzed busts of great legal luminaries passed away, and at the dark shadows they cast upon the walls.

“Do I love her? Heaven knows how truly and how well.”

He smiled then—a pleasant smile, which seemed to take away the hardness from his thoughtful face.

But it was not of Sage he was thinking, but of her two little girls and his meeting with them in the Kilby lane.

“God bless them!” he said, half aloud, “I love them with all my heart.”

The next day he was on his way down to Lawford, a calm, stern, middle-aged man, thinking of how the time had fled since, full of aspirations, he had come up to fight the battle for success. Sixteen years ago now, and success was won; but he was not happy. There was an empty void in his breast that he had never filled, and as he lay back in his corner of the carriage, he fell into a train of pleasanter thoughts.

The time had gone by for young and ardent love; but why should not he and Sage be happy still for the remainder of their days?

And then, in imagination, he saw them both going hand in hand down-hill, happy in the love of those two girls, whom he meant it to be his end and aim to win more and more to himself.

“God bless them!” he said again, as he thought of the flowers the younger one had offered him, of the kiss the other had imprinted upon his hand; and at last, happier and brighter than he had felt for years, he leaped out of the carriage and ordered a fly and pair to take him to Kilby Farm.

His joyous feelings seemed even on the increase as he neared the place, in spite of the tedious rate at which they moved, and turning at last after the long ride into the Kilby lane, he came in sight of the snug old farm just as the setting sun was gilding the windows.

The Churchwarden was at the door with a smile of welcome as Luke leaped from the fly and warmly grasped his hand.

“I knew you would come,” he said; “but how quick you have been. When did you get my letter?”

“Your letter?”

“Yes; asking you to come. She begged me to write.”

“Then it was inspiration that brought me here. She will welcome me as I wish,” he cried. “I have not had your letter. Take me to her at once, I have wasted too much time as it is.”

“Heaven bless you for coming, Luke,” said the old man, with trembling voice. “It was the mistake of my life that I did not let you wed.”

“Never too late to mend,” said Luke, smiling, and then he saw something in the farmer’s face that turned him ghastly white.

“Sage?” he gasped. “Is she ill?”

“Ill?” faltered the farmer. “I forgot you could not know. Luke, my boy! my poor bairn! She cannot last the night.”

“Stop that fly,” panted Luke. “A telegram—to London—to Sir Roland Murray—I know his address—to come at once, at any cost. Paper, man, for God’s sake—quick—pens—ink. Moments mean life.”

“Moments mean death, Luke Ross,” said the Churchwarden, solemnly. “My boy, I have not spared my useless money. It could not save her life. She knows that you have come. She heard the wheels.”

Luke followed the old man to the upper chamber, fragrant with sweet country scents, and then staggered to the bedside, to throw himself upon his knees.

“Sage! My love!” he panted, as he caught her hand. “You must live to bless me—my love, whom I have loved so long. It is not too late—it is not too—”

He paused as he too truly read the truth, and bent down to catch her fleeting breath that strove to shape itself in words.

“I could not die until I saw you once again. No; Luke—friend—brother—it could not have been. Quick,” she cried. “My children—quick!”

The Churchwarden went softly from the room, while poor old Mrs Portlock sank down in a chair by the window, and covered her face with her hands.

“I have been dying these two years, Luke,” whispered Sage, faintly. “Now, tell me that you forgive the past.”

“Forgive? It has been forgiven these many years,” he groaned. “But, Sage, speak to me, my own old love.”

She smiled softly in his face.

“No,” she said, “not your love, Luke. My children. You will—for my sake—Luke?”

He could not speak, but clasped the little ones to his breast—partly in token of his silent vow—partly that they might not see Sage Mallow’s sun set, as the great golden orb sank in the west.

Death had his work to do at Lawford as elsewhere, and the sleepy little town was always waking up to the fact that some indweller had passed away.

It was about a week earlier that Polly Morrison sat waiting and working by her one candle, which shed its light upon her pleasant, comely face. The haggard, troubled look had gone, and though there were lines in her forehead, they seemed less the lines of care than those of middle age.

Every now and then she looked up and listened for the coming step, but there was only an occasional sough of the wind, and the hurried rush of the waters over the ford, for the stream was high, and the swirling pools beneath the rugged old willow pollards deep.

Polly heard the rush of the waters, and a shudder passed through her, for she recalled Jock Morrison's threat about Cyril years ago.

This set her thinking of him and his end; from that she journeyed on in thought to Sage Mallow, the pale, careworn widow, slowly sinking into her grave; and this suggestive theme made the little matronly-looking body drop her work into her lap, and sit gazing at the glowing wood fire, wondering whether Mrs Mallow or Sage would die first, and whether Miss Cynthia, as she always called her, was soon coming down to Gatley so as to be near.

Then her thoughts in spite of herself went back to another death scene, and the tears gathered in her eyes as she saw once more that early Sunday morning, when the earth lay dark in a little mound beneath the willow, where a religiously-tended little plot of flowers always grew.

"I wish Tom would come back," she said, plaintively. "It is so lonely when he has to go into town."

She made an effort to resume her work, and stitched away busily for a time, but her nimble fingers soon grew slow, and dropped once more into her lap, as the waters roared loudly once again, and she thought of Cyril Mallow, then of Jock, lastly of Julia.

"I wonder where they are?" she said, softly. "Sometimes I've thought it might be my fault, though I don't see how—At last!" There was a step outside and with brightening face she snuffed the candle, and glanced at the table to see that Tom's supper was as he liked it to be.

Then she stopped in alarm, gazing sharply at the door, for it was not Tom's step, but a faintly heard hesitating pace, half drowned by the rushing noise from the ford.

"Who can it be?" she muttered, and then her face turned ghastly white.

"Something has happened to Tom!" She stood there as if paralysed, as a faint tapping sounded on the door—the soft hesitating tap of some one's fingers; and the summons set Polly trembling with dread.

"What can it be?" she faltered. "Oh, for shame! what a coward I am!" she cried, as she roused herself, and going to the door, her hand was on the latch just as the summons was faintly repeated.

"Who's there? What is it?" cried Polly, stoutly; but there was no answer, and taking up the candle, she held it above her head and flung open the door, to see a thin, ill-clad woman holding on by one of the rough fir poles that formed the porch, gazing at her with wild, staring eyes, her face cadaverous, thin, and pinched, and her pale lips parted as if to speak.

"Miss Julia!" cried Polly, with a faint shriek, and setting down the candle, she caught the tottering figure by the arm and drew her in, the door swung to, and the wanderer was held tightly to her breast.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" sobbed Polly. "How could you—how could you? Oh, that it should come to this!"

Her visitor did not answer, but seemed to yield herself to the affectionate caresses that were showered upon her, a faint smile dawning upon her thin lips, and her eyes half closing as from utter weariness and pain.

"Why you're wet, and like ice!" cried Polly, as she realised the facts. "Oh, my poor dear! How thin! How ill you look! Oh, my dear, my dear!"

She burst into a piteous fit of sobbing, but her hands were busy all the time, as she half led, half carried her visitor to Tom's big Windsor chair, and then piled up some of the odd blocks of wood, of which there were always an abundance from the shop.

"Oh, what shall I do?" muttered Polly; and then her ideas took the customary womanly route for the panacea for all ills, a cup of tea, which was soon made, and a few mouthfuls seemed to revive the fainting woman.

"She ought to have the doctor," muttered Polly. "Oh, if Tom would only come!" Then aloud—"Oh, Miss Julia, my dear, my dear!"

"Hush!" said her visitor, in a low, painful voice, as if repeating words that she had learned by heart; "the Julia you knew is dead."

"Oh, no, no, my dear young mistress," sobbed Polly, and she went down upon her knees, and threw her arms round the thin, cold figure in its squalid clothes. "Tom will be home directly, and he shall fetch the doctor and master. Oh, my dear, my dear! that it should come to this! But tell me, have you left Jock Morrison?"

The wretched woman shuddered.

“They have taken him away,” she whispered; “he was in trouble—with some keepers—but he will be out some day, and I must go to him again. He will want me, Polly—and I must go!”

Polly Morrison gazed at her with horror, hardly recognising a lineament of the girl in whose soft hair she had taken such pride, and whom she had admired in her youth and beauty.

“But you must not go back,” cried the little woman. “There, there, let your head rest back on the chair. Let me go and fetch you a pillow.”

“No, don’t go, Polly,” and the thin hands closed tightly about those so full of ministering care. “I’m tired—I’ve walked so far.”

“Walked? Miss Julia!”

“Hush! Julia is dead,” she moaned. “Yes, walked. It was in—Hampshire, I think—weeks ago.”

“And you walked? Oh, my dear, my dear!” sobbed Polly.

“I was—so weary—so tired, Polly,” moaned the wretched woman; “and—I was—always thinking—of your garden—that little baby—so sweet—so sweet.”

“Oh, Miss Julia, Miss Julia, pray, pray don’t!” sobbed Polly.

“Mine died—years ago—died too—they took it—took it away. I thought if I could get—get as far—you would—”

She stopped speaking, and raised herself in the chair, holding tightly by Polly Morrison’s hands, and gazing wildly round the room.

“Miss Julia!”

“Is it dreaming?” she cried, in a hoarse loud voice. “No, no,” she said softly, and the slow, weary, hesitating syllables dropped faintly again from her thin, pale lips. “I—tried—so hard—I want to—to see—that little little grave—Polly—the little one—asleep.”

“Miss Julia! Oh, my dear, my dear.”

“For—I’m—I’m tired, dear. Let—let me—see it, Polly—let me go—to sleep.”

“Miss Julia—Miss Julia! Help! Tom—Tom! Quick—help! Oh! my God!”

As wild and passionate a cry as ever rose to heaven for help, but it was not answered.

And the Rev. Lawrence Paulby stood amidst the crowd that thronged Lawford churchyard,—a hushed, bare-headed crowd,—but his voice became inaudible as he tried to repeat the last words of the service beside poor Julia’s grave.

The End.

| Part 1 Chapter 1 | | Part 1 Chapter 2 | | Part 1 Chapter 3 | | Part 1 Chapter 4 | | Part 1 Chapter 5 | | Part 1 Chapter 6 | | Part 1 Chapter 7 | | Part 1 Chapter 8 | | Part 1 Chapter 9 | | Part 1 Chapter 10 | | Part 1 Chapter 11 | | Part 1 Chapter 12 | | Part 1 Chapter 13 | | Part 1 Chapter 14 | | Part 1 Chapter 15 | | Part 1 Chapter 16 | | Part 1 Chapter 17 | | Part 1 Chapter 18 | | Part 1 Chapter 19 | | Part 1 Chapter 20 | | Part 1 Chapter 21 | | Part 1 Chapter 22 | | Part 1 Chapter 23 | | Part 1 Chapter 24 | | Part 1 Chapter 25 | | Part 1 Chapter 26 | | Part 1 Chapter 27 | | Part 1 Chapter 28 | | Part 1 Chapter 29 | | Part 1 Chapter 30 | | Part 1 Chapter 31 | | Part 1 Chapter 32 | | Part 1 Chapter 33 | | Part 1 Chapter 34 | | Part 1 Chapter 35 | | Part 1 Chapter 36 | | Part 1 Chapter 37 | | Part 1 Chapter 38 | | Part 1 Chapter 39 | | Part 2 Chapter 1 | | Part 2 Chapter 2 | | Part 2 Chapter 3 | | Part 2 Chapter 4 | | Part 2 Chapter 5 | | Part 2 Chapter 6 | | Part 2 Chapter 7 | | Part 2 Chapter 8 | | Part 2 Chapter 9 | | Part 2 Chapter 10 | | Part 2 Chapter 11 | | Part 2 Chapter 12 | | Part 2 Chapter 13 | | Part 2 Chapter 14 | | Part 2 Chapter 15 | | Part 2 Chapter 16 | | Part 3 Chapter 1 | | Part 3 Chapter 2 | | Part 3 Chapter 3 | | Part 3 Chapter 4 | | Part 3 Chapter 5 | | Part 3 Chapter 6 | | Part 3 Chapter 7 | | Part 3 Chapter 8 | | Part 3 Chapter 9 | | Part 3 Chapter 10 | | Part 3 Chapter 11 | | Part 3 Chapter 12 | | Part 3 Chapter 13 | | Part 3 Chapter 14 | | Part 3 Chapter 15 | | Part 3 Chapter 16 |

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