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Author: John Trevena

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A Drake By George!

By

John Trevena

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CHAPTER I

SOMETHING ABOUT THE FAMILY

Rumour, introducing the newcomer as a celebrity, began to fly about immediately Captain Drake

appeared upon the scene and distinguished himself not only by blocking the single narrow street of Highfield with a presence weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, but by addressing passing men, women, and children in a voice which sounded from the church at the top of the hill to the post office at the bottom; top, middle, and bottom being comparative terms when applied to the great hills of Highfield. Rumour provoked excitement when it suggested legal influences were at work about a couple of old semi-detached cottages belonging to an absentee landlord. The man who found it necessary, on account of his bulk and stentorian voice, to acquire two cottages would have plenty of money; and wealth was much the shortest cut to fame that Highfield knew of. Rumour passed into a condition almost hysterical when builders arrived, demolished the two old cottages, erected a gabled villa of suburban type, and set up against the street a massive noticeboard, which looked as if it had been designed for some important railway station; but instead of yielding such information as "Mazeworthy Junction. Change for the Asylum," it bore the inscription, "Windward House. Captain Francis Drake, Master."

Finally, three vanloads of furniture were dragged up the hill, and the family arrived to take possession of the parish; for it became at once evident that Captain Drake regarded himself as "old man" of the place, the vicar as his sky pilot, and the male inhabitants as crushers, jollies, flatfeet, and shellbacks, all of whom were amenable to his discipline.

In any case the Captain was respected by everybody, whether they had the privilege of knowing him or not—he was one of those men who had to be known thoroughly and at once—when those vanloads of furniture drew up alongside Windward House. Such fumed oak had never been seen before in Highfield. There were vases from China, ivory images from India, living trees of the forest in flower-pots from Japan, with curiosities from all corners of the earth. There was also a large cage full of cats, another cage of monkeys, yet another of parrots, and a giant tortoise, its carapace completely covered with newspaper cuttings relating to the numerous voyages of the old sailor who, in hours of leisure, had committed to the Press columns of adventures wherein fiction was once more proved to be far more interesting and instructive than truth. Birds and beasts are not usually classed as furniture, but they were announced as such in "the inventory of my possessions" duly posted upon the noticeboard by the worthy Captain whose capacity for self-advertisement was much too great for a little country parish.

The first visitor to step aboard Windward House was the Dismal Gibcat, and he came as usual with a scowl and a grievance. The Dismal Gibcat occupied a house about a mile from the village in the company of a wife who was more dismal than himself; he called himself a gentleman in reduced circumstances, and could spell the word embarrassed with ease; he ruled the parish with his scowl, and spent all the money he could get in enjoying lawsuits with his neighbours. This gentleman inquired for Mister Drake with a fearful emphasis, and received the information that the Admiral was shaving. But a door at the top of the stairs stood open, and a moment later the master himself appeared in a state of fury, half clothed and shouting tremendously, "Captain, you rascal! Captain Francis Drake, late of the Mercantile Marine, descendant of the immortal Admiral, author of 'Tortoises: and how to treat them,' 'Comments on Cats,' part owner of the sailing ship *Topper*, now unfortunately lying at the bottom of the Persian Gulf. Captain Francis Drake, always at the service of the Admiralty, but never at the beck and call of geese and asses."

"Willie, dear, you knew your name never was really Francis," called the troubled voice of Mrs. Drake from somewhere in the parlour.

"Stand off the bridge, Maria. Don't argue with your superior officer," roared the Captain.

He carried a shaving brush which might have been mistaken for a mop; and, as he brandished it, flakes of lather fell around like surf from a tidal wave. His immense face resembled the Bay of Biscay in a gale; dark and lowering above, masses of foam below. Removing the field of stubble was a tempestuous operation at the best of times: members of the crew kept apart from the quarterdeck, where the Captain gasped and struggled, scattering lather upon pictures, cats, and furniture. The Dismal Gibcat could not have pronounced his insult at a more unfavourable moment.

"I have called to tell you that board must be removed," he said rather nervously; for he had begun to realize that his scowl was directed against an individual who was not going to be reduced by it.

"You give sailing orders to me—tell me to hoist Blue Peter on my board! How long have you been harbour-master?" the Captain shouted as he crashed downstairs.

"We are proud of our scenery," continued the Dismal Gibcat. "That board is an eyesore. It can be seen a mile away. It completely destroys the local amenities, and, in my capacity as Chairman of the Parish Council, I advise you to remove it at once."

"Local amenities are pretty little things, but they aren't half as good as Englishmen's rights. It's a pity you didn't make a few inquiries about Captain Francis Drake, at places where's he's known, before you started on this little voyage of piracy. If you had found out something about him, and his way with mutineers, you might ha' tossed up, heads I don't go, tails I stay away. It's no use trying to scare me with rocks what aren't marked upon the chart. I've cast anchor here, I've paid my harbour dues. I've got notions about landscape what perhaps don't agree with yours; but I reckon most passengers would rather find a moorage opposite my signal station than sail half a knot with a face like yours. You can drop overboard, Mister Jolly Roger—and take my local amenity with you!"

So saying the Captain plunged his shaving brush full into the face of the Dismal Gibcat and drove

him discomfited from the premises. The same evening he posted the following notice:

"Captain Francis Drake will be pleased to receive the names of all parishioners who desire him to remove this board, in order that he may attend to each grievance personally. He begs to notify friends and neighbours that the parrots are shedding their feathers just now, also that he possesses a barrel of tar. *Verbum sap.*, and God save the King!" The hint was sufficient, for the Dismal Gibcat had been seen upon the road with his scowl so thoroughly lathered that it looked almost like a grin. Not a complaint was received. Indeed the vicar went so far as to declare the noticeboard was a distinct acquisition to Highfield.

Such was the beginning of the absolute monarchy of Captain William Drake. He dethroned the Dismal Gibcat from his chairmanship and converted the Parish Council into a monologue. He became vicar's churchwarden, and kept the key of the church in his pocket. He introduced a flower show, at which only vegetables were shown, judged the exhibits himself with a tape measure, and awarded prizes according to length and circumference. He collected money for the building of a Parish Hall, where the inhabitants might assemble upon winter evenings, to drink gassy liquors and listen to his yarns. His voice stormed continually. Even when darkness had fallen, a muffled roar sounded from Windward House, where Captain Drake would be reading the newspaper aloud, denouncing every form of government, and declaring that nothing sailed between the British Empire and disaster except the ships of the mercantile marine. And during the night his snores sounded like distant traffic, except when unable to sleep; and then he would sit up in bed and sing hymns for those at sea, until cattle ran about the fields, and cocks began to crow, and dogs set up a howl in every farmyard.

His untruthfulness, which harmed nobody, was due entirely to a powerful imagination. Voice and body, alike tremendous, made him conceited to such an extent that, had he been ushered into the presence of any sovereign, except the King of England—whom he regarded as an equal—he would perhaps have given Majesty permission to be seated, and might even have encouraged him to speak with a certain amount of familiarity. After having commanded a ship for a number of years, he was intolerant of even the mildest form of opposition; while the knowledge that he had succeeded in this life supplied him with an extra personality of self-confidence.

His tyranny was quite a good thing for Highfield. It caused the inhabitants to remember—and some to discover—there were other places on the map no less important. It was responsible for certain improvements, such as the introduction of telegrams and an evening post. But it did not succeed in impressing upon the people the fairly obvious fact that some other country would in time become so jealous of their territory as to lay siege to the church, general store, and post office, with the idea of breaking open poor-box and till, and escaping with loose cash and stamps; for Highfield, being in the middle of Devonshire, therefore at the centre of the universe, evinced a fine contempt for foreign countries. Captain Drake was fond of his joke, but he simply made a braying ass of himself when he declared other countries beside England possessed a mighty army, although the same listeners were well able to accept the statement that he had once adopted a mermaid.

On this single matter the Captain was a pessimist; and, as he believed in appealing to the eye when the appeal to the ear failed, he prepared and set up another noticeboard, upon which he had painted in large letters with his own hand, "The enemy will be in Highfield tomorrow;" and he whipped small boys who threw stones at it; and, when their parents grumbled, he threatened to whip them too. The mild vicar entirely lost his temper upon this occasion, and told the Captain plainly he was stirring up evil passions in the parish and corrupting the morals of the young.

"That board may tell a lie for a good many years; but it will speak the truth at last," came the answer.

The family at Windward House consisted of the Captain and his wife, their nephew George, with the two servants, Kezia and Bessie. Mrs. Drake was a lady of substance, having spent by far the greater part of her life in a position which, when not recumbent, had been sedentary: when travelling with her husband the compartment they occupied had a singularly crowded appearance. She and the Captain were devoted to each other, in spite of the fact that he had not fallen in love with her until he had made sure she did possess a comfortable income, even though it was derived from trust funds in which she enjoyed a life interest only.

"You commenced, my love, as the loadstone of my career," remarked the Captain upon the occasion of their silver wedding, "and have continued as the pole star of my existence."

Having no children, they adopted the son of the Captain's younger brother, who had died at an early age, after having attempted almost every form of livelihood, and trying none which did not make him poorer. George was apparently making it his business in life to defeat this record. He had occupied thirty years in seeking to discover the most restful method of leaning against a wall, and the least embarrassing manner of keeping the hands at ease within his trouser pockets. He had been sent to school, but ran away. He had been exiled to Canada, but had returned as a stowaway. He had been placed in business, but dismissed at the end of a week. Mrs. Drake often wondered why George had been created. Most human pegs can find a hole somewhere, but George was neither square nor round; and shapeless holes are somehow not provided.

Kezia had entered Mrs. Drake's service at a very early age, and was determined upon remaining with the family until the end. She knew nothing about herself, except that she was a respectable person and belonged to the Church of England. She did not know her age, but believed she had

been born in Exeter since the building of the cathedral; for she recalled, as her earliest experience, falling upon her face beside the west front of that building on a cold winter's day, and being picked up by no less a person than the Dean, who had made a joke about the ungodly and slippery places, which was published in a local paper, quoted in the Press of the country as a witticism of the Duke of Wellington, and translated into most of the European languages in consequence. At all events, Kezia had belonged to the Church of England ever since. She was not sure of her Christian name, but felt certain it was Biblical, and rather fancied, "'twur one of Job's young ladies;" and she did not oppose Mrs. Drake's preference for Kezia. Nor did she know her surname, but had an idea her father had been called Tom by his wives, of whom he had two; and, as she could remember two Mrs. Toms, it seemed probable that the first had been her mother. She had always got along very nicely without a surname, which was not nearly so necessary to a woman as to a man: she really did not want one, unless the man who belonged to it had a voice and figure like her dear admiral. She had looked with enthusiasm upon that massive form, and had listened in admiration to that mighty voice, until she felt that an ordinary man with a normal voice would quickly make her dull and peevish.

Bessie had not yet become a person of importance. She was quite young, fairly good looking, and still growing, which was alarming since she was already out of proportion with the doors of Windward House. Neither she nor her master made a dignified entry into the parlour; for Bessie had to stoop, while the Captain was forced to turn sideways. Mrs. Drake just fitted when nobody flustered her. Bessie knew the whole history of herself and family; and was proud of the fact that her father owned a fishing smack, while both her brothers would have entered the Navy had they not suffered from an incurable tendency to reject rations at the first rolling of the ship.

Now that the Captain was settled in the haven of Highfield, he had solved all his difficulties except the one problem of finding a place in the world for George. About twice a week he created a thunderstorm about his nephew, who remained in the attitude of an admiring listener until the tempest of tangled metaphor concerning starvation ahead, rudderless vessels, and vagabonds begging their bread, had died away along the village street; and then the cunning rascal would either place a trembling hand to his forehead declaring he had not much longer to live, or shuffle towards the door with the announcement that it might just as well happen at once, and drowning was the best way he could think of, as he could not afford to purchase fire-arms or poison; besides, a watery grave was the proper ending for a Drake. He generally added it was the man whom he venerated, the man who was content to remain in a humble position when he should have been First Lord of the Admiralty, the man who was the British Empire's principal asset—his uncle—who had driven him to this. Then the Captain, who was a soft-hearted old simpleton where his family was concerned, would take George by the shoulders, press him into a chair, give him money to buy tobacco which might ease his nerves, beg for his forgiveness, and behave like a beneficent Providence until wind and weather were favourable for the next thunderstorm.

As a matter of fact, the Captain loved his nephew, who supported his opinions and flattered him continually. Besides, George was fond of cats, and respected the monkeys, and would frequently take the tortoise for a stroll. Mrs. Drake, on the other hand, made no secret of her contempt for an able-bodied man who seemed to regard Windward House as an hotel where he could receive board and lodging without payment. She reminded George constantly she had no money to leave, and when she was gone he would find himself dependent upon charity; but George would beg her not to worry, as he had no intention of outliving anyone who was so good to him. Mrs. Drake then stated that, in her opinion, he would in a future state of existence be separated from his uncle and herself, and for that alone he ought to feel ashamed. And George admitted he was ashamed, but even an ever present sense of shame was better, he thought, than a separation from his uncle and aunt in this life.

Mrs. Drake had a good reason for not insisting upon George's departure. Doctors had warned her that the Captain's immense size was not a healthy symptom: upon his last voyage he had been discovered unconscious in his cabin; and although he declared subsequently this was nothing more than a fit of exhaustion easily to be explained by his first mate's habit of answering back, it was nevertheless accepted as a danger signal which made retirement necessary. Even the unprofitable George might be of service should a similar fit of exhaustion seize upon the Captain in his house.

CHAPTER II

EXHIBITION DAY AT WINDWARD HOUSE

"Mansion and grounds will be thrown open to the public on Sunday afternoon, between the hours of three and five, for the inspection of the rare and costly antiquities collected during his numerous voyages by Captain Francis Drake, who will personally conduct parties. As the hall carpet is of inestimable value, having formerly covered a floor in the Yildiz Palace, visitors are earnestly requested to wipe their boots."

"I think you have forgotten, William," said Mrs. Drake, when her husband had posted this notice, "how you bought that strip of carpet at an auction sale for eighteen pence. The piece you bought from Turkey is in Bessie's bedroom."

"Ah, yes, my dear, but it might just as well be in the hall, and for the purpose of exhibition we can quite easily imagine it *is* there," replied the most capable showman.

By twenty minutes past three, which was punctual for Highfield, a respectable number of villagers had gathered beside the noticeboard as though awaiting an excursion train: old men and young, women and children, stood huddled together like so many prisoners of war, all very solemn and anxious. One little boy was sobbing bitterly because a report had reached him concerning another little boy who had been invited beyond that gate and introduced to the giant tortoise, which had displayed since then a singularly well-nourished appearance. Therefore he was vastly relieved when the Captain announced that, owing to the size of the crowd, which was adopting a closer formation every moment, children would not be admitted that afternoon, but a separate day would be arranged for the little ones, when they could play in the garden and feed the animals; an ominous invitation which made the little boy cry yet louder.

The Yellow Leaf, who wore a coat not much younger than himself, as the father of the people, and related to everybody within a ten mile radius, stepped first into the house. He was, however, better dressed than the Wallower in Wealth, who was believed to own a mattress so well stuffed with gold and silver pieces that it could not be turned without the aid of crowbars. The Gentle Shepherd paused on the threshold to scrape the soles of his boots with a knife. The Dumpy Philosopher nervously unfastened a collar which was borrowed. The ladies wore all the finery they possessed.

"You are now, ladies and gentlemen, standing in the hall of Windward House, upon the priceless carpet used by a former Sultan of Turkey as a praying mat," began the Captain.

"Must ha' been a religious gentleman," said the Yellow Leaf approvingly, as he tapped his stick upon the threadbare patches.

"And fond of a quiet smoke," added Squinting Jack, pointing to some holes obviously caused by cigar ends.

"What size of a place would this Yildiz Parish be?" inquired the Gentle Shepherd.

"Palace, my dear old fellow. It's the Windsor Castle of Turkey, where the Sultan prays and smokes, and signs death sentences of his Christian subjects."

"Amazing small rooms," remarked the Dumpy Philosopher curtly.

"The Turks don't cover the whole of their floors like we do," explained the Captain. "When the Sultan wants to pray, they spread a mat like this before the throne, and he comes down on it. When he's done praying, they roll up the mat and chuck it out of the window, for the Sultan never uses the same bit of carpet twice. I happened to be passing underneath his window when this particular mat was thrown out, so I picked it up and nipped off with it, though Christians are forbidden by the law of Turkey to touch anything the Sultan has even looked at."

"Didn't 'em try to stop ye?" asked a lady.

"They did," said the Captain grimly. "Though boasting isn't much in my line, they did try to stop me—officers of the army, ministers of state, officials of the court, men in the street—but Turks have enormous noses, while I own an uncommon big fist; and when one big thing, my dear, aims at another big thing, they are bound to meet. You can see the bloodstains on the carpet yet," declared the Captain, indicating a corner where Bessie had upset the furniture polish.

"I do wish poor dear William wouldn't read so many newspapers," sighed Mrs. Drake in the background.

"Now, my dear friends and neighbours," continued the showman, warming to his work, "although fully conscious of my own unworthiness, I beg to draw your attention to this pedigree of my family, framed in English oak, and most beautifully decorated in the national colours by one of our leading artists. It commences, you see, with the name of my illustrious ancestor, Sir Francis Drake, the mighty admiral who, almost unaided, sent the Spanish *Armada* to the bottom of the Irish Sea. The head of the family has been honoured with the name of Francis ever since: the same name, ladies and gentlemen, and the same undaunted spirit. Boasting is painful to any member of the Drake family, yet I would say—give me the Irish Sea and some English ships; give me a hostile Navy, such as was faced by my immortal propogand ... my imperishable protogent ... my eternal prognosticator—that's the word, dear people—and if you think I'm boasting, I am very sorry for your opinion of Devonshire manliness and courage."

"You ha' forgot to mention what you might do to the hostile Navy," reminded Squinting Jack.

"Send it to the bottom," roared the Captain.

"I can't bear to listen when he gets near the pedigree," murmured Mrs. Drake. "He will not remember he made it all up. And he has made me promise to put Francis on the gravestone."

"Wur Queen Elizabeth one of your descendants too?" inquired the Gentle Shepherd in great awe.

"Not exactly: she was not, what you would describe as one of my forefathers," explained the Captain. "Her illustrious name is here inserted within brackets as an indication that the Drakes do not claim to be of the blood royal; but, as you will remember, Queen Elizabeth knighted Sir Francis, and there is a pleasant tradition in the family that she once flirted with him."

"Ain't that wonderful!" gasped one of the ladies.

They entered the parlour, where George was crushing flies with a cork against the windows. It was his habit to display some form of activity when his uncle was about.

"The pictures," resumed the Captain, "are chiefly good examples of the oleographic school; with here and there a choice engraving taken from the illustrated press: marine landscapes, depicting sea breaking upon rocks, being a prominent feature. The young lady picking sunflowers was painted by my wife at the age of seventeen, and is the only example of that period which survives."

"The flowers are dahlias," Mrs. Drake corrected somewhat sharply.

"My dear, anybody acquainted with our simple wayside plants could tell that at a glance. I am afraid, ladies and gentlemen, the only flowers I can name with absolute certainty are sea anemones and jellyfish. The grandfather clock is unique," hurried on the Captain. "It strikes the hours upon a gong, chimes them upon bells, and is also provided with a Burmese instrument which discourses sweet music at the quarters. A clock like this relieves the unnatural stillness of midnight, and gets the servants up early. A barometer is affixed to the case; this wind gauge records the velocity of the draught between door and window; while the burning glass registers the amount of sunshine received in this portion of the room daily. Twice during the twenty-four hours this wooden figure winds up an iron weight which, becoming detached at a certain point, falls upon a detonating substance contained in this iron vessel. The explosion occurs at noon and midnight."

"Ah, now I knows it ain't always cats," muttered the Dumpy Philosopher, who lived about a hundred yards away.

"About four hours behind, ain't it, Captain?" remarked Squinting Jack.

"It does not profess to be a timekeeper," replied the Captain. "Any ordinary clock will tell you the time. This does more—it instructs and entertains. It keeps us alive at nights. I like a clock that announces itself. Last Sunday evening, when in church, I distinctly heard the explosion, the clock being then seven hours slow, and it seemed to me a very homely sound."

"I hope Mrs. Drake ain't nervous," said one of the ladies.

"No, indeed," came the reply. "I lived for ten years next door to one of the trade union halls. I find it very quiet here."

"I reckon this would be another clock," said the Gentle Shepherd, staring at a grandfatherly shape in the corner.

"No, my friend, that is an Egyptian mummy."

"One o' they what used to go about on Christmas Eve in the gude old days what be gone vor ever!" exclaimed the Yellow Leaf with great interest.

"Not a mummer, but a body, a corpse—dried up and withered," explained the Captain.

"Same as I be nearly," murmured the Yellow Leaf; while some of the women screamed and some giggled, one hoping the creature was quite dead, another dreadfully afraid there had been a murder, and a third trusting she wouldn't have to adorn some parlour when she was took.

"Can he do anything, Captain—sing and dance, or tell ye what the weather's going to be?" asked Squinting Jack.

"'Tis a matter of taste, but I couldn't fancy corpses as furniture," observed the Dumpy Philosopher.

"What I ses is this," commented the Wallower in Wealth, "if I wur to dig bodies out of churchyard, and sell 'em to folk as genuine antiquities, I would have the policeman calling on me."

"You mustn't dig up Christians—that's blasphemy," said the Captain. "This chap was a heathen king, one of the Pharaohs you read of in the Bible, and he died thousands of years ago. He may have known Jacob and Joseph—and I bought him for five bob."

"Ain't that wonderful!" exclaimed a lady.

"It do make they Children of Israel seem amazing real," admitted the Gentle Shepherd.

"The remarkable object occupying the centre of the mantelpiece is a Russian Ikon. It used to hang upon the quarterdeck of a battleship which was lost in the Baltic," continued the Captain.

"I suppose 'tis useful vor navigating purposes," suggested the Dumpy Philosopher.

"It is what the Russians call a holy picture. They say their prayers to such things," shouted the Captain angrily.

"A queer lot of old stuff here along," said the Gentle Shepherd.

"A few articles are priceless," declared the proprietor. "These two vases, for instance. They were looted from the royal palace at Pekin by an English sailor lad who had intended them as a present for his sweetheart; but, as he couldn't carry them about, he sold them to me for ten shillings. An

American gentleman offered me a hundred pounds for the pair, but I wouldn't part with them for five times that amount. These blue dragons are covered with a lustre known as glaze, which is now a lost art. This portfolio of pictures also comes from China: there are more than fifty, and each represents one of the various kinds of torture commonly practised by Chinese magistrates upon people who are brought before them, charged with such offences as forgetting to pay local rates or being polite to foreigners. Here is the usual punishment for omitting to lick the dust when a big-pot passes—being impaled upon three stakes above a slow fire without the option of a fine."

"Nice pictures to look at on a Sunday evening," said Squinting Jack.

"The curiously twisted spike, which bears a close resemblance to iron, and is indeed almost as heavy as that metal, was given me by an Egyptian fellah, who said he had discovered it in the Assyrian desert," resumed the Captain with somewhat less confidence. "It is supposed to be a horn of that extinct animal the unicorn, but I don't guarantee it. According to a mate who sailed with me once—a chap who knew a lot about animals, and had taken prizes at dog shows—the unicorn had a hollow horn, and this, you see, is solid."

"The Egyptian fellow had you, Captain. It is iron, and there's a mark upon it that looks to me like a crown," declared the Wallower in Wealth, who had commenced prosperity as a wheelwright.

"Don't that go to show it is genuine? Ain't the lion and unicorn the—the motto of the crown of England?" demanded the Yellow Leaf.

"The beast wouldn't have a crown stamped on its horn when he drawed breath," said Squinting Jack.

"I b'ain't so certain. I ha' seen rummy marks on a ram's horn," answered the Gentle Shepherd.

"There are wonderful things in Nature," said the Captain. "When I was off the coast of South Africa, I watched a big fish flap out of the water, climb a tree, stuff itself with fruit, and then return to its native element. It may be the unicorn was adopted as one of the supporters of the Royal Arms, because it had this mark of a crown upon the base of its horn."

"Some volk ses there never wur no unicorns," remarked the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Plenty believe creation started after they were born," retorted the Captain sharply. "The lion and the unicorn are the royal beasts of England—any child knows that—and when all the lions have been shot, lots of people will say there never were such creatures. If unicorns never existed, how is it we possess pictures of the beast? How do we know what 'twas like? How do we know its name, and how do we know it had only one horn bang in the middle of its forehead?"

"That's the way to talk to unbelievers," chuckled the Yellow Leaf. "I make no manner of doubt there wur plenty of unicorns; aye, and lions and four footed tigers, and alligators too, in this here parish of Highfield, though I don't seem to able call any of 'em to mind."

"'Tis an iron spike sure enough, and 'twur made in Birmingham," whispered the Wallower in Wealth to his nearest neighbour.

"The little creature in this glass case is a stuffed mermaid, supposed to be about three months old," the Captain continued, indicating a cleverly faked object, composed of the upper part of a monkey and the tail of a hake. "I did not see it alive myself, but was told by the inhabitant of Sumatra, from whom I bought it, he had found it upon a rock at low tide crying piteously for its mother. He took it home, and tried to rear it upon ass's milk, but the poor little thing did not live many days. It was too young to show any intelligence."

"The ass's milk might ha' made it feel a bit silly like," suggested Squinting Jack.

"Don't it seem a bit like slavery to ha' bought it?" asked a tender-hearted matron.

"And a bit blasphemous to ha' stuffed the poor mite?" complained another.

"Oh no, my dear ladies. These creatures do not possess immortal souls," replied the Captain.

"How be us to tell?" inquired the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Only creatures who can pray possess immortal souls," declared the Captain piously. "When we pray we kneel. Mermaids cannot kneel because they have no legs."

"There used to be a picture in the schuleroom of a camel on his knees," began Squinting Jack; but the Captain hurried off to the next object of interest, which was a snuffbox composed of various woods inlaid with mother of pearl.

"A tragic and mysterious relic of the French Revolution, found in the hand of a Duke while his body was being removed for burial," he said in his most impressive manner. "This box is supposed to possess a most remarkable history, but it has not been opened since the original owner's death."

"Will ye please to go on and tell us all about it," requested the Yellow Leaf.

"It is the mystery of this box that nobody knows its history," came the answer.

"Why don't ye open it, Captain?"

"The second mystery of this box is that the secret of opening it is lost. It is alike on both sides, so that you cannot tell which is top and which bottom."

"I'd open 'en quick enough," said the Wallower in Wealth.

"And smash they lovely pearls all to pieces!" cried a lady indignantly.

"'Twould be a pity to spoil a couple of mysteries," said Squinting Jack.

"That's how I feel about it. As it is, this snuffbox is a genuinely romantic antique; but if we discovered its history—which I was assured by some gentleman in Paris is most astounding, although entirely unknown—it might lose a considerable part of its value. I have charged my wife to present this box to the President of the French Republic after I am taken from her. She is not bound to present it personally, but may either entrust it to the registered post, or hand it to his Excellency the French Ambassador at his official residence by appointment, whichever course may be most pleasing to her," said the Captain handsomely.

A number of curiosities sealed up in bottles were exhibited, and then the Wallower in Wealth delivered a little speech he had prepared beforehand. He began by mentioning that his cottage stood near the garden of Windward House, and went on to explain how, upon certain evenings, when shadows were lengthening, his soul had been soothed by distant strains of sweetest music. His wife, who had no ear for harmony, ventured to attribute these sounds to the rival choirs of cats on the roof and owls in the trees; his mother-in-law, who was superstitious, gave all credit to the pixies; his daughter, who was sentimental, had gone so far as to suggest angelic visitors. But he was convinced the sounds proceeded from Windward House. And he concluded by imploring the Captain to entertain the company by a few selections upon his gramophone.

Captain Drake replied that nothing so commonplace had ever disturbed the silence of his abode. "Oriental music of the most classical description is played here," he said, approaching a large black case upon gilded legs and throwing back the lid. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the musical box, formerly in the possession of an Indian potentate, and bestowed upon me in return for services which I could not mention without appearing to glory in my sterling nobility of character, which was one of the phrases employed during the ceremony of presentation. The Maharajah offered me the choice of three gifts—a young lady, an elephant, and this musical box. Being already married, and having no room in my ship for a bulky pet, I—somewhat to the astonishment of my generous benefactor—selected the musical box. There are only two others like it in this world; one being in the possession of the Dalai Lama of Tibet, while the other unfortunately reposes at the bottom of the Atlantic. The small figures dressed as Chinamen—these boxes were made in China, but the art is now lost—play upon various instruments after the fashion of a military band. In a small room such as this the music is somewhat harsh; but when heard from the garden it is, as our friend here has said, exquisitely beautiful; the more so when the parrots sing in unison."

"I thought parrots was like women; they just talked," said the Dumpy Philosopher.

"They don't sing like nightingales," the Captain admitted. "But their notes blend very pleasantly with instrumental music. Before we go outside I will wind up the box; but here is one more interesting relic I must show you. This Star beneath the glass case, although its rays are now sadly tarnished, adorned at one time the coat of His Majesty King George the First. Its history is fully set out upon the parchment beneath. The thing does look worth twopence, I admit, but then you must remember it was made in Germany, where they have always been fond of cheap decorations, which could be worn at Court, and then hung upon Christmas trees to amuse the children. According to this parchment, which supplies us with documentary evidence—the writing is somewhat blurred, as I was forced to use an uncommonly bad pen—this Star was worn by His Majesty upon his arrival in England. The maid of honour, whose duty it was to rub up the royal decorations, took the wrong bottle one day, and used her own matchless preparation for the skin instead of the usual cleaning mixture; and when all the pretty things turned black she passed them on to a Jew, and told the king she was very sorry, but she had accidentally dropped all his Hanoverian decorations down the sink. What he said with the usual month's notice I can't tell you, but probably he didn't care much, as he could buy stars and crosses and eagles by the gross from the toymakers of the Black Forest cheap for cash.

"This particular Star was cleaned by a patent process and sold to a tailor, who stitched it on to a magnificent coat he had made for a young Duke who had just stepped into the title; and he, after a time, passed on coat and Star to his valet, who parted with them to a quack doctor, well known as the discoverer of a certain cure for cataract. He had already made about a score of people totally blind when he was called in to attend a lady of quality; and when this lady's sight was destroyed, her relatives invited the quack either to have his own eyes forcibly treated with his ointment, or to clear out of the country. He soon made up his mind, sold the coat and Star to a pedlar, and returned to Germany, where he entered the diplomatic service and blinded a lot more folk.

"The pedlar made his way up to Scotland and, meeting a very shabby old fellow upon the road, sold him the coat and Star after the hardest bit of bargaining he had ever known in his life. This old chap turned out to be the first Duke in all Scotland, and he was driven to buy the finery as he had been commanded to appear at Court. When he got to London in his ramshackle old coach, he rubbed up the Star, put on the coat, inked the seams a bit, then went to the Palace, where he found the King playing dominoes with one of the English Dukes. 'Gott in Himmel!' cried his

Majesty, 'His Grace has got my old Star. I know it's mine, for 'twas made in dear old Sharmany.' The Scot was trying to explain that the Star had been made to order by his village blacksmith, when the English Duke chimed in, 'And he's wearing one of my cast-off coats!' At this point the manuscript breaks off abruptly.

"That's the true English history of this old Star, which I purchased for sixpence from a sailor in whose family it had been an heirloom for the last two hundred years."

"Ain't that wonderful!" exclaimed a lady.

"It do seem to make they old kings and Druid volk wonderful clear avore us," murmured the Yellow Leaf.

The Captain led his guests into the garden, while George, after laboriously collecting a handful of dead flies, followed, ready to support his uncle if necessary, but still more anxious to support himself.

"My cats are famous," said the Captain, approaching a building which had been once a stable, and was now divided into two compartments; one with a wired front for use in summer; the other closed and kept warm for winter quarters. "I have now succeeded in obtaining a highly scientific animal, combining the sleek beauty of the pure Persian with the aggressive agility of the British species. For the last twenty years I have supplied cats to the ships of the mercantile marine, and by so doing have saved much of the commerce of this country; for a single rat will destroy five shillings' worth of perishable cargo in one day; while a single cat of my variety will readily account for fifty rats, not to mention mice innumerable, during the same period. If you will reckon sixty cats, let us say, supplied by me annually, each cat accounting for fifty rats, again not reckoning mice innumerable, every day; if you will add a dozen cats supplied, again by me, to dockyards and custom houses swarming with vermin of every description, each rat doing damage to the extent of some shillings daily, with smaller vermin doing the same according to size and jaw power; if you will add sixty ships to twelve dockyards, and add, let us say, twenty cats supplied from my stock to foreign countries, reckoning in such cases in francs or dollars instead of shillings, and making due allowance for the different tonnage of vessels or dimensions of dockyards, if you will remember I have also supplied most of the cats at present commissioned to kill rats and mice upon the ships of the Royal Navy; and if you will include in your estimate the Grimalkins I have sold, or given, to millers, warehousemen, wholesale grocers, and provision merchants...."

"I reckon, Captain, that will come to about quarter of a million pounds a year, not taking into account shillings and pence," broke in Squinting Jack to free the Captain from his obvious difficulty.

"That is a moderate estimate; still I will accept it. Quarter of a million pounds annually for twenty years, friends and neighbour! Have I not done my part in liquidating the national debt?"

"Cats aren't what you might call nearly extinct animals same as they unicorns. Us ha' got more home than us knows what to do with," remarked a lady timidly.

"Us drowns 'em mostly," observed a matron who looked capable of doing it.

"Not cats like these—the latest triumph of scientific inbreeding," the Captain shouted.

"Oh no, sir! Ours be bred all nohow," said the timid lady.

"Don't the monkeys tease 'em, Captain?" asked the Gentle Shepherd.

"The simians have sufficient intelligence to understand that my felidæ are famous for the claws. Beneath that tree," continued the Captain, "about three paces from the side of my nephew, you see the giant tortoise, which is the greatest antiquity that I possess—next, of course, to the Egyptian mummy. That tortoise, my friends, has lived in this world during the last five hundred years."

"Ain't that wonderful!" gasped a lady.

"I captured it upon the beach of one of the Galapagos Islands, where it had just succeeded in laying an egg."

"Him lay eggs! Then all I can say is he'm the funniest old bird I ever did set eyes on," cried a lady who was famous for her poultry.

"How did you manage to get hold of his birth certificate, Captain?" asked Squinting Jack.

"Tortoises live for ever, if you let 'em alone—that's a proverbial fact," stammered the Captain, somewhat taken aback. "You can tell his age by—by merely glancing at his shell. This tortoise has his shell covered with tarpaulin to prevent the newspaper cuttings from being washed off by rain; but if it was removed you would see that the shell is yellow. It is a well known scientific fact that the shell of a tortoise is black during the first century of its life; takes on a bluish tinge for the next two hundred years; and becomes mottled with yellow when it approaches the enormous age of five hundred years."

"Same as me," said the Yellow Leaf sadly.

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTAIN MAKES HISTORY

One day George entered the churchyard and set his face towards a big sycamore, with the resolution of setting his back against it. He had been tempted by the wide trunk and smooth bark for a long time; but his attempt to reach the tree failed entirely because it stood upon the unfrequented side of the churchyard, and was surrounded by an entanglement of brambles and nettles some yards in depth.

Determined to reach that sycamore somehow, George complained to his uncle about the abominable condition of the churchyard; and Captain Drake reprimanded the vicar for "allowing the resting places of our historic dead to become a trackless jungle;" and the vicar once more implored the sexton to give up the public-house; and the sexton declared there were no such blackberries in all the parish as could be gathered from those brambles.

The matter would have ended there had it not been for Captain Drake, who visited the territory, explored to within fifteen feet of the sycamore, then called a meeting of parishioners and, with the aid of diagrams, showed how the foremost line of nettles was advancing so rapidly in a north-westerly direction as to threaten the main approach to the vestry; while a screen of brambles had already reached a nameless altar tomb whereon the youth of the place by traditional right recorded their initials.

The seriousness of the weed peril had not been realised until then; as the Dumpy Philosopher remarked, they had all been asleep and thus had been taken unprepared; but, when the parishioners did realise it, an army of offence was raised quickly; the nettles were eradicated and the brambles uprooted; that portion of the churchyard was thrown open to the public; and George attained his resting place beside the sycamore.

He had lounged against it several times before his eyes fell upon an inscription which appeared familiar, although obscured by moss and yellow lichen. As the tombstone was not more than three yards away, he was able to reach it without much difficulty. Reclining upon the turf, he summoned up energy to open his pocketknife and to scrape away the lichen until the full meaning of the discovery burst upon him.

Later in the day the Yellow Leaf met Squinting Jack, and said, "I saw Mr. Drake running like wildfire down the street this forenoon. If I hadn't seen 'en wi' my own eyes, I wouldn't ha' believed it."

"I saw 'en too wi' my own eyes," replied Squinting Jack. "And still I don't believe it."

Captain Drake would have run too had there been less of him. George had never been a liar—the poor fellow had no imagination and rarely picked up a newspaper—still his story sounded too impossible to be true. They reached the newly discovered tombstone; the Captain read the inscription; and in a voice trembling with emotion murmured, "Amelia Drake, of Black Anchor Farm, in this parish."

The portion of stone which bore the date of her departure had sunk into the ground.

"George, my lad," cried the Captain, "this is the grave of my long-lost great-grandmother."

"The missing link," added the nephew, with the joyous certainty of one about to negotiate a loan.

"Our pedigree is now complete. I am certain my father used to speak of a rumour which insisted that his grandmother's name was Amelia; and now we have discovered she lived in this parish, at Black Anchor Farm, which no doubt had passed to her husband—who is down on the pedigree as having been probably lost at sea—from the lineal descendant of the great Founder himself. The name of the farm proves that. You see, George, the reference is to a black anchor, a new freshly tarred anchor, not to an old rusty red one. I must have the stone cleaned. And we will show our respect by planting roses here."

"If it hadn't been for me, this grave would never have been discovered," said George, ready to produce a statement of his bankruptcy.

"That's true, my lad. It's the best day's work you have ever done in your life."

"Skilled labour, too," reminded George, still advertising.

"I won't forget," his uncle promised.

Black Anchor Farm was situated about two miles from the centre of the village. It was not a place to covet, consisting of a mean little thatched house; stable and barn of cob walls propped up by pieces of timber; and half a dozen fields which brought forth furze and bracken in great abundance. People named Slack occupied the place; the man was a lame dwarf who tried to work sometimes, but honestly preferred poaching; the woman went about in rags and begged; while the children were little savages, kept from school by their father, and trained to steal by their mother.

The Captain refused to be discouraged when he visited the home of his ancestors and discovered a hovel; but wrote to the owner for information, interviewed the vicar, turned up the registers,

and consulted the Yellow Leaf.

The letter was answered by a solicitor, who expressed his sorrow at never having heard of the family of Drake. The vicar mentioned that the name Anchor occurred frequently in the neighbourhood, and was undoubtedly a corruption of Anchoret, which signified a person who sought righteousness by retiring from a world of sin. He considered it probable that the site had been occupied formerly by the cell of a hermit who had distinguished himself by wearing a black cloak.

Although the Captain gave days and nights to the registers, he could find no entry concerning his family, of whom most, he was convinced, had been lost at sea, apart from the funeral of Amelia Drake. The Yellow Leaf, after remaining some days in a state of meditation, distinctly recalled a tradition concerning a lady (the Captain thanked him for the lady) who had lived alone at Black Anchor Farm for a number of years, receiving no visitors, and leaving the place only to obtain fresh supplies of liquid consolation. The end of her history was so unpleasant he did not care to dwell upon it, but apparently this lady was discovered at last ready for her funeral, and according to report it was a pity she had not been discovered earlier.

Still the Captain refused to be discouraged. His nobility of character would not permit him to disown the memory of his great-grandmother, although he thought it terribly sad she should have sunk so low. If she, during recurring fits of temporary insanity, had disgraced the great name, he had added lustre to it. If the former country residence of Sir Francis Drake had fallen into a ruinous condition, it should be his privilege to restore it with a few magic touches of the pen. He resolved to devote the remaining years of his life to the writing of *A History of the Parish of Highfield*.

"The vicar was not altogether mistaken, my love," he remarked to Mrs. Drake. "He associates the name of Black Anchor with a hermit who wore a dark coloured vestment of some description, and no doubt he is right. My unfortunate great-grandmother did live there entirely alone, and would naturally be regarded as a hermit by the superstitious people of this parish. And we need not be surprised to discover that she always wore black—silk or velvet, I presume—the last poor remnants of her former greatness. It is an established fact, I believe, that elderly ladies generally wear black."

As a compiler of history the Captain was in many ways well equipped. He wrote rapidly, which was of great importance, because the least relevant chapter in the life of a parish required a vast number of words. He possessed a gift of making the past real because he owned a powerful imagination. While confidence in his own abilities freed him from a slavish adherence to facts which could serve no useful purpose. Realising the importance of concentrating upon some particular feature, in order that the narrative might be made continuous, he had not the slightest difficulty in selecting that feature. The keynote of the entire work was sounded by the opening sentence:

"Although the Parish of Highfield is but little known to Englishmen, and occupies an extremely small portion of the map, being entirely excluded from the standard Atlas used in schools—in our opinion unjustifiably—it must nevertheless remain for ever famous on account of its associations with the sublime name of Drake."

The opening chapter dealt with the destruction of the Spanish *Armada*. The second gave an account of the arrival of Sir Francis Drake in Highfield parish, fully describing his purchase of a site and the erection of a stately manor house, of which unfortunately nothing remained except a few fragments "fraught with sweet Elizabethan memories." The site was still known as Black Anchor, which was undoubtedly the name conferred by the great Admiral upon his country residence, because he regarded it as a place to which he could retire from the world, where he could muse amid the solitude of nature, where he could rest, or, in the phrase of the seaman, "cast his anchor." It was here that Queen Elizabeth visited him, and, according to some authorities who seemed to deserve serious attention, it was here, and not in London, that the Queen conferred the honour of knighthood upon this magnificent bulwark of her throne.

The third chapter was devoted entirely to the royal visit, concerning which tradition was happily not silent. It was indeed a simple matter to follow the Queen's progress towards its culminating point, which was unquestionably Highfield Manor, as Black Anchor Farm was known in those days, through the adjoining parishes, all possessing manors of which some had survived to the present time, but most had fallen down, at each of which the royal lady had enjoyed a few hours' slumber.

Several pages were allotted to this habit of Elizabeth, who was apparently unable to travel more than five miles without going to bed; and in these the author sought to prove the existence of some malady, a kind of travelling sickness, no doubt exaggerated by the roughness of the roads and constant jolting of the coach, so that the physician in attendance felt himself compelled to advise his royal mistress to sleep at every village through which she passed.

The peculiarities of monarchs, remarked the author, are more conspicuous than the virtues or vices of ordinary people. The nervousness of King Charles the Second was no less remarkable than Queen Elizabeth's recurring fits of somnolence: he was continually retiring into cupboards, standing behind doors, or climbing into oak trees, owing to a morbid dread of being looked at. King Charles had secreted himself inside a cupboard within the boundaries of Highfield parish, but this was not to be regarded as a coincidence, for a patient inquiry into local traditions elicited

the fact that, wherever Queen Elizabeth had slept in the best bed of the manor house, King Charles had climbed a tree (usually the common oak, *Quercus robur*) in the garden. As the writer was dealing with the parish of Highfield only, it would be outside the scope of his work to give a list of villages, in Devonshire alone, which claimed to possess pillows upon which Elizabeth had deigned to rest her weary head; but he was satisfied that the Highfield pillow had been stored away in precisely the same cupboard used by Charles during one of his secretive moments. Both these interesting relics had been destroyed, as was customary, by fire.

The fourth chapter flourished the Drake pedigree, copied from the original document in the author's possession; and went on to give a pathetic account of Amelia, the lonely and eccentric lady who was the last representative of the famous family to reside at Highfield Manor. Three facts concerning her could be stated with certainty: she was of a singularly retiring nature, she was accustomed to wear a black silk dress upon all occasions, and she was murdered by some unknown ruffian for the sake of certain valuable heirlooms she was known to possess. It appeared probable that she was a poetess as, according to local tradition, she could frequently be heard singing; while her fondness for cats, a weakness which had descended to her great-grandson, was a clearly marked feature of her character.

The fifth chapter was a triumph of literary and artistic handiwork. Even Mrs. Drake, who did not approve of the undertaking because she had to meet the expenses of publication, felt bound to admit that, if William had not chosen to become a great sea-captain, a certain other William, who had written plays for a living, might conceivably have been toppled from his eminence; for nothing could have been more thrilling than the story of a family vault, "filled with the bones and memories of the greatest centuries in British history," becoming first neglected, then forgotten, and finally overgrown by brambles and nettles: a vault, let the reader remember, not containing rude forefathers of the hamlet, but members of the family of Drake; a vault, not situated in the Ethiopian desert, nor abandoned within some Abyssinian jungle, but built beneath the turf of an English churchyard hard by a simple country Bethel. This vault became entirely lost! Summer followed spring, autumn preceded winter, year after year, while the nettles increased, and the brambles encroached yet more upon the consecrated ground, until the very site of the famous vault was lost to sight—this sentence being the one literary flaw upon an otherwise perfect chapter—and the oldest inhabitant had ceased to tell of its existence.

Here the *History of the Parish of Highfield* was interrupted by some chapters dealing with the birth, education, early struggles, voyages, adventures, success, and retirement of Captain Francis Drake; together with an account of Mrs. Drake and her relations; with a flattering notice of George Drake, Esquire, who was later to win renown as the explorer of Highfield churchyard and the discoverer of the long-missing vault. It was shown also how the Captain had been guided by Providence to the village, formerly the home of his ancestors, and how "the lure of the place had been nothing but the silver cord of an hereditary attraction stretched through the centuries to reach the golden bowl of his soul." Mrs. Drake objected to this sentence, and the printer made still stranger stuff of it; but George upheld his uncle's contention that poetical prose could not be out of place in a work dealing with the origin and progress of a wayside village.

At this point the author interpolated, by means of footnotes, a few remarks, which he owned were unconnected with the purport of his work: Domesday Book alluded to Highfield in one deplorably curt sentence; the church contained nothing of interest; an oak tree, which had formerly shaded the village green, no longer existed; the views were local, charming, and full of variety; the streams contained fish; botanists would discover furze and heather upon the adjacent moorland; the name of the place was derived probably from two Anglo-Saxon words which signified a field standing in a high place.

The author arrived at that fateful day when George, led by his interest in arboriculture to inspect a magnificent specimen of sycamore upon the south side of the churchyard, found his progress checked by tangled growths which, to the eternal disgrace of the parish, had been permitted to conceal "the precious memorial and cradle of British supremacy upon the main." Mrs. Drake opposed this sentence still more strongly, but the Captain pleaded inspiration and retained it.

There followed a stirring account of "the wave of indignation that burnt with its hot iron the souls of the villagers, when their attention had been drawn to a state of neglect which threatened to deprive them of the obvious benefits of their own burying ground, and was rapidly making it impossible for the mourner to drop the scalding tear or the fragrant flower upon the sepulchre of some dear lost one." A vivid page described the destruction of brambles and nettles, the removal of five cart loads, the subsequent bonfire in which "these emblems of Thor and Woden melted into flame and were dissipated into diaphanous smoke clouds."

The style unfortunately became confused when the author dealt at length with the actual Discovery, and represented himself as head of the family kneeling in humble thankfulness beside the mouldering stone marking the hallowed spot where Drakes lay buried.

The work included with an account of Windward House, a description of the furniture, a complete list of the antiquities, among which, owing to a printer's error, appeared the names of Kezia and Bessie; with a reference to the cats, monkeys, parrots, and giant tortoise. Then Captain Drake lay down his pen, put aside the well-thumbed dictionary, and, calling wife and nephew, informed them solemnly, "The last words are written. I have rounded off my existence with a book."

Nothing much was said for some minutes. The author was obviously struggling with emotion; Mrs. Drake put her handkerchief to her eyes; George smiled in a nervous fashion and trifled with

the coppers in both pockets. Kezia and Bessie were called in and the news was broken to them: the Parish of Highfield now possessed a history.

"This," said the Captain gently, "is one of the great moments in the thrilling record of a most distinguished family. I feel as the sublime founder must have done while standing with wooden bowl in his hand gazing across the sparkling sea." Then he murmured brokenly, "Heaven bless you all," and stumbled from the room.

When the publisher sent in his estimate, Mrs. Drake was quite unable to understand how a newspaper could be sold for one halfpenny. The leading item, which was a charge for sufficient paper to print one thousand copies, came as a revelation to her; for she had always supposed that paper, like string and pins, could be had for nothing. As the publisher pressed strongly for a few illustrations of local scenery, the Captain was compelled to sacrifice, for economical reasons, three chapters of his voyages, together with the whole of his valuable footnotes. When George suggested that the history of the parish itself did not appear to be treated with that fullness the Captain was capable of giving it, the old gentleman replied, "What we lose in the letterpress we'll make up by the pictures. I quite agree with the printer, my lad: the beauty and dignity of my work will be enhanced considerably by the addition of a few engravings."

Six photographs were therefore taken exclusively for this volume, by the son of the postmistress who was an expert with the camera; and reproduced by the usual special process upon a particularly valuable kind of Oriental paper. The frontispiece represented Captain Francis Drake in a characteristic attitude. The five other illustrations depicted Windward House from the southeast; present day aspect of Black Anchor Farm; George Drake, Esquire, discoverer of the missing vault; stone marking site of vault and bearing the name of Amelia Drake; and finally, Captain Francis Drake in another characteristic attitude, with Mrs. Drake in the background. The lady, having shifted behind her husband during the moment of exposure, has disappeared entirely.

Two copies were sold. The vicar bought one out of a sense of duty, while the Dismal Gibcat purchased the other, to discover whether there was anything in it which would justify him in bringing an action for libel. Both were disappointed.

CHAPTER IV

CHANGES IN THE ESTABLISHMENT

One doctor had promised Captain Drake eighteen more months of life; another, less generous, refused to allow him more than twelve; he presented himself with ten years, and then he did not die from natural causes. The Dismal Gibcat had his revenge at last. He murdered Captain Drake before the eyes of the village, in the full light of two oil lamps; and, instead of being hanged for it, he stepped into the dead man's place, and ruled the parish with his scowl as he had done in the good old days when a pair of old cottages had occupied the site whereon Windward House now stood; although he had the decency to attend his victim's funeral, and to declare he had always respected the Captain, who undoubtedly belonged to that class of mortals, none of whom are ever likely to be seen again.

War for a right of way led up to the murder. The Dismal Gibcat owned a field, across which people had walked since the world began, according to the testimony of the Yellow Leaf, who was the final court of appeal in all such matters. When a stone coffin was disinterred, or a few Roman coins were turned up, the Yellow Leaf was invariably summoned to decide the question of ownership. He might confess that the stone coffin had been made before his time, although he would give the name of the mason, and narrate a few anecdotes concerning the eccentric parishioner who had preferred this method of burial. While he would possess a clear recollection of the thriftless farmer who had dropped the money while ploughing through a hole in his pocket. The Yellow Leaf declared he had crossed that field thousands of times when he was a mere bud, and went on to state that, if the people allowed the Dismal Gibcat to triumph over them, they would find themselves back in the dark ages, bereft of all the privileges which Magna Charta, the post office, and Captain Drake had obtained for them.

The Dismal Gibcat began by ploughing the field and planting it with potatoes. Then he lay in wait for the first trespasser, who chanced to be the vicar on his way to baptise a sick baby. Undismayed by the importance of his capture, the Dismal Gibcat informed the vicar he was committing an unfriendly act by trespassing across his vested property.

The vicar, with some warmth, asserted there was a path. The Dismal Gibcat, with exceeding dullness, replied that a man who had received his education at a public school and an ancient university ought to be able to distinguish between tilled land and thoroughfare.

The vicar declared that, if there was at the moment no path, it could only be because the Dismal Gibcat had maliciously removed it, although he did not use the word maliciously in an offensive manner. The Dismal Gibcat replied that, as there was no path, the vicar could not walk along it; and, as he was obviously trying to make one—with a pair of boots quite suitable for the purpose—he was committing an act of trespass, and by the law of England a trespasser might be removed by force.

The vicar explained that he could not stay to argue the matter lest, while they were quarrelling, the poor little baby should become an unbaptised spirit. The Dismal Gibcat declared that his vested rights were more to him than baptised babies, and ordered the vicar to get off his potatoes by the way he had come.

Finally the vicar abandoned a portion of his Christianity and threatened to hit the Dismal Gibcat upon the head with his toy font.

Civil war having thus broken out, the entire population of military age, headed by Captain Drake and the Yellow Leaf, promenaded across the field and trampled out a new pathway. The Dismal Gibcat replied by putting up barbed wire entanglements.

Then the Captain called a meeting of the Parish Council, to be held at seven-thirty in the schoolroom; little dreaming, when he set out a few minutes after eight to take the chair, that he was about to perform his last public duty.

The Dismal Gibcat attended the meeting without any idea of doing murder: he brought no weapon except his scowl, which was possibly a birthmark, and a tongue which disagreed with everybody out of principle. He presented his case to the meeting and asked for justice. The chairman promised he should have it, and went on to inquire whether the Dismal Gibcat would give an undertaking to remove the entanglements and allow the public to make free use of the pathway.

The Dismal Gibcat replied that, by so doing, he would be committing an injustice which must fall most heavily upon all those of his dismal blood who might come after him.

"Then, sir," the chairman cried in his most tremendous voice, "the matter must pass from our hands into those of a higher tribunal. We shall appeal to the District Council, and that body will, if necessary, carry the case further, even to the Court of County Council itself."

Silence followed, during which every parishioner save one in that crowded schoolroom felt thankful Highfield had a leader capable of carrying their grievances to the foot of the Throne if necessary. About the District Council little was known, beyond the fact that it had never yet interfered in any parochial affairs; while the Dumpy Philosopher seemed to be the only person primed with information concerning the County Council.

"It make roads and builds asylums," he explained. "The gentlemen what belong to it are called Esquire; and they'm mostly in Parliament."

The Dismal Gibcat had the wickedness to declare that he defied all Councils. There never had been a right of way across his field, and there never should be. Out of simple goodness of heart he had refrained from interfering with the homeward progress of a few weary labourers, although they had not asked permission to trample down his pasture; and now he was to be rewarded for this mistaken kindness by having a strip of territory snatched from him by a person —a fat, vulgar person—one he was sorry to call an Englishman—whom they had been foolish enough to elect as their chairman—a man who had written a book about himself—a common creature who claimed to be a descendant of Sir Francis Drake—a man who styled himself Captain because he had once stolen a fishing boat—a coarse bullying brute of a gasbag.

The chairman had been struggling to find breath for some moments. At last he found it, and released such thunders as had never been heard before. Even the Dismal Gibcat quailed before the volume of that tempest, while a few nervous parishioners left the schoolroom with a dazed look upon their faces. George detached himself from the wall and implored his uncle to be calm, but his words of warning were lost in that great tumult. The shocking nature of the scene was considerably enhanced by the fact that the Dismal Gibcat, for the first time within living memory, actually tried to smile.

"A right of way has existed time out of mind across that field. Sir Francis Drake and Queen Elizabeth walked there arm in arm," the Captain shouted, magnanimously ignoring the insults, and fighting for the people to his last gasp.

"Path warn't hardly wide enough, Captain," piped the Yellow Leaf, who was for accuracy at any price.

"I tell the chairman to his face he's a liar. He has never spoken a word of truth since he came to Highfield," cried the Dismal Gibcat.

Again the Captain opened his mouth, but no sounds came. He stretched out an arm, tried to leave the chair, then gasped, fell against George, and bore him to the floor. The leader of the people, the great reformer, the defender of liberty, lay motionless beneath the map of the British Empire like Cæsar at the foot of Pompey's statue; murdered by the Dismal Gibcat's smile in the village schoolroom, upon the fifth of April, in the seventy-fourth year of his age.

At the inquest it was shown by one of the discredited doctors that his heart had really given way a long time ago, and nothing but indomitable courage had preserved him in a state of nominal existence: he sought to impress it upon the jury that the Captain, from a medical point of view, had been a dead man for the last ten years; but, as everybody knew, this statement was made by an arrangement with the coroner to prevent a verdict of wilful murder against the Gibcat.

"'Tis like this right o' way business," commented Squinting Jack. "He ploughs up the path and ses

us can't walk there because there arn't no path. And doctor ses as how the Captain wur a corpse when he come to the meeting, and you can't kill a man what be dead and gone already."

The Dismal Gibcat did all that was possible to atone for his crime. He sent a wreath; he did not smile again; and in the handsomest possible manner he removed the barbed wire entanglements, and dedicated a right of way across his field to the public for ever, as a memorial to the late Captain, whose life would remain as an example to them of truth, and modesty, and childlike gentleness.

Highfield ceased to progress when the Captain had departed. The historian would have found no deed to chronicle, although he could hardly have omitted the brilliant epigram, attributed to the Dumpy Philosopher, "Captain put us on the map, and now we'm blotted out." Local improvements were no longer spoken of. Mrs. Drake continued to live in Highfield, although she took no part in public affairs, and immediately removed the notice boards which she had never much approved of. George resumed his disgraceful habits of loafing in fine weather, and keeping the house clear of flies when it rained. His aunt disowned him once a week, but he bore up bravely. She threatened to turn him out of the house every month, but the courageous fellow declared he should not be ashamed to beg hospitality of the vicar who had loved and reverenced his dear uncle. George explained that he was leading a singularly industrious career, but it had always been his way to work unobtrusively: he fed the giant tortoise, controlled the monkeys, taught the parrots to open their beaks in proverbs; he attended all meetings of the Parish Council; sometimes he sneered at the Dismal Gibcat. Above all, he managed the cat breeding industry, although it was true he had at the present time no more than six cats in stock.

"That's because you have been too lazy to look after them," Mrs. Drake interrupted. "You let them out to roam all over the place; dozens have been shot or trapped; while the others have made friends with common village cats. You know how particular your uncle was about the company they kept."

"I'm expecting kittens soon, and I'll take great care of them," George promised.

"Your uncle used to make a lot out of his cats before we came here. You do nothing except ask for money to buy them food, which you don't give them. If it wasn't for Kezia the poor creatures would be starved," said Mrs. Drake.

She realised that the only way of ridding herself of George would be to regard him as a lost soul haunting Windward House, and to destroy the place utterly; as she could not afford to do that, an idea occurred of inviting an elderly maiden sister to share her home. Miss Yard replied that the plan would suit her admirably. So Mrs. Drake broke the news to Kezia, who had become a person of consequence, accustomed to a seat in the parlour; and Kezia told Bessie she was going to allow Mrs. Drake's sister to live in the house for a time; and Bessie went to her mistress and gave notice.

"You don't mean it," stammered the astonished lady. "Why, Bessie, you have been with me fifteen years."

"Kezia ses Miss Yard's coming here, so I made up my mind all to once."

"I don't know what I shall do without you, Bessie."

"You can't do without me, mum. I'm not going exactly ever to leave you. I'll just change my name, and go across the road, and drop in when I'm wanted."

"You are going to be married!" cried Mrs. Drake.

"That's right, mum. May as well do it now as wait."

"I hope you have stopped growing," said the lady absently.

"I don't seem to be making any progress now, mum. Six foot two, and Robert's five foot three, and has taken the cottage opposite. Robert Mudge, the baker's assistant, mum. He makes the doughnuts master wur so fond of vor his tea."

"I remember the doughnuts," said Mrs. Drake softly. "I used to put out two, but the dear Captain would not content himself with less than half a dozen."

"He told Bob to exhibit his doughnuts. Master said he would get a gold medal vor 'em. But he can't find out where the exhibition is."

"I hope Robert Mudge is worthy of you, Bessie."

"He ses he is, mum. He goes to chapel in the morning, and church in the evening, and he never touches a drop of anything. And he keeps bees, mum."

"It all sounds very nice. I hope you will be as happy as I have been," said Mrs. Drake.

"Thankye, mum. I wouldn't get married if it meant leaving you; but now that Miss Yard's coming here I may as well go to Robert. Just across the road, mum. If you ring a bell at the window I'll be over in no time—if I b'ain't here already, mum."

"You have always been a handy girl, Bessie. The dear Captain had a very high opinion of you, but he was so afraid you might not be able to stop growing."

"Thankye, mum. Bob ses 'tis his one ambition to get great like the Captain; not quite so big, mum, but like him in heart; at least, mum, as gude in heart. I don't know, mum, whether you would be thinking of giving me a wedding present?"

"Of course I shall give you a present, Bessie."

"Well, mum, me and Robert think, if 'tis convenient to you, furniture would be most useful to us."

"You shall have some of Captain Drake's furniture; and you shall have more when I am gone," the old lady promised.

Bessie married Robert Mudge a month later. Mrs. Drake furnished the cottage; George presented the bride with a kitten; while Miss Yard, who had not yet completed her preparations for departure, sent a postal order for five shillings, together with a Bible, a cookery book, and pair of bedsocks. Kezia gave the wedding breakfast, and Mrs. Drake paid for it. The honeymoon, which lasted from Saturday to Monday, was spent somewhere by the sea. Then Bessie settled down to her new life, which meant sleeping upon the one side of the road and taking her meals upon the other.

Miss Yard was a gentle old creature who knew nothing whatever about a world she had never really lived in. For nearly half a century she occupied a little house just outside the little town of Drivelford; during weekdays she would scratch about in a little garden, and twice each Sunday attend a little church, and about four times in the course of the year would give a little tea party to ladies much engrossed in charity. Sometimes she would go for a little walk, but the big world worried her, and she was glad to get back into her garden. It must have been rather a mazy garden, as she was continually getting lost in it; having very little memory she could not easily hit upon the right pathway to the house, and would circle round the gooseberry bushes until a servant discovered her. One awful day she lost her servant, luggage, memory, and herself at a railway junction; and was finally consigned to the station-master, who was not an intelligent individual; for, when Miss Yard assured him she was on her way to the seaside, he was quite unable to direct her. Nobody knew how that adventure ended, because Miss Yard could not remember.

She accepted her sister's invitation gladly, because a letter came frequently from the bank to inform her she had overdrawn her account. Miss Yard did not know much about wickedness, therefore when a servant told her it was time for a cheque she always smiled and signed one. She could not understand why no servant would stay with her more than a few years; but, being a kind-hearted old soul, she was delighted to know one was going to marry a gentleman, another to open a drapery, and a third to retire altogether. It was not until she engaged a rather shy little orphan, whose name of Nellie Blisland was good enough to tempt anybody, as a lady-servant-companion-housekeeper, that the bank stopped writing to her; and then Miss Yard, who comprehended a passbook with some assistance, wondered who had been leaving her money; and at last arrived at the conclusion that Nellie was a niece who was living with her and sharing expenses. But this discovery was not made until Mrs. Drake's invitation had been accepted.

Miss Yard's memory underwent all manner of shocks, when she found herself installed in the parlour of Windward House. She perceived her sister clearly enough, but where was Nellie, and what was George? She had completely forgotten Captain Drake until she turned her spectacles towards the Egyptian mummy; and then she asked questions which caused Mrs. Drake to use her smelling salts.

"This is George, our nephew. He does nothing for a living," said the widow severely.

"Our nephew," repeated Miss Yard, in her earnest fashion. "His name is Percy, and he came to see me last year, but he seems to have altered a great deal. What is it he does for a living?"

"Nothing whatever," said Mrs. Drake.

"I've got a weak back," George mumbled.

"He's got a weak back, Maria. He must try red flannel and peppermint plasters," said Miss Yard with barbaric simplicity.

"Stuff and nonsense! He's got the back of a whale, if he'd only use it. This is not Percy, our real nephew, who for some reason never comes near me, but my nephew by marriage. He's not your nephew really."

"I'm sorry for that. I like nephews, because they visit me sometimes. What's the name of this place, Maria?"

"Highfield, and it's eight hundred feet above the sea," said George, in a great hurry to change the subject.

"I hope it's somewhere in the south of England. The doctor told me I was not to go near Yorkshire," said Miss Yard.

"You are in Devonshire, just upon the edge of Dartmoor," George explained.

"That sounds as if it ought to suit me. I can't explain it, but I was so afraid this might be Yorkshire. Where is Nellie? I do hope she wasn't lost at that dreadful railway station."

"Nellie is upstairs," Mrs. Drake replied.

"I wish somebody would go and bring her. I don't know what she can be doing upstairs. My memory is getting so troublesome, Maria. Before Nellie came to live with me I had quite forgotten she was Percy's sister."

"But she isn't," said Mrs. Drake. "Percy's only sister died as a child."

"Did she!" exclaimed Miss Yard. "I wonder how long I shall remember that. How many children did my brother Peter have?"

"He never married," replied Mrs. Drake.

"Then Nellie must be poor dear Louisa's daughter."

"That would make her Percy's sister. Nellie is your companion. She is not even so much related to you as George."

"Now I have quite forgotten who George was," said Miss Yard.

At this moment Nellie herself appeared with a load of luxuries, such as footstool, shawl, wool slippers, and various bottles to sniff at, which she had just unpacked. Miss Yard fondled the girl's hands, and told her that somebody—she could not remember who—had bees trying to make trouble between them by spreading a malicious story about Nellie's birth and parentage; but she was too muddled to know what it meant.

Mrs. Drake had been aware that her sister's intelligence was not high, but was dismayed at discovering her mental condition was so low; and she quickly repented of the new arrangement, which could not be altered now that Miss Yard had disposed of her house and most of her belongings; bringing just sufficient furniture to equip a sitting room and bedroom, and to replace those articles which Mrs. Drake had bestowed upon Bessie.

Her sister's furniture soon became a source of anxiety to Mrs. Drake, as she did not like to have things in the house which did not belong to her, and she also foresaw difficulties should the partnership be dissolved at any time by the death of either her sister or herself. So she took a sheet of notepaper and wrote upon it, "If I depart before Sophy, all my things are to belong to her for her lifetime;" and this document she placed within a sandalwood box standing upon the chest of drawers in her bedroom.

Then she took another sheet of notepaper and commanded her sister to write upon it, "If I die before Maria, all my things are to belong to her." Miss Yard obeyed, but when this piece of paper had been stored away within the Japanese cabinet standing upon the chest of drawers in her bedroom, she took a sheet of notepaper upon her own account, and wrote, "When I am gone, all my things are to belong to Nellie;" and this was stored away in the bottom drawer of her davonport, as she had already forgotten the existence of the other hiding place.

And this was the beginning of the extraordinary will-making which was destined to stir up strife among the beneficiaries.

CHAPTER V

GEORGE TACKLES THE LABOUR PROBLEM

The following summer Percy Taverner visited his aunts. This gentleman, who was younger than George, would in due course inherit the money left by the late Mr. Yard to his sons and daughters, of whom the two ladies of Highfield were now the sole survivors. Therefore Percy had nothing to lose by being uncivil, although as a matter of fact he had only neglected Mrs. Drake because he disliked her husband. His Aunt Sophy he loved with good reason, for he made a living by mortgaging his fruit farm, and when the borrowed money was spent he had only to explain matters to Miss Yard, and she would pay off the mortgage and immediately forget all about it. Percy was not an idler like George, but he possessed little business capacity, and had selected a form of occupation about which he knew nothing whatever; and as he would be quite a rich man when his aunts departed, he did not take the trouble to learn. Nor did he care to consider such examples of longevity as the giant tortoise and the Yellow Leaf.

Miss Yard was delighted to see Percy, but greatly distressed when he declined to kiss his own sister; at least he was willing, but Nellie positively refused. The usual explanations were gone through, and the good lady tried hard to understand.

"Of course you are right not to kiss Nellie as she's your cousin. Young people who can marry must not get into the habit of kissing each other," she said.

Mrs. Drake was inclined to be chilly towards Percy, but thawed quickly when he revealed himself as an attentive and obliging young man. She was quite sorry he had to sleep across the road in Bessie's cottage because there was no spare room in Windward House; and was almost indignant when Percy declared upon the second day he could not stay until the end of the week, as he dared not neglect his tomato plants.

"Your foreman can look after them," she said. "I have not seen you for years, and after all there's

nothing like one's own relations. It's a pleasure to have some one to talk to, for your poor Aunt Sophy is getting so stupid, and George is no company at all. What do you think of George?" she asked suddenly.

"Not much," replied Percy with a laugh.

"I want to speak to you about George," Mrs. Drake continued. "You're the head of my family, so I should like your advice about the good-for-nothing creature. He is getting on for forty, and has never done a day's work in his life. He sleeps here, and takes his meals, and grumbles, and begs money—and, my dear Percy, he has been seen coming out of the public house. He does nothing whatever. He won't even dig up the potatoes."

"He knows you can't leave him anything?" asked Percy.

"Of course he knows it. He will have the furniture and all the curiosities collected by the Captain; I think that's only right, and besides, I promised my husband he should have them. But the things won't be of much use if he hasn't got a home."

"He can sell them," said Percy.

"Second-hand furniture goes for next to nothing," replied Mrs. Drake.

"That depends," said Percy. Then he pointed to the mantelpiece and continued, "If I were you, Aunt, I should wrap those two Chinese vases in cotton-wool, and put them away."

"Are they really valuable? My dear husband thought they were, but I'm afraid he didn't know much about such things, and he would exaggerate sometimes. He used to say they were worth a hundred pounds apiece."

"He was under the mark," said Percy. "I'm not an expert, but I know more about Chinese vases than I do about tomatoes, as a friend of mine deals in the things, and I've picked up a lot from him. I believe those vases are worth a heap of money."

"Well, that is a surprise!" cried Mrs. Drake. "I shall take your advice and pack them away. Don't mention it to George."

"Certainly not," said Percy, somewhat indignantly.

"And now what can you suggest?" Mrs. Drake continued, waddling to the mantelpiece and flicking a disreputable blowfly from one of the vases. "I have told George plainly a hundred times he must do something for a living, but he won't take a hint. I suppose you wouldn't care to give him employment? He ought to know something about fruit, as he spends half his time leaning against an apple tree."

"He wouldn't work under me. Besides, I'm doing a losing business as it is. It's a jolly difficult problem, Aunt."

"Will you open his eyes to his folly and wickedness? If you can't make him ashamed, you may be able to frighten him. Tell him, if he works, I will help him; but, if he won't work, I'll do nothing more for him."

"All right, Aunt. I'll shift the beggar," said Percy cheerfully; and he went out to search for his victim.

George was reclining upon a seat which his uncle had dedicated to the public for ever, to commemorate the return of the Drakes to Highfield. When he saw the enemy approaching he closed his eyes; for his cunning nature suggested that Percy would respect his slumbers unless he came as a special messenger. When the footsteps ceased, and the ferrule of a stick was pressed gently against his ribs, George realised that a certain amount of trouble awaited him.

"I was sound asleep. It's a tiring day, and I've been a long walk," he explained amiably. "Sit down, old chap, and look at the view; but if you want to admire the sunset, I should advise you to go higher up."

"I don't want to admire the sunset," replied Percy. "I've been having a talk with Aunt Maria——"

"And I've been to Black Anchor," broke in George. "I don't suppose you've read my uncle's history of the parish. It's a classic, and there are nine hundred copies at home. People called Slack were living there when we came; a regular bad lot and a disgrace to the village."

"Friends of yours?" asked Percy.

"Not likely! They were no better than savages. The man hobbled off one day and has never been seen since, and the woman was sent to prison for stealing, and the children were taken into a Home. The farm has been without a tenant for the last two years, and now an old man named Brock has taken it."

"Perhaps he would give you a job," suggested Percy.

"That's a good idea. I'm sorry I forgot to ask him when I went over this afternoon," said the amiable George, perfectly well aware in which direction the wind was blowing. "Unluckily the old chap hasn't any money. He cooks the grub while his grandson drains the bogs. Everybody's talking about it; they can't get over the idea of two men running a farm without a woman. Sidney,

the young chap, wants to go into the Navy, but he sacrifices his future to help his grandfather. Funny idea that! Now if my uncle had been alive he would have got young Brock on a training ship, I warrant."

"Funny idea he should want to do some good for his grandfather?"

"No; but it's queer that a chap who wants to go into the Navy should come to Black Anchor with all its associations of us Drakes," said George loftily. Then he added, "I'm rested now, so I'll take a stroll."

"Just as you like. We'll sit here and talk, or we'll stroll and talk," said the pestilential Percy.

"Go on then," said George sourly.

So Percy in his capacity of ambassador delivered the ultimatum: Aunt Maria had borne with her husband's nephew for a great number of years, postponing vigorous action out of a mistaken kindness, but she was now firmly resolved upon the act of expulsion. "It's for your sake entirely," he continued. "Naturally Aunt wants to see you settled in some business, as she knows she can't leave you anything."

"Except the furniture," remarked George indifferently.

"That's not exactly a fortune," replied Percy, wondering how much his cousin knew about Chinese vases.

"My uncle promised I should have the furniture," said the monotonous George.

"Every man should work," observed Percy virtuously.

"I could manage tomatoes," retorted George.

"I shall be a rich man when the aunts die, while you will have nothing. I don't require to build up a business. Don't you want a home of your own, wife and children, and all that sort of thing?"

"No," said George.

"What do you want then?"

"Board and lodging, and some one to look after me," replied the candid cousin.

"Aunt Maria has said her last word. She won't keep you in idleness any longer. And I'm going to stay here until you leave the place."

"They never brought me up to do anything," argued George for the defence.

"They did their best, but you wouldn't work."

"They ought to have made me. I was young then, and it was their duty to make me submit to discipline. Now I'm middle-aged."

"Thirty-eight is still young."

"With some men; not with me. My habits are formed."

"When you find something to do—"

"That's just what Aunt Maria says," George interrupted bitterly. "She never suggested anything but once, and then she said I might have gone abroad as a missionary if I hadn't been unfit for the job. It's all very well to talk about doing something in this beastly overcrowded world, but what can a middle-aged bachelor do except put his trust in Providence? My uncle was at least practical: he did suggest I should turn pilot or harbour-master, although he knew the very sight of the sea puts my liver out of order."

"You might open a shop to sell fruit and flowers; and I'll supply you."

"I don't understand buying and selling, and I can't do accounts. You would take the profit, and I should have the losses."

"You must make up your mind. Aunt is perfectly serious," declared Percy.

"I don't want to offend her, and of course I couldn't abuse her kindness," said George slowly; "but just suppose I did refuse to leave home—suppose I insisted upon staying here and leading the sort of life that suits my health—what could she do?"

"If you were rotten enough for that, I suppose she could appeal to the magistrates for an ejectment order," replied Percy hazily.

"She is much too kind for that. Besides, I am her nephew."

"Only by marriage. You are not a blood relation; you can't claim to be dependent on her."

"I was thinking what a scandal it would make in the parish. Aunt and I don't get on well together, but I'm sure she would never turn me out."

"You ought to have heard her just now. I had no idea Aunt Maria could be so determined. She will give you money—she will help you—but go you must."

"Did she say where?"

"That's for you to decide. Isn't there any sort of job that takes your fancy?"

"I like railways. I always feel at home in a big railway station," George admitted.

"Station-master,—or traffic-manager—might suit you."

"Do you know I really believe it would," said George brightly.

"Now we've found it!" exclaimed Percy. "I'm going the day after tomorrow, and you had better come with me. We will travel up to Waterloo, and you can see the directors there about getting a job as station-master. I don't know if there's a premium, but, if there is, Aunt will pay it. You might get a small suburban station to start with. We'll go on Friday—that's a bargain, George?"

"Right, old chap! It's a long time since I had a holiday," came the ominous reply.

Mrs. Drake opened her heart and purse when she discovered George was about to accept a position as station-master. Miss Yard said she was sorry to hear he was giving up tomatoes, then in the same breath implored Percy to keep away from junctions where people were lost and trains collided with distressing frequency. Kezia mended linen, packed, and uttered many a dark saying about men who left their homes on Friday in the pride of life and were not heard of again. Percy assured his aunts they might always rely upon him to settle any difficulty. While George basked in popularity, like a sleek cat upon a windowsill, and took all that he could get in the way of cash, clothing, and compliments.

"You must come here sometimes. I expect you won't be able to get away for a year or two; but when you do get leave remember this is always your home," said Mrs. Drake warmly.

"I feel sure we shall soon meet again," said George hopefully.

"A year anyhow: you cannot expect a holiday before then. I'm sure the railway will be lucky to get such a fine looking man, though it's a pity you stoop, and I wish you were not quite so stout. Perhaps the King will get out at your station some day; and you will have the honour of putting flower-pots on the platform and laying down the red carpet. You may be knighted, George, or at the very least get a medal for distinguished service."

George was not thinking about honours much; for he had glanced towards the mantelpiece and discovered that the pair of vases were missing.

"I have put them away," explained Mrs. Drake. "They are wrapped up safely in a box underneath my bed."

"I was afraid Percy might have taken them," said George cautiously.

"He did advise me to put them away, as he thought perhaps we ought to take care of them," Mrs. Drake admitted.

"I hate the chap," muttered George.

"I was afraid Aunt Sophy might break them. She is always knocking things over. She takes an ornament from the mantelpiece, and when she tries to put it back she misjudges the distance. It's the same with tables and teacups. She has broken such a lot of crockery."

"Uncle said I was to have the vases and everything else that belonged to him," said George firmly.

"Oh, you needn't worry," Mrs. Drake replied. "Now that you are really going to work for your living, I will let you into a little secret. When I married your uncle he insisted upon going to a lawyer and making his will leaving everything to me, although the dear fellow had nothing to leave except his odds and ends. So then of course I made a will leaving everything to him, although I thought I had nothing to leave; but the lawyer explained that any money I should have in the bank, together with the proportion of income reckoned up to the day of my death, would go to him. Then we adopted you, so I went to the lawyer again, and he put on something called a codicil, which said that, in the event of uncle dying first, everything that I left would go to you."

"Then there is no reason why I should work for my living," said George cheerfully.

"How are you going to live upon the interest of two or three hundred pounds?"

"A man of simple tastes can do with very little," declared the nephew.

Fruit grower and prospective railway magnate went off together on Friday morning, but the only despatch to reach Windward House came from Percy, who announced he had reached his mortgaged premises in perfect safety, after leaving George upon the platform of Waterloo station surrounded by officials. This might have signified anything. Mrs. Drake supposed it meant that all the great men of the railway had assembled to greet their new colleague upon his arrival. What it did mean was that Percy had freed himself of responsibility at the earliest possible moment, abandoning his cousin to a knot of porters who claimed the honour and distinction of dealing with his baggage, which probably they supposed was the property of a gentleman about to penetrate into one of the unexplored corners of the earth.

Not a postcard came from George. He disappeared completely; but Mrs. Drake was delighted to

think he was attending to his new duties so strenuously as to be unable to write; while Miss Yard remembered him only once, and then remarked in a reverential whisper that she would very much like to visit his grave.

It was the fourteenth day after the flight of George into the realm of labour; and during the afternoon Mrs. Drake set out upon her weekly pilgrimage to the churchyard, accompanied by Kezia, who carried a basket of flowers, and Bessie with a watering pot. Nellie had settled Miss Yard in her easy chair with the latest report of the Society for Improving the Morals of the Andaman Islanders, and had then retired to her bedroom to do some sewing. The giant tortoise was clearing the kitchen garden of young lettuces; the monkeys were collecting entomological specimens. One of the intelligent parrots exclaimed, "Gone for a walk;" a still more intelligent bird answered, "Here we are again!" Then George passed out of the sunshine and entered the cool parlour.

"Oh dear! I'm afraid I had nearly gone to sleep," said Miss Yard, rising to receive the visitor, and wondering whoever he could be, until she remembered the churchwarden had promised to call for a subscription to the organ fund.

"Do please sit down," she continued and tried to set the example; but she missed the chair by a few inches and descended somewhat heavily upon the footstool. The visitor helped her to rise, and was much thanked. "You will stay to tea? My sister will be here presently," Miss Yard continued, while she fumbled in her reticule, and at last produced a sovereign. "You see I had it all ready for you. I remembered I had promised it," she said triumphantly.

George pocketed the coin, and thanked her heartily. He mentioned that it was very dusty walking, and he was weary, having travelled a considerable distance since the morning. Then he proposed to leave Miss Yard, who shook hands, and said how sorry her sister would be not to have seen him; and went to his bedroom, which he was considerably annoyed to find had been converted into a place for lumber.

"Maria, you have missed the vicar!" cried Miss Yard excitedly, the moment her sister returned. "I gave him a sovereign for the Andaman Islanders, and he told me what a lot of sleeping sickness there is in the village."

"What are you talking about? The vicar can't have been here, for we saw him in the churchyard, and he never mentioned any sickness in the village."

"Perhaps I was thinking of something I had just read about. One gets muddled sometimes. But the vicar—or somebody—has been, and there was nearly a dreadful accident. He caught his foot in the hearth rug, but luckily my footstool broke his fall."

At that moment footsteps descended the stairs. With a feeling that the sounds were horribly familiar, Mrs. Drake hurried into the hall, there to discover her nephew, who appeared delighted to be home again upon a thoroughly well earned holiday. "George, I have prayed that you wouldn't do this," she cried.

"It's all right, Aunt," came the cheery answer. "Though perhaps it *was* rather silly of me to start work upon a Friday. The railway profession is very much overcrowded just now, and there's not a single vacancy for station-master anywhere. They have put my name on the waiting list, and as soon as there's a job going, they will write and let me know. I am quite content to wait, and I may just as well do it here as in expensive lodgings."

"How long do you expect to wait?"

"Can't tell. It may be a slow business, but it's sure. A station-master told me you may have to wait year after year, but promotion is bound to come at last—if you live long enough."

"Then you may do nothing for years."

"I'm not going to take anything; I owe it to my uncle's memory to occupy a respectable position. Still, if I can't get a terminus after a few months' waiting, I'll put up with a small junction. Rather than not work at all, I would condescend to act as a mere Inspector," said George with dignity.

"I wish the vicar would shave off his moustache," Miss Yard murmured.

CHAPTER VI

HONOURABLE INTENTIONS

Every evening at nine Mrs. Drake drank a cup of coffee. This was a custom of some historical importance, and it originated after the following manner:

Captain Drake had a great liking for a small glass of whisky and water after his evening pipe; but, during the first few weeks of married life, refrained from divulging this weakness to his wife, who could not understand why he became so restless at the same time every evening. The Captain explained that, when he had finished smoking, he suffered from an incurable longing to arise and walk about the house. Mrs. Drake advised him to take exercise by all means, and the Captain did

so, wandering towards the dining room at nine o'clock, and returning about ten minutes later in a thoroughly satisfied state of mind. But one evening the lady heard him whisper to the servant, "Water, my child! Water!"—the Captain never could whisper properly—and upon another evening she distinguished the creak of a corkscrew, while every evening she was able to detect a subtle aroma which could not have been introduced as one of the ordinary results of walking about the house.

"So you are fond of whisky," she said sharply.

"Well, not exactly fond of it, my dear," stammered the Captain. "Really I don't care for whisky, but I like the feeling it gives me."

"I don't like hypocrisy, and I dislike still more the feeling it gives me. In future we will drink together. When you take your glass of whisky, I will have a cup of coffee," she replied.

After the arrival of Miss Yard at Windward House, she too was offered the cup, but declined, as she abhorred coffee.

"But it's cocoa," explained Kezia.

"Why do you call it coffee then?" asked Miss Yard, who had quite enough to perplex her poor brain without this unnecessary difficulty.

"Mrs. Drake used to have coffee once, but, as she never cared for it much, she took to cocoa. She has drunk cocoa for twenty years, but we always call it coffee."

Bessie and Robert stayed every evening to drink coffee, which was generally cocoa, but sometimes beer. One evening Nellie was so late that Kezia declared she should wait for her no longer. It was Thursday, and Nellie, who sang in the choir, had gone out to attend the weekly practice. Suddenly Robert withdrew his head from a steaming bowl and declared he heard voices in the garden. All listened, and presently Nellie's laughter passed in at the back door, which stood open as the night was warm, but Nellie did not accompany it.

Robert made a signal to the others, and they tiptoed out like so many conspirators, to discover the young lady enjoying a confidential conversation with somebody else who sang in the choir, and whose voice had been described by the schoolmaster-organist as a promising baritone. It looked as if it was promising then.

A few minutes later Kezia and Bessie appeared in the parlour, and asked Mrs. Drake if she had any objection to Sidney Brock drinking a cup of coffee.

"Who is Sidney Brock?" demanded Mrs. Drake, like a learned judge of the King's Bench.

"He'm the grandson of Eli Brock, and he sings in the choir."

Mrs. Drake expressed her approval, but required to know more about the family before she could issue a permit to Sidney entitling him to drink coffee.

"They'm the new folk to Black Anchor," explained Bessie. "Mr. Brock used to keep a post office, they ses, but it failed, and now he'm farming wi' Sidney, and they ha' got no woman, and they took Black Anchor because 'twas to be had vor nothing nearly, and 'tis wonderful, Robert ses, what a lot they ha' done already."

"The post office failed!" exclaimed Miss Yard, who had been listening intently with a hand behind her ear. "What a pity! Now I shan't be able to write any more letters."

"Mr. Brock's post office, miss," cried Bessie. "It was a shop as well, but it didn't pay."

"How much does he want?" asked Miss Yard, searching for her reticule.

"Nothing, miss."

"What's he come for then? I hope he hasn't brought a telegram."

"He's one of the choirmen, Sophy," exclaimed Mrs. Drake, adding, "But I don't know why he should come here."

"He's just brought your Nellie home," said Kezia.

"Oh, I am so thankful!" cried Miss Yard. "I knew Nellie would be lost, going out these dreadful dark nights."

"She only went to choir practice, miss. Sidney is her young man now, and they'll make the best looking couple in Highfield," said Bessie.

"How silly of you to tell her that!" said Mrs. Drake crossly.

Miss Yard said nothing for a few moments. She stared at the mummy, then at the grandfather clock, which was no longer in working order; and presently her poor old face began to twitch and tears rolled down her cheeks. She tried to rise, but Kezia restrained her with kindly hands, saying, "Don't worry, miss. Sidney is a very nice young man, and I'm sure Nellie couldn't do much better."

"She never told me," sobbed Miss Yard.

"Perhaps she did, but you know you don't remember anything," said Mrs. Drake soothingly.

"My memory is as good as yours. I can remember you eating a lot of chocolate on your fifth birthday, and being suddenly sick in the fender. Nellie has run away and got married—and I never gave her a wedding present—and I can't get on without her. You know, Maria, I never did like that fat woman at the post office."

"What has she got to do with Nellie?"

"You told me Nellie had to marry the man because the post office failed—and that woman opens my letters and reads them."

"Call Nellie and tell her to put Miss Sophy to bed," ordered Mrs. Drake.

"The young man's waiting outside," Kezia reminded her.

"Ask him in, and give him a cup of coffee. And, when she has gone to bed, tell him to come in here. I want to see what he is like. Get Nellie, quick!" cried the lady; for Miss Yard had got away from her chair and was knocking things over.

Nellie appeared in full flower, to scold her mistress for not remaining dormant until her usual bedtime; but on this occasion Miss Yard rebelled against discipline.

"You have deceived me," she said bitterly. "You have been a little viper. Everybody in this house deceives me, and keeps things from me, except George. He is the only gentleman here. He's the only one who knows how to behave properly. When I hit my head upon the door, he was sorry for me; but you laughed, and my sister laughed, and everybody's laughing now except George. He knows how hard it is to walk out of a room without hurting yourself."

"It's so easy to laugh somehow," said Nellie.

"Why did you marry the postman without telling me?"

"I have not married the postman, and I'm not thinking of getting married; and what's more I won't marry while I have you to look after," Nellie promised.

"But you went out and got lost, and some man found you, and they all say you married him."

"There wasn't time," said Nellie. "Now come away to bed, and we'll talk about it in the morning."

"I hope we shall be able to forget all the malice and wickedness. Maria, do let us try to begin all over again," said Miss Yard earnestly. "This evil speaking and slandering is so dreadful. You tried to take away poor Nellie's character; you heard Kezia say she was a regular bad girl; and that horrid Bessie, who will *not* stop growing, said it was because the woman at the post office couldn't sell her stamps, and then the postman tempted her to run off with him."

"But he didn't succeed," said the laughing girl, as she conveyed Miss Yard towards the stairs.

As they disappeared George entered the house, and observed to his aunt that the night was warm. Mrs. Drake felt cold towards her nephew, whose letter of appointment had not yet arrived, but she thawed sufficiently to inquire whether he knew anything about the Brocks. George became suspicious, and answered guardedly:

"The old man is a marvel. He cooks the food and keeps the house tidy, and puts in a good day's work as well upon the worst farm in the parish. But the people don't like him much."

"Why not?" demanded Mrs. Drake.

"They think it's queer a man should do a woman's work; and some of them say it's not quite decent."

His voice died away into a gasp of amazement, for that moment Kezia announced Sidney, and that young fellow appeared upon the carpet. George had been about to give him a remarkably good character, but was now disposed to reconsider his decision; especially when Mrs. Drake, after a few preliminary remarks, introduced the name of Nellie. George immediately withdrew to a back window and began to search for flies.

"She is a very good girl, and my sister is wonderfully attached to her," Mrs. Drake resumed.

"Same here," said Sidney promptly.

"I don't know whether you are engaged to her," said Mrs. Drake.

"Well, we don't exactly get engaged. We just walk together until we can get married, and then we do it," exclaimed Sidney.

"I hope you won't ask her to marry you while my sister is alive."

"Nellie wouldn't leave Miss Yard, and 'twould be no gude my asking her."

"Do you think the farm will pay?" was Mrs. Drake's next question.

"We'll get a living out of it, sure enough," replied Sidney cheerfully. "The last folk left it in a pretty bad state—they let the bog get into the best field, and the whole place is vull of verm—but there's plenty of gude soil. 'Twill take a year to get straight, and after that we shall go ahead.

Grandfather's past seventy, but he's vor ten hours a day yet."

"An example for some men," commented the lady, with a shrug of her shoulders towards the fly killer. "The finest man in the world—that's grandfather. There ain't hardly a job he can't do, whether 'tis man's work or woman's work."

"How old are you?"

"Past nineteen."

"Would you marry a girl older than yourself?"

"If her name wur Nellie Blisland, I would."

"I hope you will get on," said Mrs. Drake in her kindliest fashion. "You may come in any evening for a cup of coffee with the others, and tell your grandfather to stay to supper with you on Sundays after church."

"Thankye kindly," said Sidney.

"That's what I call a man, though he is only nineteen," observed Mrs. Drake, when she and her nephew were alone again.

"Oh yes, he's a nice boy, a clever boy. A bit mealy-mouthed, and all that sort of thing," said George indifferently.

"Do you know anything against him?"

"I can see what's going on. The old man is one of the best, but Sidney isn't quite straight. This singing in the choir, you know, is just a blind. Nellie's not the only girl."

"Do you mean to say the boy is a humbug—like you are?"

"Find out for yourself," replied George fiercely, and stalked out of the room.

Local rumour was brought to Windward House every day by Robert, but Mrs. Drake had no direct communication with him. She inquired of Kezia concerning Sidney's character, and Kezia appealed to Bessie, who knew quite as much as her husband, although she could not speak with his authority. Robert declared he liked Sidney, and had never seen him with more than one young woman at a time; but he admitted some rather unkind things were being said against the two occupants of the lonely farm, especially by the women, who were of opinion that old Brock had disposed of his former relations by means of those illegal methods which made the ordinary Sunday newspaper such interesting and instructive reading. At all events, a man who was independent of female labour could not expect to be regarded as a Christian, even though he did attend church and had grown a patriarchal beard. The Brocks, in short, were not like other men; they were therefore mysteries; and anything of a mysterious nature was bound to be intimately connected with secret crime.

These things Robert admitted, quite forgetting—if the fact had ever dawned upon him—that it was the custom in Highfield, as in other places about the Forest of Dartmoor, for the parishioners to revile each other amongst themselves, and to defend one another against all outsiders. In the bad old days a certain vicar of Highfield had been a notorious drunkard, and was so hated by his people that he could hardly appear in the street without being insulted; but when the authorities sought to procure evidence against him, all were for their vicar, and the very men who had carried him home drunk the previous night swore they had never known him the worse for liquor. Mrs. Drake did not know of this peculiarity, and was therefore forced to the conclusion that Mr. Brock had a past, which was not wonderful considering his age; and that, if Nellie married Sidney and went to live at Black Anchor, it was quite possible she would not have a future. So she instructed Kezia not to encourage the young man, and advised Nellie to fall out of love as tactfully as possible.

In the meantime, George appeared to be passing through the throes of reformation. Although actually the same unprofitable person, he succeeded, by a skilful change of methods, in making his aunt believe industry was now the one and the only thing he lived for. He displayed a passion for railways; talked of little but express trains and timetables; constructed a model of a railway station out of a few packing cases; and drew caricatures of locomotives. He fumed every morning because the long expected letter from headquarters still failed to arrive. Mrs. Drake, who was easily deceived, quite supposed George had turned over a new leaf; and he had done so, but without changing his book. He had not the slightest intention of quitting Windward House, but he could see no prospect of carrying out his programme by persevering in the old methods. He continued to idle away his time; but he did so in a different fashion.

His next step was to develop the programme, and to indulge a few of the leading items to the other person whose name was writ large upon it. This was no easy matter, since opportunity, resolution, and guileless speech would have to be obtained simultaneously. George's eloquence was of the meanest description; he was master of no honeyed phrase, while his method of expressing affection for another consisted in advertising the virtues of himself.

One afternoon he was lying beneath a favourite apple tree, when a fine specimen of the fruit fell upon his chest. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked round. Then he ate the apple and listened. The silence was profound; he seemed to be indolent monarch of a lazy world. George

remembered that, shortly before sleep had gently touched his eyelids, Mrs. Drake and Kezia had passed out of the garden. Miss Yard would be contentedly muddling through the maze of some missionary magazine. While the only other person in the house might be sitting beside a window at the back.

George comprehended that the falling apple had been a call to seize the opportunity; resolution he seemed to have acquired by devouring it; eloquence alone was wanting. But big words, he knew, could never fail brave people.

Fortune was smiling in the kindest way from the little upstairs window, where Nellie's head was bobbing over a sewing-machine, which she fed with yards of summer-cloud material. George went on steadily reforming and strenuously gazing; but Nellie did not condescend to throw a glance in his direction.

"There's a nice view from your window," he said at last; an unfortunate beginning, as the girl could see little except himself.

"Lovely," she said, without looking around.

"Are you sewing?" George inquired gently.

"Learning the typewriter," she replied.

George wanted to go into the house and procure a glass of cider, but dared not lose the opportunity.

"Nellie," he said, making as many syllables possible of her name, "do you mind me talking to you a little about yourself?"

"I can't prevent it unless I shut the window, and don't want to do that," she said.

"I wanted to say that—to remind you that my aunt is not going to live for ever," George continued.

"That's not talking about me."

"Ah, but I'm coming to you presently."

"You can stay where you are," she said coldly.

"Miss Yard won't live for ever either," said George, more confidently. "She can't leave you anything, because all her money goes to my beastly cousin Percy. I know she is always promising to leave you money, but she can't do it."

"I am to have her furniture anyhow," said Nellie, removing her hands from the machine, and turning at last towards the window.

"Oh no! I get that. Aunt Sophy's furniture is to go with the rest."

"Is that really true?" asked Nellie, who had good reason to be suspicious of Miss Yard's promises.

"Yes, it all comes to me," said George eagerly. "I shall have the furniture, and the house, and the cash my aunt leaves. The two Chinese vases aunt keeps underneath her bed are worth a thousand pounds; that's a great secret, and I wouldn't tell any one but you. The other things will fetch five hundred pounds. Then I shall have the money that aunt leaves—perhaps another five hundred. Then the property will bring another thousand. So you see, when the old ladies die, I shall have pots of money."

"It will mean more to be you then than it does now," said Nellie darkly.

"Yes, I shall be quite rich. You see, there's no reason why I should work, as aunt is well past seventy."

"But I thought you were going to do something great and wonderful on the railway?"

"That was an idea, but I can't afford to leave the place; that's another secret, Nellie, and I wouldn't tell any one but you. I am so afraid aunt may give away the vases. She's getting a bit queer in her memory too, and she's always giving away things. When I went to see about a job on the railway she sent a lot of my things to a rummage sale. She has given Kezia the bed she sleeps on, and a lot more things; but they all belong to me, and I shall claim them when she dies."

"She has promised me the round table in the parlour," said Nellie.

"Of course I don't mind what she gives you," said George awkwardly.

"Many thanks. Now I must go and put on the kettle for tea. You have told me such a lot about myself."

"Yes, and I've got still more to say. I shall have quite three thousand pounds—and my tastes are very simple. I don't expect much, and I don't ask for much. It's my own belief that I can put up with almost anybody."

"Now I'm in for it!" Nellie murmured, with a scorching glance at the somewhat dejected figure in the garden.

"I have always flattered myself," George rambled on, with the feeling that eloquence had come to him at last, "I can get along anyhow with anyone."

"You mustn't be too complimentary. Flattery alone is not worth much, you know," she said carelessly.

"I mean all that I say, and—and I'm not so idle as they make out, but what's the good of breaking your back when you are coming into thousands? It's only taking a job from some other fellow. I can draw quite well, and paint, and prune roses, and I shall have all my uncle's famous furniture, and the house, and the money—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't keep on talking about me," cried Nellie.

"If you won't let me say anything more, I'll write it all down," said George delightedly. "I have tried, but it's so hard to find a word to rhyme with Nellie, while Nell is just as bad. Now if your name had been Mary, there's dairy, and fairy, and hairy—"

"And wary," laughed the girl, as she ran away from the window.

CHAPTER VII

SCANDAL AND EXPOSURE

Squinting Jack declared there were some things better than a murder. He referred to the mystery which surrounded the unnatural tenants of Black Anchor Farm. They had received a visitor, who was neither honest gentleman, nor respectable lady; but a woman with bold red cheeks. She had driven through Highfield, staring at the inhabitants and smiling at their dwelling places; her driver had inquired of the first gentleman in the place—George being set up above the vicar because he did no work—which of the lanes ahead would be most likely to lead towards Black Anchor; and a few days later this same red-cheeked lady had been driven back through the village, staring and smiling as before. Her clothes where the saddest part about her; for she was dressed in the height of fashion.

So far the Dismal Gibcat had defended the Brocks because every other person was against them; he admired their poverty and loved their humility; he prophesied kindly concerning their future, and sent them superfluous vegetables. The three stages of manhood were at last represented in Highfield parish by righteous men: old Brock, young Sidney, and his middle-aged self. But the vision and visit of the painted lady caused two vacancies. The Dismal Gibcat drew the line at well dressed women.

The Yellow Leaf was consulted because of his knowledge of the world's history, and he gave it as his opinion that the atmosphere of Highfield had been deprived by the nameless visitor of a considerable amount of moral oxygen: in the first place she belonged to a higher class than the Brocks; in the second place she came upon a secret mission, and in the third place she entered a house which it was notorious contained no other woman. She could not be a relation; while, if she had come as a friend, all he could say was heaven preserve Highfield from such friendships.

"Some poor folk do have rich relations, though mine ain't come along yet," said Squinting Jack.

"What would you be saying about me, if I wur to receive a visit from a young lady wi' red-hot painted cheeks?" inquired the Yellow Leaf.

"I should say you wur lucky," replied Squinting Jack.

"Her cheeks wur warmish, I allow; but I wouldn't exactly call 'em painted," observed the Dumpy Philosopher.

"You'm mixing it up wi' doorpost paint. Ask your missus if her cheeks warn't plastered wi' cosmetics," said the Yellow Leaf crossly.

"I'd rather not," retorted the Dumpy Philosopher.

"There be two ways of looking at pretty nigh everything, a gude way and a bad way," urged the Gentle Shepherd. "There be ladies who take a kindly interest in young men, and try to help 'em along a bit. Us knows the Brocks ain't got much money, vor they ha' took the poorest farm in the whole parish. Maybe this lady is helping young Sidney a bit, and her come along to see how he wur doing."

The others listened doubtfully, then turned to hear the oracle's opinion.

"I ha' heard tell o' such ladies, but I ain't seen one of 'em; and I wants to see a thing avore I believes—ay, I wants to see it two or dree times," said the Yellow Leaf. Then he asked, "How old do you say her wur?"

The Dumpy Philosopher fancied the region of twenty; the Gentle Shepherd thought the neighbourhood of forty; while Squinting Jack suggested second childhood.

"You can tell an old lady when you sees one," replied the Yellow Leaf, "and you can tell a young

maid when you sees one; but when you can't tell whether a woman be old or young, then you'm looking at something what ain't respectable. 'Tis old folk what be charitable, and she warn't old; and when young ladies be charitable to young men, their charity ain't far away from home, I reckon. They Brocks ha' no woman to mind vor 'em; 'tis because they don't dare to; 'tis because this lady wouldn't like it, and they can't tell when she may be coming. She'm a jealous lady vor certain, and she won't have no woman to Black Anchor 'cept it be herself. And she couldn't come to the farm if they had another woman, vor her wouldn't have the face to do it."

This was one of the longest, and quite the wisest, of all the opinions stated by the Yellow Leaf. Although it could hardly add to his reputation, it destroyed entirely the credit of the Brocks.

"The old man don't hardly ever come into the village, 'cept it be to church, and he don't pass the time o' day to no one," said the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Now I come to think of it, young Sidney has a funny, uneducated sort o' way of answering," added Squinting Jack.

"They'm mysteries," concluded the Yellow Leaf, "and I hopes to live to see 'em all exposed to the vull light o' day."

Robert passed this scandal to Bessie, and she hurried it across to Kezia, who carried it while still fresh into the parlour, and presented it to both the ladies. Miss Yard expressed no interest, but Mrs. Drake was painfully distressed. She was ageing rapidly, and beginning to lose her memory too; she had forgotten what a very favourable impression the boy had made upon her.

"Are you quite sure she did go to Black Anchor?" Mrs. Drake inquired.

"Yes, Aunt," said George, who was busy designing locomotives. "She asked me the way—at least the driver did. They were both strangers to me."

"Quite a young gal, warn't she, Mr. George?" appealed Kezia.

"Not more than eighteen, I should think. But she wore a wedding ring; I saw it distinctly."

"Yes, mum; I saw her drive past, so bold and staring. They say she's an actress, mum."

"How awful! I suppose she's his wife."

"Well, mum, us all hopes she is."

"The wretched young man! How can he be so wicked!"

"Is anybody wicked?" asked Miss Yard vacantly.

"Never mind, Sophy. It's nobody you care about. Has she been told? You know who I mean."

"Oh no, mum. We wouldn't like to say anything much to her. But of course she mustn't go out with him any more."

"Of course not," said George vigorously.

"I suppose I must break it to her," said Mrs. Drake. "And he sings in the choir too—miserable wretch!"

"I warned you, Aunt," said George.

"He must never come into the house again. Ask Robert to tell him."

"Oh no, mum! We couldn't drink coffee with him now. He seemed such a nice young man too. Robert thought him almost like a gentleman."

"It's often these nice young men who turn out the greatest humbugs," said Mrs. Drake severely.

"What is she saying? I do hope there are no such things in the house," Miss Yard cried anxiously.

Nellie was thoroughly well told. Kezia, Bessie, and Robert were alike eager to play the part of candid friend because they liked her so much; indeed, they somewhat overwhelmed her with candid affection. According to Bessie, the mysterious lady had been overheard imploring Sidney to return with her; while Robert declared the young man had confessed the whole truth. Kezia could invent nothing, so contented herself with moaning over life's tragedies like the chorus of a Greek play. Nellie, being a wise maid, argued with nobody, and smiled at everyone; but her eyes made people sorry for her; and because of their sympathy they brought yet other charges against Sidney.

Nellie waited for choir practice, when she hoped to hear a healthier story. She expressed no gratitude when the heroic George offered to accompany her to church, lest the dragon Sidney should abduct her forcibly and add her to his collection in the cupboard at home. He explained these references according to the best of his historical information, quoting the story of Bluebeard at some length. He was still talking when Nellie escaped from the house, and went to church by herself.

During practice the other members of the choir shrank from Sidney, as if afraid he should make some evil communication; and they practised the hymns, which were of a penitential nature, at him. It was never the custom in Highfield to allow even one sinner to go unpunished.

"At last!" exclaimed Nellie, when they were out of the church and alone together in Dartmoor wind and darkness. "Of course you know what I am going to say?" she added.

"You'm going to say this place be vull o' liars," suggested Sidney.

"Oh no, indeed! Our friendship is quite over, and you are not to come near Windward House again."

"What's it all about, Nellie?"

"You know perfectly well. I'm walking with you this evening just to hear what you have to say."

"You think I'm a bad lot?"

"I'm getting dreadfully certain of it."

"Because you've heard tales. I know you'm the prettiest maid in the world, but if a stranger wur with us he wouldn't believe me if I said so, vor 'tis too dark to see you. You can't be sure of anything you'm told. I'm not the best chap in the world by a long way, but if you could see me 'just as I am,' as we wur singing in church just now, you might fancy I b'ain't quite what folks make me out to be."

Nellie was disturbed by this speech, and still more by the manner in which it was uttered. She had an uncomfortable feeling that Sidney was trying to bring himself down to her level, although her birth and education were undoubtedly superior to his.

"I suppose it's easy to sing like that, especially as you must have had no end of practice," she said crossly.

"Now you'm out o' tune, Nellie."

"Miss Blisland has discovered you have made a fool of her. You asked her to—to—well, you know what, when all the time you are married—"

"Here, I say, steady! I didn't know it had got to that," he broke in sharply.

"Then who was that girl who came to see you?"

"She's not a girl. If you want to know her age, I'll tell you. She is forty-three—and I'm nineteen. Is it likely I'd be married to a lady old enough to be my mother?"

"Who is she?"

"A very kind lady who has done a lot vor me. Her name is Mrs. Stanley."

"Then she is married!"

"Her husband's been very kind to me too."

"And I suppose you are very fond of her?"

"Well, that's natural, considering what she's done vor me."

"You love her!" cried Nellie, getting out of patience with his coldness.

"There's someone I love better."

"And that's yourself," she snapped.

"'Tis the pretty maid I'm going to marry, and that's you."

"If you dare to say such a thing again," gasped Nellie, "I'll—I'll run away."

"You can run t'other end of the world, but I shall come and fetch ye back," declared the bold youth.

"What's to prevent me from marrying someone else?"

"Yourself, I fancy."

"But I never did like you much, and now I hate you," she said, troubled again by his accent, which recalled her own superior education.

"If you won't hate me any more than what you do now, I shan't grumble," replied the confident young man. Then he asked gently, "Won't you come out Sunday afternoon?"

"No, I will not."

"I could tell you a tale what might make us sweethearts again," he continued.

"I expect there is hardly any sort of tale that you don't know. But why don't you?"

"I'm going to make you believe in me and trust me."

"Tell that to Mrs. Stanley—I'm sure she's a widow."

"I trust her, and she knows it. I told her about you, and she wanted me to promise not to marry till I'm twenty-five."

"By then, I suppose, she'll have become sick and tired of you," said Nellie, who was rapidly forming Highfield opinions about Mrs. Stanley.

"She doesn't mind who I marry—"

"How perfectly unselfish!"

"So long as 'tis the right sort o' maid."

"I hope you'll find her. Goodnight; I'm going now," said Nellie, standing beside the garden-gate of Windward House. Then she added rather faintly, "I'm sorry you ever came to Highfield."

Sidney struck a match and, making a lantern of his hands, turned the light upon her face.

"Oh, Nellie darling! There's a tear upon your cheek!"

"Don't be rude and wicked," she murmured, searching for the gate handle, which she generally found quite easily.

"The beautifullest tear from the loveliest eye in the world!"

"What's wrong with the other eye?" she asked trying to laugh.

"It's still more lovely. Nellie, you are—just Nellie, and that means everything. You shall trust me, and I'll make you love me, if I have to work a thousand times harder than I do on the farm."

"Will you have nothing more to do with Mrs. Stanley?"

"I can't do that."

"You mean she won't give you up!"

"She's the best and kindest lady in the world. But you come first, and that's where you'll be always."

"I must be second too. It's no good, Sidney. I'm not going to be talked about and laughed at—no girl can stand it. Besides, Mrs. Drake has forbidden me to speak to you, and my poor mistress would go crazy if she knew what has happened. I have a good home, and I must think of my future. Leave me alone, please, and let me forget you. But I must give up the choir and sit at the bottom of the church, for I—I can't sing any more."

"Is that you, Nellie?" called Kezia; and the faithful band of protectors and consolers appeared, putting the false Sidney to flight.

George was so pleased when Nellie did not go out upon Sunday afternoon, that he presented her with a picture of his latest locomotive, very handsomely designed, but without cylinders. He began about this time to take an interest in his personal appearance, with the result that Mrs. Drake, who was not at all prejudiced in his favour, remarked to Kezia that Mr. George was undoubtedly the best looking man in the place, which, after all, was not much of a compliment. Kezia, who was a Drake in everything but surname, and contemplated assuming that to supply her own deficiency, agreed, and went on to mention Mr. George was regarded as the perfect pattern of an English gentleman by Highfield, where all geese were swans.

Mrs. Drake was simple enough to believe George was preparing himself for the duties of station-master, and he more than suggested this was indeed the case; having the impudence to hint at negotiations for various stations where it would be his business to receive all manner of royalties; but the letters he received were of such a confidential nature that he was not at liberty to show them to his aunt. He convinced her they were all typewritten, and this was quite sufficient for his purpose, because the old-fashioned woman supposed letters written by machinery could emanate only from departments under the immediate control of Ministers of State.

The cold-blooded George had drawn up a programme of his career under such items as Courtship of Nellie, Annihilation of Sidney, Conciliation of Aunt, Guarding of the Furniture, Departure of Aunt Sophy, Contract with Nellie, Departure of Aunt, Marriage and Retirement. With fine prophetic instinct a date was appended to each one of these events: Miss Yard had but a single year of life remaining, while three more years were allotted to Mrs. Drake. So far the programme was well ahead of time, owing to the visit of Mrs. Stanley.

The careful mind of George was troubled concerning his forthcoming marriage and subsequent retirement. He asked himself frequently whether it could be prudent to enter into a matrimonial alliance with Nellie, or indeed with any girl; was a wife preferable on the whole to a housekeeper? George sought the opinion of the Dismal Gibcat, who replied that the house presided over by a wife was bound to be respectable, while the house ruled by spinster or widow was not; besides, a housekeeper could not be scowled at with impunity, whereas a wife might easily be taught all the accomplishments of her husband: that was to say, if the husband found it necessary to slander another man, or to deprive some woman of her character, the partner of his joys and sorrows would slander these persons too; whereas a housekeeper might find it her duty to defend them.

Then George consulted the Yellow Leaf, who was of the decidedly robust opinion that men and women should not only marry as early as possible, but should keep on doing it as often as the law allowed; and even if they did offend against the law sometimes it was better to err upon the right

side. He alluded to his own brilliant example of marrying at eighteen, with the happy result that the entire population of the village were more or less related to him; and he went on to declare he had already appointed a successor to his present wife, who had been bedridden for some years.

Although George had some doubts remaining, he arrived sorrowfully at the conclusion that it would be his duty to make Nellie happy, if the ladies of Windward House should respect his programme and depart from the world according to scheduled time. The question of his retirement remained the only point to be disposed of. Should he conclude a life of usefulness as the most respected parishioner of Highfield, or favour a wider circle? Certainly it would be more agreeable to retire in a village, where respect came automatically, than to run the risk of being dishonoured in some town, where standing at corners or musing beside lamp posts might be wrongly construed as revealing instability of character.

It might, he feared, become necessary to commence his retirement within the next few months, for Mrs. Drake was clearly in a restless frame of mind, and the impending failure of his negotiations with the railway company might induce her to issue the expulsion order which Percy would be called upon to execute. In such case George decided his health would be forced to suffer a breakdown, although it might be possible, now Mrs. Drake's powers were growing defective, to assure her his career upon the railway was finished; but, unfortunately, owing to his inability to serve full time, he enjoyed no pension.

A wet day assisted George in making a discovery which, although not altering his programme, seemed to promise an extension of the indefinite time limit.

"I want to go to the sea. Aunt Sophy worries so about her friends, and I can't make her believe she hasn't got any. She will forget all about them if we go away. When are you going to your station?" asked Mrs. Drake, while Miss Yard looked up plaintively and wanted to know what she had done now.

"Oh, nothing. I'm telling George we are going to the seaside directly he is ready to leave."

"I think you had better not wait," said George warningly.

"You promised to go this month," his aunt said fretfully.

"Changes have occurred, with the result that I have now broken off the negotiations."

"Then I have done with you!"

"I'm so glad somebody else has broken something," said Miss Yard happily.

George left the room, and returned presently with an armful of plans and diagrams.

"I knew they existed, and at last I have found them," he remarked triumphantly.

"Take away your rubbish!" said Mrs. Drake.

"My uncle made these plans. These diagrams were the solace of his closing years," said George; and directly he had spoken his aunt's face softened, and she fumbled for her spectacles.

"My dear uncle charged me to carry out the work if he should not live to complete it. These are his plans for a railway to link up the scattered parishes of this moorland region. It is my earnest hope," said George, "that I may be permitted to undertake the work which is to give Dartmoor a railway and Highfield a station."

"I had forgotten all about it," Mrs. Drake murmured.

"I did not forget," said George reprovingly. "I should have acted long ago, if I could have found these precious plans. Here is the prospectus in dear uncle's writing. He shows how simple and inexpensive it would be to build a railway across the Dartmoor, without a single viaduct, tunnel, embankment, or cutting. It was his intention to make Highfield Station a terminus, as he could not see his way to surmount the steep drop into the valley without going to considerable expense. Now you can understand why it is no longer my intention to occupy the poorly paid position of station-master. I aim at higher things. I mean to be a railway magnate."

"What can you do?" asked Mrs. Drake, much impressed by those relics of her husband.

"I shall communicate with my railway friends; I shall float a company, and appoint a Board of Directors; I shall pass a Bill through Parliament."

"Whatever is George doing?" inquired Miss Yard.

"Making a railway," replied her sister.

"I wish I could do something half as useful," sighed Miss Yard.

George borrowed five pounds for postage stamps, converted his bedroom into an office, and fed the village with false news which percolated into the ears of Mrs. Drake by means of Robert the dripping tap and Kezia the filter. George had anticipated this, and, knowing the truthful ways of the village, was not greatly astonished when Robert informed him in confidence how engineers had already been seen taking the level of the Dartmoor heights; while the parishioners had sworn to tear up the railway as fast as it was made, unless they received ample compensation for this

cynical infringement of their rights.

What he had not anticipated was the action taken by his aunt. Left to herself she would have remained credulous to the end; but Kezia declared Mr. George was not spending his days letter writing; while Bessie stated the postmistress had told her Mr. George had bought no stamps lately.

"I have looked into his room and seen him writing," said Mrs. Drake despairingly.

"He wur doing poetry, mum," said Kezia sadly.

"Oh, I'm sure he's not so bad as that," cried the lady.

"I don't want to say too much, mum, and I ain't going to say anything against Mr. George, whom you might call a member of the family," continued Kezia in the voice of doom, "but I saw a lot of the paper he had wrote some of his poetry on."

"I saw it too, mum," chimed in Bessie.

"And, mum, at the end of the first line wur six kisses."

"Crosses, mum," exclaimed Bessie, as an expert in this form of literature.

"And the second line—oh, mum, I don't know as how I can say it."

"Shall I do it vor ye?" asked Bessie eagerly.

"No, Bess, I'll do it. He said, mum, his heart wur all jelly."

"Think of that, mum!" gasped Bessie.

"Oh no! Not jelly again. We had yesterday," cried Miss Yard, who liked to be consulted concerning the bill of fare.

"I do hope the poor creature isn't going off his head," said Mrs. Drake.

"Don't you see, mum, that word wur meant to sound like the word at the end of the first line what he wrote in crosses. And you know, mum, there's someone in this house whose name do have the same sort of sound as jelly."

"Ah, but she b'ain't so soft," added Bessie. "And he wrote she was so bewitching, drinking cocoa in the kitchen. That was a rhyme, mum."

"I have heard quite enough," said Mrs. Drake wearily. "I wish to goodness I had never seen the fellow," she murmured.

The following week she visited the Captain's grave, staying longer than usual, and scribbling industriously on scraps of paper the whole evening. Next day the exodus took place, Kezia and Nellie accompanying the ladies to the seaside, while George remained in solitary possession. As any pretence of industry was no longer necessary, he settled down to enjoy a honeymoon with indolence, until a letter arrived to waken him completely.

It appeared that Mrs. Drake had written to Percy, informing him of all George had said and not done; also asking for information about the floating of companies and the construction of railways, as, she explained, George had decided to build one across Dartmoor, and was inviting Miss Yard and herself to become debenture holders.

Percy's answer had crushed the poor lady entirely. He explained that, as George of course was perfectly well aware, to obtain a position as station-master it would be necessary to enter the service of the railway company as a clerk, and work upwards gradually. As for building a railway, that was not the recreation of a single individual, but a superhuman undertaking, which in the first place would require to be discussed by some of the greatest financial magnates upon earth for half a century—at least such was his own impression—before Parliament could even be approached; and then another half century would probably be demanded for the arrangement of preliminary details; and after that a new generation would have to begin the work all over again. While the suggestion of a railway across Dartmoor could appeal only to a Parliament with a sense of humour.

Accordingly Mrs. Drake disowned her nephew. She ordered him to depart from Highfield, declaring also her intention of not returning to Windward House while he remained there. For his maintenance she was prepared to allow the sum of ten shillings weekly so long as she might live. Should he delay in taking his departure, Percy would instruct some gentleman learned in the law to hasten the eviction. And if he took anything in the house away with him, he would thereby forfeit all benefits under her will.

This letter made the world seem cold to George, who strongly suspected Percy had dictated the punitory clauses. It was clear that his reign as first gentleman of Highfield was over. Not being of that faint-hearted disposition which abdicates without a struggle, George wrote a touching letter which was also, he considered, a complete vindication of his conduct; for, as Mrs. Drake must have been aware, he had suffered from his spine since childhood.

Then he packed his belongings and travelled an hour's journey into the next parish, where he arranged with the landlord of a wayside inn, which bore the hospitable title of "Drink and be

Thankful," to accommodate him with board and lodging upon especially reduced terms; and from this alcoholic address he despatched a daily apology for his existence to Mrs. Drake, each document more poignant than the one preceding it. His aunt sent a cheque for a quarter's allowance, which George cashed gratefully; but she did not write. That business was entrusted to Percy, who sent an ultimatum, giving George forty-eight hours to retire from the "Drink and be Thankful," and warning him that, if at any future time he should be discovered within twenty miles of Highfield village without obtaining a permit, his prospects would be marred considerably.

George pronounced a malediction against Percy and all his tomatoes. Then, as compliance seemed necessary—for he was terribly afraid his aunt might destroy her will—he decided to make a farewell visit to Highfield, in order that he might muse amid the scenes of his former slothfulness, and inform the villagers he was going away to oppose on their behalf the promoters of the Dartmoor Railway Company.

George was not surprised to discover the door of Windward House standing open, as he supposed Bessie would be cleaning; but he was considerably astonished to behold Miss Yard nodding in the parlour, with Nellie on her knees hard by extracting the indifferent lady from a web of wool which, with amazing thoroughness, she had wound about herself. George made a sign to the girl not to disturb her mistress, but to follow him as soon as possible into the garden.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked, hastily, adding that he was not at all sorry to see her.

"Miss Sophy was so miserable I had to bring her back. When we went away she thought she was going back to her old home; and then, when she couldn't recognise anybody she kept on saying she was forsaken. She would stop people in the street and ask them where she lived, and if they didn't remember her. As she got worse every day I had to bring her back. Aren't you living here now?" asked Nellie.

"No," said George sadly. "You gave me no encouragement."

"So you waited until I was out of the house, and then you ran away!"

"My aunt and I have now agreed to differ. How did you leave her?" asked George pompously.

"Oh, very well. In fact, Kezia said she had not seen her in such good health for years."

"Miss Yard is breaking up, I think," said George, thinking of his programme, which was suffering sadly from interference.

"Indeed she's not. She is just mazed after the journey, as they say about here. Then you are really not going to live here again?"

"Not for the present. But I shall write to you, Nellie, at least once a week, and I shall think of you nearly every day."

"Thank you. Are you going to turn blacksmith?"

"Why do you ask a ridiculous question?"

"We have been playing at rhymes lately; and the only rhyme I can find for your name is forge."

"Nellie," said George heavily, "it is frivolous conduct like this which breaks a man up completely."

"I'll be serious then. When are you coming back?"

"Not until the place becomes my own. My aunt has injured me; she has upset all my plans. I do not intend to speak to her again until she has asked for my forgiveness."

"There goes the gate!" cried Nellie. "It's sure to be Bessie. If you don't want to be seen here—run!" she laughed.

"I do not stir for Elizabeth Mudge."

"Or budge for any man," sang teasing Nellie. Then her note changed, for the postmistress appeared from behind the rhododendrons.

"Why, it's Mrs. Cann! And she's got a telegram!"

"Vor you, Miss Blisland. Very bad news, miss. Terrible news. But she wur an old lady, and 'tis better to be took avore you knows where you be than to see it coming. I hopes and prays as how I'll be took the like way—selling a penny stamp, or licking a label, or doing some poor soul a gude turn by giving her an old-age pension."

She went rambling on, while Nellie tore open the telegram and read, "Mistress passed away in her sleep. Kezia."

She shivered slightly, then handed it to George.

"Cruel bad news vor you, sir, especially as we'm all so sorry to hear you be a leaving us," said the postmistress.

"I had meant to go away," replied the self-sacrificing and sorrowful reprobate. "But I'm afraid I shall have to change my plans now."

CHAPTER VIII

A TANGLED INHERITANCE

George formally took over Windward House, with the exception of his aunt's bedroom, the door of which was locked. Bessie admitted she held the key, but was not going to give it up to anybody except Kezia. In the meantime, Miss Yard wandered about the house, declaring that Maria had always been able to look after herself, scolding Nellie for wearing black, "and making yourself look so small I can't see you," driving away Bessie by waving her hands and calling "Shoo!" but delighted with George because he looked bright and cheerful.

"Maria has been making up the past again," she said plaintively. "She told me I was good for nothing, and she wouldn't have me here any longer. She keeps all my friends away from me—and now she has hidden my money."

"We'll look for it," said Nellie, glad of the excuse to lure her back into the parlour. "I expect it is hidden in one of the usual places—inside the clock, or on top of the bookcase."

"It's no good looking there, Nellie. I have searched the whole house—and my cheque-book has gone too. My sister takes everything away from me."

A pleasant quarter of an hour was spent in searching for the missing bag of money, which had been secreted with more than usual ingenuity. These games of hide-and-seek were of daily occurrence, as Miss Yard would hide away everything she possessed, and then accuse the others of robbery by violence. On this occasion the little bag containing her spare cash had been deposited behind the register; George made the discovery after noticing a heap of soot upon the fender; and Miss Yard was more delighted with him than ever.

"Percy always does the right thing," she declared. "He wrote to that horrid man who said he was going to come and live here. Nellie, remind me tomorrow to pay off a mortgage on his railway."

"Percy grows tomatoes, Aunt. I am George, and I'm here to look after you," explained that gentleman uncomfortably.

"How silly people are!" said Miss Yard. "Of course it's tomatoes, and not railways. I don't know why they talk about railways, but I suppose it's because Nellie and I missed a train the other day. Everybody mixes up George and Percy, but one is quite as good as the other. One quality only, and that's the best. Now I wonder where I read that."

Then she opened the canvas bag and gave George ten shillings because he was so clever; and she gave a sovereign to Nellie because she was so good; but she refused to give Bessie a present, as she felt positive that young woman had conspired with Mrs. Drake to hide away her money.

"I must write to Maria and tell I've found it, and ask her to forget the past like I do and begin all over again," she said, shuffling to her writing table, where nearly every day she wrote letters which Nellie subsequently destroyed.

"Don't try to make her understand," said this young lady to George. "I have told her Mrs. Drake is dead, and she quite realised it, but a minute later had forgotten all about it. It's no use worrying her. She has no memory, and hardly any mind, left; but she is perfectly healthy and enjoys life thoroughly. Really, it isn't such a bad state to be in after all."

George rather looked forward to the funeral, as he meant to enjoy a settlement with Percy, who arrived only just in time to join the others in the churchyard. Mrs. Drake's bedroom had been opened the day before: George discovered the will, while Kezia made off with the box which had always stood upon the chest of drawers.

After the ceremony they returned to Windward House. Presently George and Percy went into the garden to discuss business, assuming a brotherly affection, although George felt sure Percy entertained nothing but evil thoughts concerning him.

"That was rather a nasty letter you wrote to me, old chap—about clearing out of the place, you know," he began reproachfully.

"Aunt asked me to write it, and of course I had to. I don't want to rub it in, George, but you deceived the old lady badly, and you've been a frightful slacker," replied Percy.

"If it comes to deceit, I expect you put your best tomatoes on top of the basket," said George, opening a line of attack which made Percy cough uneasily, before he attempted to point out the difference between deceiving hostile tradesmen and affectionate relatives. "What do you propose doing?" he asked.

"This is my home," replied George firmly. "Somebody must be here to look after Aunt Sophy, keep up the property, and look after the servants."

"I suppose the place belongs to Aunt Sophy now, and in that case it will come to me," said Percy sternly.

"Grab it all, old chap!" exclaimed George mockingly.

"It's like this," said Percy sharply. "I'm one of the trustees of the Yard estate, and Hunter is the other. I dare say you have heard the aunts mention Hunter; he's a partner in Martin and Cross, the family solicitors. I needn't go into the details of Mr. Yard's will, but of course you know Aunt Maria enjoyed only a life interest in her share. Aunt Sophy now inherits the lot, but she can't touch the capital, all of which comes to me at her death. That's the position."

"And here's mine! Oblige me by running your eye over this, my dear chap," invited George, producing his aunt's will.

Percy did so, frowning considerably, and when he had finished tried to mutter a few words of congratulation.

"Not so bad," chuckled George. "The whole place is mine, and everything in it. Aunt Sophy is now my tenant."

"There's no mention of the house," objected Percy.

"Read this—'all I die possessed of.' The property belonged to aunt; left her by my uncle."

"But she bought the ground and built the house," cried Percy.

"Out of income," said the triumphant George.

"I suppose you'll be sending this to Martin and Cross?"

"It goes this evening by registered post. Aunt Sophy won't leave Highfield. She will be enjoying the use of my house and my furniture. In return she can give me board and pocket-money. Quite a decent scheme, old chap. Everybody satisfied! No grumblers!"

"I didn't know anything about this will," muttered Percy.

"You can't object to my staying here now—you can't order me out, my dear old chap. Nice little property, isn't it?" cried George riotously.

Percy had not much more to say, especially as he seemed in a hurry to catch a train which would carry him towards London and Mr. Hunter's office. Immediately he had departed, Kezia approached and asked, "Can I speak to you vor a minute, please?"

"Certainly," replied the prosperous George, following her into the dining room, where Bessie towered beside the table upon which reposed the sandalwood box taken from the late mistress's bedroom. George could not help noticing what a quantity of waste paper appeared to be lying about.

"This wur lying on the top," explained Kezia, presenting a slip upon which was written in his late aunt's handwriting, "This box is the property of Kezia, who has served me faithfully since her childhood."

"I ha' been wi' her forty years, and I don't know how I shall get along without her. I feels as though she can't be gone vor ever, and will soon be coming back again maybe," Kezia continued.

"She knows what be going on. She can see me, and you, and Mr. George, and she can tell what he'm thinking of," added Bessie.

"Went just like the Captain, all to once and no fuss. She said to me many a time, 'I wants to go like him, Kezia, nice and quick.' So she did, poor dear! Lay down, and went to sleep, and never woke up again this side Jordan. And the last thing she said wur, 'Kezia, I ain't felt so well as I be feeling now vor I can't tell ye how long.'"

"They'm always like that," said Bessie.

"What are all these papers?" asked George.

"These be mine," said Kezia, taking one bundle. "Those belong to Bess. This one is vor Miss Sophy. And this one is vor Nellie."

"Wasn't there one vor Mr. Percy?" inquired Bessie.

"Here's something on the floor," said George. He picked up the scrap of paper and read, "I should like Percy to have something to remember me by. He can take the pair of silver candlesticks given me by his mother as a wedding present."

"He can't have them," said Bessie, looking across at Kezia.

"No, that he can't," said Kezia, staring rather uneasily at Bessie.

"What are all these papers?" George demanded, feeling in his pocket, to make sure that the will was safe.

"Will ye please to read 'em?" replied Kezia, extending her bundle.

George opened the first and read, "I want Kezia to have all the furniture in her bedroom, also six dining room chairs, my sofa, and the largest bookcase." The second paper included, for Kezia's benefit, much of the furniture in the parlour, together with "the pair of silver candlesticks given me by Louisa as a wedding present." The third paper mentioned most of the articles in Mrs. Drake's bedroom, with the grandfather clock, the Chinese vases, "and anything else Mr. George

does not want." And so the lists ran on, until Kezia had been left everything in the house several times over.

Then Bessie proffered her bundle with a sorrowful smile. First of all she was to have the bed she had once slept on, then all the furniture in her bedroom, much of that in the parlour, half of that in the dining room, with "the pair of silver candlesticks given me by Louisa as a wedding present," most of the ornaments including the Chinese vases, the Egyptian mummy, and "any other little thing Mr. George does not care about."

Nellie was to have the round table in the parlour, which had been already bestowed upon both Kezia and Bessie. While Sophy was requested to take the musical box and "the pair of silver candlesticks given me as a wedding present by Louisa."

"This is a nice business!" George muttered.

"Seems to be rather a lot of mixing up, don't it!" said Bessie.

"I can see what has happened," George continued. "Poor old aunt never had much of a memory, and, when she put away one of these papers in the box, she forgot about the others. Some of them were written when I was a child—the ink is beginning to fade—while others are quite recent."

"She would write 'em in the evening. I've seen her doing it. And when she went into her bedroom, she would put it into the box quick and lock it up. She wouldn't let no one touch that box," said Kezia.

"You see she wanted to leave you something to remember her by, and she never looked into the box to see what she had written."

"I suppose we mustn't take the things now?" asked Bessie hurriedly.

"Nothing wur to be touched, Bess, while Miss Sophy lived. Even Mr. George warn't to touch anything," said Kezia with unnecessary irony; since, according to these scraps of paper, George had nothing to take.

"I have the will which was made soon after I came to live with my uncle and aunt. There is no mention of Miss Yard," said George firmly.

"Mrs. Drake wrote a paper and gave it to Miss Sophy. And Miss Sophy wrote a paper and gave it to Mrs. Drake. Here it is!" exclaimed Kezia, diving to the bottom of the box, which contained brooches and other trinkets dropped in from time to time. "You see, Mr. George,' If I die before Maria, all my furniture is to belong to her.' And 'tis signed Sophy Yard."

"What did my aunt write on her paper?" cried George, as a horrible thought flashed across his mind.

"Just the same. If she died avore Miss Sophy, everything she possessed wur to belong to her."

"And she has died before Aunt Sophy after all," George muttered.

"Why, so she has! I never thought of that avore," said Bessie.

George refused to discuss the matter further, pointing out that nothing could be done during Miss Yard's lifetime, although he had no intention of remaining inactive until then. Escaping into a quiet place, he sought to find a solution of the problem thus suddenly presented to him. By a properly attested will the entire furniture of Windward House had been left to him; this furniture had been left also to Miss Yard by a rough kind of agreement; the same furniture had been bestowed upon Kezia by means of a number of scraps of paper which were certainly not legal documents; while the greater part of the furniture had been also bequeathed to Bessie by means of similar scraps of paper. The conclusion arrived at by George was that the will must prevail over all other documents, although it was difficult to see how he could prevent pilfering; and his final wise decision was to preserve silence concerning these scraps of paper in all his subsequent dealings with Messrs. Martin and Cross and Mr. Percy Taverner.

"I feel sure Kezia and Bessie cannot claim anything, but I'm afraid the lawyers may say the will is cancelled by the document given to Aunt Sophy," George muttered. "But then they needn't know anything about it. All the business will be done through the trustees and myself. They don't know, and I shan't tell them. I'd better strike up a friendship with Percy; I'll conciliate him; I'll sacrifice the pair of silver candlesticks."

He went home, sealed the will in an envelope, and addressed it to Messrs. Martin and Cross. Then wrote to Percy, explaining his discovery of a scrap of paper written by their late aunt, expressing a wish that the candlesticks should be given to him upon her death. "Of course they are mine really," he wrote, "but I feel that I ought to respect her wishes, especially as the candlesticks were given her as a wedding present by your mother."

Kezia and Bessie remained chattering vigorously after George departed from them, but neither ventured to speak upon the subject which threatened to convert friendship into rivalry. It was true, owing to an unfortunate slip of the tongue, Bessie mentioned how grand the silver candlesticks would look upon her mantelpiece; but Kezia merely replied that Mrs. Drake had been very generous to Mr. George in leaving him a will as a remembrance of her, although she presently administered a rebuke by speaking about her future retirement, when she looked

forward to reading her books of religious instruction by the light of wax candles set in the candlesticks aforesaid. To which Bessie replied somewhat feebly they wouldn't be of any use to Miss Yard because she used a reading lamp. She could not trust herself to say more, but, when gathering up her share of the testamentary documents preparatory to departure, another idea occurred, and she asked, "Who do the house belong to?"

"Mrs. Drake said to me a lot of times it wur to go to Miss Sophy."

"Who gets it when she dies?"

"I don't know. If nobody else wants it, I don't mind taking it," said Kezia.

"Mr. George is sure to ask vor it," said Bessie, moving slowly towards the door.

"Well, he won't get it," replied Kezia sharply.

Bessie crossed the road and welcomed Robert from the bakery with the announcement that a domestic crisis was impending. Robert studied the documents, and agreed with his wife they would certainly be called upon to fight for their rights. Then he asked for information concerning George, and Bessie replied, "He ain't to get nothing."

"Didn't Mrs. Drake leave 'en a will?" questioned the cautious Robert.

"Kezia ses it ain't really a will. It's a codicil, and that means he gets nothing 'cept the little bit o' money in the bank, and he'll have to pay out all that vor the funeral expenses. Miss Sophy gets the house, and me and Kezia has the furniture."

"Then Mr. George is ruined!" exclaimed Robert.

"Best thing what could happen to 'en," said Bessie.

Robert had his tea, then went out into the village to report. Since the days when he had first gazed upward, fascinated by the altitude of Bessie's windswept features, he had acted as an intermediary between Windward House and the general public, bringing the scandal, fresh and greasy as his own doughnuts; and bearing to the village green—which was not so green as it sounded, for the signpost represented a rising sun—valuable items of information regarding Mrs. Drake's most recent act of charity, or Miss Yard's latest partition of a tea service. On this occasion he brought news which was to set all the tongues wagging: George Drake, the most respected man in Highfield, the sole gentleman, the fearless idler, was now a homeless fellow, a destitute person, without a scrap of inheritance he could call his own. The Drake whom they had honoured as a swan was hardly worth the price of a goose.

A gentleman was not defined by the worthies of Highfield as a man of good birth, but as one who declined all labour. George had fulfilled this definition admirably. An idler, it was argued, possessed ample means, and for that cause he was respected. Highfield required nothing further of him, except that he should wear decent clothing and not be seen with his coat off, digging potatoes or nailing two pieces of board together; even the picking of peas was a dangerous pastime, while mowing the lawn would have meant an irremediable loss of caste. It could honestly be said of George that he had done nothing disgraceful; he had kept his hands clean; he was far more of a gentleman than his uncle had been. And now he was exposed as a common impostor who had been wearing an order of chivalry to which he was not entitled.

"I always thought," said the Wallower in Wealth, who, above all men, had respected George, "that when Mrs. Drake died he would have her money."

Everybody in the place had thought the same; and were now to realise that George had bitterly deceived them.

"He don't get nothing," declared Robert. "The furniture comes to Bessie, and the house goes to Miss Yard."

"What do old Kezia get?" inquired a charitable voice.

"What me and Bessie like to give her," replied Robert.

George went to sleep that night sure of his position as the most popular man in Highfield parish; for everybody knew how the odious scheme of a Dartmoor railway had been brought to nothing owing to his strenuous opposition. Nor did he suppose, upon going into the village the following morning, that his glory had departed. He was therefore unpleasantly surprised to be greeted by nodding of heads, and no longer by hands uplifted to the forehead. Highfield nodded to equals, and touched hats to superiors. George did not like the omen.

The Yellow Leaf was enjoying a large slice of bread upon which butter, cream, and jam were piled in lavish quantities; and when George inquired after Mrs. Y. Leaf, he received the answer, spoken with some asperity:

"Her be tedious this morning. Ses her be going quick, and I be to hurry after; but I tells she I b'ain't agoing to hurry."

"Would you like to buy my giant tortoise? I'll sell him for five shillings," George continued.

"What would I do wi' a tor-toys?" asked the Yellow Leaf with great deliberation.

"It's a nice friendly animal," explained George.

"Would he make gude eating?" asked the Yellow Leaf.

"Might be a bit tough, but he'd make splendid soup," said George.

"I ha' no craving vor gigantic tor-toyses, thankye. And if I did crave vor 'en, how be I to know he'm yours to sell?"

"Of course it's mine. Everything belongs to me," said George sharply.

"Then you have been told lies."

"I ha' heard another tale."

"I hears plenty o' they. Don't ye ever think o' driving that old toat of a tor-toys into my garden, vor if you does I'll kick 'en." And with these words the Yellow Leaf withdrew into his cottage, munching severely at his bread and jam.

Bessie has been talking, thought George, as he went along the road, to pause beside a potato patch where Squinting Jack was whistling as he worked. He looked up and nodded, then went on digging, while George drew near and remarked:

"I'm selling off the animals."

"Sorry I b'ain't a butcher, sir," said Squinting Jack.

"I've got a very good half Persian cat for sale at two shillings," George continued.

"How much would ye charge vor the whole cat?" asked Squinting Jack.

"I mean it's part Persian."

"Which part?" asked the humourist.

George laughed somewhat feebly, while Squinting Jack continued, "I've got a whole English cat what you can have vor nothing."

By this time George had discovered he was not so well liked as formerly, and the reason was not far to seek: Kezia and Bessie were advertising their own triumph and trumpeting his misfortunes. George went a long walk, climbed a steep hill, and sat upon the summit, trying to work out a plan of campaign which might enable him to obtain the victory over all his enemies.

"Why not shift the responsibility?" he muttered at length. "That's the plan right enough—shift it on to Percy. He wants to run the whole show—why not let him?"

George meditated yet more deeply, rubbing his head which was nothing like so dense as his relations had supposed. "Percy means to do me, so it's my duty to do him. When you want to catch anything you set a trap. And now I've got it!" George shouted exultantly. "I'll tempt Percy with the furniture—I'll get him to buy it! Then I shall have the cash, while he can settle with Kezia and Bessie, and all the rest of the beastly, selfish, money grabbing crowd."

CHAPTER IX

A SUBTLE SINNER'S SUCCESS

Mr. Hunter of Messrs. Martin and Cross sent George a very civil letter, acknowledging the will and announcing that the papers necessary for obtaining probate would be prepared in due course. As a valuation of the furniture would be required, he proposed to send down the man usually employed by his firm for that purpose, his knowledge being extensive and his fee moderate.

One other point Mr. Hunter wished to refer to. He had gathered, from an interview with Mr. Percy Taverner, that Miss Yard's mental condition left something to be desired: although in several respects a person competent to do business, she might be described as susceptible to the influence of a superior intelligence, and could therefore be prevailed upon to act in a manner contrary to her interests: she would—to put the matter plainly—sign a cheque if ordered by some other person to do so.

Mr. Hunter understood further that Miss Yard positively declined to leave Highfield House, which was now Mr. Drake's property by virtue of the phrase "all that I die possessed of" contained in the codicil to the will of Mrs. Drake deceased; and at her age it might perhaps be inadvisable to press her. The position was somewhat a delicate one, as he understood Mr. Drake's financial position was not possibly quite so strong as could be wished; and he might be desirous of selling the property. Or, on the other hand, he might be inclined to allow Miss Yard the use of the premises upon the undertaking that she provided him with board and lodging, and paid a peppercorn rent.

Both Mr. Percy Taverner and himself, in their joint capacity as trustees of the Yard estate, agreed

that in such case it would be absolutely necessary to appoint some trustworthy person as the manager of Miss Yard's affairs, such person to be given the charge of the lady's cheque-book, and to give an account of all moneys spent. Mr. Taverner had recommended for this purpose Miss Nellie Blisland, whom he believed to be a thoroughly trustworthy young person and one, moreover, not only firmly attached to Miss Yard, but highly favoured by the lady herself.

"More of Percy's dirty little ways," was George's comment. "He thinks I shall wheedle money out of Aunt Sophy like he does himself. I'm quite satisfied that Nellie should be appointed; but I should like to be told for certain that he didn't squeeze her hand when he said good-bye. I saw him looking sideways at her anyhow. Now for the trap—and I don't care which of 'em tumbles into it."

He wrote to Mr. Hunter, quite agreeing with all that gentleman had said. It was unfortunately true that his financial condition was somewhat embarrassed at the moment, while his physical state did not encourage him to hope for any considerable increase of income likely to accrue from his professional duties of civil engineer. The position, as Mr. Hunter had admitted, was somewhat delicate, since Miss Yard would be living in his house, enjoying the use of his furniture; and would probably continue to do so until her death, by which time a great quantity of domestic utensils would have been destroyed, much valuable crockery broken, while the whole of the furniture would have suffered deterioration owing to wear and tear; furthermore he would have no control over the servants, who might conceivably indulge in a certain amount of pilfering—indeed a few articles had already unaccountably disappeared.

He could not, of course, allow Miss Yard, whom he regarded with feelings of utmost affection, to be disturbed, or even to be troubled by any suggestion that her tenancy of Windward House should be brought to a close; but it was perhaps a pity Mr. Hunter had not suggested that Miss Yard should purchase the furniture—with the exception of a few articles he would wish to retain because of their sentimental value—for the sum which might be quoted by the professional valuer. George did not press the point in the least, but he would remind Mr. Hunter, under such an arrangement, Mr. Percy Taverner might very likely benefit.

The appointment of Miss Nellie Blisland as custodian of Miss Yard's bank account met with his entire approval. He had watched this young lady carefully, and could assure Mr. Hunter that Miss Yard's interests would be perfectly safe in her hands.

As Mr. Hunter prowled and sniffed through these elegant sentences, he discovered nothing of a suspicious nature. On the contrary, Mr. George Drake appeared to him a very obvious gentleman indeed. He wrote to Percy, requesting another interview, and when the tomato merchant arrived Mr. Hunter spread George's letter before him and asked him what he thought about it.

"Nothing until I've heard your opinion," replied the cautious Percy.

"You have the advantage of knowing Mr. Drake."

"It's no advantage," declared Percy.

"What sort of a man is he?" asked Mr. Hunter.

"As this is a privileged communication, he's the most useless, good-for-nothing chap in the country," replied Percy; and he went on to narrate the tragical history of his cousin's deception and indolence.

"Then he is, in your opinion, unscrupulous?"

"That's right. If he wants Miss Yard to buy the furniture, it's because he hopes to benefit by it."

"Naturally," said the lawyer. "There's nothing unscrupulous in that. Under the will of Mrs. Drake he becomes possessed of a certain amount of property; and, being a poor man, he is anxious to convert this property, or a portion of it, into cash. There is apparently no opening for fraud but, should one exist, you may be quite sure I shall discover it in the course of negotiations."

"What do you advise?" asked Percy.

"First of all I should like to know whether he has written to you?"

"I had a note from him, offering me a pair of silver candlesticks. It appears he found a scrap of paper left by my aunt, expressing a wish that I should have them, as they were given her as a wedding present by my mother. I don't want them just now, as I live in lodgings, so I wrote back and said they had better stay in the house until Miss Yard dies."

"It would have been the easiest thing in the world to have destroyed that piece of paper. Yet Mr. Drake has communicated its contents to you," said Mr. Hunter, putting on his eyeglasses and again searching the letter for any possible stratagem or pitfall.

"I don't say George is altogether bad. I suppose he can respect his aunt's memory to a certain extent," replied Percy.

"His standpoint appears to me not unreasonable," the lawyer continued. "The furniture belongs to him, and his argument, firstly that he will be unable to realise upon it during Miss Yard's lifetime, and secondly that it may deteriorate to some extent in value before her death takes place, is quite a sound one. It is possible that Miss Yard may live to well over ninety, and his financial position may become intolerable before then. I understand the furniture is valuable?"

"Most of it is rubbish; but there are two Chinese vases which, I believe, are enormously valuable. Captain Drake probably looted them during one of his eastern expeditions. I have described them to Crampy, the well known expert, and he says they may be worth almost anything."

"Mr. Drake is careful to mention there are a few articles he would wish to retain because of their sentimental value. For sentimental read pecuniary," said Mr. Hunter, in the shocked voice usually adopted by a lawyer when he discovers another person trifling with the truth. "But the goods are his, he is aware of their value, and naturally he wishes to retain them. These vases throw a new light upon the position. The best thing he can do is to sell them at once: then, if they are as valuable as you suppose, he can retire from Windward House, and live upon the interest of his capital."

"Leaving Miss Yard in possession of the house?"

"Exactly—if he will agree to that course."

"Then you are going to advise Miss Yard to buy the furniture?"

"I think not, and I will give you my reasons. In the first place we ought not to perplex Miss Yard with matters of business she cannot understand. In the second place it might not be safe for her to become the owner of the furniture. Miss Yard, I understand, does exactly as she is told; she is completely under the control of servants; if an entire stranger entered the house and introduced himself as a relation, she might give him anything he liked to ask for. It would be easy for Mr. Drake, if he is unscrupulous as you suggest, to visit Miss Yard and induce her to sign a will leaving him the furniture she had previously purchased from himself."

"On the other hand," said Percy, "we shall never get George out of Windward House while the furniture belongs to him. He is too much afraid of the servants stealing things."

"I had thought of that difficulty," said Mr. Hunter in his most omniscient manner. "What I am going to recommend is that you should make Mr. Drake an offer for the goods."

"George wouldn't sell to me," said Percy.

"It cannot matter to him whether you or Miss Yard purchase the furniture. If you do so, it will be upon the understanding that Mr. Drake leaves Miss Yard in undisturbed possession of the premises at a rental to be agreed upon. By this arrangement she will be left in a position of absolute security. While, if you decide not to purchase, Mr. Drake may sell the contents of one room after another according to his need for money."

"I'll think over it, and let you know," said Percy.

"During the course of the next few days we shall be receiving the figures from the valuer," Mr. Hunter continued. "I shall then be in a position to advise you as to the sum you should offer Mr. Drake. You agree with me, I think, that I have suggested a way out of the difficulty?"

"I am always ready to take your advice," replied Percy. "But I believe George hates me and, if I made him an offer for the furniture, he would smell something fishy."

"He will receive a complete assurance from my firm that his interests are being adequately protected," said the lawyer, with a dignity that seemed to make the windows rattle.

A few days afterwards the expert sent in his report, and Mr. Hunter was considerably astonished to read that the contents of Windward House, excluding the articles belonging to Miss Yard, were valued for probate at the sum of £220 5s. 3d. He sent for the valuer, requesting another interview with Percy at the same time; and, when they came together, an explanation of these figures was demanded; the lawyer mentioning that, according to his instructions, the late Captain Drake had died possessed of a great number of valuable antiques.

"Most of them worthless. At all events, it's no easy matter to value such things as an Egyptian mummy and a stuffed mermaid for purposes of probate."

"How about the Russian Ikon and the Indian musical box?" asked Percy.

"There is no market price for articles of that description. They might fetch a few shillings, or a great number of pounds. It would depend upon history and association, or upon rivalry between collectors. I value the Ikon at ten shillings, and the musical box at five pounds. It's all guesswork, but I doubt whether you would get much more. As for the mummy, I simply throw it in with the oleographs."

"Why the odd threepence?" asked Percy.

The valuer coughed and said nothing.

"Mr. Taverner and I are particularly interested in a pair of Chinese vases," began Mr. Hunter cautiously.

"Which were kept in a box under Mrs. Drake's bed," added the more reckless Percy.

"Those things!" exclaimed the valuer disgustedly. "I remember them well, for I thought Mr. Drake was getting at me when he pulled out the box and unwrapped those vases. There's your odd threepence, sir!" he continued, turning towards Percy. "And dear at the price."

"You have made a mistake, my friend. I'm not an expert, but I would give five hundred pounds for those vases without having another look at them," said Percy.

"Then I wish they were mine!" cried the valuer.

"Perhaps you would describe these vases for Mr. Taverner's benefit," the lawyer suggested.

"They're not worth describing, sir. They are the sort of things exchanged by hawkers for a rabbit skin. A pair of green vases about eighteen inches high, with red cabbages meant for roses splashed across them."

"We need not trouble you any further, I think," said Percy.

"It was the most difficult job I've had in my life. I value plate and furniture, not the contents of museums," the man protested.

"You have done your work excellently, as usual; and you have also given us the information we require," said Mr. Hunter, as the valuer took his hat and his leave.

"Of course you see what has happened," began Percy at once.

"Mr. Drake had concealed the vases. I shall write pretty sharply to remind him he must not play these tricks with the law," said Mr. Hunter.

"He's a bigger fool than I took him for, if he thought he could deceive the valuer—not to mention you and me," said Percy.

"Mr. Drake is no fool: on the contrary, he seems a clever fellow. He did not suppose he could deceive the valuer, nor did he make the attempt. He simply produced the pair of worthless vases without comment."

"Then what is he playing at?"

"In the first place he tries to evade the death duties as far as possible; and these fall upon him rather heavily, as he was related to the deceased only by marriage. Mr. Drake would naturally prefer to receive one thousand pounds for the vases rather than nine hundred. In the second place, he is anxious to discover how much we know about these vases. It is true they belong to him, but he is by no means certain of their value. If we make a fuss about the vases he will guess they are genuine; whereas, if we make no inquiry, he will evade the duty and at the same time be satisfied that you are not scheming to get hold of them."

"I never thought of such a thing!" exclaimed Percy.

"The best thing we can do is to send down an expert in china. I shall first write to Mr. Drake, informing him that he must produce the vases."

"Send Crampy! You needn't write; I'll go and see him," cried Percy eagerly.

"We could not get a better man than Mr. Crampy; but I'm afraid his fee will be rather high."

"He'll do it for a guinea if I ask him. Crampy is a great friend of mine. He told me to keep an eye upon the vases."

Mr. Hunter being perfectly agreeable, Percy snatched his hat and made off, muttering as he reached the street, "For poor old George's sake I must tell him not to value them too high."

George in the meantime had nothing much to worry about, although somewhat disgusted at the low figure placed upon the furniture. He and Mr. Hunter wrote to each other every day like a couple of lovers; George always hoping that the lawyer enjoyed a continuance of perfect health; while Mr. Hunter trusted himself to anticipate a complete cure from the backache which had blighted Mr. Drake's existence for so long. Kezia and Bessie were moderately happy while taking stock of the goods which appeared to belong to them under the joint tenancy created by the scraps of paper; but there was obviously a certain amount of coldness arising between them at the prospect of a day of settlement. George was not much accounted of by either, although the interference of the valuer was bitterly resented, and George had much difficulty in making them understand that, whenever a person of quality departed this life, the Government required a perfect stranger from one of the State Departments to set a price upon the furniture, in order that statistics as to the national wealth might be obtained.

Although they were both prepared to fight for the possession of the Egyptian mummy, which Robert was especially anxious to see set up against the wall of his parlour, and Kezia had long regarded as the joy and inspiration of her spiritual existence, neither of them showed the slightest interest in the Chinese vases which they regarded as vulgar. Vases to Kezia and Bessie were—vases; that is to say, conspicuous objects set upon either end of mantelpiece or dresser, to be replaced by others when broken. Any little village shop, or travelling Cheap-Jack, sold artistic vases, such as those Mr. George had lately purchased to delight his eyes, of a beautiful bright green painted with lovely roses. As Kezia and Bessie were quite prepared to make George a free gift of all the rubbish in the house, they assured him, in the kindest possible fashion, that the vases with hideous dragons on them were his, together with the tortoise and cats, and any other little thing he might like to have as a remembrance of his aunt. George did not thank them much, but then he had never been demonstrative.

Letters from the lawyer and expert reached George by the same post; the one informing him the vases must be produced; the other announcing the day upon which the valuation would be made. When Mr. Crampy arrived he was received at the door by Bessie, who spent most of the day regarding her own home from the windows of Windward House and, as no visitor was expected by any one except George, who as usual had kept his own counsel, she said, "Not today, thankye," and would have shut him out; but, perceiving that the gentleman appeared somewhat agitated, she added with less severity, "Have ye come vor anything?"

Mr. Crampy had a nervous manner and spoke somewhat indistinctly; but Bessie was able to gather he had come all the way from London to inspect their china.

"Please to step inside," she said.

Mr. Crampy did so, and Bessie led him like a lamb into the kitchen, where she announced to Kezia, "Gentleman come to see the cloam."

"That's one lot on the dresser," gasped Kezia, wondering how many more inquisitors would arrive. "The best dinner service is in the pantry," she added.

Mr. Crampy grew more nervous, but managed to explain he had come to see a certain Mr. Drake.

"I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure," said Bessie, "but I fancied you said something about china."

"Yes, I have come to see a pair of vases," stammered Mr. Crampy.

"Best tell Mr. George a gentleman wants to see 'en," said Kezia, when the situation threatened to become painful.

A minute later Mr. Crampy was left to cool in the dining room. Presently George descended the stairs, carrying a large white candle beneath each arm. He apologised for the stupidity of the servants, then locked the door, and placed the precious bundles on the table, with the announcement, "I didn't show these things to the other man for, to tell you the truth, I was afraid he might place a ridiculously false value upon them. I expect you know what's what in this particular line?"

"I am supposed to have a very fair knowledge of Chinese porcelain. A great deal of it passes through my hands," said Mr. Crampy, who was now perfectly composed.

George removed a quantity of twine, unwound some yards of linen, removed clouds of brown paper, then abstracted from a bushel of fibre the vase heavily swathed in cotton-wool; and this he handed to Mr. Crampy with the utmost reverence.

The expert paused a moment to adjust his glasses; then he drew aside the wool and gazed at the vase with the love and tenderness of a father regarding his firstborn child. His lips moved to mutter repeatedly the single word, "Undoubtedly!"

"A dream, isn't it?" remarked George.

"Glazed porcelain, moulded in relief with dragons—belonging probably to an early period of the Tsing dynasty, about the end of the seventeenth century."

"And they've been knocked about like a couple of twopenny teacups," added George.

"Do you know, Mr. Drake, how they came into your late uncle's possession?" asked the expert, caressing the glazed surface with tender fingers.

"My uncle had a yarn for everything. He would have said they were a present from the Emperor of China. The only thing I'm concerned about is the price you mean to put upon them."

"Porcelain of this class has its own value," replied Mr. Crampy. "Were these vases to be offered for sale, they might fetch a thousand pounds or, on the other hand, they might be knocked down at five hundred. I am here to value them for purposes of probate, and that means the lowest possible value I can put upon them. Is the other vase in a perfect condition?"

"Just the same. Not a mark upon it. Shall I unwrap it?"

"Oh no! It is quite sufficient to have seen the one. I think I may value them, for legal requirements, at five hundred pounds; but, Mr. Drake, if you are willing to accept a thousand pounds, I will hand you a cheque for that amount before I leave this room."

"There's a big difference between the figures," said George.

"I don't say you would get more than a thousand pounds for these vases. But I am in the trade, I know how to get to work and secure a profit on the transaction."

"It sounds a very liberal offer, but I won't decide offhand."

"There is no hurry whatever," said the expert hastily.

"If nothing better comes along I'll write and let you know," said George, tingling with happiness and excitement.

Nor did his triumph end here. A few mornings later came a letter from Mr. Hunter, and George read as follows:

"With reference to so much of the furniture and other articles—excluding the pair of Chinese vases, to which you probably attach a sentimental value—as belonged to your late aunt, I have had an interview with Mr. Percy Taverner, and I am now authorised on his behalf to make you an offer of £200 for these effects. Although this sum is less than the amount of the probate valuation, you might feel disposed to accept the offer, having regard to the fact that it would save you the expense of removing the furniture and holding a sale by auction and the auctioneer's commission on a sale. I shall be glad to hear from you when you have considered Mr. Taverner's proposal."

"I've caught 'em!" cried George exultantly. "I baited and set my little trap and I've caught, not only slippery Percy, but that two-faced, double-tongued, pill-gilding, thimble-rigging, gammoning, diddling Hunter!"

CHAPTER X

THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR PARAMOUNT

"This is easier than catching flies," was George's comment, when the cheque for the furniture arrived, together with a document which pretended to be a receipt, but was unable to disguise the fact that it was also an agreement; for it contained a clause, by which George undertook to quit Windward House within three calendar months, and to accept Miss Yard as his tenant for life at a yearly rental of thirty pounds.

He looked forward to a busy day without flinching. Some forms of labour were fascinating, and quashing lawyers was one of them. George did not write to Mr. Hunter returning thanks, but walked into the market town and opened an account with the post office savings bank by paying in the comfortable cheque. Returning to Highfield, he lured Nellie into the garden, and informed her he was piling up money in a reckless fashion.

"Two hundred pounds this morning," he said. "Another two hundred next week. And so it will go on."

"Where's it all coming from?" she asked.

"Money Aunt left me. They don't know what a lot she *did* leave. It's a great secret and I wouldn't tell any one but you. I'm refusing money—that gentleman who called the other day begged me to accept a thousand pounds, but I wouldn't look at it. I can retire any day now."

"From what?" she laughed.

"From business. Making money is business, and I'm making it like the Mint."

"Did you really get two hundred pounds this morning?"

"Look at this, if you can't believe me," George replied, showing her the bank book. "It's nothing—just a flea bite—what the French call a game of bagatelle. Still it would give many an honest soul a start in life."

"You had better lend the money to your cousin," suggested Nellie.

"I'd let it perish first," cried George. "Whatever made you think of such a thing?"

"Mr. Taverner wrote to Miss Sophy this morning—she shows me all her letters now—and asked her to lend him two hundred pounds, as he had suddenly discovered another mortgage he had forgotten to pay off."

"The fellow's a ruffian!" exclaimed George, not without some admiration for Percy's methods of finance, which compared favourably with his own.

"He had learnt the profession of begging, and isn't ashamed to practise it. I think he might wait until Miss Sophy is dead."

"Percy has no moral sense," said George, with the utmost severity. "He has visited here, and I have entertained him; but he has never given me anything except superciliousness, and on one occasion a cigar which was useless except as a germicide. I have never yet heard your opinion of him."

"He's a name and nothing else," she said.

"I did have an idea he wanted to be something to you."

"What rubbish! He never even looked at me properly. When he didn't gaze at my boots he stared over my head; and he spoke to me like a gramophone."

"You didn't exactly like him?" George suggested.

"I positively dislike him."

"You never looked at him softly with your nice blue eyes?"

"My eyes are not blue."

"They seem very blue sometimes, but I'm not good at colours. I am glad you don't like Percy. It has removed a great weight from my mind. I had a dreadful suspicion, Nellie, and—and I was afraid it might interfere with my sleep; but I won't say anything more about it now. Don't you think we had better meet this evening, when it is getting dusk," George rambled on heavily, "and go a little walk, and talk about plans?"

"I have no plans," said Nellie. "I shall just go on living here until Miss Yard dies, and then I shall pack up my belongings—including the round table in the parlour—and disappear from Highfield forever."

"Not you," said George. "I have a quantity of plans, Nellie; a lot for you as well as for myself."

"Tell me all about them."

"This is not the time."

"Can't you speak while we stand here in the sunshine?"

"It would be easier if we were walking about in the dark."

"That might be bad for me," she reminded him. "When a couple talk in the dark, other couples talk about them. I will listen to some of your plans—with a decided preference for those about myself. You shall tell me four," she said, tapping the first finger of her right hand. "What is plan number one?"

"About Aunt Sophy," replied George promptly:

"Unless there's a sudden change in temperature," murmured Nellie, "I am to be frozen out again."

"You come last," said tactless George.

"Just as I expected, and perhaps a little more," she answered.

"Aunt Sophy must die," said George firmly. "That sad event should happen any time now. The first plan is to get rid of her."

"Let it be done decently," she begged.

"I don't want her to die, for, of course, one is always sorry to lose old relations. Aunt Maria's death was a great shock to me," George explained. "But for Aunt Sophy it would be a happy release, especially as I cannot be master in my own house while she lives. She ought to have gone before Aunt Maria."

"I suppose she forgot."

"Do you notice any signs of breaking down?"

"In yourself?" asked Nellie gently.

"In Aunt Sophy. I—I don't much like to be made fun of, Nellie."

"I was trying to cheer you up, as this is not Miss Sophy's funeral. Don't worry about the dear lady; she is perfectly well and thoroughly happy; her health has been much better since we came to Highfield; and I shall be quite astonished if she doesn't live another twenty years. She is a great admirer of the giant tortoise—"

"He's over five hundred years old," cried George in anguish.

"That makes Miss Yard the smallest kind of infant."

"If she lives another two years, I must give her notice. I cannot have her upsetting all my plans—though I quite agree with you she is a dear old lady."

"Plan number two!" cried Nellie.

"That concerns myself," said George.

"You should have been number one," she said reproachfully.

"I had to put Aunt Sophy first, because I cannot arrange my own future while she occupies the house. I don't want to say too much about myself."

"I know," said Nellie sympathetically. "That's your way. But you should try to be a little selfish sometimes."

"You are quite right, Nellie; we must think of our own interests. I have wasted far too much time bothering about Aunt Sophy, Kezia, Bessie—"

"And me!!" cried Nellie. "Do let me come in somewhere."

"Not with them. You come in a class by yourself."

"The fourth," she murmured.

"As Aunt Sophy is so good and religious we cannot want her to live on, knowing how much happier she will be in the next world; and then I can settle down as the big man of Highfield—quite the biggest man in the place, and I hope the most respectable. Mr. and Mrs. George Drake, of Windward House, in the parish of Highfield and county of Devon, Esquire, as the lawyers say."

"How unkind! You introduce Mrs. Drake, and then ignore her. You married her at one end of your sentence and divorced her, for no fault whatever, at the other end."

"Married ladies are not credited with separate existences," explained George.

"They generally insist upon taking one."

"By lawyers, I mean. They are not distinct entities like spinsters and widows."

"I see: while I am single I have a personality, when I marry I lose it, when I am a widow I regain it. You could not have improved upon that sentence."

"Why not?" asked George.

"In its repetition of the most important letter in the alphabet. Now for plan number three."

"But I have said nothing about myself yet!" cried George.

"Don't try. You are finding it very disagreeable, I am sure; and after all I can guess. This house ought to be converted into a mansion, and you mean to do it. This village sadly needs a squire, resident magistrate, pillar of uprightness; and you fully intend to supply that want."

George nodded, and hoped she would go on talking like that, blinking after the fashion of a tomcat who has just enjoyed a bowl of cream.

"I have all sorts of plans for my future, but they are not properly arranged yet. Aunt Sophy blocks them all. I am not ambitious," George blundered on, "but I do mean to have a comfortable home, luxurious armchairs, piles of cushions, deep carpets, felt slippers, and good cigars. I don't care how simple my food is, so long as I have good tobacco, and the very finest tea obtainable. I should like to turn the parlour into a tea house, with a divan at one end where I could lie and smoke—sometimes."

"A dream of Turkish delight!" laughed Nellie. "What is the third plan?"

"Concerning finance, and there I can't be beaten," replied George promptly.

"I thought you were rolling in money."

"It is coming in nicely now," George admitted, "but after a time the flow will cease; while I shall still be spending. The problem before me is how to invest my capital so that I shall be certain of a comfortable income. Government securities are treacherous things, and I have very little confidence in railways. The secret of wealth is to invest your cash in those things which everybody must have. Now every man must buy tobacco and drink beer; they are necessities of life. And every woman must carry an umbrella. What is a woman's principal necessity next to an umbrella?"

"No respectable girl would even think of anything except umbrellas," replied Nellie. "But most girls are not respectable, I'm afraid, and, though it is a horrible confession to make, they cannot be happy unless they are constantly supplied with chocolates."

"Is that really the truth?" asked George, with much interest.

"It is, indeed. My kind of girl must have chocolates, just as your kind of man must drink beer."

"Now that you mention it, I seem to remember there are an extraordinarily lot of sweet shops in every town."

"And I should visit them all, just as naturally as you would go into the public houses."

"That's a very valuable suggestion," said George. "I shall invest the whole of my capital in beer, tobacco, umbrellas, and chocolates. You see, Nellie, that will practically cover the prime necessities of either sex. A man goes to work with a pipe in his mouth, and he walks straight into a public-house. A woman comes out with an umbrella, and the first thing she does is to buy chocolates."

"There are sure to be exceptions," said Nellie. "A bishop, for instance, might not go to his cathedral with a pipe in his mouth, while a Cabinet Minister would probably walk straight past several public-houses."

"But they all smoke and drink at home."

"I don't fancy somehow that bishops drink beer."

"Bottled beer," said George eagerly.

"Surely some are teetotallers!"

"Then they drink cocoa, and that's chocolate melted down. On the other hand, plenty of ladies drink beer. You can see them carrying jugs—"

"Not ladies!" cried Nellie.

"Well, charwomen—they are ladies from a business point of view. I can see myself making tons of money," said George delightedly. "If only Aunt Sophy—"

"Do please let the poor old lady live on and enjoy herself. You wouldn't like to be hunted out of the world to suit anybody's plans. And now," said Nellie, "we reach the fourth subject, which I flatter myself has some connection with a certain person who is quite used to being regarded as an afterthought."

"Three persons—Kezia, Bessie, Robert. They must go, all of them."

"Really this is the last straw!" cried Nellie. "I was almost certain I should be at least honourably mentioned."

"But I am talking to you, not about you. I'm telling you my secrets—and I wouldn't do that to anyone but you. Nellie, you don't think I am playing with your affections?"

"I'll not listen any longer. I couldn't expect to come first, but I did hope to be placed last."

"If you would walk after dark—"

"I'm not a ghost; besides, I will not be ashamed to stand in the light."

"Then we might talk about something that means love," said George, who, being wound up for that sentence, was bound to finish it.

"Oh, George!" exclaimed one of the parrots.

"I wonder what it would be like," said Nellie, when she had done laughing.

"You teach those birds to say things," he muttered crossly.

"They are so intelligent. That one can say, 'Nellie's the belle of the ball.' Even that sort of compliment is better than none."

"I am thinking, Nellie, that you like chocolates. I had better get you some," George continued, believing it might be threepence well invested.

"That wouldn't be a bad idea."

"And you would take them as a compliment from me?"

"I'll take all I can get," she promised.

"You know, Nellie, I'm older than you, but I'm reliable. I'm not much good at silly talk, but I do mean what I say. I can quite understand some men would say very silly things to you, but I can't."

"People will talk rubbish when they are in love," she admitted.

"It's a very serious matter. I wouldn't joke about such a thing," said George.

"Of course, when a man tells his own particular girl she is a star, a flower, an angel, and a goddess, he is only joking; but most girls are so sweet tempered they can take a joke."

"I never made a joke," cried George.

"And I hope you will never try."

"But I'm full of affection."

"I have never seen any one quite so seriously in love as you are."

"I'm so glad you can see it. You have quite sensible eyes, Nellie, and I think you may improve a good deal as you get older. I am easy-going, and you are pleasant, so we ought to get along very well."

"You are so much in love," cried Nellie, "that you can't help saying silly things. You regard the person that you love as the most angelic creature possible; and angels are always masculine in spite of lovers' talk."

"I take people as I find them; I never look for their faults," said the virtuous George.

"Try! If you could discover a few faults in the person that you love, it might help you to stop saying, 'I am,' and to begin learning, 'Thou art,'" replied Nellie, as she ran off towards the house.

"There, George!" cried one of the parrots; while the giant tortoise thoughtfully advanced one millimetre.

"She is not nearly serious enough," said George, "and I'm afraid her words sometimes have a double meaning; but she is useful and quite ornamental. She pours out tea beautifully, and I do admire the way she puts on Aunt Sophy's slippers."

The next duty—a more simple one—was to win the sympathy of Miss Yard. Every evening, when fine enough, the lady walked once round the garden and, upon returning to the house, was packed into her chair till supper time; although she refused to remain quiescent, and would

wander about the room hiding her valuables in secret corners. On this particular evening she fell asleep and, when George entered the parlour, she did not recognise him until he had introduced himself.

"I shall soon be getting quite stupid," she said. "I was just going to ask you to sit down and wait for yourself. But I'm thankful to say my memory is just as good as ever."

"Then you remember Percy?" began George, seating himself close beside her.

"Oh dear yes! I often hear from Percy. He tells me he has a fine crop of potatoes."

"Tomatoes."

"He dug up two hundred pounds' worth last week. I had a letter from him this morning telling me that."

"And you remember Mr. Hunter?" George went on.

"I've just sent him a subscription for his new church," replied Miss Yard.

"Ah, that's somebody else. I mean Mr. Hunter, your family solicitor."

"Oh, yes, I remember him quite well. He came to see me when I lived somewhere else. It must have been a long time ago, because he's been dead for years."

"He's back again at his office now, and has written to me. He tells me I am to leave you," said George solemnly.

Miss Yard gasped and looked frightened at this message from the grave. She seized George's arm and ordered him to say it all over again, more slowly.

"Mr. Hunter is afraid that, if I live here, I may rob you; so he says I must go out into the world and make my own living. That's impossible at my time of life," said George warmly.

"You wouldn't do such a thing," cried Miss Yard, almost in tears. "You are so kind to me; you find my money when the others hide it away. If I break anything you are always the first to run for the doctor—I mean when I bump my head. I shall write to Mr. Hunter and tell him his new church will never prosper if he does this sort of thing."

"It is hard to be ordered out of my own house," said George.

"Whatever can the man be thinking of! I really cannot understand a clergyman being so wicked. Perhaps I ought to write to the bishop."

"He's a lawyer, Aunt," George shouted.

"Now why didn't you tell me that before?" said Miss Yard crossly. "Of course, lawyers will do anything. The people who did my father's business were the only honest lawyers I ever came across. This house belongs to me, and you shall stay here as long as you like. If you'll find my cheque-book I will write to this man at once—I mean, if you will bring my pen, you shall have a little present, for you are always so thoughtful. I am so sorry your poor dear mother didn't leave you much."

George had not time to correct her error; besides, it was useless. He brought her writing materials after a vain search for the cheque-book, for Nellie had taken possession of that, and said, "I don't want to confuse you, Aunt, but I suppose you will be leaving Nellie something?"

"Everything I have," replied Miss Yard earnestly. "I am leaving her the house, and all the furniture, my clothes and jewels, and as much money as I can save. I could not rest if I thought dear Nellie would be left unprovided for. You will look after Nellie, won't you? I should be so pleased if you would adopt her as your daughter."

"I'm not quite old enough," George stammered.

"Nonsense, you look quite elderly," said Miss Yard encouragingly. "And Nellie is such a child."

"If I had been younger I might have thought about marrying her," said George awkwardly.

"Now that would have been a nice idea! What a pity it is you are not forty years younger."

"You are thinking of someone else," cried George despairingly.

"Oh, I'm sure you are sixty. Your mother married when I was quite a girl. I do remember that, for I got so excited at the wedding that, when the clergyman asked her if she wanted the man, I thought he was speaking to me, and I said, 'Yes, please,' and poor Louisa gave me such a look, and I went into hysterics. Girls can't go into hysterics in these days like we used to do. It's funny how well I remember all these things that happened in our young days, but then for an old woman my memory is wonderful. What were we talking about before you mentioned your mother's wedding?"

"About Mr. Hunter, the lawyer who has ordered me to leave you," replied George, deciding to say no more of his matrimonial intentions.

"I never heard of such impertinence in my life. He will be telling me next I don't own the place," cried Miss Yard, stabbing with her pen in the direction of the ink pot. "What am I to say to the

wretch?"

"Remind him I am your nephew, and I have every right to enjoy your hospitality. Tell him I am indispensable to you. Then you might add something about the wickedness of depriving an orphan of his home, and conclude by mentioning that you will never consent to my leaving you."

"I'll tell him, if he persecutes you any more, I will put the matter into the hands of my own solicitor," Miss Yard declared, scribbling away briskly, for her greatest delight, next to chattering, was letter writing.

"I wouldn't do that," said George piously. "It sounds too much like a threat, and after all we must try to forgive our enemies."

"Thank you for reminding me. That's a beautiful idea of yours. I wish I was a good and clever old woman like you are."

George was stooping over her at the moment, and this compliment made him groan. "It's my poor back," he explained.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed the innocent old lady. "When you have gone to bed, I shall send Nellie to wrap you up in red flannel. We old people cannot be too careful."

Miss Yard wrote letters to all manner of persons, living, dead, and imaginary; but very few found their way to the post office. George took possession of the letter to Mr. Hunter and despatched it himself; and, knowing exactly when the answer would be received, he took the precaution of going out to meet the postman. By this time he was prepared for action, as the cheque for two hundred pounds had been cleared, and the amount was deposited safely to his account.

There were two letters, and one was addressed to himself. Miss Yard's was merely a note, acknowledging the receipt of her communication and mentioning that Mr. Taverner would shortly be writing with a view to clearing away the misunderstanding which had arisen since the death of Mrs. Drake. George opened a phial of malice and poured out its contents upon the name of Percy. Then he examined his own letter, which was bulky and of a strongly acid tendency.

Mr. Hunter was astonished and pained to think that Mr. Drake should have taken advantage of the age and infirmities of Miss Yard to such an extent as to have made her the instrument of his plans; as it was perfectly evident Mr. Drake had dictated, or at least had inspired, the letter which had been addressed to his firm by Miss Yard. Mr. Hunter earnestly desired to avoid anything of an unpleasant nature, and he hoped therefore Mr. Drake would not venture to repeat an experiment which suggested a state of ethics with which he had not previously been acquainted; and would adhere to his undertaking, given as a condition to Mr. Taverner's purchase of the furniture, namely, to leave Miss Yard in undisturbed possession of the premises bequeathed to Mr. Drake by his late aunt, and better known and described as Windward House. Mr. Hunter had also just been informed, to his soul's amusement, that Mr. Drake had not yet subscribed to this form of agreement, nor had he acknowledged the receipt of a cheque for two hundred pounds forwarded him some days previously. Mr. Hunter continued to be sorry to the end of his letter, which was a memorable piece of philosophic morality, suggesting that the lawyer's office had been quite recently taken over by some institution for reforming wicked people.

George expressed a hope that Mr. Hunter some day might be sorry for himself. He had underrated the powers of the lawyer, who had now proved himself to possess the ordinary malevolent, orphan-baiting, legal soul. However, George had no intention of surrendering without a struggle. He took his pen and obliterated the highly offensive clause which referred to his expulsion from Windward House. He then added his signature and composed an epistle complaining bitterly of the oriental methods of oppression which were being brought to bear upon him. He mentioned that he was an invalid Englishman residing in Devonshire; and laid particular stress upon the fact he never had been an Armenian living somewhere in the Turkish Empire. He especially desired to draw Mr. Hunter's attention to the phenomenon that the present age was democratic, and British workmen—with whom he did not disdain to be associated—were becoming impatient of high-handed methods. He enclosed the receipt and regretted the delay, which had been unavoidable owing to the insertion of the clause—now deleted, as Mr. Hunter would observe—which seemed to strike far too harshly against his personal liberty. He had given this clause his serious attention for some days, but had arrived at the conclusion, regretfully, that it involved a principle he was quite unable to accept. Messrs. Hunter and Taverner, in their joint capacity as trustees of the Yard estate, had apparently conspired—he did not use the word in an objectionable sense, although in his opinion it had but one meaning—to secure his eviction from premises to which he was legally entitled. They had offered him a wholly inadequate sum of money for the furniture, and this offer he had accepted with the sole idea of rendering Miss Yard a kindness; but now, it appeared, the money had been intended as a bribe to induce him to quit his home. Was this altogether legal? Was it honest? Could it be respectable? He felt compelled to remind Mr. Hunter, again regretfully, that a bribe was something given to corrupt the conduct of poor but decent men.

Then he went to Miss Yard and told her the lawyer was still tormenting him, and he was very much afraid it might soon be necessary to go away and find some hiding place.

"Has the man written to me?" asked Miss Yard, when the whole matter had been recalled to her memory.

"Don't you remember? He said you were a silly old woman, and you had no business to interfere."

"Where is the letter? Find it for me, George, and I'll do something," she cried indignantly.

"You were so angry that you threw it on the fire. Don't worry, Aunt; I shall know how to defend myself. The man tried to bribe me to leave you, and now he's threatening to send me to prison by means of false evidence."

"I wish you would let me write to my own man, what's his name?"

"That would lead to expense, and you must not spend money on me. If I don't go away I'm afraid the man may come to Highfield with a gang of ruffians, and break into the house—and I won't have you worried."

"I'll give you some money," said the generous lady. "Where's my cheque-book? Tell Nellie to find my cheque-book."

"Thank you, Aunt. A little money will be very useful. This man is just a blackmailer, and if I hide for a few weeks he will forget all about me. Then you can write and invite me to come back," said George tenderly.

"I'll write this moment," cried Miss Yard.

"But I haven't gone yet. You are mistress here and, if you like to invite me, of course, I can come and stay as long as you care to have me."

"And if that horrid man tries to turn you out again, I shall let Percy know about it, and I shall get advice from Hunter—I wonder how I came to remember his name. Do write to Hunter and tell him all about it," Miss Yard pleaded.

"To please you, I will," George promised.

That evening he received a letter in strange handwriting, and bearing the illegible postmark which signified that it came from London. George opened it and, perceiving the signature of Mr. Crampy, expert in ancient porcelain, read the contents with interest:

"Since visiting you I have spoken with several collectors about your pair of vases, which, I have no doubt whatever, are excellent specimens dating from the Tsing dynasty, although I admit forgeries of this period are exceedingly difficult to detect. My object in writing is to warn you against being imposed upon, and to remind you of your promise to give me first refusal up to a thousand pounds, which sum I am still perfectly willing to risk.

"It is highly probable some wealthy collectors may call upon you as, when the existence of such vases as you possess becomes known, there is invariably a hue and cry after them. I enclose, on a separate sheet of paper, a list of names; these are all gentlemen whom you can trust absolutely. The two against whose names I have pencilled the letters, U.S.A. are, I know, very keen to get your vases. If you should do business with any of the gentlemen on my list I get a commission. I don't suppose you will let yourself be humbugged, but I beg you not to make any offer in writing unless you intend to stick to it, as any of these collectors would convert your scrap of writing into a stamped legal document at once, and then sue you for breach of contract if you tried to get out of it.

"So long as you refuse to part with the vases for less than a thousand, you'll be all right."

CHAPTER XI

SOME LEADING INCIDENTS

"I do hope there's nothing wrong with Mr. Percy, vor Miss Sophy ha' got a letter from him, and she's crying something shocking," remarked Kezia, as she handed George a communication informing him that, not only Mr. Hunter, but the entire firm of Martin and Cross, had been outraged by the unspeakable conduct of Mr. Drake, who had dishonoured the title of gentleman by breaking his plighted word, and had stained his own name for ever by repudiating a contract. During the whole course of his professional career Mr. Hunter was thankful to say he never before received a letter suggesting that he—a solicitor—was capable of conspiring with another to deprive a third party of his lawful inheritance. He banished the sinister reflection, and enclosed a fresh form of receipt, containing the clause which Mr. Drake unaccountably regarded as oppressive, after having expressed his entire approval of the conditions contained therein, and he pressed for its execution at once or, failing that, the immediate return of the cheque for two hundred pounds. Mr. Taverner had specifically mentioned he would not purchase the furniture unless Mr. Drake gave an undertaking in writing to withdraw from Windward House; and now that Mr. Hunter had become more intimately acquainted with Mr. Drake's character, he was bound to confess that Mr. Taverner had displayed remarkably shrewd judgment.

"I trapped him, but he doesn't know it; I have trod upon his corn, and he doesn't like it; now I'll make a fool of him completely," George muttered.

Then Miss Yard came trembling and half tumbling downstairs, supported by Nellie, and weeping

bitterly in quite a joyful fashion.

"Percy has got a new tomato and he calls it Emily," she announced.

"Emmie Lee," corrected Nellie.

"You mustn't allow that to upset you," said George.

"But he's going to bring her to see me, and he wants me to write to her. Oh dear! I do pray it may be a blessing to him."

"Try not to cry any more, or you will have such a headache," said Nellie soothingly.

"I should not have thought," remarked George, "that tomatoes were worth crying about anyhow."

"All the information was there, but rather too condensed," explained Nellie. "Mr. Taverner discovered in one of his glass-houses—"

"Oh, no, Nellie, you are silly, child. It was at a garden party."

"You begin breakfast, and let me tell Mr. Drake in my own rambling fashion," said Nellie, coaxing the lady into her cushioned chair, then slipping into her own place behind the tea tray. "Mr. Taverner discovered his foreman had cultivated a particularly fine tomato plant unawares, and he made up his mind it was a new species, so he means to introduce it to the market under the name of Emmie Lee."

"He's full of dirty little tricks like that," George grumbled.

"And she's the great-grandchild of a clergyman, so there cannot be anything wrong with the family," sobbed Miss Yard.

"You must stop crying at once," said Nellie sternly.

"My dear, I will cry and be happy."

"The truth of the matter is, Percy has got a young woman?" George suggested.

"That's it," said Nellie. "And he's naming the new tomato after her."

"Because it matches her complexion, I suppose. What has he got to be married on?"

"It's not love, he says. It's money. I am so thankful."

"It is love, Miss Sophy. Love on both sides, at first sight, and all the way."

"Of course it is, my dear. Poor dear Percy! He was such a gentleman, and he did work so hard. If I could have seen him once more, just to tell him how happy I am—"

"Now you are not to say anything more until you have eaten your breakfast," Nellie ordered, as she rose to supply the old lady with a fresh handkerchief and a piece of buttered toast.

That morning George wrote a curt and final note to Mr. Hunter, announcing his intention of leaving Highfield within the next few days, and enclosing the receipt duly signed. He then approached Nellie, informed her duty was calling him elsewhere, and explained that, before his departure, a little cheque from Miss Yard would be acceptable.

"You know the rules," she said. "I have to give an account of my stewardship to the trustees."

"Yes, but Aunt Sophy owes me rent, and you mustn't allow her generous nature to be restrained if she wishes to add a few pounds by way of bonus," said George.

"There are to be no additions whatever," she said firmly. "I'll let Miss Sophy give you a quarter's rent, but no more. She can't afford it, as her bank account is low."

"Because she gives all her money to Percy. You let her do that," cried George wrathfully.

"How can I prevent it? Mr. Taverner does bleed her frightfully, but he's a trustee, and her nephew."

"So he can levy blackmail, grab all his aunt's money, ransack my home! He's above the law, while I'm crushed down by it. The kindest thing I can say about Percy is to call him a kleptomaniac, though I believe he's a pirate."

"I want you to tell me who really does own the house and furniture. And why are you going? I'm sure you wouldn't leave Highfield unless you had to. I promise not to tell anyone," said Nellie eagerly.

"Not even Sidney Brock?"

"You are not to mention his name to me. You know quite well I never see him now that he's given up the choir," said Nellie, flushing with shame, indignation, and other things.

"I should have said nothing if he hadn't written to you. I saw the postmark was Highfield—and of course I felt jealous," said George composedly.

"Yes, he did write, and asked me to meet him again. Just a selfish letter," snapped Nellie. "I'm not

going to answer it. Now I've told you my secrets, and I expect to hear yours."

"I never did like the idea of keeping anything from you," said George doubtfully.

"Especially as Mr. Hunter would tell me everything, if I liked to write and inform him I cannot undertake my new duties until I have the whole position explained to me."

"If you tell Kezia and Bessie there will be a fearful rumpus."

"I won't say a word to either. I don't care much about them, now I see how grasping they are, though it's only natural I suppose. Mrs. Drake treated them more like relations than servants, and they are quite sure she meant them to own everything."

"They know my aunt left a will," said George.

"She left about a hundred," laughed Nellie. "Kezia has fifty, Bessie has forty, Miss Sophy has two, and I have one."

"But the will in my favour is the only legal one; and it's the only one the trustees know about."

"Some of the papers were signed and dated, though none were witnessed. Anyhow, they are all later than your will," said Nellie.

George thought he could see what she was driving at. Miss Yard would leave the entire property to Nellie if she could; and his aunt had certainly left a scrap of paper expressing a wish that her sister should own the house. No doubt Nellie has this document hidden away safely. It did not matter much, and yet George felt uncomfortable at the idea of his wife owning the property.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said boldly. "My aunt lost her affection for me rather during the last years of her life, as she thought I didn't put my whole heart into my work, and perhaps she didn't want me to own the property. Still, she never destroyed the will, and that leaves the house to me."

"But who owns the furniture?"

"Last week it was mine. Now it belongs to Aunt Sophy."

"You never gave it her!"

"She has bought it. I offered it to her through Hunter, and he advised Percy to buy it with her money."

"That means the furniture belongs to Mr. Taverner."

"Aunt Sophy paid every penny of the purchase money, therefore it belongs to her. I have you as a witness to prove it."

"She advanced the money to Mr. Taverner. She didn't even know what he wanted it for," cried Nellie.

"It will come out at her death, when Percy claims the furniture. We must keep the cheque, produce it to Percy, and demand an explanation. If he refuses to withdraw his claim, we will threaten to expose his knavish tricks before his high-minded Emmie, the whole of her virtuous family, and the immaculate firm of Cross and Martin."

"We!" laughed Nellie. "Do you suppose I will be the accomplice of your villainy?"

"This afternoon," said George, "I am going into town, and there I shall buy a sixpenny printed form of Will. I shall then insert what is necessary, words to the effect that all the furniture, with everything that Aunt Sophy dies possessed of, are to come to you. I have kept a copy of aunt's will, which was properly drawn up by a lawyer, so I shall know how to do it. Then you must ask Aunt Sophy to sign it. Kezia and Bessie ought to be the witnesses. It would serve them right," said George, chuckling vastly.

"I'll have nothing to do with it," cried Nellie.

"Then I must work alone as usual. I'm not going to let you be defrauded. The only way to get justice is to help yourself," declared George. "There's Hunter now! He would give twopence with one hand and steal your last sovereign with the other. And, if you caught the rascal, he would swear you had dropped the sovereign in his pocket. And he wouldn't rest until he had got back the twopence. Hunter stands for justice; he deals in it like Percy, who puts his sound tomatoes on top of the basket to hide the rotten ones underneath."

"I'm afraid you don't love Mr. Hunter," laughed Nellie. "Is it because he has ordered you to clear out?"

"He and Percy between them hatched the dirty plot. They know I want money—"

"A few days ago you were refusing it."

"Ah, but that was tact. The pair of rascals offered to buy the furniture, if I would promise to leave my own home. That was bribery and corruption. They want to get rid of me; they would like me to starve in a ditch, and they would prefer the ditch to have water in it. Hunter's not quite so bad as Percy, I think. Hunter has to be a scoundrel, or he couldn't make a living. But Percy is just a

homicidal maniac."

"They are afraid you might try to influence Miss Sophy," suggested Nellie, when she had done laughing.

"It's Percy's doing entirely. He's a common malefactor himself, so he thinks I must be the same. He's not going to have any one else milking his golden goose. Besides, he knows how fond I am of Aunt Sophy, and what great care I take of her. I have saved her from serious injury many a time, and that doesn't suit Percy at all. He wants the dear old lady to fall about, and hurt herself, and die of shock, so that he can get her money, which I hope will be a curse to him."

"I understand the position," said Nellie. "You really are going?" she added.

"I must go," replied George gloomily. "It is hard on both of us, but you must try to be brave, for we shall soon meet again. Aunt Sophy won't live long when she hasn't me to look after her."

"Thank you for another compliment," cried Nellie.

"You deserve them all," said George, with more tenderness than usual.

He set off presently, carrying the precious vases wrapped up like twin-babies and, arriving at the market-town, he entered the shop of the principal ironmonger, who dealt also in all kinds of earthenware goods, and had the notice, "Art pottery a Specialty," posted in one of his windows. The proprietor advanced to meet him, and was highly flattered when George remarked he had come to obtain the impartial opinion of a specialist regarding the value of some Chinese vases.

"If I can't give it ye, sir, I don't know who can. I ha' handled cloam all my life, as my father did avore me, and I'll quote ye a fair market price vor anything you like to show me. They are amazing ugly things, sure enough, wi' they old snakes all twisted round 'em," said the honest tradesman when George had undressed his babies.

"They're beautifully glazed," said the owner proudly.

"Yes, they'm nice and shiny. 'Tis done by baking 'em. Now you want me to tell you how much they'm worth?"

"Suppose I asked you to buy them, how much would you offer?"

"I might give ye eighteen pence vor the pair, though I should fancy I wur doing ye a favour. Some folks like these ugly things—I sell a lot o' they china cats wi' the eyes starting out o' their heads—but I would be satisfied if I got a shilling each vor these old vases."

"A gentleman told me the other day they were worth a lot of money—hundreds of pounds in fact," said the astounded George.

"I believe ye, sir. Plenty o' gentlemen, when they see a bit o' cloam that ain't quite the same as ordinary cloam, will tell ye it's worth money. Cloam is wonderful cheap just now, sir. I can show ye some amazing bargains in vases at half a crown the pair, and far better value than these old china things."

"But the gentleman, who told me they were valuable, came from London," George protested.

"Well, sir," replied the little provincial, smiling broadly, "ain't that just where all the vules do come from?"

There was another china shop in the town, so George tried his fortune there. This shop was kept by a fat lady, who turned sour when George informed her he had not come to purchase anything; and passed into indignation when he had unveiled the vases.

"Take 'em away, sir," she said sternly. "I wouldn't show such vulgar stuff in my window if you paid me for it. My establishment is noted for chaste designs—flowers, and birds, and butterflies—little lambs, and shepherdesses—and I deal wi' gentlefolk."

"A thing can be ugly, and yet priceless," said George.

"It's not the ugliness so much as the obscenity," replied the stout lady, who was herself no gracious object. "They were made, I fancy, by poor benighted heathens; though why people ship such stuff into England, when they can buy cheap and beautiful Christian home-made vases from such establishments as mine, I can't tell ye," she declared, handling one of the treasures so recklessly that George darted forward in great terror.

"Oh, you needn't be alarmed," she went on. "If I did break it, I'd give ye another pair, and something to be proud of. I should smash these nasty old things into crocks and put 'em in my flower-pots."

George returned to Highfield, wondering greatly. He knew nothing whatever concerning china, and apparently the local experts were no better informed than himself. Crampy, on the other hand, had valued the vases at a thousand pounds, although he admitted the possibility of their being forgeries; he was, however, prepared to pay the money and take the risk. Before reaching home George had fully decided to secure the thousand pounds before he commenced his pilgrimage.

He was absent from the village about three hours, and during that short period all manner of

things had happened. The Yellow Leaf had often noted with regret that a strong leading incident rarely occurred in Highfield; but, when one did take place, it was almost sure to be accompanied by another, to the great confusion of the inhabitants who were compelled to discuss two incidents at the same time.

The first, and by far the most startling, incident took place quite early in the afternoon. Nellie had gone into Miss Yard's bedroom to look up some mending, and presently seated herself beside the window which overlooked the village street. That letter from Sidney worried her, but the knowledge of his loose principles troubled her far more. She remembered the words of his defence, indeed there was nothing much about him she had forgotten, as her memory was much better than Miss Yard's; and still she could not decide whether to answer the letter or to ignore it; whether to meet him once more or to let him go; whether to go on thinking of him—but that she had to do; or to hate him—though she couldn't.

"It's a dreary outlook," she murmured. "Little work and no love makes me a dull maid. I'm alone in the world, and somebody loves me, but he's a bad somebody. And another somebody is willing to marry me, but he's a silly old somebody. And I want the bad somebody."

"Hook it!" shrieked a parrot from the garden, addressing a bumblebee which was threatening to enter its cage.

"Polly gives me advice," she murmured. "Hook it! Hook George, and pour out rivers of tea, and put on his slippers in respectable humility. No, thankye, Poll! I won't hook it. I'll fish for something better, else, when Miss Sophy dies, I must find another job, and go on jobbing it," she whispered, looking into the glass, "until I don't look anything like so saucy as I'm doing now."

"Nellie, where be to?" called the equally saucy parrot.

"Here she be!" answered the girl from the window. "Her's going to write to the bad somebody, and her's going to meet him, and her's going to be a soft dafty little vule and believe his nonsense."

While she spoke a rumbling of wheels heralded the approach of the incident, which had already occurred with disastrous results along the more important reaches of the street. Nellie remained at the open window out of curiosity until the incident, which was of no importance to her at the moment, became revealed in the form of a young and pretty girl, gazing about in a highly interested fashion as she swept past in an open wagonette; a beautifully dressed young lady, certainly no more than eighteen, who looked quite capable of travelling round the world without an escort.

"Whoever can she be?" Nellie murmured, as she went towards her own room, to get that letter written before she changed her mind again.

She could hear voices buzzing in the kitchen, where Kezia and Bessie were discussing the incident; presently she opened the door and listened, for the air was thrilling with unpleasant sounds of proper nouns and most improper adjectives; finally she went downstairs and presented herself at the kitchen door.

"Oh, Miss Nellie!" cried Kezia. "Did you see the person driving past?"

"I did see her," replied Nellie. "Who is she?"

"Ah, that's what every one's asking. I shouldn't like to say who she be. See how bold she stared as she drove along!" said Bessie.

"She warn't so bold looking as that other one," remarked Kezia.

"She wur just a bit o' painted brass," said Bessie. "This gal's terrible young. Oh, ain't it awful to see 'em all so wicked! Folks are saying they won't ha' much more of it."

"Where was she going?" asked Nellie impatiently.

"To Black Anchor Farm. Where else would she be going? The driver stopped by the green and asked the way to Black Anchor."

"'Tis three o'clock. She can't get away tonight," Kezia whispered.

"She brought a bag—she's going to stay a long while," muttered Bessie, covering her face for shame.

"Policeman ought to get hold of her and lock her up," cried Kezia wrathfully.

"Ah, that he ought," agreed Bessie. "If me and Robert wur to have a few words, he'd be round quick enough and tell us to keep our mouths shut. Pity I b'ain't an actress! I could do what I liked then. The folks won't stand much more of it. I wish Captain Drake wur back again; he'd have they Brocks out of the country in no time."

Nellie crept back to her room and destroyed the unfinished letter. Then she drew down the blind.

The second incident commenced about an hour later, when another conveyance reached Highfield and proceeded at once to Windward House. A gentleman stepped out and inquired for Mr. Drake. Having learnt from Kezia that George was absent, but expected home at any time, the gentleman said he would take a stroll round the village and await his coming.

This incident would have passed almost unnoticed, so far as the general public were concerned, had the stranger been of the usual speechless type of tourist, content to stare deferentially at the local antiquities and to wander aimlessly round the churchyard. But he was not, as he himself admitted, within measurable distance of an ordinary man; for he joined a group of villagers, who were discussing the latest tragedy in whispers, and insisted upon introducing himself and asking questions about themselves.

In the first place he came from America, and he lost no time in informing his listeners that an American gentleman was the only perfect specimen of humanity to be found upon the face of the globe. In the second place he was a millionaire, and had no bashfulness about advertising the fact. Finally, he enjoyed use of the name Josiah P. Jenkins, and his business premises, or at least some of them, were situated in Philadelphia, which, he explained, was the city of brotherly love, where Irish toasted English, whites embraced negroes, Jews dined with Christians, and sharp practice was unknown.

By this time the poor little actress, driving in solitary state towards Black Anchor, was almost forgotten. Actresses had occurred before, unhappily, but this was the first occasion during the entire history of the universe upon which a millionaire had walked and talked in Highfield. Mr. Jenkins was bestowing a new tradition upon the village; he was quite the equal of Queen Elizabeth, who had slept, and very much superior to King Charles, who had hidden, somewhere in the neighbourhood. Here was an individual who reckoned the weekly wage, not by a few shillings, according to local custom, but by innumerable dollars every moment. The people gazed upon him with reverence, while children approached to touch him, and discover what metal he was made of, while some of the more intelligent made remarks concerning copper which the great man did not seem to understand. The Yellow Leaf admitted afterwards he was thankful he had lived to see it, although he would have respected millionaires far more had he never set eyes upon the corporeal presence of Mr. Jenkins. It was wonderful, he added, how quickly these Americans acquired a superficial knowledge of the English language.

"What might be your occupation, sir?" asked the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Railways, my friend, with patent medicines as a side-line," replied Mr. Jenkins.

"I hope you ain't come here to build none, nor make none," said the Yellow Leaf.

"I have come here in my private capacity as art lover, collector, connoisseur. I am awaiting the arrival of one of your leading citizens, Mr. Drake of Windward House."

"And here he be, bringing home the washing," cried Squinting Jack, as George at the moment appeared upon the road with a fantastic white bundle beneath each arm.

"Don't you believe his tale," whispered the Dumpy Philosopher to his friends, as the American started forward to meet George. "He'm going to make that railway across Dartmoor what'll ruin the whole lot of us—and Mr. Drake ha' been and brought 'en here."

CHAPTER XII

A SPLENDID BARGAIN

It was the most awkwardly thrilling moment of George's life, when he found himself confronted by the millionaire before the eyes of the Elder Inhabitants. Because of the couple of ridiculous bundles he could not grasp the hand of Mr. Jenkins; he dared not explain he was carrying the porcelain about with him; so he muttered something about grand weather and unexpected pleasure, then raced homewards with the American ambling at his side.

"Crampy flung me a line telling me about your masterpieces. I beat the sun this morning in an aeroplane invented by a friend; came to turf on Salisbury plain; friend and driver broke rudder and ankle; caught a horse, rode him barebacked to the nearest garage; bought a car, drove it fifty miles; car broke down, sold it second-hand, hired a train, drove here from the station—all so to speak. If I'm not first, I guess I'm a derned good second."

"You needn't have hurried quite so much," gasped George, wishing he could exaggerate like that.

"I guess, sir, when it comes to business, a man has got to put in his best licks, or some other fellow will pull his foot ahead and spudgel up the goods. Cramp has unloosed his jaw-tackle to the crowd. I'm not particular scared of the Britishers, who look before they leap, and think before they look, and make their wills before they think; but there's quite a few Americans in your London, England, nosing around for something specially ancient to take home. There's Wenceslas Q. Alloway of Milwaukee. Lager-beer he is, or was, for now he's mostly grape juice for conscience' sake; with an elegant white beard and the innocent ways of an archangel—he's got this collecting craze so bad he'd mortgage his immortality, or a thousand years of it, for a bit of old china, though he'd try to stick in a clause to best the devil, for he's a pretty derned orthodox First Baptist on a Sunday. I'm a Second Adventist, and my crowd has just built a church in Philadelphia which for size and shape makes your Westminster Abbey look a bit retrospective."

"Come inside," said George faintly. "I'm afraid I can't offer you much hospitality, as I'm only

staying here with my aunt who is not able to receive visitors."

"Don't mention hospitality, sir. Just give me a sight of your vases, and if they're genuine, you'll be giving me a gorge. Wonderful pretty place. I'd like to ship the whole of this township across to America, put up a barbwire fence around, and charge a dollar for admission. Beautiful place to be buried in! Might I inquire if you are carrying anything specially out of date?"

"I've been shopping," replied George.

"Mr. Drake!" called the voice of the postmistress. "A telegram vor ye, sir."

George tore open the envelope and read, "Just heard from Crampy. Fifteen hundred if O.K. Alloway."

"Knew he'd switch on to the main track up to time, but he can't begin to best me. Guess he's exceeding your speed limit right now, and about midnight his automobile will be killing ducks in this neighbourhood," said Jenkins complacently.

"I suppose you know something about china?" George suggested, as he ushered the visitor into the dining room.

"My knowledge of porcelain extends from my head to my finger ends. When you show me Chinese vases I'm at home, sir, I'm surrounded with familiar objects, I'm behind the scenes. Crampy knows something, but I can run a saw upon him. When his wells dry up, that's the time, sir, mine begin to flow," said Jenkins, ostentatiously producing a long cheque-book and slapping it upon the table.

"If you will excuse me a moment, I'll go for the vases," said George.

He carried the bundles up to his room, and consulted the list which Crampy had sent him. Having satisfied himself that the names of Jenkins and Alloway appeared upon it, he went downstairs with the undraped vases, thankful his visitor had called at the time of day when Miss Yard and Nellie were shut up together, and Kezia was occupied in the kitchen.

The millionaire stood in the attitude of a clergyman about to receive a child for baptism; and, when George extended one of the vases, he accepted it reverently, then walked to the window, examined it, tapped and stroked it, hugged and adored it, and very nearly kissed it, before turning to exclaim, "These are the goods, Mr. Drake!"

"Yes, they are very fine specimens," replied George casually.

"I don't say they are unique at present, though that's what they will be when I get 'em across to Philadelphia. I guess there's been an empty mantelpiece in the Emperor of China's palace for quite a few years."

George explained the vases had been discovered by his uncle during one of the anti-foreign riots in China many years ago.

"Your uncle was a great lad, sir. He saw his chance to loot the pieces, so he repelled boarders and took 'em. I should call your uncle a public benefactor. He removed these vases from the custody of the uncivilised Chinee, and conferred them upon the cultured world of art. When the potter turned them on his wheel," continued Jenkins, beginning to rhapsodise, "he little thought they were destined, by a far-seeing Providence, to find a home in the United States, the illustrious city of Philadelphia, the unassuming if somewhat palatial mansion—"

"The postmistress again!" exclaimed George, hurrying to the front door.

"I hadn't hardly got back home, sir, when there come another. I do hope, sir, it ain't bad news again," said the good woman, as she handed over a second telegram.

"It's of no consequence," said George.

"I'm very glad it ain't no worse, sir. I hope, sir, you'm going on well," said Mrs. Cann, trusting that an interpretation of these telegrams might be vouchsafed to her.

George cautiously replied that his lumbago was improving daily; then he returned to the dining room and said, "Here's a telegram from an American named Anderson. He asks me not to deal with any one until he calls, and he offers seventeen hundred."

"I don't know the fellow," said Jenkins suspiciously. "I would advise you to have nothing to do with him. He may be a crook, a man of straw."

"He's all right," said George. "Crampy sent me a list of collectors I could trust, and his name is on it. I suppose Crampy himself is safe, as a firm of lawyers, who are supposed to be respectable, sent him down here."

"Crampy is as genuine as the rising sun. He's valuer to your Court of Probate, he's got a fixed place of business, his name's in the Directory. He's just got to tote fair, but he won't get rich till he grows more brain. I've known Crampy to pay down big money for a fake."

"He made me an offer for these vases," said George.

"I'll double it," cried the millionaire, nestling down to his cheque-book.

"He offered me a thousand pounds."

"Then I'll give you two thousand."

"I might get even more at a sale," George muttered greedily.

"I guess you don't know a great lot about sales," said Jenkins pityingly. "If you put these vases up to auction, collectors and dealers would get together and fix the price beforehand. I'm playing my lone hand in this game, for I'm dead set on getting the ornaments, and I don't mind paying a fancy price for 'em. Crampy won't go beyond a thousand, and even Alloway reckons he's sure of them for fifteen hundred. The other chap offers seventeen hundred it's true, but I have my doubts about him. I didn't mean to bid two thousand, but I've promised to double Crampy's offer, and I'm a man of my word or I'm nothing. Now, sir—you to play!"

"I'll take it," said George.

"Easy way of making money, ain't it?" said the American jauntily. "If you wouldn't mind wrapping some cotton-wool and paper round the things, I'll take 'em right along with me."

"Are you going to offer me a cheque?" George stammered.

"I was going to, but as you don't know a great lot about me, and perhaps you don't feel like relying on Crampy's introduction, and as I must take the pieces right away with me, I'll just hand over the stuff in notes upon your Bank of England which, so far as I know, hasn't put its shutters up," said the millionaire, producing a mighty pocketbook. "Here you are, sir—four five-hundreds, and may they breed you a bonanza. Kindly hand me a form of receipt; and if at any time within the next forty-eight hours the vases should be discovered forgeries, I am at liberty to return them, while you will hand back the money. At the expiration of the forty-eight hours the deal is closed absolutely and, if the things are fakes, I come out spindigo. Don't be ashamed of your suspicions, and don't consider my feelings. Hold up the notes to the light and take a look at the watermark."

"That's just what I was doing," said George feebly.

A few minutes later the millionaire departed, George walking with him to the inn where his conveyance waited. Here also wise men were discussing the state of decadence towards which the parish was being hurried by moral failures like the Brocks and such a despicable plotter as the formerly respected Mr. Drake, who was undoubtedly scheming to construct that Dartmoor railway by means of American dollars. Mr. Jenkins was seen to drive away by the Gentle Shepherd, who reported the gratifying intelligence to headquarters, and a hearty sigh of relief went up while a quantity of inferior beer went down. Yet nobody sighed so deeply or so joyously as George as he hurried home a man of means at last.

Rapture lost half its charm because there was nobody with whom it could be shared; for Nellie, he found, had retired with a headache, while Bessie, upon sentry duty near the bedroom door, repelled the advance of Miss Yard who was in tears because they would not let her in to see the poor girl's body.

"I knew she would go like that. I told her she had a heart, because she was such a good girl, and they always go suddenly. I do hope you won't be the next, George. Of course you know poor Percy is gone," she wailed.

"You were very good in your young days," said George gallantly, "but you are still alive. There's nothing much the matter with Percy, except that he's going to get married."

"Take that woman away," snapped Miss Yard, "and make her stop growing. She gets worse every day."

"I finished long ago, thankye, miss," said Bessie.

"What a wicked story! She's done a lot since yesterday," complained Miss Yard. "Do let me have one peep at my dear little Nellie before they take her away."

The young lady herself cried out and hoped they would all be taken away. Peace was restored, after Miss Yard had tumbled down happily, convinced that the age of miracles was not past.

George woke the next morning with a sense of prosperity which required a safety valve when the inevitable letter from Mr. Hunter, who had now shrunk icily into a solitary initial beneath the signature Cross and Martin, announced, "the probate of your late aunt's will has been granted, and you are now at liberty to draw cheques against the balance of two hundred pounds lying in the bank."

George felt sufficiently healthy to dig potatoes, make love, or perform any other menial act. He ate a huge breakfast, then climbed into an apple tree and whistled for half an hour: Miss Yard, sitting at the window, declared she had never heard the blackbirds sing so beautifully. While thus relieving his high spirits a light carriage could be heard approaching; its wheels rattled down the hill; the driver shouted to the horse; and the conveyance drew up beside the garden gate.

"Here's another millionaire!" George chuckled, as he dropped from the branches. But there was nobody except the driver, whom George recognised as belonging to the principal hotel of the neighbouring town.

"I was to give you this letter, sir, and to bring you this box, and to wait for an answer," said the man.

"Did a gentleman called Jenkins send you?" George faltered, receiving the box with the dignity of an author taking back his rejected masterpiece.

"That's right, sir. I was to get back as quick as I can, for the gentleman wants to catch a train. Here's the letter, sir; and I was to be sure and take back an answer."

George hurried indoors, his knees wobbling; tore open the envelope and read:

"It's worse than a falling birth rate, but the vases are fakes. I have examined them carefully with strong glasses and discovered marks which show beyond a doubt they are not more than a hundred years old. These pieces would deceive any amateur and quite a few experts: they fairly hocussed me till I turned on the glasses. This will make your soul sick, I guess, but you've still got Crampy. I won't say anything to queer your business; but take my advice and don't hawk the things about, or some other fellow may get notions. Your best chance is Crampy, right now, while he's innocent. The longer you keep the vases the more they'll smell. Kindly return shinplasters by bearer, and pile up my sympathy to your credit."

George sprang to the box and wrenched off its lid; but a glance dispelled his suspicions. The vases had not been exchanged for local beauties; they had been returned undamaged but condemned. Crampy was honest, and Jenkins was genuine; and he himself had lost a fortune.

"I don't want to gammon a decent fellow like Crampy, but I can't afford to lose a thousand pounds," George muttered, after the driver had departed with the banknotes. "I'll walk over to Brimmleton and send him a telegram. If it goes from here Mrs. Cann will talk all over the village. And on the way back I'll look in at Black Anchor, and try to find out what young Sidney is up to."

Before starting he told Nellie of his intentions, which were still honourable; but the young lady was indifferent to the point of malice.

"They are nothing to me, and the sooner they clear out of the place the better," she said firmly.

"I'm going to give the lad a little friendly advice. The people are complaining that he's making Highfield more like London every day; and naturally they are getting angry about it," said George.

"Oh, don't talk to me about it," cried Nellie.

"Shall I talk to you when I come back?"

"That will depend upon what you have to say."

"It can't possibly be good news," said George cheerfully. "I knew Sidney was a bad egg the first time I saw him. He never took his eyes off my boots, and that's a sure sign of a nasty character."

So George walked to Brimmleton, where he was a foreigner, and despatched the telegram to Crampy, accepting his offer for the vases and pressing for a reply immediately, as he was very much afraid Jenkins might leak a little upon his return to London. Then he turned aside to the lonely farm, where half-savage children no longer rolled in the mud, noting with approval the effect of hard labour in the shape of reclaimed land and well drained fields. The Brocks, if vicious, were at least not idle; and George was always well pleased at discovering signs of human industry which convinced him that the race was by no means decadent.

Nearing the house he walked warily; and here a shocking spectacle was presented. He saw a young girl—the same infamous young person—most daintily attired, seated upon a boulder near the door, wearing over her pretty frock a deplorable type of beribboned and belaced apron, perusing a volume with a lurid binding which assuredly was teaching her terrible things. And he saw the old man—the grandfather—approach with a mattock on his shoulder; and he pulled her hair; while she shouted at him—some nameless jest, doubtless, but happily George could not hear the words.

Presently Sidney appeared—for it was nearly dinner time—and the worst happened. The abandoned young creature jumped up and ran towards him, with an expression, described mentally by George as one of ready-made affection, upon her pretty face; and, as they walked into the house, the wicked young man passed his arm around the waist of the shameless damsel.

The watcher groaned in spirit, although he could not altogether escape from the idea that the ungodly were not necessarily to be pitied in this world. Then he walked to the house and knocked at the door. The scuffling sound of young women in flight caused him to shake his head again.

"So 'tis you, Mr. Drake! You'm quite a stranger," exclaimed Sidney readily enough, though in George's opinion his face wore a hunted look.

"I'd like to have a few words with you," he replied.

"Right," said Sidney, looking back into the house to call, "Tell Dolly not to hurry wi' the dinner, grandfather."

"Dolly!" groaned George, somewhat enviously. He had clung to the hope that the girl's name might turn out to be Jane.

"You know, Sidney, I don't bear you any ill-feeling," he began, when they stood a few paces from the house, although his eyes were stricken with horror at discovering the young woman had been reading a book printed in French. "But there's some very loud talk up in Highfield about you and your goings on with the ladies."

"We have nought to do wi' Highfield volk, and we don't care that much vor their talk," replied Sidney, snapping his fingers.

"They are threatening to mob you," George whispered.

"Not they," laughed Sidney. "They ain't got it in 'em, and if a crowd did come down along me and grandfather would settle the lot."

"It's pretty bad to have young women here—from France too—one after the other. You can't blame the people for being a bit upset."

"If that's all you've got to say, Mr. Drake, I'll thank ye kindly, and tell ye I don't want to hear no more of it. Dolly is staying vor a week or two, and when she goes I'll get another," said the young outcast fiercely.

"I thought I'd just look in and warn you as I was passing," said George. "You know, Sidney, I don't blame you, and I think you're quite right not to give way to them. If I can help you in any way I shall be only too glad. These ignorant people don't understand men of the world like you and me."

"I reckon," said Sidney, with the deplorable grin of a completely dissipated soul.

"I mustn't keep you from your dinner, Sidney—and from the ladies. Give my best wishes to your grandfather, and my respects to Miss Dolly. I do hope she is enjoying her visit," said the double-faced George. Then he ambled off, trying to smile and frown with the same face, entirely satisfied that Sidney would never again be permitted to approach within speaking distance of Miss Blisland.

He was unable to report the result of this visit, beyond mentioning he had discovered things too terrible for words; and, although Nellie did appear for one moment inclined to listen, George could do nothing except place a hand across his eyes and declare he could not face her after the scenes of sheer depravity he had been compelled to witness at Black Anchor. Nellie was well aware George would exaggerate if he could; but this did really appear to be a case where exaggeration was impossible.

"You do get a lot of these nasty things, Mr. George," remarked Kezia, as she approached with a telegram which suggested to her nothing except murder and sudden death.

"In this case I shall attend the funeral," said George cheerfully, when he discovered the deluded Crampy would meet him at the station upon the following day.

"Who's gone now?" asked Kezia.

"Next week I am going into business," explained George with suitable emotion. "This telegram is from a friend who wants to go into partnership with me."

"I hope he ain't coming here then," said Kezia, who was beginning to resent the visits of strange gentlemen, because they walked upon her carpets and sat upon her chairs. "What be you going to sell, Mr. George?" she asked with much interest.

"China," he replied.

"I do hope and pray as how you may succeed," gasped Kezia; and off she went to inform Bessie that Mr. George was about to start a cloam shop. Bessie quite believed it, as Mr. George had always been so fond of handling cups and saucers.

Miss Yard also was fond of tea drinking, but she had no tenderness for china, and would generally release her cup in a vacuum, instead of placing it fairly upon the table; and express a vast amount of amusement at the ridiculous laws of nature when the cup exploded upon the carpet. She was particularly robust that afternoon and insisted upon pouring out tea herself. When the fragments, which filled two small baskets, had been removed, the steaming carpet mopped, and dryness restored, George seated himself beside the old lady, produced a sheet of foolscap covered with writing, and said in his most silvery voice:

"Circumstances, my dear aunt, will compel me to leave you during the course of the next few days: but I cannot go until I have the satisfaction of knowing you have made a will in our dear Nellie's favour."

"Good heavens—in my presence, too!" gasped the young lady.

"I need not remind you of the goodness, the modesty, the unselfishness of our Nellie," he continued. "She would serve you for nothing, but nevertheless it is your duty to leave her all you can."

"I can't stay and listen to this," cried the distressed beneficiary.

"Don't interfere. She has always meant to do it, but never will unless we jog her memory," George whispered.

"I'll have nothing to do with it," exclaimed Nellie; and out she went with a fine colour.

"Is this something to do with that nasty robbery they call income tax?" asked Miss Yard.

"This is your last will and testament," replied George solemnly. "I know you mean to leave everything to Nellie, but you can't do that unless you sign a will. You must die soon, you know; and, if it was to happen suddenly, Nellie would get nothing."

"I did write out a paper, but somebody has hidden it away somewhere," said the old lady.

"Pieces of paper are very little good," said George. "This is a properly drawn up will. When you have signed it I can go away quite happy, and I shall know dear Nellie will be provided for."

"Will she have the house, and the furniture, and all my money?" asked Miss Yard eagerly.

"Percy gets your money, but Nellie will have all that you may leave in the bank, any investments you may make, and the proportion of income up to the time of your death," said George learnedly.

"Must I write my name somewhere?"

"Yes, and two witnesses are required; but Nellie can't be one," said George, going to the window and gazing along the street for some honest person who could also write.

Presently the Wallower in Wealth appeared, prospecting the gutter for any signs of gold dust.

"I know he can write, for he signed a petition to uncle in favour of more frequent offertories in aid of the poor and needy," George muttered. Then he caught up the will, lest Miss Yard should scribble her name all over it during his absence, ran out into the street, and invited the scribe to step inside and witness Miss Yard's signature.

"I'll do it on one condition," said the Wallower in Wealth.

"What's that?" said George.

"You sell me the musical box. I'll give ye ten shillings vor it."

"That musical box is worth fifty pounds," said George. "But I can't sell it."

"Ain't it yours?"

"It has been out of order since my uncle died."

"You get it put right, and let me have it vor fifteen shillings, and I'll sign."

"Miss Yard wants you to witness her signature. You won't be doing anything for me."

"You'm asking me."

"Miss Yard isn't feeling very well today, and she's in a hurry to get her affairs settled."

"I b'ain't preventing her," said the Wallower in Wealth.

"She can't do it without witnesses."

"I might spare a pound vor the musical box."

"You couldn't get it repaired. That musical box is a lost art."

"If I take it wi' all its faults, and Miss Yard gives me five shillings vor my time and labour, will ye sell me the box vor one pound two and sixpence?"

"I can't stay here talking. If you won't come I must get somebody else," said George impatiently.

"Other folk would want to be paid the same as me," said the Wallower in Wealth.

"Then I shall go and ask the vicar."

This was a fatal blow, and the bargainer climbed down at once.

"I'll stand witness vor half a crown and first refusal of the musical box," he promised.

Miss Yard was unusually silent after signing her will, and paying a fee to both her witnesses. She lay back in her chair with dreamy old eyes which looked as if they were recalling many scenes. While George carried the precious document upstairs to Nellie.

"Put it away and keep it safe until she dies," he said.

"I want to say the right thing," she murmured. "You ought not to have made her sign, although she often says it is her intention to leave me something."

"You won't forget that I might have acted in a most scandalous fashion," George hinted.

"Yes, I know!" she said hurriedly. "You could have put your name in place of mine, and she would have signed just as willingly. But it's a horrible business."

"All business is horrible. That is why we hire people to do it for us. I was thinking of myself as well," said George heartily. "We are getting along very nicely, Nellie—no just cause or impediment, you know! This should mean one of those nice little sums of good money known as

capital," he whispered, rubbing his hands.

"I must go to Miss Sophy," said Nellie; and she moved towards the stairs like one in trouble.

The next day George carried his vases tenderly to the station where, at the appointed time, Crampy arrived, and at once inquired:

"Has Jenkins been down?"

"He came," replied George, prepared for some such question, "but we couldn't do business."

"All cackle, I suppose? That's his way. He'll come into my place to bargain for a piece of Sèvres; swear he must have it, talk me dizzy; then say he must cross the Atlantic and think about it."

"He seemed very anxious to buy the vases, but he couldn't quite make up his mind. I didn't exactly trust the fellow," said George. Then he went on to describe the millionaire's adventures with aeroplane and motor car between London and Highfield.

"That was just his ornamental way of telling you he's a hustler. He travelled by railway, and third class all the way. Jenkins is an awful liar; but he's honest. I want to catch the up train, due in about twenty minutes, so we had better get to business. If you are ready to hand over the pieces, I am prepared to give you my cheque for a thousand marked accepted by the bank."

"Jenkins said they were really worth more than that."

"Though he wouldn't give it," laughed Crampy. "I'll just take another look at 'em to make sure."

"It doesn't matter," George protested.

However, Crampy insisted in a courteous fashion: so they walked to the far end of the platform, where George unpacked one of the vases, and the dealer, having put on his glasses, examined it shrewdly until the owner began to suffer from the silence.

"Do you know, Mr. Drake, I'm not sure—upon my soul I can't say for certain whether the things are genuine or not."

"Don't tell me they are forgeries," said George weakly.

"They are marvellously well done. Still, I've got a horrible idea in my head there is something wrong with them."

"Jenkins told you?" cried George involuntarily.

"So he said they were fakes!"

"He didn't go as far as that, but he thought there might be some doubt about them," George admitted.

"It looks bad—Jenkins is an uncommon smart amateur. Still, Mr. Drake, I'm a man of my word, and I'm going to make you an extremely liberal offer. I'll buy the vases for the price agreed upon. If they should turn out to be genuine, I can make a fair profit. If they must be condemned as forgeries, I may discover somebody with plenty of money but not enough brains to put unpleasant questions. Or, if you prefer it, I will sell the vases for you on commission. But, in that case, you stand to lose. It's a gamble so far as I'm concerned."

"That's a luxury I can't afford," George muttered.

"Exactly! Here's my cheque! I'm not a philanthropist; I'm willing to do any man a good turn, but I'm far more anxious to do a bit of good for myself. I may lose, but it's just as likely I shall clear a profit. These vases can be passed off, though you couldn't do it—but, mind you, I don't say even now they are not genuine."

With a vast sense of relief George accepted the cheque, and gave up possession of the Chinese vases.

CHAPTER XIII

WASPS AND OTHER WORRIES

"Have you any idea what we are doing here?" Miss Yard inquired one morning, while Nellie was assisting her to dress.

"We came to live with your sister," replied the girl.

"I suppose there's some truth in that. But what's the good of staying now Maria has gone to the seaside? I want to go home, and see my friends again," declared Miss Yard, declining the next garment until she should receive a satisfactory answer.

"This is your home," said Nellie.

"Then why don't we have tea parties, and why don't we meet every week to knit chest protectors

for the people who eat one another?"

"Because we no longer live in a town full of old ladies with nothing to do."

"There was an old clergyman who used to make me shiver with his dreadful stories," added Miss Yard eagerly.

"Not exactly. While the rest of you knitted, one of the ladies used to read aloud from a book, written by a missionary who had spent thirty years upon an island in the Pacific; and he did mention that, when he first went there, the people were not vegetarians."

"And we sent him a lot of mufflers and mittens," cried Miss Yard.

"Yes, and he wrote back to say wool was much too warm for people who wore nothing at all."

"That's what made me shiver," said Miss Yard triumphantly. "It wasn't so much what they ate, as their walking about without clothes. They used to go to church with nothing on. It must have been dreadful for the poor clergyman. No wonder his health broke down. We must go back," said Miss Yard decidedly. "I can't think what made me so silly as to come here. Do you remember the lady who lived in a dandelion?"

"Now you really have puzzled me," laughed Nellie.

"A little yellow dandelion on a hill. There were no stairs to go up, but I didn't like it much in summer."

"I've got it! You mean the bungalow that belonged to Miss Winter. You didn't like her."

"She used to kiss the clergy," said Miss Yard sadly.

"My dear Miss Sophy you must not libel people. She told you once the only men she ever had kissed were clergymen; one was her father, and the other her uncle. What makes you remember all this?"

"Percy has written to me, and says he's going to be a missionary."

"Let me see the letter."

"It's on my table. I'm sure Percy will make a good missionary, for when he wants money, he's not ashamed to ask for it."

"This is an appeal from the Society for Supplying Paper-patterns of the Latest Fashions to the Ladies of the Solomon Islands."

"That's where Percy is going. I do hope they will dress themselves properly for his sake."

"Oh, here it is!" cried Nellie, discovering a letter on the carpet. "So Mr. Taverner is coming here next week."

"And he's going to bring me some tomatoes."

"He's going to bring his fiancée," said Nellie.

"Now I've quite forgotten what that is."

"The young lady he's going to marry."

"That's what I mean. I get so confused between tomatoes and mortgages."

"He has just come into some money most unexpectedly," Nellie read. "He arrived at the conclusion long ago that the climate of England is quite unsuitable for the cultivation of tomatoes; and as he is anxious to exploit the capabilities of his new variety, he is going to settle, after his marriage, in Tasmania, which he believes is an island with a future. He is coming to Highfield to bid his dear good aunt a long farewell. Whatever gave you the idea he was going to be a missionary?"

"Doesn't he say so?" asked Miss Yard.

"No, he is going to Tasmania to grow tomatoes."

"I suppose I used to know something about Tasmania; but then I used to be very good at acrostics, and I can't do them now."

"It's an island near Australia. But not every one who goes to an island in the Pacific intends to be a missionary," said Nellie, adding to herself, "This will be delightful news for George."

That gentleman was depressed, for he had just received an anonymous communication threatening him with a fearful end upon the day that the first boulder of the new railway was blasted. Also Crampy had sent him a perplexing note, mentioning that some experts believed the vases were genuine, while others declared them to be forgeries; but, in any case, he had succeeded already in disposing of them.

When George had read Percy's letter, which Miss Yard passed across the breakfast table, with the remark that she herself would like to live "in the Pacific," if he could find her an island where the police insisted upon the wearing of apparel during divine service, he became highly

suspicious, and suggested to Nellie in an undertone that Percy had selected the Antipodes with a view to removing himself as far as possible from the Central Criminal Court.

"He's going to grow Tasmanias in Tomato," announced Miss Yard.

"He means to grow giant tomanias—I mean tomatoes, in—oh, bother!" laughed Nellie. "Miss Sophy has muddled me. Why shouldn't Mr. Taverner grow tomatoes in Tasmania?"

"What about this money? Would anybody leave money to Percy unless they had to?" cried George.

"It may have been left to his young lady," suggested Nellie.

"He has robbed someone," said George bitterly, "and now he's running off the earth to hide the swag."

"If I wanted to say something nasty about Mr. Taverner," said Nellie, "I might suggest he had become engaged to Miss Lee because this money had been left to her."

"I should be certain of it, if he wasn't clearing out of the country," replied George.

"Isn't this honey?" complained Miss Yard. "What makes it taste so bitter?"

"Heavens, don't swallow them! Have they stung you?" cried Nellie, perceiving suddenly that the good lady was spreading her buttered toast with a mixture of crushed wasps and honey.

"They are not at all nice. Did the doctor order me to have them?"

"They are wasps, Aunt," said George bluntly.

"Are they the things that turn into butterflies?" gasped Miss Yard, rising from her chair and showing signs of distress.

"Don't worry, dear. They are quite harmless. Come and lie down, and I'll bring you something to wash out your mouth," said Nellie; and she carried off the old lady. While George, always ready to play emergency-man, rushed into the kitchen, acquainted Kezia with what had happened owing to her gross carelessness in putting away the honey pot with the lid off, and ordered her to despatch a telegram to the doctor. Then he went into the parlour and observed consolingly:

"People can live a long time with bullets inside them. Wasps can't be worse, especially as they must be digestible."

"I am afraid of the stinging parts," said Nellie.

"Perhaps they are worn off," he replied.

Miss Yard lay upon the sofa breathing peacefully, thankful she had made her will, but looking wonderfully healthy. She complained, however, of drowsiness, whereupon Bessie, who had rushed across the road at the first alarm, and was then standing in the parlour armed with the brandy bottle and blue bag, exclaimed incautiously, "That shows they'm stinging her. Robert ses his father wur bit by a viper, and he drank a bottle of brandy and lay unconscious vor twenty-four hours."

"Was it really a viper?" groaned the sufferer.

"I don't think they will do her any harm," said George. "In some countries the people live on frogs and slugs."

"And St. John the Baptist always had grasshoppers with his honey," added Bessie reverently.

"And Germans eat worms, and thrive on 'em," George concluded.

Kezia was crying in the hall, declaring that the jury would bring it in manslaughter. Being called upon by Bessie to make some valedictory remark to the poor lady, she approached, and blubbered out:

"Mrs. Cann ses, miss, you ain't to worry. She can't hardly open her mouth in the post office without swallowing something; and one evening, miss, taking her supper in the dark, she ate a beetle; and there's more good food about than us knows of, she ses; and it 'twas all cooked, miss, and if it warn't vor the look of such things, we might live a lot more cheaply than we do; vor she ses, miss, 'tis horrible to think what ducks eat, but there's nothing tastier than a duckling, 'cept it be a nice bit of young pork; and she ses, miss, she saw a pig of hers eat a viper—"

"There's nothing here about internal wasp stings," broke in Nellie, who had been consulting a book of household remedies.

"I can't think how it got into the house," Miss Yard was moaning, with her eyes fixed upon vacancy. "It seems wonderful that it should have run down my throat when I wasn't looking."

"Are you in any pain, dear?" asked Nellie.

"No," replied Miss Yard in a disappointed voice.

"They'm always like that," wept Kezia. "My poor missus was wonderful well the morning she wur took."

"I'm going away too," said the invalid. "Will you find me a train, George?"

"Where to?" asked the obliging nephew.

"The place where Nellie and I came from. I don't know what they used to call it."

"We'll go directly you are well," Nellie promised.

George brought a railway timetable, a pair of compasses, and a map of the British Isles; and delivered a lecture which delighted the old lady so much that she forgot her pangs, and was greatly astonished when the doctor bustled into the room thankful to know he was not too late.

"I suppose you want a subscription," said Miss Yard.

"I had a telegram saying you were seriously ill, but I have never seen you looking better," replied the doctor.

"Yes, I am wonderfully well, thank you. I hope you're the same," said the merry patient.

"Oh, doctor!" cried Nellie, entering the apartment. "Miss Yard was eating her breakfast—"

"And I swallowed a snake! Do you know I had forgotten all about it!" cried the old lady.

Nellie revised this version, and the doctor was professionally compelled to act the pessimist. He advised a little walk in the garden, to complete digestion of the wasps, recommended a stimulant, prescribed a tonic, and promised to call every day until the patient should be in a fair way to recovery.

Then he departed, and Miss Yard immediately suffered a relapse brought on entirely by the visit. She was stricken with some mortal disease, and they were hiding the truth from her. She consented to walk round the garden, as it would be for the last time; then, having insisted upon being put to bed, she implored Nellie to tell her the worst; and, when the girl declared it was nothing but a little indigestion, the old lady lost her temper, and said it was very unjust she should have to die of a disease that was not serious.

"There's nothing whatever the matter," said Nellie.

"Then what's all this fuss about?" asked Miss Yard.

"You are making the fuss."

"I didn't send for the doctor. And he's coming again tomorrow. It's not measles, and it's not whooping cough, but I believe it's poison. Bessie put poison into the teapot."

"Why Bessie?"

"I knew she would do something dreadful if she didn't stop growing. And Robert is so short. It must all mean something. He held the teapot while Bessie put in the poison. Nasty bitter stuff it was too! I suppose I must forgive them, though I don't like doing it. Where is George?"

"He is packing. He's going away tomorrow."

"But he must stay for the funeral!"

"There's not going to be a funeral. You know Mr. George must leave us; he has told you so lots of times."

"Tell him to come here. I must give him a present. Look in the cupboard and find me something to give George. And pack up all my clothes, for I shan't want them again. Send them to that Bishop who wrote and said he hadn't got any."

"I don't think, really, your clothes are suitable for the ladies of the Lonesome Islands," said Nellie.

"You must keep the best things. I want you to have my black silk dress and the coat trimmed with jet ornaments. They will come in nicely for your wedding. Perhaps George would like a brooch. Tell Bessie and Robert to come here at five o'clock to be forgiven—but I won't promise. You must write to Percy, and tell him I was so sorry not to be able to say good-bye, but the end came suddenly, though I was quite prepared for it. Why aren't you packing my clothes—or did you say George was doing it?"

"I'll call him. And if you worry me much more I shall swear," said Nellie.

George came and mourned over his aunt because the time of separation was at hand. Miss Yard agreed, but almost forgot her own impending departure when George explained he was referring to himself.

"Oh, but you are not going to die yet. I'm sure that isn't necessary. Besides, you are looking so well," she said earnestly.

"He is not looking a bit better than you are," cried Nellie.

"I am about to start on a long journey, Aunt," said George piteously.

"Oh, yes! I remember now about the island in the Pacific where the tomatoes grow."

"I have been working rather too much lately, and need a rest," he explained; "but directly you

want me back you have only to send an invitation."

"I shall be left all alone—oh, but I forgot," said Miss Yard, interrupting herself in a shocked voice. "You must stay, George, to do me a great favour. I want you to bury me in Westminster Abbey in the next grave to Queen Elizabeth."

"My dear Miss Sophy!" exclaimed Nellie.

"Don't listen to that child. She is in a nasty cross mood—and somebody has been teaching her to swear. I took a fancy to Westminster Abbey when I was quite young, and, even if it is rather expensive, I should like to treat myself to a grave there."

"I'll see to it," George promised.

"You shouldn't say such a wicked thing," cried Nellie.

"Are you suffering at all, Aunt?" he inquired, anxious to change the subject.

"I don't think so," said Miss Yard. "It's all going to be wonderfully peaceful. I'm so thankful!"

"Shall I ask the vicar to call?" George whispered.

"Of course not," said Nellie fretfully. "She would think he had come to prepare her. I am very sorry you sent for the doctor. Here's another beastly wasp! Do kill it."

"Is she packing my clothes?" whispered Miss Yard, peering over the bedspread.

"No, and I'm not going to," replied the young rebel.

George struck out manfully at the living wasp, knocked it down somewhere, and began to search for the body which was still buzzing.

"Oh dear!" cried Miss Yard. "There's such a dreadful pain in my hand."

"I knocked it on the bed. She really is stung this time!" George shouted, seizing the insect in his handkerchief and destroying it; while Nellie fled for the restoratives which were necessary at last.

It was the best thing that could have happened, for immediately her hand was bandaged, Miss Yard's interest became centred in that, and she forgot there was anything else to worry about. When the doctor called next day, he was advised to say nothing about affairs internally, but to concentrate all his ability, and his bedside manner, upon the outward and manifest sting; with the result that Miss Yard was pronounced out of danger within forty-eight hours; by which time George had vacated the premises and made room for Percy.

Hardly had he driven away when there came a knock upon the back door, and when Kezia went to answer it, she found the Wallower in Wealth standing there, with twenty-five shillings in his hand and a bargaining expression on his face. Having inquired after the well-being of every one in the house, and made a few remarks upon the climate, he stated that he had lately enjoyed a conversation with the blacksmith, who had declared there never was a machine he couldn't mend and, if the musical box were brought to his forge, he would speedily compel it to play all kinds of music.

"What's it all about?" asked Kezia; and, as she put the question, Bessie crossed the road. Upon those rare occasions when she happened to be at home, there was nothing going on in the house opposite which Bessie did not contemplate from her upstairs window.

"Mr. Drake promised me the musical box," explained the visitor, who had watched the departure of George before setting out on his expedition.

"It ain't his, and he knows it. And you knows it too," said Kezia warmly, "else you wouldn't ha' waited till he'd gone away."

"Gone away, has he!" exclaimed the Wallower in Wealth. "You give me his address and I'll send the money on to him."

"That musical box belongs to me," said Kezia.

This was a critical moment in Bessie's career; to have yielded then would have meant the complete abandonment of all her rights in furnishings. She did not hesitate in declaring war upon her ancient ally with two steely words:

"'Tis mine!"

"I'm surprised to hear you say such a thing, Bessie Mudge; and Miss Sophy lying ill in bed too," replied Kezia.

"Mrs. Drake left me the musical box, and I ha' got writing to prove it, and me and Robert are only waiting vor Miss Sophy's funeral to take it."

"Mrs. Drake said I wur to have all the furniture in the house."

"I wouldn't like to have to call you anything," said Bessie.

"And I'd be cruel sorry to fancy you craved to hear the like," retorted Kezia.

Then they paused to think out new ideas, and to place their arms in more aggressive attitudes.

"When furniture be left to more than one person simultaneous, 'tis usual to divide it," explained the Wallower of Wealth.

"Half a musical box b'ain't of no use to me."

"Nor me."

"You sell me the box, and I'll give you twelve shillings, and twelve shillings to Mrs. Mudge, and I'll get it put right at my own expense," said the Wallower in Wealth, seeking to introduce the peaceful principle of compromise.

"I wouldn't take twelve pounds. The Captain told me there warn't another box like that in this world," said Kezia.

"He told me there wur another, but 'twas lost," replied Bessie, adding with the same spirit of determination, "I wouldn't take twelve pounds neither. Robert ses not a thing in the house can be sold without his consent."

"Who's Robert Mudge?" cried Kezia, in the voice of passion.

"He's my husband," replied Bessie.

"And who be you?"

"I'm his wife."

"Sure enough! They'm husband and wife. I saw 'em married," said the Wallower in Wealth, with a distinct impression that Bessie was winning on points.

"I don't know what's going to happen to us, I'm sure," said Kezia. Then, in accordance with military strategy, she conquered the enemy by abandoning her position and slamming the door after her.

That evening Bessie advanced as usual for coffee, which included a hot meal, and during this campaign Robert did not accompany her, being detained, according to the best of his wife's belief, in the bakery, working overtime at buns. Kezia distrusted this communication, as no festival of buns was impending, and arrived at the conclusion that the assistant baker had absented himself from coffee drinking owing to a bashfulness not uncommon in the time of war and tumults. Having, as she supposed, abated the pride of Robert, Kezia sought to assuage the malice of Bessie by small talk concerning Miss Yard's convalescence, the departure of George, which was positively final like the last appearance of an actor, and the Turkish state of things at Black Anchor. But the musical box remained an obsession, playing a seductive jig for Bessie, and a triumphal march for Kezia; and at last the former said:

"Me and Robert ha' been talking, and he ses nothing should be took away avore Miss Sophy dies."

"That's what my dear missus said. Not me, nor you, nor Mr. George, wur to touch anything till Miss Sophy had been put away," agreed Kezia.

"Didn't Mr. George sell part o' the cloam?" asked Bessie.

"Well, Bess, I did give 'en a pair of old vases. I know I ought not to ha' done it, but we've got plenty o' cloam, and I wanted the poor fellow to have something, him being a relation."

"What us wants to think about is this," Bessie continued, "me and you ain't agoing to quarrel. Mrs. Drake made a lot of mistakes in her lifetime, poor thing, and 'tis vor us to make the best of 'em."

"I'm sure I put in a good word vor you many a time," declared Kezia.

"I know you did," said Bessie warmly.

"I used to say to missus, 'Never mind about me, but do ye leave Mr. George and Bessie something. I don't care about myself,' I said."

"When us come back from Miss Sophy's funeral, us will divide up the things. First I'll take something."

"First me!" said Kezia sharply.

"You'm the eldest. You can take first," said the generous Bessie. Then she inclined her head towards the door and whispered, "Ain't that someone in the hall?"

"'Tis only Miss Nellie," said Kezia. "There's a drop o' cocoa left in the saucepan, Bess."

"I'm sorry us had words today, Kezia," said Bessie, as she took the drop.

"Don't ye say anything more about it. I'm sure the dear missus would walk if she fancied we weren't friendly. But I do wish she hadn't got so forgetful like."

"That ain't Nellie!" cried Bessie, listening again.

"Sounds as if Miss Sophy had got out of bed and fallen down."

"'Twas a bump vor certain. I'm agoing to see," said Bessie, opening the kitchen door.

She advanced along the passage, but was back in a moment.

"The hall door's wide open—and I saw a light from the parlour."

"There's a man in the house!" screamed Kezia. "Don't ye go out, Bess!"

"Who's there?" called the valorous Bessie, advancing again to the passage. Then she shrunk back, crying:

"Here's a young man—and here's an old 'un. They're carrying something. Don't ye go out, Kezia."

"Oh, my dear, I ain't agoing to," faltered Kezia, retiring into the far corner of the scullery.

"They'm running!" Bessie muttered. "One wur youngish, and t'other wur oldish. They ha' gone now. I heard 'em shut the gate."

"'Tis they Brocks," whispered Kezia in terror of her life.

"'Tis somebody who knew Miss Sophy wur lying ill in bed."

Bessie took the lamp and went forth boldly, calling a challenge at every step. Presently Kezia plucked up courage to follow, and they went together into the parlour.

The musical box had disappeared: so had the pair of silver candlesticks, the Russian Ikon, and various other rich and rare antiquities.

"Oh, Kezia; ain't it awful in a Christian country!" exclaimed Bessie.

"Go vor policeman! No, don't ye—they may come back again."

Then Kezia's eyes fell upon the mummy, and she cried hysterically, "Thank heaven they ha' spared the King of Egypt!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE GRABBERS

The constable, an exceedingly able man who was expecting to become a sergeant, gave it as his opinion that a thief had been at work. In support of this theory he pointed out certain prints of hob-nailed boots, which upon examination he discovered to be his own. Thereupon he increased his reputation by a shake of the head, and the statement that, even in a small community, mysteries were bound to happen.

Kezia began to mutter about Sidney Brock, who had eaten and drunk in her kitchen, and had endeavoured to entice Nellie into his harem; while Bessie had the effrontery to suggest she had seen two dark shadows, unquestionably substantial, disappearing along the lane in the direction of Black Anchor.

"You can get to London by that road," replied the policeman. "Were they walking or running?" he inquired.

"When I last saw 'em they was running fit to break their necks," said Bessie.

The constable twirled his moustache and smiled in a superior fashion; for he was about to make a point.

"Running with a musical box pretty near the size of a piano, not to mention other articles of furniture," he said.

"The box wur big, but not very heavy," explained Kezia. "It stood upon legs, four of 'em, but a man could lift it off and carry it."

"And the legs would follow after?" suggested the policeman, who believed in making people laugh; but he failed on this occasion.

"They would have to walk back for the legs," Kezia explained.

"How many men did you say there were?"

"Two, but I wouldn't swear to nothing," replied the tactful Bessie.

"If policeman wur to go along the lane he might catch up wi' them," suggested Kezia.

The officer declined, pointing out that it would be a physical impossibility for two men to carry such bulky articles all the way to Black Anchor, and a moral impossibility to do so and escape detection. Then he sought for information concerning the ownership of the purloined property.

"'Tis mine," came the simultaneous answer.

"That wants a lawyer," said the policeman, beginning to show the acumen which was winning him

promotion; and when the position had been explained he continued, "Maybe Mrs. Drake left a like paper for Miss Yard?"

"Two of 'em," said Kezia.

"Leaving her everything?"

"Just the house and a pair of silver candlesticks."

"What ha' been stolen," added Bessie.

"And a paper for Miss Blisland?" went on the policeman, longing for a superior officer to hear him.

"Her left she the round table in the parlour, but that be rightfully mine," replied Kezia.

"Mine too," said Bessie.

"Likely enough she left a bit of writing for Mr. Drake?"

"He got a bit, but he wouldn't show it to no one," said Kezia.

"Maybe the person who took the things has got about as much right to them as certain other folks," said the constable darkly. "That's all I can say at present, but I'll make inquiries in the morning," he added, as Robert came up to find out what had happened.

Highfield was an honest place, where a farmer did not wait for a dark night to divert his neighbour's water supply, or postpone the cutting down of a hedge, which did not belong to him, to a misty day. The inhabitants therefore were convulsed with horror when informed by Robert that an act of real dishonesty had happened: to wit, a pair of desperate ruffians had broken into Windward House and departed with much furniture. It became at once obvious to everybody, except the policeman, that the district had been systematically plundered. Squinting Jack declared, now he came to think of it, eggs had been missing from his hen roost for weeks past; the Wallower in Wealth swore that a sum not exceeding twenty-five shillings had been extracted from his mattress; while the Dumpy Philosopher discovered a number of vacancies among the red cabbages in his back garden.

This being a matter of morality, the vicar was made the victim of a deputation, headed by the Dismal Gibcat, an inevitable but unfortunate selection, as this gentleman had not said his prayers in public for some years, because, according to his own statement, a violent fit of nasal catarrh seized upon him immediately he entered the church. The Dismal Gibcat, encouraged by the silent but moral support of several Nonconformists, who were generally credited with loving their neighbours rather more earnestly than themselves, framed an indictment against the Brocks: they were aliens who had sprung up at Black Anchor with the suddenness of toadstools; no respectable female presides in their kitchen; they were visited frequently by women of a certain class; they had already corrupted the young people of the neighbourhood; and were now breaking into houses and removing every article of value. Assassination of prominent personages would follow in due course.

"You are entirely mistaken," replied the vicar, somewhat stiffly. "It must be well known to the parish that I often visit the Brocks."

"They do say you'm friendly wi' every one," observed the Dismal Gibcat bitterly, as he was obviously an exception.

"I hope so. At all events I like the Brocks—indeed, I respect them."

"How about they women and gals?" cried the Dismal Gibcat.

"Probably their presence can be explained. As for this robbery, it is ridiculous to suspect the Brocks. I may as well mention that I knew something about them before they came here," said the vicar.

"They ses you turned Sidney out of the choir because he teased the maidens."

"That is quite untrue. He resigned and explained his reason for doing so."

"Well, if they'm friends of yours, 'tis no use us talking; but I believe they took them things as much as if I'd seen 'em doing it. Ain't that the general opinion?" demanded the Dismal Gibcat of his limp supporters.

"I takes volks as I finds 'em," replied the Dumpy Philosopher.

"I wouldn't like to say parson goes shares wi' the Brocks in everything—in every single thing," observed the Dismal Gibcat, as the deputation retired, "but I shouldn't be surprised if a lot o' volk didn't think so."

During this excitement Percy and his young lady arrived, two days before they were expected, and flustered Kezia so that she could think of the robbery only at intervals. Bessie made no mention of it: neither did Robert, though he went to the village shop, purchased a pound of candles, and tried unsuccessfully to buy a bottle of lubricating oil. As it was impossible in Highfield to enter into secret negotiations for the purchase of even a penny tin of mustard, the policeman, in the course of his inquiries, heard about it and, having worked out the problem

without the aid of pencil and notebook, he proceeded to the bakery and told Robert he ought to be ashamed of himself.

"For why?" asked the assistant baker, with the assurance of a man who had nine points of the law in his favour.

"What did you buy this morning at Mrs. Trivell's shop?"

"Bottle o' blacking," replied Robert.

"Sure it wasn't whitewash? What else did you buy?"

"Penn'orth o' blacklead," said Robert cheerfully.

"Making the case pretty black, ain't you? You didn't buy a pound of candles, of course—best wax candles. But, if you did buy candles, what were you going to do with them?"

"I don't know what you can do wi' candles except light them," said Robert.

"And you didn't buy a bottle of lubricating oil, because Mrs. Trivell hasn't got any. If you did buy a bottle of salad oil, what would you be going to do with it?" continued the policeman, in his best and brainish manner.

"You can do pretty near anything wi' salad oil," declared Robert.

"Among the things stolen from Windward House last night were a pair of silver candlesticks and a musical box, out of order, but perhaps it might play a tune if you oiled the works," said the policeman sternly.

Robert stroked his nose and mentioned that an officer who could put one thing to another like that, was not at all required in Highfield parish.

"What were you doing when this robbery was taking place?" came the question.

"I fancy I might have been giving a hand," Robert admitted cautiously.

"Who helped you?"

"I don't know as anybody helped. But it wasn't a robbery, vor Mrs. Drake left all the things to Bessie," said Robert cheerfully.

"And to other folks as well."

"I b'ain't responsible vor that. First come, first served; and other volks take at their peril, I ses."

"It's my duty to tell Miss Blisland you took the things. Where have you hidden 'em?"

"Inside the peatstack. If you'm going to tell Kezia, I shall shift the things into town and sell 'em."

"That's your affair," replied the constable. "Seems you haven't exactly committed a robbery, as you have a sort o' right to the things; and you haven't committed a trespass, as you can go into the house when you want to. So I can't charge you with anything. But I reckon it won't be long before you have the lawyers after you; and then the Lord ha' mercy on your pocket, Robert Mudge."

Before the constable could reach Windward House to report how easily he solved a problem, his wife ran to meet him with cheering information concerning a great fire upon the outskirts of the parish; and, as conflagrations are things no policeman can resist, he mounted his bicycle and scorched towards an isolated farmhouse which was doomed to destruction; as its bankrupt owner had taken the precaution to store plenty of dry faggots, well sprinkled with petroleum, within the well-insured premises. The farmer was sitting upon an upturned pail, which smelt of anything but water, bemoaning his fate, and informing the neighbours that spontaneous combustion would happen sometimes no matter what you did to prevent it, when the constable arrived, sniffing greedily at the clue-laden atmosphere. The farmer replied that the oil barrel had leaked terribly, and there was no preventing that either. The policeman investigated, went on his way to report, and returned with papers in his pocket; and, while teaching the farmer a few cheerless facts concerning the legal meaning of arson, such a trifling affair as the Highfield grabbing passed naturally and conveniently from his mind.

Percy introduced himself to his Aunt, kissed her upon both checks according to a family tradition; the bride elect followed his example; and they all talked of Tasmania, tomatoes, tickets, and travelling, with a few remarks upon marriage licences, until Miss Yard rolled off the sofa for sheer joy of motion.

"Nellie!" she called. "Pack my things at once! Percy and Emmie have got a licence to go to Tasmania, and tickets to get married, and I won't stay here any longer."

"But this is your home, Aunt," mentioned Percy.

"And there are not many places like that, you know," Miss Lee added.

"I used to have a much better home than this. We had tea parties, and mothers' meetings, and all sorts of nice things. I'm going to forget the past and begin all over again."

"Miss Sophy is quite serious," Nellie explained, when Percy approached her on the subject. "It's

very seldom she keeps an idea in her head, but, when she does, it governs her completely. Ever since she was stung by the wasp she has been worrying to get away."

"How about taking her back to Drivelford?" suggested Percy.

"That would do nicely. But you must see to it, else Mr. Drake will; and there will be more trouble between him and Hunter."

"George has gone for good," said Percy sternly.

"He told me all he had to do was to go away; there was nothing said in the agreement about the time he was to be away. Miss Sophy has written already inviting him back."

"If he insists upon returning here to live—" began Percy.

"You will be at the other end of the world, and Hunter won't know anything about it," she concluded.

"George is a great scoundrel," said Percy. "I have only another two weeks in England; but I suppose I must go to Drivelford and find a house."

Miss Yard was delighted when Nellie informed her that the golden age of tea and talk was about to be restored; and she blessed Percy with such tenderness that her nephew felt compelled to make her a most liberal offer.

"You know, Aunt, the furniture in this house belongs to me. It was left to George, and I bought it from him for two hundred pounds. Don't you think the best plan would be for you to buy it from me for—shall we say—one hundred and fifty pounds? I lose and you gain, but that's as it should be."

"What an excellent idea!" cried Miss Yard. "Nellie, bring my cheque-book."

"You cannot afford to spend so much money, especially as we have a move before us," said Nellie quietly.

"Oh, I'll take a hundred pounds," said Percy.

"Miss Sophy cannot afford that either."

"That's what she always says, but I tell her I can afford it," said Miss Yard crossly.

Percy began to feel uncomfortable, as this was the first time his golden goose had been prohibited from egg laying. He made up his mind that Nellie was developing into an offensive young person; honest no doubt, and admirably suited to control Miss Yard; but with mistaken notions as to the dignity of a nephew and trustee. He sought, therefore, a secret interview with the young lady, in order that he might caution her against any further opposition, and remind her that in all financial matters his word must be the last; and this interview was granted very willingly.

"Sit down, please," he began, when they had entered the dining room.

"If you stand, I shall too," replied Nellie, who was holding a small article wrapped in paper.

"Just as you like," said Percy. "Is that Miss Yard's passbook?"

"No," she replied. "But if you want to see the passbook I will fetch it. Miss Sophy has a little over two hundred pounds at present."

"Another dividend is due next month. My aunt is quite able to pay a hundred pounds for the furniture."

"The question is," said Nellie, "to whom does the furniture belong?"

"To me, of course."

"Have you what the lawyers call a good title?"

"I hope you are not going to be impertinent, Miss Blisland," said Percy sharply.

"I know Mrs. Drake left the furniture to Mr. George," she continued, thankful of her promise not to mention those numerous scraps of paper.

"And I bought the stuff from him."

"With Miss Sophy's money."

"What has that to do with you? I can borrow from my aunt, and of course she does not expect me to repay the money."

"But I expect it. I manage her affairs, and I tell you plainly this borrowing must cease. I shall not allow Miss Sophy to pay you a single penny for the furniture, because it is hers already," said Nellie, with all the coldness of a magistrate sentencing a poacher.

"The little devil! You had better keep your mouth shut, or I may be tempted to say something rude. I don't want to forget I am talking to a young woman. You have just got to do what I tell you," blustered Percy.

"But I decline," said Nellie sweetly.

"Then you can look out for another job. I shall tell Hunter I have dismissed you for gross impertinence. That's all I have to say. You may go now."

"Thank you," she said. "But I haven't finished yet. I want to know what is going to be done about the furniture."

"I have nothing more to say to you."

"You must tell Miss Sophy, and she will consult me. So I may as well hear your decision at once."

"I shall have a sale," replied Percy. "My aunt can buy new furniture when she gets to Drivelford. After all, it's not so very much more expensive than moving it."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said Nellie.

Again Percy was tempted to say something rude; and again he yielded. Then an explanation flashed across his mind and he began to laugh.

"I see what it is! My aunt has promised to leave you as much as she can—"

"Then why should I object to her buying the furniture?"

"All I know is you won't get it. I shall visit the nearest auctioneer tomorrow—"

"It's time we changed the subject. I believe this is your property," interrupted Nellie, holding out the packet wrapped in paper. "Do you think it fair to ask Miss Sophy to pay for the furniture twice over, when you have just come into two thousand pounds?" she added.

"Who told you that?" cried Percy, snatching the packet and tearing off the covering. "My pocketbook! You stole it from my room. You have been through my letters. You are the most unscrupulous young woman!"

"We had better not talk about stealing. Perhaps you remember sitting in the garden with Miss Lee yesterday evening. You did not come in until dark, and you were so much engaged in discussing your plans that you forgot to bring in the chairs. You also forgot your pocketbook. Kezia found it and gave it to me. Now I return it."

"After turning it inside out," he muttered, dropping the lion's hide and assuming the calfskin.

"I have not even opened it," she replied.

"Then how do you know I have come into two thousand pounds?"

"A gentleman called Crampy told me."

"Crampy! He couldn't tell you—he wouldn't!"

"It must have been one of the parrots then," said Nellie gleefully. "Let me tell you a story! Once upon a time there was an idle gentleman who had made up his mind never to work for his living, because he owned a pair of Chinese vases which were supposed to be priceless. This gentleman had a cousin, who knew the vases were exceedingly valuable, and, as he was a bad man, in fact a terribly unscrupulous man," said Nellie, opening her eyes widely.

"Here, I say! You stop that!" bellowed Percy.

"I'm having my revenge for being called a little devil," she said gaily. "As this cousin was a thorough scoundrel, he determined to grab the vases, so he went to another unscrupulous man called Crampy and told him, if he could get the vases cheaply from the idle gentleman, he should have half the profit. Crampy agreed, visited the gentleman, saw that the vases were genuine, and offered him a thousand pounds. The offer was refused and Crampy went away, beaten on the first round. His next step was to send the idle gentleman a list of collectors who could be trusted; and this was followed by a visit from an American millionaire, Josiah P. Jenkins, who in his own domestic circle was generally known as Bill Sawdye."

Percy forgot himself and swore.

"The story is not very clear at this point, but it appears Bill Sawdye was a sort of handyman employed by Crampy for dirty little jobs like this. He offered the idle gentleman two thousand pounds for the vases. This was accepted, Bill paid the money, and took the things away."

"I don't want to hear any more," muttered Percy, gulping like a fish.

"But I must have the satisfaction of showing you how well up I am in the latest criminal news," said Nellie. "Next day Bill sent back the vases, swearing they were forgeries, and assuring him Crampy was the last hope. The idle gentleman communicated at once with Crampy, agreeing to accept his offer. Crampy paid the thousand pounds and went off with the vases. He sold them for five thousand, and that left four thousand to be divided between the wicked cousin and himself. It was understood that Crampy should pay Bill and all expenses. These two scoundrels expect to live happily ever after, but I'm sure they won't," concluded Nellie.

"I was a fool to have kept Crampy's letter. But what right had you to take it out of my pocketbook and read it?" growled Percy.

"I told you I never looked inside your pocketbook, but you left it unfastened, and there was a good deal of wind in the night. This morning, when I went out to pick sweet-peas, I saw a letter blown against the sticks. I glanced at it out of ordinary curiosity, I read on out of interest, and I finished it out of duty."

"Now you can hand it over," said Percy sulkily.

"I intend to keep it for the present. I may even have to send it on to Mr. George."

"He can't do anything. It was a trick, but a perfectly straightforward business trick. Crampy made an offer, and he accepted it."

"Mr. George is a stronger man than you, though he does pretend to have a weak back. If he knew about this, and could get at you, I believe he would break your head. He would write to Hunter anyhow, tell Miss Lee and all her family—"

"Do you know his address?"

"Yes, and I can bring him here tomorrow; and I will too, if you refuse to make over the furniture to Miss Sophy. That is only fair, as she has paid for it."

"If I consent to make my aunt a present of the furniture?" suggested Percy.

"Then I promise not to mention the matter to Mr. George."

"All right. I'll tell Hunter to draw up a deed of gift. Of course you understand it would be useless telling George, as he cannot recover the vases or make any claim against me?"

"Then why are you clearing out of the country?"

"The soil of Tasmania is said to be ideal for—"

"Fugitives from justice," finished Nellie.

"Emmie, my darling," said Percy, a few minutes after this interview, "I feel quite certain there is something wrong with the drains. I shall tell aunt we are leaving in the morning."

"Percy is so wonderfully unselfish," said Miss Yard to Nellie that evening. "He has made me a present of all the furniture; and tomorrow he is going to find me a new home."

CHAPTER XV

A NEW HOUSE AND THE SAME OLD FURNITURE

Miss Yard became uncontrollable, almost dangerous, when Percy wrote informing her he had discovered a house situated upon high ground, quite fifty feet above the meadows through which the Drivel percolated. The garden soil was a singularly fertile gravel; the view, which was monotonous, consisting chiefly of mole heaps, was fortunately blotted out by lichened apple trees; while the principal reception room had been designed, in his opinion, with a view to knitting parties; and a retired Archdeacon had quite recently passed away in the best bedroom.

The old lady craved for Drivelford delights every hour of the day. She escaped constantly from the garden to begin the first of the hundred miles which separated her from such a respectable abode. When imprisoned in the parlour, she wrote a quantity of letters to old friends, most of whom had travelled far outside the radius of the postal union, inviting them to her first tea party at the Lodge, Drivelford. The name of the house was really Wistaria Lodge; but Percy had recommended the shorter form as less of a committal.

"Percy must live with us; he will enjoy the river. Don't you remember the gentlemen, in long coats and round hats, who used to sit all day smoking and tasting something out of jars? Percy would like that," she said merrily.

"Mr. Taverner is now a married man, and by this time he is a thousand miles away. I suppose you are referring to Mr. George," said Nellie.

"Of course I mean George. Why don't you listen, child? He can sit by the river with the rest of the gentlemen. He can hand round the cakes, and talk to the ladies. Give nice things, and say nice things. I wonder if somebody told me that, or whether I invented it. I used to be clever once; twenty years ago I could have told you what Wistaria meant."

"It's a creeper," explained Nellie. "But Mr. Taverner as good as says there isn't one."

"I'm glad of that. I do not like creeping things. Now I'm going to write to George. My memory is wonderfully good today, and yet I cannot remember the name of the lady he married."

"My memory is better than yours, but I cannot remember it either," laughed Nellie. "When Mr. George marries, I shall expect to hear your banns read out."

"I could have married once," declared Miss Yard. "He was a curate with such a funny face, and his nose was just like a cork."

"Why didn't you?" asked Nellie.

"I think there was some impediment. I rather fancy he took to comic songs, or perhaps he forgot to mention the matter. Why did George go away, if he never means to get married?"

"That's a long story, which I cannot tell you now, as I must get on with the packing. Don't you write to Mr. George. Leave that to me."

"He is coming with us," cried Miss Yard.

"He is not," said Nellie.

She went out, locking the door lest Miss Yard should commence one of her perambulations towards Drivelford, murmuring to herself:

"Kezia goes with us, so there will be no trouble with her; but Bessie, of course, stays with her husband. Whatever will she and Robert say—and do—when we begin to move the furniture? George must come back. He's pretty artful, and perhaps he'll suggest a plan."

The artfulness of George was a thing to be reckoned with, so, when Nellie wrote, she did not mention that the furniture was now the legal property of Miss Yard; but merely informed him they were leaving Highfield, and requested him to return as soon as possible.

She had hardly finished this letter when Kezia entered the room, seated herself in the most comfortable chair, as prospective mistress of all she surveyed, and announced her intention of getting to the bottom of everything.

"I don't know what's going on, but there's something being kept back what I have a right to know. Who stole my things, Miss Nellie? Who come into this house, when me and Bess wur sitting in the kitchen, and took my musical box, and my silver candlesticks, what dear Mrs. Drake left me—snatched 'em out of my hand, as you might say? Mr. George had gone away, so it couldn't be him. It warn't nobody here. It warn't the Brocks, they ses. That musical box wur so heavy the dear Captain couldn't lift it without saying something Mrs. Drake wur sorry vor. And it went off avore my face as if 'twur smoke."

"I'm just as much puzzled as you," said Nellie. "Perhaps the policeman will tell us all about it when he comes home."

"I've got a fancy he took the things himself. He's got a way of hanging about after dark what I don't like," said Kezia. "I ha' never trusted policeman, since one kissed me when I was a young gal. 'Twas ten o'clock at night, and I wur standing by the gate—and then he begged my pardon, said he'd mistook the house, and 'twas the gal next door he meant to kiss. You can't trust them, miss. They ses he's gone to run in a farmer whose place got burnt down, but it's my belief he's gone to sell my candlesticks."

"You mustn't say such things," cried Nellie.

"And what's all this about going away? Mr. Percy come here, and I heard 'en tell about finding a house, and Miss Sophy does nought 'cept worry about packing and getting off, and her talks all day about a place called Drivelford. Nobody tells me nothing about it."

"Miss Sophy has told you a great deal."

"I don't pay no attention to what she ses. Mrs. Drake said Miss Sophy wur to die here, and be put away in Highfield churchyard, and nothing was to be touched in her lifetime."

"But surely Miss Sophy can please herself!"

"Mrs. Drake said I wur to look after Miss Sophy," muttered Kezia.

"And so you shall. We are going away, as Miss Sophy really ought to live in a place where she can see a few people. We have taken a house in Drivelford, which is where she used to live, and we shall go there some time this month. Kezia, I want you not to mention this to anyone, not even to Bessie," said Nellie impressively.

"Well, I never!" gasped Kezia. "I fancied we should never be going away from here, and I don't think it's right. I'm sure Mrs. Drake wouldn't like it. What sort of a place is this Drivelford?"

"Oh, it's quite a bright little town, and a lot of old people go there to live because the death rate is only seven and a half in a thousand."

"What do that mean?" asked Kezia.

"Statistics are beyond me, but I suppose if means that out of a thousand people only seven and a half die."

"What happens to the old folk what don't die? How long do the person what half dies bide like that? Do he get better or worse? How be us to know whether me, and you, and Miss Sophy, won't be among the seven? I can't sense the meaning of it."

"It does seem rather hard to explain, especially as Drivelford has the biggest cemetery I ever saw in my life. You will like the place, Kezia. There are plenty of houses and rows of shops—one very big one, called Field, Stanley, and Robinson, where you can buy anything."

"I'd like to be among a few shops," said Kezia more cheerfully. "Ain't Stanley the name of that dreadful woman what came to Black Anchor?"

"I believe that was the name, but it is quite a common one. There are no Stanleys in Drivelford anyhow; but there are three churches and two chapels."

"That'll keep us busy on Sundays," said Kezia delightedly.

"And there's an electric theatre."

"What's that?" asked Kezia suspiciously.

"A place where they show pictures."

"I won't go there. I've heard a lot of loud talk about them places. I heard of a young woman who went into one, and was never seen again. That Stanley woman came from an electric theatre, where there was singing and dancing and showing their legs, you may depend. Ah, they'll be weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth some day. Is there a dentist in Drivelford?"

"Yes, and several undertakers, and a huge lunatic asylum," cried Nellie.

"Well, perhaps it won't be so bad. There's nothing to cheer a body in Highfield. I'll try to put up with it, vor the sake of dear Mrs. Drake. She said I wur never to leave Miss Sophy. Poor Bessie'll fret herself into a decline when she hears I'm agoing away vor ever."

"Mind you don't tell her. I know you two are great friends, but directly Bessie hears we are going to move the furniture, she and Robert will be over here claiming all sorts of things."

"So they will," said Kezia uneasily. "I don't mind about Bessie—she's welcome to anything I don't want—but Robert's been talking a bit too sharp lately. I can't lay a hand on anything in the kitchen without him saying it belongs to Bessie, and telling me to be careful how I touches it."

"If it comes to the worst, we might let them have the mummy. Miss Sophy doesn't really care for it," suggested Nellie.

"They ain't agoing to have he. I wouldn't part wi' the dear old stuffed gentleman, not vor fifty pounds," cried Kezia.

"Oh dear!" sighed Nellie. "I can see very well we are in for a battle—feather beds torn in pieces—carpets rent asunder—you and Bessie tugging at opposite ends of Mrs. Drake's sofa. But suppose Robert brings a crowd!"

"I won't say a word," promised Kezia, breathing heavily with excitement. "They shan't know we'm going vor ever till the vans come. I suppose us couldn't move the things on a dark night, same as they does in towns?"

"Right under Bessie's window!" exclaimed Nellie. "Why, it will take them a whole day merely to pack the things."

"Robert won't let a thing be took. He ha' said so many a time. 'Not a stick, Kezia, is to go out of the house,' he says, 'unless I takes it.' Whatever shall us do, Miss Nellie?"

"We had better wait until Mr. George comes. Then, if he cannot suggest anything, I shall have to write and ask Mr. Hunter to come down and look after Miss Sophy's interests."

"But the furniture don't belong to she," objected Kezia.

"At all events she has a life interest in it," Nellie reminded her.

"Sure enough. Mrs. Drake said it wur to belong to Miss Sophy while she lived, but no longer. I suppose I'll have to see about letting the house now," Kezia remarked, gazing yearningly at the oleographs. "I did think once of living here, when Miss Sophy wur took, but it's too big vor me, and I'd feel lonely here. Besides, I wouldn't want to bring back the furniture. I ought to get thirty pounds vor it, and that's a nice bit coming in every year. Perhaps I might sell it, but I fancy Mrs. Drake wouldn't like me to do that. What would you do, if the place wur yours, Miss Nellie—would you let or sell it?"

The girl seized her letter and fled, being far too kindly a little coward to inform Kezia that the house belonged to George. She looked into the parlour, where Miss Yard was singing away happily and, after bidding her to go on with her warbles for another ten minutes, she ran out of the house; but hardly had turned towards the post office when a voice called from the opposite direction. Nellie turned, shading her eyes, seeing nothing at first because she was staring into the glow of the sunset; and then two figures advanced towards her—the policeman and George Drake.

"I was just going to post a letter to you. Whatever has made you turn up again?" she cried.

"The bad shilling has saved you a good penny stamp," replied George. "I seemed to have been away quite long enough and, as my lodgings were jolly dull, I decided to accept Aunt Sophy's invitation to live in my own house again. I ought never to have gone, for as soon as I was out of the house—what do you think the policeman has been telling me?"

"About the robbery."

"How that miserable Robert stole my things, while Bessie kept Kezia in the kitchen."

"That's right, miss. I guessed how it was at once, but couldn't say anything till I'd made sure. I was just coming to tell you when I met Mr. Drake," said the new sergeant, stroking his moustache complacently.

"It doesn't pay to be a rascal here," said George. "This policeman has caught a farmer burning down his house, and Robert making off with my property, within the last few days. I hope it won't be long before he gets a murder. I don't mind telling him to his face that he deserves a double murder and suicide."

The constable expressed his gratitude for this unsolicited testimonial, and added, "Mr. Drake thinks, miss, I'd better not go any further in the matter, as there seems to be a sort of doubt as to who owns the furniture."

"There is no doubt whatever. I own the things, and I'll see about getting them back without troubling you," said George.

"Right, sir!" Then the policeman bade them good evening and went his way.

Immediately they were alone, George burst out excitedly, "Nellie, there's another girl!"

"In your case? Well, nobody's jealous," she replied.

"A prettier one than ever, but very young, in short skirts, with her hair down, and her name's Teenie," he continued, without even hearing her comment.

"I think you've come back perfectly crazy," observed Nellie.

"If you don't believe me, you can just go to Black Anchor and find out for yourself."

"Oh, you mean another girl there!" she exclaimed, flushing angrily, and adding, "I don't want to hear any more—but how do you know?"

"She travelled in the same carriage with me, and I thought what a dear—I mean passable little thing she was. Directly the train stopped I saw Sidney, and he called out, 'Here I am, Teenie darling!' And the little girl fairly shouted, 'Oh, Sidney dear, how brown you are!' Then she jumped out, and they kissed and hugged. I never saw anything more disgraceful in my life. I sat back in the carriage so that Sidney shouldn't see me. I suppose they have driven through the village by this time, unless they have the decency to wait until it's dark."

"Where's your luggage?" asked Nellie rather sharply, but determined to change the subject.

"First the painted lady, then Dolly, now Teenie! Thirty, then twenty, and now fourteen! The next will be twelve, and after that they'll be coming in perambulators. My word, young Sidney is a patriarch!"

"Hold your tongue," cried Nellie, more sharply than she had ever spoken in her life.

"I'm sorry, but my feelings ran away with me—she was such a pretty youngster—but of course it's fearfully sad. I had to walk from the station, as I couldn't get a conveyance: the carrier can fetch my box. What's the news? Has Percy been?"

"He came, saw me, and fled," replied the girl more amiably.

"I knew he was a coward, but I didn't suppose you could frighten any one."

"He wanted Miss Sophy to buy the furniture. I told him it was hers already. He blustered and threatened; I stood like a tor. He was so rude that I lost my temper; and when I am angry I can frighten anyone. He yielded and ran. The news," continued Nellie, "is that we are going to run too."

"For a change of air. I'll come with you."

"A permanent change. We are going back to Drivelford. The house is taken, and the problem before me is how to move the furniture."

"So you wrote asking me to come back and do the dirty work?"

"If you like to put it that way."

"Aunt Sophy has no right to leave without giving notice. She is my tenant for life. If she breaks her contract I shall claim the furniture—it is mine really, as Percy didn't give me a fair price, and now he's gone to Tasmania he can't interfere. I have always regarded the furniture as belonging to me in spite of Percy's interference. Of course, when I say to me, I mean to us."

"Don't worry," she said. "Mr. Taverner has signed a deed of gift making over everything in the house to Miss Sophy; and, as she has signed a will in my favour, the furniture should come to me eventually—if Kezia and the Mudges don't grab it all."

"So you made Percy give my furniture to Aunt Sophy. Percy, who has never given away anything in his life except a bad cigar!"

"Marriage has improved him."

"He wasn't married when he came here."

"He was on the brink. I persuaded him that, as Miss Sophy had paid for the things, she ought to have them."

"That argument would simply slide off his back. You said he threatened you, and, from what I know of him, it's fairly certain that he swore at you. Is it likely he would threaten one moment, and give way the next? His young woman may have changed his vile nature—I hope she has—but you can't reform the stripes off a zebra. You found out something about him—you made him confess how he got hold of that money he wrote telling us about, and why he was clearing out of the country. He has defrauded the Yard estate, and Hunter helped him. The next thing we shall hear is that Hunter has gone to study the business habits and professional morals of the Esquimaux. Out with it, Nellie, or I shall suffer from a horrible suspicion that Percy has squared you."

"I have spoken nothing but the truth, and you won't squeeze anything more out of me," she said.

"When a fellow stays in lodgings," said George, "he must either read novels or go mad. I have been reading a quantity of novels, and they convinced me that women are deceitful beings."

"They have to protect themselves against the perfidy of men," cried Nellie.

"Remember poor innocent Adam! He was all right as long as he was engaged to Eve; but what happened when he married her?"

"It's a shame that story was ever invented."

"He wouldn't have eaten the apples; peaches and bananas were good enough for him," George continued.

"But the serpent started it, and the serpent was the devil in disguise, and the devil is a fallen angel, and all angels, as you told me once, are gentlemen. So the male sex is the most deceitful after all."

"Why can't you stick to the subject?" said George sourly.

"Certainly," laughed Nellie. "This business about the furniture must be settled finally one way or the other. Are the Mudges to have anything, and, if not, how are they to be prevented from taking just what they want?"

"Robert and Bessie are not to take a stick from the house, or a stone from the garden; and they must give back the things they have stolen," replied George.

"Are those scraps of paper worth anything at all?" she demanded.

"They are as useless as agreements between nations."

"Then why don't you tell Kezia?"

"Because the law is so slippery."

"That means you are not certain."

"I am quite positive; but how can I be responsible for judicial errors? Kezia may put her case into the hands of some shady lawyer—worse even than Hunter—and some stupid court may make a mistake in her favour. Kezia is going with you, so there will be no trouble with her while Aunt Sophy lives."

"But it's not fair to keep her in ignorance."

"It's supposed to be a state of bliss."

"Oh, I can't argue with you. Will you answer one question properly?"

"I'll try," said George.

"How are we to rescue the furniture from the Mudges?"

"If they don't know you are going to move, and have no suspicions," began George.

"They have none," said Nellie.

"And are not told."

"They won't be."

"Then you can leave it to me," said George.

CHAPTER XVI

GEORGE TAKES CONTROL

Miss Yard shuffled contentedly downstairs, nicely dressed for her evening meal, which usually consisted of thin soup, a milk pudding, and boiling water; peeped into the parlour, drew a deep breath and peeped again, uttered a few exclamations, then shuffled back to the stairs, called Nellie, and announced:

"There's a great big man in the house!"

"It's only old George," whispered the irreverent girl.

"I don't know anybody of that name; but there used to be several King Georges, and they were followed by William, and then came our dear good Victoria, who was taken in the prime of life just when she seemed to have settled down, and after that I don't remember anything," said Miss Yard.

"George is the name of our present King—and of about ninety per cent, of his loyal subjects," said Nellie.

"What's he doing here? This isn't Windsor Castle," stammered Miss Yard. "Has he called for a subscription? Gentlemen who come here always want subscriptions. Does he want to hide? I do hope there's not a revolution. Go and show him into a cupboard, Nellie, and tell him how loyal we are."

"My dear lady," laughed Nellie, "you are clean muddled, confoozled, and astern of the times. This gentleman is your much respected relative, George Drake."

"Why couldn't you say so at once, without talking a lot of wicked rubbish about a revolution and the Royal Family hiding on Dartmoor?" demanded Miss Yard snappishly.

"Of all the injustice!" sighed Nellie; but the old lady had left her. Toddling at full speed into the parlour, she embraced George, and said how well she remembered him, though twenty years had passed since they had met. "I knew you at once, directly I looked into the room I recognised your stooping shoulders and your bald head," she added, looking at a portrait on the wall and describing that accurately.

"Nellie couldn't make you out at all," she continued, "but then she was a baby when you went away. Nellie, dear, where are you? Come and be kissed by your uncle. I told you he would come back some day."

"The soup is on the table," cried Nellie as she fled.

The mind of Miss Yard roamed in a free and happy state about the nineteenth century, enabling her, during the progress of a meal, to pass through a number of different periods. While taking her soup and sipping her boiling water, she informed the others that the first railway had recently been constructed, and it ran between Highfield and Drivelford, and for her part she was very glad of it, as she thought it was quite time the coaches were done away with, and she fully intended travelling by the railway if Mr. Stephenson would let her.

"Whoever is Stephenson?" inquired George, who ought to have known better.

"It's wonderful what things she does remember," replied Nellie. "She would forget me if I left her tomorrow; yet she can remember the man who invented railways."

"I think you had better go tomorrow," said George, taking the cue.

"Yes, I should like to be one of the first," Miss Yard admitted.

"Why have you put that idea into her head? It may stick, and then she'll drive me crazy," scolded Nellie; it being perfectly safe to speak openly before the old lady.

"Send her off with Kezia at once," urged George.

"I must go with her."

"Then take Kezia too. If she stays she will split to Bessie. Even if she tries her hardest not to, she won't be able to help herself. You can't keep anything a secret for long in a place like this. You clear off, and I'll go into lodgings—and read more novels."

"Won't that look queer?"

"It would if Kezia stayed: it won't if she goes. I can't put up here with nobody to look after me."

"And you will undertake to move the furniture?"

"I will," he promised.

"Very well," she murmured after a pause. "We can't possibly get away tomorrow, as it will take me a day to pack; but we will go the day after."

"Oh, well, it's no good bothering now," said Miss Yard in a voice of bitter resignation, pushing back her plate and kicking at her footstool. "They've started without us."

George occupied his old bedroom, positively for the last time, and in the morning went out to wrestle with his difficulties. His reception by the villagers was colder than ever because, during his absence, the Dismal Gibcat had made a speech directed mainly against the man who had

dared to interfere with local progress. The Dismal Gibcat preferred to be in a minority of one, but such was his gift of eloquence that a single speech sometimes swung the majority over to his side; which was an embarrassing position only to be escaped from by repudiating his former opinions. This speech had done its work, as George was presently to discover when the Dumpy Philosopher and the Wallower in Wealth approached him with questions concerning the Dartmoor Railway Company.

"That scheme is done for. It was one of my uncle's bubbles, but I have pricked it," he replied, groping his way back to popularity.

"Us wur told a lot of American gentlemen wanted to build the railway wi' something they called a syndicate," said the Wallower in Wealth.

"I told 'em the country is hardly flat enough," said George.

"It wur flat enough vor Captain Drake, and it wur flat enough vor you when you fetched that millionaire down along to look at it," said the Dumpy Philosopher.

"That's all a mistake. Mr. Jenkins came here to buy a pair of vases," said George, speaking the truth with disastrous results; for the two elders were not quite such fools as to believe a gentleman would travel from London to Highfield for the sake of purchasing a shilling's worth of crockery.

"They'm out o' cloam in London, I fancy," remarked the Wallower in Wealth.

"And in America," added the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Mr. Jenkins is a collector of vases," explained George.

"He never come to look at mine. There's a proper lot o' cloam in Highfield, and he didn't crave to see it. Us ha' heard he come to build the railway, and you stopped him from adoing it."

"Well, perhaps I did," replied George, trying to score a point by lying. "I know you are all against the scheme."

"Us wur agin it very strong, because it had never been properly explained," said the Wallower in Wealth. "Us hadn't been told they meant to put a terminus in Highfield. I ha' been to terminuses. 'Tis places where trains start from."

"And where 'em pulls up," added the Dumpy Philosopher.

"Where they starts from and where they pulls up again. It don't make no difference. I ha' started from terminuses, and I ha' stopped in 'em, so I knows what I'm telling about. A terminus brings a lot of money into a place. When they makes a terminus a town is soon built all round it. There's one or two in Highfield who ha' seen Waterloo, and that's a terminus. And they ses 'tis wonderful what a big town ha' been built all round it. A hundred years ago it wur just a ploughed field, where that tremenjus big battle was fought what made us all free volk vor ever; and now 'tis all terminus as far as you can see. That American gentleman come here wi' his syndicate...."

"'Tis something vor levelling the ground, I fancy," said the Dumpy Philosopher, when his colleague paused.

"He would ha' levelled the ground as flat as your hand, and made the terminus; and we would ha' sold our land vor what us like to ask. Now you've ruined us, sir. You ha' stopped the terminus—and you stole my musical box," said the Wallower in Wealth, combining his grievances in one brief indictment.

"You're talking like a child. How can I steal my own property?" cried George angrily.

"Mrs. Drake left all your furniture to Kezia," shouted the Wallower in Wealth.

"And the rest of it to Bessie," added the Dumpy Philosopher.

"They ha' got paper to prove it, Robert ses."

"Why did you offer me money for the musical box, then?" asked George.

"To try your honesty," replied the Wallower in Wealth. "And you warn't honest. You wouldn't take my money because it warn't big enough. Then you go and steal the musical box, wi' a lot of other things, from Kezia."

"And from Bessie Mudge," added the Dumpy Philosopher.

"And if you don't get sent to prison—"

"It won't be for the same reason that you aren't put away in a lunatic asylum," George finished; wondering, as he went on to engage a lodging, how it was his uncle had succeeded in ruling this community of wranglers.

A devout widow let religious rooms opposite the churchyard: they were religious because tables were piled with theological tomes, and walls were covered by black and white memorial cards, comforting texts, and discomposing pictures of Biblical tragedies in yellow and scarlet which helped to warm the house in chilly weather. Towards this dwelling George made his way, knowing the importance of being respectable, although he could not help feeling he had done

nothing to deserve those pictures. But presently he swung round, and went off in the opposite direction. An idea had come to him: he remembered the Art Dyers.

That name described a married couple; not a business of giving a new colour to old garments; but the vocation of bread baking, cake making, and specialising in doughnuts. Arthur Dyer was the stingiest man in Highfield; he gave away no crumbs of any kind; had any one asked a stone of him, he would have refused it, but would assuredly have put that stone into his oven and baked it, hoping to see some gold run out. He went to church once a week, no entrance fee being demanded, and always put two fingers into the offertory bag, but whether he put anything else was doubtful. He was also Robert's employer. Mrs. Dyer had learnt in the school of her husband until she was able to give him lectures in economy; and in times past she had implored George, out of his charity, to drive the wolf from their door by finding her a lodger.

"She will ask a stiff price, and I shall get nothing to eat except bread puddings," he muttered, "but the game will be worth starvation."

George might also have remarked with poetic melancholy he had lived to receive his warmest welcome in a lodging house, when Mrs. Dyer had taken him in, showed him a bed, certain to be well aired as it stood above the oven, and promised to be much more than an ordinary mother in her attentions. The rooms appeared somewhat barren, but the air was excellent, being impregnated with an odour of hot fat which was a dinner in itself, and might very possibly be charged as one.

A slight difficulty arose regarding terms, owing to a sudden increase in the price of commodities and a shortage of domestic labour. Everything had got so dear Mrs. Dyer could not understand how people lived: it seemed almost wicked of them to make the attempt, but then a funeral had got to be such a luxury it was perhaps cheaper to struggle on. That was what she and her husband were doing from day to day, with everything going up except their income. Luckily they were still able to sell a few doughnuts: people insisted upon them for their tea. The local doctor spoke highly of them, and most of the babies in the parish were brought up on their doughnuts, with a little beer occasionally—the doctor said it helped. After sleeping in that atmosphere Mr. Drake would find one good meal a day—a chop followed by bread-and-butter pudding—would be almost more than he could manage. She did not want to make a profit, but if he could pay five shillings a day, she thought with careful management she might not lose much.

This matter arranged, George returned to Windward House, where the packers were as busy as a hen with one chicken. Miss Yard, feeling she must be doing something, was pinning sheets of newspaper round the mummy. Bessie was hindering Kezia from filling all manner of cases with various ornaments and photographs, which it was the custom to take away for the annual outing, although they were never removed from the boxes. Bessie felt uncomfortable, as it appeared to her Kezia was dismantling the place.

"You don't want to take all them pictures," she said at last.

"I'd feel lonely without 'em," explained Kezia.

"You never took 'em last time you went to the seaside. You'm not going to be away more than two weeks."

"Miss Sophy might fancy to be away a bit longer. I do like to have my little bits o' things round me, wherever I be."

"What's the name of the place you'm going to?"

"Miss Nellie will tell ye. 'Tis worry enough vor me to get ready without bothering where we'm going," replied the harassed Kezia.

"Miss Sophy ses 'tis Drivelford."

"'Tis something like that, I fancy," admitted Kezia, beginning to break down under cross-examination.

"That's where Miss Sophy come from. It ain't seaside."

"A river ain't far off," Kezia muttered.

George had arrived and, hearing these voices, he tramped upstairs to save the situation.

"They are going to Drivelmouth," he said.

"I fancied Miss Nellie said Drivelford," remarked the futile Kezia.

"I know she did, and that's where Miss Sophy come from. Why does she want to go back there again?" Bessie inquired warmly.

"You ought to know by this time it's no use attending to what Miss Yard says. Drivelford is quite a different place from Drivelmouth, which happens to be on the sea just where that beautiful river, the Drivel, runs into it. There's a splendid sandy beach—and it's quite a new place they've just discovered," explained George.

"Seems funny, if 'twas there, they never found it avore," said the suspicious Bessie.

"It has just become popular. It was a little fishing village, and now they are making roads and

building houses because doctors have discovered there's something in the air," George continued.

"That's what Miss Nellie told me. There's an amazing big cemetery, and 'tis a wonderful healthy place," said Kezia.

"You see, doctors recommend the place so highly that old people go there and die. That accounts for the cemetery, which is not really a local affair, for Drivelmouth is the healthiest place in England," said George.

"Miss Nellie ses there be a thousand volks, and seven be took, and one gets paralytics," commented Kezia.

"Drivelmouth is a great place for general paralysis. The paralytics are wheeled up and down the front all day. People go there just to see them," said George recklessly.

"Wish I wur going," Bessie murmured.

"Surely you are not going to take all those things!" George exclaimed, indicating a teaset, dinner service, and a quantity of art pottery.

"That's what I tells her. She don't want all them things away with her," cried Bessie.

"I don't like leaving them behind—wi' thieves breaking into the house to steal. I ha' lost enough already," said Kezia plaintively.

This was a fortunate remark, as it disconcerted Bessie and put a stop to questions, while at the same time it removed her suspicions. It was not surprising that Kezia should wish to take away as much treasure as possible. She would have done the same herself. Still, she did not like to see that dinner service go out of the house. Robert had been about to move that.

"How long be 'em going away for, Mr. George?" she asked presently, when Kezia had gone to gather up more of her possessions.

"That depends on the weather," came the diplomatic answer.

Packing continued steadily: boxes, crates, and hampers were piled up in the hall awaiting transport; Kezia had been prevented from leaking; Miss Yard continually inquired whether the railway was quite finished.

The calm of exhaustion prevailed, when there came a defiant knock upon the front door, and the bell rang like a fire alarm.

"It must be a telegram," said George gravely.

"I hope nothing has happened to Mr. and Mrs. Taverner," said Nellie.

"Why shouldn't something happen to them?" George muttered.

"What do they say? Is there any hope?" cried Miss Yard.

"We don't know anything yet," replied Nellie.

"The railway has gone wrong. I was afraid it would—they were so venturesome. You were reading about letters coming without wires."

"Telegrams," corrected Nellie, listening to the voices outside.

"Yes, the postmen are very wonderful. You said they were using the stuff we eat in puddings, tapioca—or was it macaroni?"

"You mean Marconi wireless messages, Aunt," said George.

"I always mean what I say," replied the lady curtly.

In the meantime Kezia and Bessie had advanced together, preparing themselves to face the police inspector, but hoping it would be nothing worse than the tax collector. Bessie opened the door, while Kezia sidled behind her. The next moment they both groaned with horror.

"Is Miss Blisland in?" asked a pert young voice.

"She might be," replied Bessie hoarsely.

"Ask her please if she'll come out and speak to me."

"Oh, my dear, shut the door and bolt it!" Kezia whispered.

This was done, and they presented themselves in the parlour with woeful faces.

"It's her!" Bessie announced. "She wants to see you. She's standing on our doorstep!"

"Who?" cried Nellie.

"The last of 'em—the one that come yesterday. She didn't tell us her name."

"She's ashamed of it," said Kezia.

"Perhaps Mr. George'll go and send her off," suggested Bessie.

"Who are you talking about?" asked Nellie impatiently.

"The wench from Black Anchor. She ain't no more than a child, but the way her stared on us wur awful."

"Sent a shiver through me—so bold and daring!" Kezia added.

"Miss Teenie, is it?" George muttered. "Sit down, Nellie; I'll go and talk to her."

"I can do my own business, thanks," said Nellie, going towards the door.

"I'll come with you anyhow," he said.

"You will do nothing of the kind," replied the young lady coldly.

Out she went, while Miss Yard stood trembling on the hearthrug, and Bessie listened at the keyhole, and Kezia sniffed beside the window. George was trying to persuade himself that no young woman would venture to trifle with his noble nature.

"Is it very bad?" asked Miss Yard.

"Yes, miss," replied Bessie. "She's brought her in—she's taken her into the dining room—she's shut the door. Oh, Miss, they're laughing!"

"I never did think Miss Nellie would go like this," Kezia lamented.

"She was here just now," said Miss Yard simply.

"Yes, miss, but she's gone now—gone to the bad."

"What's it all about?" asked the old lady, appealing to George who seemed to be the only comforter.

"I am sorry to say Nellie has got into bad company—into the very worst company—and we shall have to be very stern with her."

"Yes, indeed we must, or she will lose all her money. I know what these companies are. I get a lot of circulars, and I always tell Nellie she is to burn them," said Miss Yard in sore distress.

"Just listen to 'em talking!" cried Bessie.

"I can't abear much more," Kezia wailed.

The next minute Miss Yard was struggling towards the door, rejecting the advice of George, pushing aside the arms of Bessie; declaring that nobody should prevent her from dragging Nellie out of the pit of financial ruin. She stumbled across the hall, banged at the door of the dining room until it was opened to her; and then came silence, but presently the old lady's queer voice could be heard distinctly, and after that her bursts of merry laughter. Miss Yard had fallen into this very worst company herself. Kezia and Bessie crept silently toward the kitchen. The whole house was polluted. George searched for flies to kill.

"Oh, I say, what tons of luggage!" cried a childish voice.

"Yes, we are off first thing in the morning," said Nellie; and then followed some whispering, with a few words breaking out here and there:

"Miss Yard wants to be among her old friends again ... a great secret, you know" ... "of course I shan't tell anyone, but Sidney will be" ... "I'm so sorry, but it can't be helped" ... "there's such a thing as the post" ... "good-bye! I'm so glad you came."

The door shut, George jumped out of the window in time to see the young girl racing down the lane; then he returned to the house and asked sternly, "What's the meaning of this?"

"Really and truly I don't know," replied Nellie. "But I am at least satisfied that Highfield needs a missionary."

"Now you are shuffling. You invited that miserable little creature into my house, you encouraged her to cross my doorstep, I heard you laughing and talking as if you were enjoying yourself. You actually gave away the secret about Drivelford. Come outside!" said George, as if he meant to fight.

"I mean you can't believe a word that Highfield says," she explained, following obediently. "That little girl's as good as gold."

"To begin with, who is she?" George demanded, scowling like the Dismal Gibcat.

"That is more than I can tell you. She told me her name was Christina—sometimes Chrissie—but those who love her generally call her Teenie."

"What did she want?"

"She invited me to tea at Black Anchor Farm on Sunday. She also promised to chaperon me."

"The infamous urchin!" groaned George.

"I should have gone," she said steadily.

"Then you must be altogether—absolutely wrong somewhere. Go there to tea! Sit opposite that wicked old man, beside that abandoned youth, and positively touching that shameless child who hasn't got a surname! After all that has passed between us, after all your promises to me, after all that I have done for you—all my kindness and self-sacrifice—you would drink tea out of their teapot, and let yourself be talked about as one of the young women of Black Anchor!"

"My suspicions are not quite gone. But directly I saw little Miss Christina I knew the horrible things we have heard are all lies. She's a young lady. She goes to school at Cheltenham."

"That makes it worse. You know old Brock—he's an ordinary labourer. While Sidney is a common young fellow who can't even speak English. They are not fit to lick the polish off your shoes."

"But then I don't want the polish licked off my shoes; it's enough trouble putting it on. I do not understand the Brocks, and I can't imagine why Miss Teenie wouldn't tell me her whole name. If I could have gone to Black Anchor on Sunday, I might have found out something."

"These Dollies and Teenies, and painted females, are no relations of such common chaps. And I won't have you speaking to any of them."

"Really!" she murmured with great deliberation.

"No, I won't; and they are not to write either—I heard something about the post. Just suppose you had thrown yourself away utterly, suppose you had lowered yourself so fearfully as to have got engaged to this Sidney instead of to a Christian gentleman—how awful it would have been!"

Nellie changed colour and gazed significantly at her left hand, which was unadorned by any lover's circlet.

"You would not only have lost me, which would have been bad enough, but I should have lost the furniture, all my dear uncle's precious antiquities and priceless curios—"

"Which would have been far worse," she added.

"It would have been dreadful. Now I have secured all the furniture to you—"

"I did that for myself; I got it from Mr. Taverner," she interrupted.

"But I advised Aunt Sophy to make her will. Of course I was thinking of myself—we must do that sometimes—but I was quite unselfish in the matter. I knew if the furniture was left to you, it would be the same as—as—"

"Be careful, or you'll spoil the unselfishness," she broke in gently.

"Things have come to a head now," George continued. "You are going away tomorrow, and, of course, you will never see these horrible people again. We must do something, Nellie—we must be reckless, as we are both getting on in life. This is the third of September, and I do think before the month is out we ought to—I mean something should be done. Shall we settle on the last day of the month? I have quite made up my mind to live with Aunt Sophy; it will be good for her, and cheap for us."

"This is what the Americans call a proposition," she murmured.

"Then when she dies, there will be the furniture all round us. And Kezia can go on living with us, imagining that the furniture is hers, until she too departs in peace. We can teach Aunt Sophy how to save money, and show her how to invest it for our benefit. It looks to me as if we'd got the future ready-made."

"Is there anything very serious in all this?" she asked.

"Well, it's not like a bad illness, or any great disaster. It's comfort, happiness, all that sort of thing. When we are in for a jolly good time, we don't regard that as serious."

"But what is to happen on the last day of the month?"

"It has just occurred to me we might do the right thing—obviously the right thing. Don't you think so, Nellie? What's the good of waiting, and wearing ourselves out with ceaseless labour? On the thirty-first of this month, the last of summer, let us make the plunge."

"Do you mean it?" she asked, with a queer little laugh, which was perhaps a trifle spiteful; but then the lover was so very callous.

"I have thought over it a great many times, and I've always arrived at the same conclusion."

"But what do you want me to do on the thirty-first?"

"To go to church."

"I go every Sunday."

"For a special purpose."

"I always have one."

"To hear the service read."

"Will that make any difference to me?"

"Why, of course it will."

"It will change my present B. into a lifelong D.?"

"That's a very artistic way of putting it," said George, rubbing his hands.

"On the thirty-first?"

"It will suit me nicely."

"For the sake of peace and quietness I agree. But I want you to promise one thing—don't waste money over an engagement-ring; as, if you do, I won't wear it."

"That's a splendid idea! But all the same, Nellie, I should never have thought of going to any expense."

"You are so economical. It's the one thing I like about you."

"And the one thing I like about you," said George, not to be outdone in compliments, "is your willingness to listen to good advice."

They parted, with quite a friendly handshake. George went to his bed, and was baked so soundly above the oven that, before he reached Windward House the following morning, Miss Yard and her attendants had departed.

CHAPTER XVII

PLOUGHING THE GROUND

Kezia had locked up the house and given to Bessie possession of the keys; because she had always been left in charge when the family departed to the seaside, having received her commission as holder of the keys from Captain Drake himself in the days when she was growing. Now there was a husband in command, and one who held decided views regarding property. Robert expressed his willingness to undertake the duties of custodian; but, in order that the work might be performed efficiently, he proposed to Bessie that they should close their own cottage and retire into luxurious residence across the road.

So when George called at his own house, which was occupied by caretakers he had not appointed, the doors were locked against him. He was not refused admittance, as that might have looked like an unfriendly act; his presence was simply ignored. Robert, smoking in the parlour, with his feet upon the sofa, heard the knocking; but he struck another match and smiled. Bessie, who was preparing the best bedroom, heard the ringing; but she peeped behind the curtain and muttered, "Can't have him in here taking things."

George retired to his lodgings and stared at the framed advertisements, until he heard Dyer singing as he scoured the oven. The baker had been heard to declare that, if he had not known how to sing, he would have lost his senses long ago owing to the fightings and despondings which beset him. As a matter of fact he did not know how to sing, and those who listened were far more likely to lose their senses. George descended, assured Dyer it was a sin to bake bread with a voice like that, and went on to inquire affectionately after the business.

"Going from bad to worse, sir," came the answer. Dyer was more than a pessimist; he was not content merely to look on the dark side of things, but associated himself with every bit of shadow he could find.

"I don't see how that can be. People may give up meat, they may reduce their clothing; but they must have bread," replied George.

"But they don't want nearly so much as they used to," said Dyer bitterly, "and they looks at anything nowadays avore they takes it. When I started business a healthy working man would finish off two loaves a day; and one's as much as he can manage now. The human race ain't improving, sir; 'tis dying out, I fancy. They used to be thankful vor anything I sold 'em, but now if they finds a button, or a beetle, or a dead mouse in the bread—and the dough will fall over on the floor sometimes—they sends the loaf back and asks vor another gratis. And the population is dwindling away to nought."

"According to the census—" began George.

"Don't you believe in censuses," cried the horrified Dyer. "That's dirty work, sir. Government has a hand in that. If me and you wur the only two left in Highfield parish, they'd put us down, sir, as four hundred souls."

"You have a big sale for your cakes and doughnuts," George suggested.

"I loses on 'em," said the dreary Dyer.

"Then why do you make them?"

"I suppose, sir, 'tis a habit I've got into."

"My uncle used to say he had never tasted better cakes than yours."

"Captain Drake was a gentleman, sir. His appetite belonged to the old school what be passed away vor ever. When he wur alive I could almost make both ends meet. But he gave me a nasty fright once, when he got telling about a tree what grows abroad—bread tree he called it. Told me volks planted it in their gardens, and picked the loaves off as they wanted 'em. 'Twas a great relief to my mind when he said the tree wouldn't be a commercial success in this country because the sun ain't hot enough to bake the bread. Talking about gentlemen, sir, what do you think of the Brocks?"

"A bad lot," said George, wagging his head.

"Sure enough! They make their own bread," whispered the baker.

"I didn't know they went so far as that," replied the properly horrified George.

"Some volks stick at nothing. But is it fair, sir? How be struggling tradesmen to escape ruin when volks break the law—"

"It's not illegal."

"There's Government again! I tell ye how 'tis, sir, Government means to get rid of me, though I never done anything worse than stop my ears when parson prays vor Parliament. I hates Government, sir, and I do wish it wur possible to vote against both parties. If I wur to make my own tobacco, or vizzy wine such as rich volk drink at funerals, they'd put me away in prison. Why ain't it illegal vor volks to make their own bread? I'll tell ye why, sir: 'tis because Government means to do away wi' bakers. They ha' been telling a lot lately about encouraging home industries, and that's how they stir up volks to ruin we tradesmen by making all they want at home."

"You are not ruined yet. Robert declares you are the richest man in Highfield—not that I believe much he says," George remarked, settling down to business.

"Quite right, sir. I ha' learned Robert to bake, but I can't prevent him from talking childish. He'd like to see me out of the business, so that he could slip into the ruins of it. When he sees I'm the richest man in the village he means the poorest. 'Tis just a contrairy way of talking. Captain Drake often looked in to tell wi' me—out of gratitude vor my doughnuts what helped him to sleep, he said—'twur avore he died so sharp like."

"I guessed as much," said George.

"And he used to tell me, if you wanted to make a man real angry you had only to say the opposite of what you meant in the most polite language you could find. He told Robert the like, I fancy."

"My uncle generally found the soft answer a success," said George. "He told me once how another captain once called him 'a bullying old scoundrel with a face like a lobster-salad,' and he replied, 'You're a ewe-lamb.' The other man got madder than ever though, as my uncle said, you can't find anything much softer than a ewe-lamb. But Robert isn't always calling you a rich man. He's in our kitchen every evening, and he talks pretty freely when he has a drop of cocoa in him."

"He ain't got nothing against me. Me and the missus ha' been a father to him," said the baker, with suspicious alacrity.

"He thinks he has a grievance."

"Then I suppose he's still worrying over his honeymoon. A man what's been married years and years ought to be thinking of his future state and his old-age pension. He might as well be asking vor his childhood back again."

"He says you cheated him out of his honeymoon," said George, who knew the story: how Dyer's wedding present to his assistant had been leave of absence, without pay, from Saturday to Monday; coupled with a promise of a week's holiday, with half pay, at some future date when business might be slack; which promise belonged to that fragile order of assurances declaimed so loudly at election time.

"'Tis a lot too late now," said the baker.

"I suppose a deferred honeymoon is better than none at all," George remarked. "Anyhow, Robert and his wife are grumbling a good bit and, as I'm staying here, they asked me to remind you of your promise, business being very slack at present."

"I ha' never known it to be anything else, but 'tis funny it should be picking up a little just now. I got a big order vor cakes this morning, as there's a school treat next week. Me and Robert will be kept very busy all this month—but it's a losing business. There's no profit in cakes, nor yet in bread. There used to be a profit in doughnuts, but that's gone now."

The cautious George said no more, being content with the knowledge that he had given Dyer something to worry about. The baker would certainly not mention the matter so long as Robert kept silent; and Robert had probably forgotten all about the promise, although many months back

George had overheard him assuring Bessie it would be time to think of a new dress when master's wedding present came along.

"One thing is certain: nobody can get the better of me," George chuckled as he left the bakehouse. "I beat Hunter at his own game, I diddled Crampy in his, I scared Percy out of the country—at least that's my belief—and now I'm going to make old Dyer set a trap to catch the furniture snatchers."

The Mudges, unsuspecting treachery, were glittering like two stars of fashion; Robert lolling at ease in the parlour until Bessie summoned him to supper in the dining room. If it was their duty to look after the house, it was also their pleasure to take care of themselves. They did not regard George as either friend or enemy; they despised and pitied a poor fellow who possessed no visible means of support, while attributing his presence in Highfield to a cat-like habit of returning to a house which might have been his had he behaved with propriety.

The only person they feared was Kezia, who certainly did appear to have almost as much right to the Captain's furniture as themselves. This suspicion was in Robert's mind when, the shutters having been closed and the lamps lighted, he stood beside the round table upon which were spread various scraps of paper beginning to show signs of wear and tear.

"If we takes all that Mrs. Drake sees we'm to have, what do Kezia get?" he asked.

"Not much," replied Bessie.

"If Kezia takes all the things Mrs. Drake said she could have, what do we get?" continued Robert.

"Nought," said Bessie.

"When property be left this way, volks sometimes share and share alike; or they sells the stuff, and each takes half the money," continued Robert.

"Kezia won't neither sell nor share. She'll bide quiet till Miss Sophy dies, and then she'll see a lawyer," declared Bessie.

"Our bits o' paper are as gude as hers."

"Kezia would sooner lose everything than see us take any little old bit of stuff. She'm a spiteful toad."

"The nicest thing we can do, Bess, is to go on shifting, one bit now and agin. Kezia won't notice nothing, if us takes 'em gradual."

"Where can us hide them?" asked Bessie. "We can't put 'em over in the cottage. Kezia ain't such a vule as you think. If I wur to take a kitchen spine she'd miss it."

"She never found out about the last lot," Robert reminded her.

"Policeman went away sudden and forgot to tell her. We'll have to shift those things, vor rainy weather'll be starting soon, and that musical box will spoil inside the peatstack."

"I'll get 'em out avore they comes back home; I b'ain't ashamed of claiming what be rightly ours. I told policeman we'd took what belonged to us, and he said 'twas all right this time, but us mustn't do it too often. I'm going to shift a few more pieces across the way in a day or two."

"Best wait till Miss Sophy dies," said Bessie nervously.

"We'll let the big furniture bide till then. Where's Miss Sophy going to be buried?"

"Somewhere in London, she ses. Said she wouldn't be buried here if they paid her vor it."

"That's got it!" cried Robert. "When Kezia goes to the funeral, I'll shift the furniture."

"Don't that seem like trying to get the better of her?"

"Ain't she trying to deprive us of our rightful property? Don't she want to see me and you cut off wi' a fry pan? See what's wrote on this paper—'I want Bessie to have all the furniture in the spare bedroom.' And on this one—'all the furniture in the dining room.' And on this here—'all the stuff in the kitchen.' Ain't that clear?"

"Sure enough," said Bessie.

"Then there's the house and garden; worth a thousand pounds, I reckon."

"It seems as how Mrs. Drake never left the place to no one, unless it wur to Miss Sophy. But, I tell ye, Kezia means to have it."

"Parson had best keep his eyes open, or she'll slip off wi' the church," said Robert grimly.

"If Miss Sophy ha' got it, 'tis only vor her life. She can't keep it afterwards," explained Bessie. "So Nellie can't get it, and Mr. George ain't to have nothing, and I'll watch Kezia don't have it, though I wouldn't mind letting her the attic where they keeps the boxes."

"What about Mr. Percy!"

"Well, there! I never thought of him. But the house belonged to Captain Drake, and he didn't like

Mr. Percy, so it don't seem right the place should go to him."

"Mr. George would know."

"'Tis him, I fancy, who's been knocking such a lot," said Bessie.

"Go and let 'en in," directed Robert. "He can't do us any harm, and he may do us a bit of gude."

Bessie obeyed, and George entered, beaming in the most sunny fashion, assuring the Mudges he too had frequently been deluded into the belief that a loose branch had been tapping against the door, when in reality somebody was knocking and ringing. It was a mistake, he thought, to plant umbrageous perennials so close to the front doorstep, which had been nicely purified since Miss Teenie stood upon it. Their plan of acting the part of caretakers with the thoroughness of ownership he commended highly; as, with autumn approaching, it was necessary to keep the house warm and the furniture dry; and the only satisfactory way of doing so was for Robert to smoke his pipe in the parlour while Bessie reclined upon the easy chairs which, he went on to suggest, would be her own some day.

"Us might as well take t'em now as wait vor 'em, Robert ses," replied Bessie, delighted at the geniality of her visitor. "Won't you sit down, Mr. George, and make yourself comfortable? I was surprised to hear you had gone to Mrs. Dyer's. I'd have asked ye to come here, if I'd known you wur going to stay."

"Thank you very much," said George simply. "I should have been far more comfortable here; but I am not making a long stay, and I felt sure you would be wanting to turn out these rooms."

"Kezia said you weren't coming back again," observed Robert, hoping to obtain raw material for gossip.

"What do she know?" snapped Bessie.

"Nothing," replied George. "I had to come back on business in connection with the railway. You see, I'm civil engineer to the company, and I have to prepare a report."

"They did say you had given up the railway," remarked Bessie, beginning to understand the politeness of George's manner, although she did not know why engineers had to be more civil than other people.

"That railway has been in the air a long time, but I shall never rest until I've made it," said George with energy. "Everything is arranged now except a few preliminary details, such as issuing the prospectus, collecting the money, and obtaining of Parliamentary powers. I have an idea of turning this garden into the terminus, and making the house the station. This will make a good waiting room, while the dining room can be converted into the booking office. The station-master and his family can live upstairs. I shall be station-master, as well as general manager."

Bessie gulped and Robert whistled.

"Your cottage will do for a goods' station. I shall build a platform round it, put up a crane—"

"What about the street?" cried Robert.

"I shall divert that, if necessary. If I find the church is in my way, it must come down."

"But you won't start till Miss Sophy dies. Mrs. Drake said nothing wur to happen till Miss Sophy died," said Bessie.

"We can't possibly wait for her. We have got to make progress," replied George firmly.

"What about Mr. Percy?" asked the crafty Robert.

"What has he got to do with our affairs?"

"Ain't he to have the house and garden?"

"The whole of this property belongs to me, and Miss Sophy is my tenant," replied the far more crafty George; for this was the question he had been leading up to.

"Kezia won't have it anyhow," Robert muttered with satisfaction, removing his boots from the sofa. He wanted to go out into the village and talk.

"You never did tell us much about that paper what Mrs. Drake left vor you," said Bessie reproachfully.

"It was just an ordinary will, leaving me some money and the house. She couldn't deprive me of that, as the property belonged to my uncle, and he made her promise I should have it. If you don't believe me, you can ask Miss Blisland," George added lightly.

"Of course we believes you. I always thought it funny Mrs. Drake shouldn't have left you nothing," said Bessie.

"What do you think she meant to do about the furniture, sir?" asked Robert boldly.

"Ah, that's a troublesome question," said George cautiously.

"I fancy she meant to leave half to Kezia and half to me; but she wur such a kind-hearted lady

that she left all of it to both of us," observed Bessie.

"Not all—tell the truth, Bess. We ain't going to claim what don't belong to us. She never left you the carpet on the stairs, nor yet the old bed in the attic," said Robert severely.

"You can't be too honest in business, and that means, if you are too honest, some one else will get the better of you," said George. "If Mrs. Drake had left the furniture to Mr. Taverner and myself, as she has left it to Kezia and you—"

"What would you ha' done, sir?" asked Robert eagerly.

"I should have looked after my own interests," George answered, as he reached for his hat.

The Mudges escorted him to the door of his own house, and hoped he would look in any time he was passing.

"It's right about the house," said Robert, as he too reached for his hat. "And it's right about the railway. I know Captain Drake meant to build it; he talked a lot about it, and he brought gentlemen down to look round the place; they pretended to be fishing, but we knew what they wur up to. Mr. George ain't clever like his uncle. He made a vule of hisself when he said the American gentleman come here to buy a pair of vases—all the way from America to buy a bit o' cloam! Everybody knew he'd come about the railway. Mr. George ain't clever—that's a sure thing. He can't talk so as to deceive a child. 'Twas the American gentleman what put him up to the idea o' turning this house into the terminus. He would never ha' thought of it."

CHAPTER XVIII

SOWING THE SEED

Next morning George invited the dreary Dyer to step into the parlour with a view to continuing the diplomatic conversation commenced the previous day. The baker responded with a certain amount of trepidation, as he thought it possible Mr. Drake might desire to buy a share in the business, and he did not at all relish the idea of confessing that the profits were considerable. His relief, therefore, was only equalled by his amazement when George inquired:

"Did you ever buy a penny weekly journal, Mr. Dyer?"

"Never in my life, sir," replied the baker.

"Then you know nothing about picture puzzles?"

"Never heard of 'em avore, sir."

"A penny weekly journal exists upon its picture puzzles," George continued. "The last time I went away I bought one of these papers. The competition interested me, as the pictures represented the names of certain railway stations, and that's a subject I know as much about as any man in England."

"I don't know as I quite get your meaning," said the baker.

"I'll explain. Suppose the picture is intended to represent Marylebone. You may be shown a drawing of a little girl eating a mutton chop. Of course, you are expected to have some brains."

"I wouldn't use mine vor such a purpose," said the baker somewhat sharply.

"It's quite simple when you've got the trick. You have to assume the little girl's name is Mary, and *le* is French for the, and there's more bone than anything else in a mutton chop. Well, I went in for this competition, and I've won second prize. I don't know why I didn't get the first, but perhaps that was suppressed for economic reasons."

"I suppose it would be the same sort of thing as a flower show," suggested Dyer. "I got second prize for carrots once. It should ha' been half a crown, but they ran short o' money, so I got only eighteen pence, and I never showed again."

"My prize was worth winning," said George, who had really received a solatium of ten shillings. "It was fifty pounds."

Dyer repeated the amount, firstly as a shout of admiration, secondly as a whisper of covetousness; then he released all kinds of exclamations for some moments; and presently observed with emotion:

"Education does it, sir! If I could ha' gone to a big school, and to the University, I might ha' gone in vor them pictures too. Little gal eating a mutton chop—well done, sir! They'm nought but bone as you ses. You found out her name wur Mary, and you talked French, and you learned all about the railways. Ah, that's wonderful! But I fancy, sir, you must ha' used a map."

"I did it by skill entirely, but of course I had an advantage over my competitors owing to my connection with the railways. Now you are wondering why I'm telling you this?"

"We all knows you does business in railways," said Dyer absently.

"I find myself with a large sum of money, and I mean to make a good use of it. I propose spending the whole amount in giving happiness to others; but I want to do it unobtrusively. I intend to give a meat tea to the old folk of this parish, but I shall hand the money to the vicar and request him to keep my name out of it."

"Perhaps, sir, you'm a-paying vor the cakes ordered yesterday," cried Dyer.

"Don't mention the matter," said George.

"You can trust me, sir."

"Another thing I am anxious to do is to give the Mudges a real good holiday. That's what I wanted to see you about, Mr. Dyer. I know you wish to keep your promise—about the wedding present, you know—but, of course, you can't afford it. My idea is to send them away for a week to the seaside. Bessie served my uncle and aunt faithfully for a number of years, while Robert was always ready to make himself useful in the house; but I've done nothing for either of them. We could give them the best week of their lives for five pounds."

"Did you say anything about me, sir?" asked the baker.

"Yes, because I felt sure you would insist upon contributing something, though I should like them to think the whole amount comes from you. Suppose I give three pounds. You can make up the other two."

"Can't be done, sir. Can't possibly be done. Besides, sir, business is looking up, owing to your generosity, and I can't spare Robert."

"It will give you a splendid reputation for liberality. Everybody in the parish will know you have given the Mudges five pounds and a week's leave of absence."

"I works vor my reputation, sir. Two pounds would ruin me. I can't tell ye how bad things be; I'd be ashamed to speak the truth, sir; I don't hardly like to think on it. Often, when missus fancies I'm asleep, she has a gude cry. She knows we can't pay five shillings in the pound if miller wur to call vor what us owes 'en."

"I'll subscribe four pounds, if you will give the other," said George.

"Where would I get a pound from?" asked Dyer, more drearily than ever. "I'd have to borrow, or sell the bed I tries to sleep on, but can't vor all the trouble. A sovereign, sir, is more to me than to any one else in this parish."

"I've heard that before, and I believe it."

"And it's the truth. Twenty shillings might make the difference between pulling down the blinds today, or keeping 'em up till next week."

"Will you give ten shillings?" George inquired desperately.

The baker shook his head like one in pain, muttering something about last straws and poor relief.

"Will you give anything?"

"Well, sir, to show my heart's in the right place I'll sacrifice a shilling. I'll grab it from the till when missus ain't looking."

"Here is the money," said George, counting out five sovereigns. "You had better see Robert at once: tell him to get away tomorrow. This is September, and fine weather may break any day."

Such a rush of philanthropy numbed the baker's faculties; but even in that semi-paralysed condition he remained a man of business. His fingers closed upon the coins, his feet carried him to the door; then he turned back to face this benefactor, who was shedding sovereigns in the reckless fashion of a tree casting its autumnal leaves. The old folk were to be provided with a meat tea; the Mudges were to be given a week at the seaside; the donor was to remain anonymous. Dyer in all his dreariness could not understand why Mr. Drake should desire to benefit his fellow creatures at all; but, more than that, he was actually proposing to do good stealthily. Where then was the advertisement?

"It's a lot of money, sir. You could buy a bit of land vor this," he said at last.

"I do not require any land," George answered.

"You don't get any profit so far as I can see," the baker proceeded.

"I am helping you to give Robert and Bessie the first real holiday they have ever known; I am enabling you to keep your promise; and I am enjoying the satisfaction of performing an unselfish action."

"'Tis there I'm beat. Why don't ye give the money to Robert, and tell 'en 'tis a present from me and you?"

"I will, if you like, and tell him your share is one shilling."

Dyer again moved towards the door; but still he hesitated.

"They could do it on less than five pounds, sir."

"Give them four, then, and keep the other sovereign for yourself," George replied, breaking out into bribery.

"What about the shilling?" asked Dyer eagerly.

"I'll let you off that."

The baker became a reformed character at once. He did not profess to understand Mr. Drake's extraordinary conduct, but he was quite willing to benefit by the eccentricities of any man. His meanness had become a by-word in the parish. Now Mr. Drake was offering to purchase him a reputation for generosity, which was almost as good as an annuity, and was giving him a sovereign for himself. Dyer was not the man to shrink from duty that was profitable.

"You're the son of your uncle, sir," he said with feeling.

"I have always set his example before me," replied George.

"I'll spare Robert a week from tomorrow. Don't ye think, sir, four pounds are a bit too much?"

"I couldn't let them do it on less," said George firmly.

"And you don't want me to tell 'em part of the money comes from you?"

"I want them to think you are keeping your promise."

The baker retired, muttering, "He wants to get 'em out of Highfield House vor certain. But that don't matter to me so long as I get my profit."

George went for a long walk to refresh himself, not bothering about his popularity any longer, as he was contemplating an act which would make future residence in Highfield impossible; but he met the Wallower in Wealth, who demanded his musical box; and the Dumpy Philosopher, who put searching questions concerning the railway and the amount of compensation for wounded feelings he was likely to receive; and the Yellow Leaf, who had just lost his wife and was going courting. Returning, during the late afternoon, he stopped at his own house, knocked, but received no answer from that side of the street. Bessie looked out from the cottage window opposite and invited him to step in that direction.

"Have ye heard the news, Mr. George?" she whispered excitedly. "Master ha' given Robert three pounds and a week."

"Three pounds!" cried George fiercely.

"Us can't make any one believe it. Three solid sovereigns, sir! Robert ha' got teethache through biting 'em."

"I am not surprised," said George. "Dyer has been left a lot of money—he told me yesterday. An uncle, who went to New Zealand years ago, has just died and left him thousands. He can buy up the whole village if he wants to."

"Master never told Robert he'd been left money. He gave 'en the sovereigns and said 'twas a reward vor the way Robert had worked. Couldn't spare 'em, he said, but his conscience worried him. They do say the Dyers ha' never given away anything avore 'cept the water what they boiled their cabbage in."

"When are you off?"

"First thing tomorrow. We'm going to my home, so it won't cost nothing 'cept the railway. I'm getting our things together now."

"Where's Robert?"

"Going round wi' the bread—that's him a-whistling. He'm fair mazed, Mr. George."

"Who is to take care of the house?"

"I'll lock it up and take the keys away wi' me. Why shouldn't us go? No one won't go near the house, wi' you and policeman about."

"I think you ought to wait until Miss Yard comes back," said George, who knew enough about women to be aware how the spirit of opposition acts upon them.

"And lose our holiday! The only real holiday we've had, and the chance to see my folks again. Not likely, Mr. George! If we don't go tomorrow, master will ask vor them three sovereigns back again. How did you manage to find out he'd been left all this money?"

"I was talking with him yesterday and—it just slipped out. You will hear more when you come back."

"I'll make Robert ask 'en vor a rise. How long be you staying, Mr. George?"

"I might be here when you return or, on the other hand, I might go tomorrow. Do you want me to take charge of the keys?"

"Somebody ought to go in and open the windows."

"I don't mind doing you a favour. If I'm called away I will leave the keys with Mrs. Dyer."

"Not wi' she. Leave 'em wi' Mrs. Cann to the post office. You come this evening, and I'll give ye the keys."

"All right," said George. "But you know I don't approve of your going after having been left in charge."

"If I don't go, Robert will, and he ain't going home without me," said Bessie. "I wouldn't like leaving if Kezia wur here, vor I'd dread her selling some of my things; but Robert ha' told the volks the house belongs to you, so there's no fear of any one breaking in, unless it be the Brocks. Policeman ha' promised to keep his eye on them."

George went on to punish the baker, who had succeeded with grievous pangs in handing over three sovereigns, but had failed in his endeavour to part with the fourth. Dyer affirmed Robert had lied, by no means for the first time; but, when George threatened to call the Mudges that they might give evidence upon oath, Dyer admitted it was just possible the missing coin might have slipped through a hole in his pocket; so he called his wife to light a candle and to sweep the floor. The elusive piece of gold, however, had passed entirely out of vision, although neither of the Dyers could feel surprised at that; the lady declaring it was wonderful how easily things lost themselves; while her husband said he had done nothing except drop money all his life.

"Very well, Mrs. Dyer," said George. "When you make up my bill for lodgings and bread puddings, just remember that you owe me a pound."

"You wouldn't think of such a thing. You'm too much of a gentleman," cried Mrs. Dyer.

"The missus fancies you meant it, sir. She ain't very humorous," explained the baker.

George had a trick of nodding after supper, and that evening he did not wake until it was nearly time to sleep more seriously. Remembering that Bessie would be sitting up to surrender the keys, he hurried out; but when he entered Windward House modestly by the back door—hoping to overhear some scraps of conversation—the house appeared deserted, until he pushed open the kitchen door, to discover the Wallower in Wealth sipping a cup of something hot beside the fire.

"Where are the Mudges?" cried George.

"Where's my musical box?" retorted the man in possession.

George had made a rule never to use bad language; by an exception then he proved the rule's existence. Some men are frightened when sworn at because they never know what may come next; and the Wallower in Wealth belonged to that class. He sat silent and sulky, while George repeated his question with one more exception.

"Gone vor their holiday," came the answer. "I looked in to wish 'em gude-luck, and Mrs. Mudge asked me to bide till you come. Keys be in the doors, I was to tell ye."

"Their train doesn't go till seven o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Postman told 'em there's an excursion up to London at eleven, so they reckoned they'd go part of the way in that, and get there quicker."

"The fools!" cried George. "That train will take them in the very opposite direction."

"They was a bit mazed. Robert had begun to enjoy his holiday, and Bessie wur trying to catch up wi' 'en. Now they'll ha' to wait all night outside the station."

"What are you drinking?" asked George, sniffing at the fumes.

"Mrs. Mudge said 'twur coffee, but it tastes more like hot whisky and water. I'll give ye thirty shillings vor the musical box."

"I'm not going to talk business at this time of night. It's my bedtime and yours too," said George, making a motion towards the door.

"There's a drop o' this wonderful nice coffee in the jug."

"Take it with you."

"I won't take it in the jug, lest I forget to bring it back. Your very good health, Mr. Drake—and I'll give anyone thirty-five shillings for that musical box."

George hurried into the town next morning, and ascertained from a porter who had relations in Highfield, that the muddled Mudges had started upon their journey in the right direction shortly after midnight, by obtaining an introduction to the guard of a goods train and travelling—contrary to all regulations—in his van. The porter mentioned that the guard had possibly been influenced by the fact that Bessie was carrying a basket of delicacies, while the neck of a bottle protruded from the pocket of Robert's overcoat.

Satisfied on this point, George visited a certain place of business, and interviewed the manager who promised to send up to Highfield, very early on the following morning, two furniture vans, with sufficient men to do the packing in one day. The simplicity of working out a plot caused

George to laugh aloud; also to treat himself to a luncheon from which bread and margarine pudding was rigorously excluded.

On the way home he sighted, in the dip of the road, a pair of strolling youngsters, boy and girl, who looked back often as if expecting somebody; the back of the one, and the beauty of the other, seemed familiar. Suddenly the girl took to her heels and raced round the bend, while the boy allowed George to draw up to him.

"Why does the little girl run so fast?" asked George in a paternal fashion.

"She's full of beans," replied Sidney.

"Taking a holiday?" George continued.

"I fancied a friend might be coming by the three o'clock train; but I've had the walk vor nothing."

"Another young lady, I suppose?"

"That's right," said the laughing profligate.

"Well, I'm confounded! It seems to me you are collecting girls," George muttered.

"There's plenty. I'll leave ye a few to choose from," said Sidney.

"I've done my choosing and I'm going to settle down after this month. I suppose you know we are all clearing out of Highfield? Miss Blisland has gone already, and you'll never see her again. You tried to catch Nellie," said George, who frequently lost by his silly conversation all he had gained by his cunning. "But she saw through your nasty little ways, my lad. She didn't fancy your harem. Nellie is one of the most sensible girls I have ever met, and she's got the makings of a good woman in her."

"I reckon," said Sidney, like an oaf.

"It's a bit of a change to me to marry any one, but I don't mind sacrificing myself," George rambled on. "There's no secret about it. We've taken a house at a place called Drivelford, and we're going to let Miss Yard live with us. You won't get the chance to congratulate Nellie, and I shouldn't permit it in any case, as I don't think you are the sort of young fellow she ought to speak to; but I do hope you are feeling a bit sorry for yourself. I'm not perfect, but I do think a man ought to be honest and truthful, and be satisfied with one wife, so long as she does what he tells her."

"That's right enough," said Sidney.

"You see what a callous young fellow you are already. You pretended to be in love with the future Mrs. Drake; but, now that you have lost her, you don't care a hang."

"Not that much," said Sidney, snapping his fingers.

"That's your character," said George bitterly. "Why should you care? There are plenty of Dollies, and Teenies, and painted ladies, cheap for cash as the advertisements say."

"Here, you mind what you're saying. You're going a bit too far!" cried Sidney, rounding angrily upon his oppressor.

"I'm not insulting you," George explained. "But I do want to give you a little good advice before we part. I can quite understand that you don't want to hear the truth about your young women, and they wouldn't like to hear it either. That little girl ran away just now because she couldn't face a decent gentleman."

"She ran because she wouldn't be introduced to you."

"That shows she can't be altogether bad," said George approvingly. "Now I must leave you, as I'm going to take the short cut across the fields. I do hope you will remember what I've said. When this new young woman arrives, try to show yourself a lad of courage. Send her home again or, if you don't like to do that, send her to me."

For some inscrutable reason Sidney could not restrain his laughter.

"Ah, you think I should want to make love to her," said George angrily. "I know your nasty mind. You and your grandfather had better be careful. You haven't got a friend in the parish."

"Except the vicar," Sidney reminded him.

"And, if he goes on visiting you, he won't have a friend in the parish either. Do you know what they call you in the village?"

"Do you know what they call you?" Sidney retorted joyously.

"They call you the Mormon."

"And they call you Ananias!"

"Well, that beats everything," gasped George, as he dropped clumsily over the stile. "I never tell lies except in the way of business. I always speak the truth in private life."

Days were shortening, so that by the time George had finished his tea, which included a propitiatory offering of doughnuts, the boom of beetles sounded in the street. As life was dull in the bakery, he decided to spend a tranquil evening in his own house, surrounded by the furniture he had been brought up with. He went and settled himself in an easy chair with one of the copies, still unburnt, of his uncle's monumental work, "A History of Highfield Parish." But reading grew tedious, and the doughnuts he had consumed so recklessly began to trouble, and the buzzing of flies and wasps became tempestuous.

Yet these sounds recalled pleasant memories of the past; he had not done much with his life, still he had managed to win distinction as an insect killer. He had eased his uncle's labours by crushing the wasp, and averted his aunt's displeasure by obliterating the blowfly. He rose and went into the kitchen to search for a cork.

The lighted candle cast weird shadows as he blundered through the pantry to the larder; discovering at last a cork which smelt of alcohol. That at least would give the wasps a pleasant death. But, while hurrying back to the insect-haunted parlour, he heard a new disturbance: no sleepy buzzing, but the fall of active footsteps. Then a handbag was flung recklessly through the open window; banging upon a chair, rolling to the floor. The footsteps died away, and the gate of the garden slammed.

With horrible dread of a possible explosion, George crept towards the missile, and touched it gingerly. It was a neat brown bag, ridiculously small to hold a wardrobe, and it bore the initials N.B.

"That's what they put in books, when they want to draw your attention to something," he muttered.

CHAPTER XIX

REAPING THE HARVEST

It would have been extraordinary, after Teenie's visit, had Nellie not received a letter from Sidney, begging her to give him an opportunity of clearing up the mystery which had so long surrounded Black Anchor Farm. The style and spelling of this epistle moved her to the discovery that it would be necessary to leave Miss Yard in the hands of Kezia, and return to Highfield, for one night only, in order that she might superintend the packing of the furniture; in place of George, who might quite possibly prove untrustworthy.

She replied, not altogether to that effect, without one thought for the ridiculous nature of her expeditionary programme; she could not arrive at Highfield until late in the afternoon, she would be compelled to leave early the following morning, while the packers could not reasonably be invited to work from dusk to sunrise. Sidney could meet her at the station if he liked: in fact she thought that might be the best plan, "As poor old George does not possess a sense of humour." Sidney thought so too; but Nellie in her hurry missed the train. She was able to agree with Miss Yard, who could not travel without the observation, "They ought to do away with railway junctions."

There was no good reason for losing all sense of method upon her arrival at Windward House. As a methodist, she would have walked calmly indoors, announced to Bessie—who was presumably in charge—that she had returned to spend one more night in her old bedroom entirely out of sentiment; and then have gone for a walk, in the opposite direction to Black Anchor, among the moths and beetles, hoping to catch a glimpse of the new moon. But the sight of that open window, the garish lamplight, the cold apparition of George with a murderous cork in his hand, made her hopelessly unmethodical. Her mind became so entirely disorganised that everything escaped it, except that stupid necessity of going for a walk immediately. She flung her bag through the window and fled.

On the way to Black Anchor Nellie succeeded in persuading herself that she was, if not exactly discreet, at least as sensible as any other young woman in revolt from the severity of everyday life towards a more picturesque and imaginative style of existence. She actually made a plan. As it was night, and sufficiently dark for spying, she would approach the farm among the bogs, flit around it like a will-o'-the-wisp, play watchful fairy at the window, act recording angel at the keyhole, until part at least of the mystery might be revealed. She had no particular wish to discover the secret of Sidney's fascination, which attracted to him young ladies of superior birth and education, but she desired very much to learn something about these prepossessing damsels; who they were and why they came; and above all it was her business to ascertain why Sidney spoke like a farmer's boy, but looked like a farmer's landlord, and wrote like the descendant of a poet laureate.

"How dark it is down here!" she murmured. "Lucky I know the geography. I wish I knew my history half as well."

Then it seemed to her that all kinds of light-footed people were leaping over the bogs and jumping the furze bushes; while the moor on each side twinkled with teasing eyes of local inhabitants sent out to watch the movements of the spy.

Nellie saw the farm, and knew by the stream of light that all the doors and windows stood wide open. The trackway beyond was dangerous because one window threw a searchlight right across it; but she walked on, having never been taught the art of scouting, and came presently to a colossal figure, carved apparently out of granite, or beaten into human shape by wind and weather, rising from an unhewn boulder halfway to the sky. This was a wonder of the moor never previously discovered, thought Nellie; but a moment later she felt certain ghosts were abroad, and this colossus was being worshipped by the local inhabitants, dancing invisibly all over the peat and tussocks: she could detect the smell of incense, see the smoke rising; any moment she might be compelled to witness a human sacrifice. There was a glow of fire undoubtedly. Again she fled, while the colossus shook from side to side although there was no wind.

"How silly of me!" gasped Nellie. "It was old Mr. Brock, sitting on a rock—bother the rhyme!—smoking a cigar."

Obsessed by the idea of finding out something concerning this enchanted region, she went on towards the farmhouse, forced to walk along the lighted trackway because it skirted the edges of a bog, where in full swing was the season of grand opera and, from a cool green dais, the bullfrog conductor constrained an enormous amount of energy out of his orchestra—it sounded like Tanhäuser but was more melodious—although the night-jars and owls did their best to mar the performance out of professional rivalry, while the beetles with their trombones were hopelessly discordant. But soon there were other sounds, far pleasanter; a scuffling in the furze-clad regions beyond; an approach, a trepidation, a capture, and a scream:

"You beast, Sidney! I did think I had hidden myself that time."

"I saw the white ribbon in your hair. You looked out just at the wrong moment."

"It's my turn to seek now."

"I'm going up to Highfield."

"I don't believe she's coming."

"I'll go and find out anyhow."

"Shall I come?"

"No, you stop at home."

"I won't spoil sport. If you see her, I'll cut off full lick."

"Listen! that was grandfather whistling."

Nellie stood upon the trackway shivering. Behind her old Mr. Brock closed the pass; in front Sidney was approaching; on the right side spread the bogs; on the left a jagged wilderness of boulders. From a strategical point of view she was done for. And she had come there to spy! She could only halt in vexation squeezed against a rock until captured, or advance with what little dignity remained to make an unconditional surrender.

"Boots muddy, hair all anyhow, crushed clothes—and caught in this abominable fashion," she murmured. "In fact I'm so untidy there's just a chance he may not recognise me."

She had not the slightest cause for worry. A girl may know when she looks attractive to other girls; but she seldom realises she is most fascinating to a man when her boots are muddy and her hair is all anyhow.

There came a rabbit-like scamper up the trackway, and the stampeding Teenie screamed again:

"Oh, I say—you did make me jump! Sidney! Sidney, you ass! Here she is! Here's Miss Blisland! Oh, what a lark!" shouted the child with shameless and barbaric jubilation.

"Don't talk such beastly nonsense," cried the other voice.

"It is her!" screamed the child.

"Yes, it's me," said Nellie faintly; and all three stood together, in an atmosphere of amazement and bad grammar.

"I thought, as it was such a lovely night—I mean evening—I would stroll in this direction to tell you I'm off again first thing in the morning," explained Nellie.

"This is splendid! I was just going to start for Highfield, but this is far better, as there's no old Drake to waddle about and quack. I was hanging about the road all the afternoon. This is Teenie Stanley—my cheeky young sister."

"Your sister! And your name isn't Brock at all!" cried Nellie.

"Run away, kid, and talk to grandfather," Sidney ordered; and the little whirlwind whisked round Nellie and departed.

"I did have the idea, but thought somehow it wasn't possible," Nellie was saying. "You have humbugged everybody, but you never really deceived me; if you had, I shouldn't be here now. I saw through your Dartmoor dialect, and all the rest of it. And I suppose Dorothy is your elder sister?"

"Of course she is."

"And the much-abused Mrs. Stanley—"

"Is my mother who, in spite of local rumour, does not put on local colour."

"Why ever didn't you tell me before? What was the sense of making such a mystery of it?"

"The people in Highfield made the mystery. We didn't want them to know we were here."

"Couldn't they see you, stupid?" said Nellie, more cheerfully.

"I mean grandfather didn't want them to know who we are; but I should have let out everything that evening—when you were spiteful—if we hadn't quarrelled. You know, Nellie, you were rather too cross about mother, and—and I lost my temper because you wouldn't trust me, and I made up my mind you should."

"You are nearly as bad as George Drake," she declared.

"Nearly isn't quite."

"And who are you, please?"

"Oh, we are not of vast importance. My full name is Arthur Sidney Stanley. It was a shame to give me such names, as I can't possibly put my initials on anything. That little beast, Teenie, always calls me ass. We're not exactly paupers, as we own a big share in a number of stores all over the south. There's one at Drivelford."

"I've been in it hundreds of times, and distinctly remember seeing you behind the counter."

"Don't be horrid. I've never been to Drivelford in my life, but I'm going there tomorrow if you are."

"Who is Mr. Brock?" she asked in a great hurry.

"Really my grandfather, and the owner of Black Anchor Farm, also the patron of the living. Now you know why the vicar condescends to visit us. Brock is such a common name in this part of Devonshire that nobody could dream he is *the* Mr. Brock."

"And why did you come here? Why have you lived, like a couple of common people, in this ramshackle place, without housekeeper or servant? You simply made the people talk about you. How could they understand a couple of gentlemen pigging it! Your mother and sisters coming here naturally made a scandal. Even I couldn't believe they were your relations, though I was positive you were much better than you pretended to be. I shall never forgive you for talking to me in Devonshire dialect, though I'm quite willing to forget you had supper one Sunday evening in our kitchen."

"Wasn't it fun too!" Sidney chuckled. "I wanted grandfather to come, but he drew the line at that. When you know grandfather well—and that's going to be jolly soon—you will guess how enormously he has enjoyed his time here. It was his idea entirely. He loves roughing it, he has spent most of his life knocking about the world, and he's only really happy in a cottage. He declares luxury and high feeding kill more people than any disease. It's only the rustic who lives to be a hundred, he says; and, as he means to score a century himself, he takes a spell of living like a rustic occasionally. He could never get a satisfactory tenant for this place, so he told father one day he'd made up his mind to show the commoners what hard work could accomplish on a Dartmoor farm."

"Where do you come in?"

"Just here. I hadn't been very strong since leaving school—crocked myself rowing—and the doctor said I ought to work in the open air for a time before taking up anything serious. You can't persuade doctors that farming is work; they look upon it as a recreation. So grandfather suggested I should come along with him. Father was willing, but mother was horrified. I jumped at the idea of course. Grandfather is the grandest old fellow alive, and I would rather be under him than all the doctors in the world. He wouldn't have a housekeeper, as he likes doing everything for himself when he's roughing: besides, a woman would have seen his papers and letters, and found out who he was; and naturally he doesn't want the people to know that the patron of the living, and biggest landowner in the parish, is grubbing in the bogs down here."

"Didn't the scandal make him angry?"

"He has never heard a word of it."

"So that's the mystery!" cried Nellie, feeling rather ashamed of herself.

"It's jolly simple after all. We are going away before winter, when there's a flood four days a week, and a gale the other three. Grandfather owns the place has beaten him. He says a man who tries to farm on Dartmoor ought to receive a premium instead of paying a rent. If it isn't bog, it's rock, and, if it isn't rock, it's 'vuzzy trade.' And if you do put in a crop, the moles turn it out; and, if the moles don't turn it out, rabbits, sheep, mice and grubs in millions and slugs in trillions gobble it up completely. Now come and be introduced to grandfather, and then I'll take you home. He is sure to growl at you, but you must stand up to him, and then he'll love you. He likes anyone to stand up to him. The vicar got the living by contradicting him. I say, Nellie, don't hurry

back to Drivelford."

"Are you aware you have not called me Miss Blisland once?" she demanded, showing no inclination to approach the terrible black grandfather.

"Quite! And are you aware you have never once called me Sidney?"

"I must go back in the morning. Miss Yard will be crazy all night without me. She will think I've been kidnapped," Nellie hurried on.

"She won't be wrong."

"I should like to start at once, though I hate the idea of facing George. I'm a dreadful coward really, and I'm afraid he will think I have treated him badly. He knows of my arrival, but I'm quite certain he is not bothering to look for me."

"A kick in the face will do him good," replied Sidney disdainfully.

"He can't take a joke, though he did try to take me, and I'm much the biggest joke he has ever run against. The truth of the matter is he has made up his mind to get back the Captain's furniture, which belongs to Miss Yard now, and he knows the only way he can get it is by marrying me."

"There's grandfather growling! He's telling Teenie to go to bed, and she's telling him to go himself. That kid never is tired. Now he's chuckling! Grandfather likes to be cheeked."

"I ought to have gone long ago. It must be getting on for midnight."

"And we've got to be up early. I'm coming with you, and you shall introduce me to Miss Yard, and then I'll take you to my people, and then we'll get married—"

"Well, of all the precociousness!" she gasped. "Do you know I'm older than you?"

"You can't blame me for that."

"And I expect to be treated with respect. And my father was never anything more than a very poor curate."

"Well, a curate is a bishop on a small scale, and we are only shopkeepers on a large scale. It's funny that poor curates should always have the nicest daughters."

"And I can't forgive you for talking to me like a farmer's boy."

"Then I won't forgive you for saying horrid things, and thinking worse about my mother and sisters."

"Of course we might forget. But then that wouldn't be enough. So I can never marry you, Sidney—at least, not until Miss Sophy dies."

"She'll have to be jolly quick about it," said the young man fiercely.

"She is very kind and considerate," Nellie murmured doubtfully; trying to work out the algebraical problem. If a Giant Tortoise is hale and hearty at five hundred, and a Yellow Leaf is trying to inveigle a Mere Bud towards the matrimonial altar at ninety-something, what is the reasonable expectation of life of an old Lady who has nothing to die for?

"All this time," said Sidney, "grandfather is peering at us, while Teenie is simply goggling. We have got to pass them, and then—thank heaven!—we shall be alone."

"If I let you come with me—" she began.

"As if you could prevent it!"

"Will you stand up to George for me? Will you play the Dragon, and *not* get beaten?"

"Rather! I owe the saint one for his sermons."

But Sidney was not given the opportunity, for, when they reached Windward House, after wasting an extraordinary amount of time in climbing the hill, they found the place deserted; but the key was in the door, and a note lay on the table. They read it with explosions of sheer rapture.

Why Nellie had returned to Highfield George, for his part, could not imagine; but he considered her conduct on the whole disgraceful, and begged to remind her that nothing but a satisfactory explanation could avert a rupture. She, in her selfishness, had supposed, no doubt, he would either light a lantern and seek to track her footsteps; or sit up and wait until she should be pleased to return. He had no intention of doing either of these things. A game of hide-and-seek about the Highfield lanes at dead of night, after a long and fatiguing day, was not much to his taste; while the rôle of henpecked lover, awaiting the return of a profligate fiancée to the family hearth, was a part he was still less suited for. It was his habit to retire at half past ten. He had retired, utterly worn out and exhausted. In the morning he would give Nellie an opportunity for explaining her conduct; and, if the explanation should prove unsatisfactory, he should seriously contemplate asking her to return all the presents he had given her.

"What has he given you, darling?" asked Sidney.

"Nothing whatever, dearest."

They had learnt a number of words like that while toiling up the hill.

"But surely, sweetheart, he must have given you something."

"I expect he's thinking of the furniture; but I got that for myself, though he doesn't know how."

Then they made their plans, but George had also made his. His usual habit was to permit the sun to warm the world before he walked upon it; but on this occasion he had requested Mrs. Dyer to call him early. Nellie, on the other hand, overslept, having nobody to call her, and being naturally tired after so much travelling, romance, excitement and happiness: excellent things but all fatiguing.

She woke with a dream of a battlefield where shells of monstrous size were exploding upon every side, each one missing her by inches; nor was this surprising for, upon opening her eyes, she soon became aware that stones were being hurled into the room.

"It can't be Sidney," she murmured sleepily. "He wouldn't wake me so roughly, even though I am late. Goodness—that's a rock!"

It was not Sidney. It was George, as she discovered by one swift glance. He frowned like an artillery man while adding to his stock of ammunition.

"Stop it! You've broken the water jug, and my room is flooded," she cried.

"So I've got you up at last! You threw your bag into my window last night, so I throw stones into your window this morning. It's what they call the *lextalionis*."

"Please go away! I'm not dressed yet," she called.

"I'm waiting to hear your explanation, and I'm going to stand here, in this very same place where I was first beguiled by your deceitful face at the window, when you sat and worked a sewing machine, like that lady in the Bible who got pushed out and trodden underfoot," said George wrathfully; for during the night a suspicion of the truth had reached him.

"I'd better get it over at once," Nellie murmured. Then she wrapped herself in the quilt and approached the window.

"Here I am!" she said brightly.

"What a nasty, hostile, ungrateful expression. And you ought to be in a white sheet instead of that scarlet quilt," said George bitterly.

"Well, you shouldn't be so rude as to throw stones at me. They were not pebbles either."

"It's my house and my window. Why have you come back?"

"Because I wanted to."

"That's a woman's answer. Did you give your address to that wicked little girl who answers to the name of Teenie?"

"I might have."

"That's another woman's answer. Did that young man who wallows in vice write to you?"

"A young gentleman known here as Sidney Brock did write to me."

"That's the sort of confession a woman does make. And you actually replied? You had no shame whatever?"

"I sent an answer."

"Then came!"

"And saw and conquered," she murmured happily.

"What are you muttering about?"

"I suppose you would call them my sins. But, if you speak to me again like that, I shall shut the window," Nellie replied with spirit.

"I'm blest if she isn't going to argue," George mumbled. "I don't want to be hard upon you, young woman, but I can't have this sort of thing," he went on sternly. "You desert my dear old aunt, and come back here, and rush into bad company, and you don't even ask my permission. I'm a liberal and broad-minded chap, but I can't stand that."

"How are you going to prevent it?"

"By asserting myself, by putting my foot down. Here am I working and toiling for you. I have sent Robert and Bessie away for a well-earned holiday, and presently vans will be coming for the furniture. It's all for you. I don't think of myself at all. I'm saving the furniture, and handing it over to you at great expense, while you are breaking my heart by making appointments with young Mormons in the dark, and going to such a place as Black Anchor at dead of night, and staying there till morning. That sort of conduct makes men commit murder and suicide, and other

things they are sorry for afterwards. But I'm not a criminal, and I'm not passionate. I'm practical, and cool, and—and amiable. I have taken quite a fancy to you, Nellie. Other people don't think much of you, but I can see you have good qualities, only you won't show them. Now I want you to tell me why you wrote to young Sidney, and why you met him last night. Be very careful how you answer, as the whole of your future happiness may depend on it."

"I wanted to clear up the mystery," she said.

"There is no mystery about shameful wickedness. Being about to marry a respectable gentleman, who bears a highly honoured name, upon the last day of this month—"

"Oh, stop! Do please!" cried Nellie appealingly. "We are only playing. We have been fooling all along, and you must have known it. I was always laughing and teasing—have you ever seen me serious, as I am now?"

"You don't mean to tell me you are trying to get out of it—you are not going to keep your promise?"

"What was my promise?"

"That you would marry me on the last day of this month."

"It wasn't put like that. I promised, in fun, to marry you on the thirty-first of September, and, of course, I thought you would have seen through that joke long ago."

"I suppose the point of the joke is that you mean to become a Mormon?"

"There is no thirty-first of September. And I am going to become a Mormon, if you like to put it that way, for I am engaged to Sidney Brock."

"And I'll tell you what I am going to do," George shouted. "I'm going to jilt you."

"Thanks so much," laughed Nellie.

George stalked out of the garden, and was not seen again until Sidney and Nellie had departed, and big vans had drawn up beside Windward House to the wonder and dismay of all the village. Then he revisited the scenes of his former triumphs and issued certain orders to the packers. After that he hurried off to the town and visited an auctioneer.

Returning to Highfield, he passed behind Robert's cottage, demolished the peatstack, and brought to light the musical box, the silver candlesticks, and all the rest of the purloined articles. These were deposited in the vans.

A hostile crowd had collected, but George took no heed of anyone; not even the Wallower in Wealth who sought ineffectually to obtain possession of the musical box by force and without payment. The unhappy Dyer had his eyes opened to the exceeding perfidy of his lodger, but he dared not open his mouth as well.

The following day bills were posted about the neighbourhood, announcing a sale to be held at short notice, in the market hall of the town, of the valuable furniture and remarkable antiquities formerly in the possession of Captain Francis Drake, by order of the Executor of the will of Mrs. Drake deceased.

"I'm sorry for Aunt Sophy, but she ought to have kept out of bad company," was George's only comment.

CHAPTER XX

THE GLEANERS

When Bessie and Robert returned to Highfield; when the people discovered how the light railway, which originally had been a matter of electricity, and then had degenerated into an affair of steam, was in fact a proposal of gas entirely; when Windward House remained empty and unswept, with the giant tortoise lord of the manor; and when the niggardly Dyer was attacked on all sides as the confederate of the public enemy—there unfortunately existed no genius of the lamp competent to continue the parochial record from the point where Captain Drake had closed it. Genii of the lantern undoubtedly did exist, and these made another story, a kind of fairy tale, which was not told outside the village. All the water was spilt near the pump. Nobody took part in the revolution which followed, causing an alteration in the landscape; at least nobody in particular; but there was not a man, woman, or child of destructive age who did not give a hand towards the general rubbing of the lamp. When the furniture failed to arrive at the banks of the Drivel, and inquiry elicited the fact that all had passed into the hands of dealers, Kezia fell into a state of melancholy which not even her favourite Sunday walk around the cemetery was able to relieve; and when the cruel truth of George's unassailable title to Windward House was broken gently room by room, despondency increased upon her to such an extent that she actually paid a visit to the electric theatre.

Miss Yard laughed merrily at the humorous idea of buying new furniture, and told everybody

about her provincial escape from the fire which had destroyed everything she possessed, and how a young gentleman called Sidney had rescued her from the flames at great personal risk. She was so grateful that she suggested he might become engaged to Nellie, and he had done so at once; which showed how absurd it was to say that young men of the present day were rude and disobedient. Of course it was understood that the engagement was only to continue during her lifetime. As for Nellie, she breathed a great sigh of relief. The loss of the furniture might be a serious matter, so far as Kezia's future and Miss Yard's banking account were concerned; but it meant the total eclipse of George. He could not show his face either in Highfield or Drivelford; he had done for himself completely. She refused to listen to Sidney's proposal of instructing Hunter to institute proceedings.

"By doing nothing we get rid of him for ever," she said.

"Anyhow, we can take action against the people who bought the things," he urged.

"We shall do nothing of the kind. It would worry the old lady into her grave; and I believe that's your object."

"I want to punish the brute for bullying you and preaching at me."

"You can't make a thick-skinned creature like George feel anything," she answered. "If he were put in prison, he would congratulate himself upon living free of expense. And if he refunded the money, he would insist upon coming here and living with Miss Sophy. It would be no use turning him out. He would come back like a cat and make us all miserable. Leave him alone, and we shall hear no more of him."

She prophesied truly. Those who had been honoured by the society, and somewhat doubtful friendship, of George Drake were not privileged to look upon him—or on his like—again. After gathering in his harvest, he retired into the privacy of lodgings, having a sum of sixteen hundred pounds to his credit, and spent a couple of years drinking tea, smoking cigars, and trying to make up his mind whether his landlady's daughter "would do."

This young lady was of a more orthodox type than Nellie. She possessed a head of golden hair, upon which much time and dye had been expended; her eyes were dull; her countenance was flaming. George secretly admired that style of beauty. The young woman could make tea, arrange cushions, fetch and carry slippers, stand in a deferential attitude; she showed unmistakable signs of honesty, and obeyed the call of her mother instantly; she had no conversation, the possession of which was a gift that marred so many women; she giggled respectfully when addressed; nor did she shrink from admitting that gentlemen of Mr. Drake's magnificence unhappily grew scarcer every year.

George became highly delighted with Matilda which, he remarked, was a sweet, old-fashioned name, suggesting to him somehow the odour of lilac and honeysuckle. He congratulated himself frequently upon having thrown over that designing young woman, Nellie, just in time; and, at the expiration of eighteen months of indolence, he informed her—for in such a matter he disdained all questions—of the social position that awaited her. She was capable of improvement, he admitted, and no doubt she would improve. Grace she would acquire by watching him. The heavy tramping about the house might be exchanged for a gentle footfall by the use of more appropriate footwear. He begged her to bear these things in mind, and above all never to forget that out of all the women in the world he had selected her.

Matilda appeared quite satisfied. So did her mother, who was deep in debt, and had no scruples against adding to the burden, when informed by her future son-in-law that his resources were practically unlimited.

"It has just occurred to me I have a property on Dartmoor worth a couple of thousand," he said in the grand manner, well suited to his wealth and indolence. "I have not been near it for the last two years. It's a fine house—a beautiful Elizabethan mansion—but it has a somewhat peculiar history," he added.

"Is there a ghost?" asked Matilda's mother, who was greatly impressed by everything George said.

"There are several ghosts," he replied.

"Don't ye ask me to live there then," said Matilda, with her giggle which ought to have been illegal.

"Nothing would induce me to go near the place," said George with perfect truth. "I ought to have sold it long ago, but these little things escape one's memory. I will dispose of it at once, and buy a cottage, with a bit of land. I shall keep bees and prune the rose trees; while you look after the poultry and the cow, do the cooking, mind the house, and attend to me."

Matilda was a poor mathematician, but even to her this did not appear a fair division of labour. Already she was running up a little account against her future husband. His courtship was not of that vigorous order she had a right to expect; his indolence seemed to her a type curable only by the constant application of a broomstick; his craving for tea and tobacco, unless checked, might easily become morbid. Matilda possessed some wits; not many, but ingenious ones; and, until George was safely tied to her by matrimony, she was going to pretend she had no conversation.

When George observed that the Dartmoor property had just occurred to his memory, he intended perhaps to say he had thought of little else during the last two years. He had almost succeeded in believing that his disposal of the furniture had come perilously near actual dishonesty; by which he meant to imply his action had been unbusinesslike and foolish; though he had the satisfaction of knowing that Nellie had been justly punished for her offences. He had planned to sell, or to let, Windward House immediately; but had reckoned without his cowardly nature, which conjured up visions of all manner of people seeking vengeance against him. Bessie and Robert would be clamouring for his arrest; Kezia might have taken her scraps of paper to some solicitor; Nellie might have placed the matter in the hands of Hunter; the dreary Dyer might be forced to bring an action for conspiracy to clear his own mean character. George had been so terrified by these fancies that, for several months, he hardly dared to stir from his lodgings, and could not look a policeman in the face.

But now that two years had passed, and nobody had tapped him on the shoulder, he decided it would be perfectly safe to emerge from his obscurity to the extent of communicating with a land agent in Exeter, which city was a satisfactory distance from Highfield, and instructing him to offer the property for sale by public auction or, should an opportunity arise, to dispose of it at once by private treaty. For sake of convenience George requested that letters should be addressed to him at a certain post office, as he still thought it advisable to protect the sanctity of his private residence.

The land agent replied that a sale by auction was generally the most lucrative manner of disposing of a property, and suggested the despatch of a clerk skilled in valuation to inspect the premises. He mentioned also that applications for houses in the Highfield district reached his office continually, and he would be pleased to issue orders to view the property which by the description appeared a valuable one.

George agreed to everything, but was inclined to lay stress upon the private sale if possible, as he did not wish the local inhabitants to know that the ownership of the house was about to change hands. Included in the sale, he mentioned, would be a giant tortoise—or the animal might be offered separately—more than half a thousand years old. This reptile, which would appeal alike to animal lovers and to antiquarians, was a fixture with the garden, above which it browsed one half of the year, and below which it slept for the other half.

Some days passed, during which George became a prey to various emotions. Then came a letter which puzzled him exceedingly. The land agent would be much obliged if Mr. Drake could make it convenient to call at his office in order that certain misunderstandings might be removed. He did not care to say anything more definite at the moment, as it was quite possible he had read Mr. Drake's instructions wrongly. If this was not the case, something very mysterious had happened.

George thought of all manner of things, but above all he suspected treachery. If he entered the office, he might find himself trapped; with Bessie in one corner, Kezia in another, Dyer in the third, and Nellie in the fourth; with that notorious oppressor of widows and orphans, Hunter himself, standing vindictively in the centre; not to mention a horde of howling Highfielders outside the office. So he decided to take Matilda with him. It would be a nice outing for the girl. He could send her into the office to spy out the land; and, if necessary, he could sacrifice her to the violence of the mob.

However, no precaution was required for, upon reaching the office and peering anxiously through the glass portion of the door, George discovered one clerk sprawling over a desk asleep, and another reading a newspaper. Reassured by these peaceful signs of business as usual, he told Matilda to go and look at the shops, and to cultivate a gift of imagination by selecting those articles of dress and adornment which she most desired; then entered, and asked the clerk, who seemed more capable of action, whether his master was disengaged. The reply being favourable, George gave his name, though with less noise than usual, and was immediately invited to step upstairs and to open the first door that occurred. He did so, reproaching himself bitterly for the shameful timidity which had kept him in hiding for two years, and entirely convinced that the purloining of the furniture was a very ordinary and straightforward piece of business.

But this fine humour was knocked out of shape when the land agent, after a few preliminary remarks concerning hurricanes and anticyclones—appropriate under the circumstances—remarked courteously:

"In what part of Highfield parish is the property situated?"

"Near the end of the village street, just above the post office," answered the astounded George.

"So I judged from your description. It sounds a very remarkable thing to say, Mr. Drake, but—we can't find it."

"What the deuce do you mean?" George stuttered. "Not find it! Not find Highfield House! Why, it's the only gentleman's residence in the village. It stands out by itself. It hits you in the eye. It's as obvious as Exeter Cathedral."

"Then you have no explanation to offer?"

"Explain! What do you want me to explain?"

"Why my clerk, also a possible purchaser, both acting on the same day though independently,

were unable to locate the property. And why the local residents have no knowledge of its existence."

"Of course, they went to the wrong village."

"There is only one Highfield in Devonshire. I will tell you precisely what happened. Upon receiving your instructions, I directed my valuation clerk to go to Highfield and inspect the property. I also displayed a notice in the window. Houses on Dartmoor are selling well just now, as very few are available, and the district has become highly popular as it is said to be the healthiest part of England. Hardly was the notice in the window, when a gentleman called and asked for an order to view the property; and he travelled in the same train as my clerk, though neither was aware of the other's existence; nor did they meet in Highfield, as my clerk had left the village—supposing that a mistake had been made—before the gentleman arrived. Since then several people have inquired after the property, but I had to put them off until I had seen you. Now, Mr. Drake, surely you can explain the mystery."

"Mystery—there can't be one. There's the house simply blotting out the landscape! If they couldn't find it they must have been blind and paralysed," George shouted.

"My clerk could see no signs of a gentleman's residence in the village, and when he asked one or two of the inhabitants they knew nothing about Windward House. He did not press his inquiry, as he naturally supposed you had somehow sent the wrong instructions."

"I should like to know what part of the world he did go to," George muttered.

"The gentleman who went to view the property, returned here in a pretty bad temper, as he thought I had made a fool of him," continued the agent.

"He too inquired of the local inhabitants where Windward House might be situated, and received the same answer. They either did not know, or would not tell him."

"Are you making this up? Have you received instructions from people answering to the names of Hunter, Mudge, Dyer, Blisland, Kezia, Brock, to humbug me?" cried George.

"Certainly not, sir," said the agent sharply.

"Then I'm confounded! I don't believe in magic, ghosts, witches, evil eye, Aladdin's lamp, or pixies. Have you ever heard of such a thing in your life? Have you ever known a fine, big, well built, modern residence to vanish off the face of the earth, together with the ground it stood on, and the garden around it? Do you believe such a thing is possible? Because, if you do believe it, I am ruined."

And having thus spoken George wiped away the most genuine moisture that had ever dimmed his vision.

"I cannot offer any explanation, Mr. Drake, but it's certain your house has disappeared. Don't you think the best thing you can do is to go there yourself and find out what really has happened?"

"I won't go near the place," cried George. "I wouldn't be seen in it. I—I might disappear too."

"Then will you put the matter into the hands of the police?"

"I'll have nothing to do with them either," declared George.

"Shall I go myself and make inquiries of the vicar or some other reliable person?"

"All right," said George heavily. "It means more expense, but that's nothing to me now. If my house has gone, I may as well go to my last home at once. It's no use trying to kick against the powers of darkness," he muttered.

So the agent travelled to Highfield and collected a few details from certain inhabitants, who did not altogether approve of the local revolution, but were not going to make themselves unpopular by refusing to take a rub at the lamp themselves. Having learnt so much, it was easy to add to his information by assuming hostility to George and expressing approval of the punishment which had been meted out to him.

"Mr. Drake said one thing and meant another all the time he wur here," explained the Dumpy Philosopher. "Us didn't mind that, but when he started to treat us as human volks wur never meant to be treated, us had to learn 'em a serious lesson. His uncle promised to build us a railway, and they do say he left money vor it; but Mr. Drake did all he could to stop it from a-running. American gentlemen come here—a lot of 'em—to make the railway; but he said us didn't want it, and he drove 'em away, and he wouldn't let 'em spend a shilling. Said they'd come here to buy cloam. Said he'd rather see us all starve. Said he'd build the railway himself out of his own pocket, and he'd put a big waterwheel atop o' Highfield hill to draw the trains up; though us knew he couldn't, vor there ain't enough water coming over in summer to draw up a wheelbarrow. Said he'd make Highfield House a station and put a terminus in the back garden. I don't know what else he warn't going to do, but he wur talking childish day by day. And when he'd deceived us more than us could bear, he run away."

"What he done to poor and honest volk don't hardly seem possible," said the Gentle Shepherd. "Mrs. Drake left 'en Highfield House, and all the furniture she left to Bessie Mudge what married Robert Mudge who works vor Arthur Dyer. They ses she left part of the furniture to Kezia, but

Bessie ses that part o' the will be so mixed up it can't be hardly legal. Mr. Drake kept on going away, and coming back again; and one day he come back, and drove Miss Yard and Kezia out of the place; and he goes to Dyer and bribes 'en to send Robert and Bessie away vor a holiday; and when they'm gone he brings up vans and clears out all the furniture; and he breaks into Robert's house and steals a lot of his furniture, what he bought and paid vor wi' his own money; and he sells the lot by auction avore us could recover from the shock; and he ain't never been seen nor heard of since. And I fancy 'tis the most disgraceful deed what can ha' happened since the creation of the world."

"But he couldn't take the house, nor yet look after it, vor us wasn't going to have him back again after the way he'd used us, and us wasn't going to have 'en letting or selling the place neither, and making money out of our misfortunes," said the Wallower in Wealth. "He tried to ruin us all, he ha' brought the Mudges to awful poverty, and he ha' pretty near drove the Dyers into the asylum, and he stole a musical box what ha' been in my family vor generations out o' mind. It wur a fine house, sure enough, but 'tis all gone now. There's nought left but foundations, and there's not much o' them, and you can't see 'em, vor they'm covered wi' grass. The trees be all cut down, and the shrubs ha' got moved, and the garden wall ain't there no longer. The house warn't there one day, and gone the next, as some volk say. It seemed to go so gradual that no one noticed it really was a leaving us. Us all knew why it wur going, and how it wur going; but us didn't talk about it much, vor what be everybody's business ain't nobody's business."

"The youngsters started it," said Squinting Jack. "They smashed the windows and got inside. They sort o' took possession of the place and played there every day. They played at soldiers mostly. One lot o' children climbed up into the roof, and defended themselves wi' tiles and laths, while another lot attacked 'em wi' doors and window frames. And when they'd finished play, they took home all the broken stuff vor firewood. That wur the beginning, but in an amazing short time the house began to alter; it wur never the same place after the children got playing in it. When an old woman wanted wood vor the fire, she just went vor it; and when any one wanted a new door or window, they knew where one wur handy. Then one or two started building a cottage, and as the cottages went up Windward House come down. Some mornings us missed a bit o' wall what seemed to ha' fallen in the night, but nobody asked questions, vor us all had a hand in it, but there's no evidence to prove it. You won't find anything worth taking away now, not if you was to search wi' a miscroscope. The house didn't vanish away suddenly, not by no manner of means."

"It seemed to me," said the Gentle Shepherd, "as if it melted."

"It vanished in small pieces," added the Dumpy Philosopher.

The Wallower in Wealth had nothing more to say. The giant tortoise had transferred itself to his garden, having apparently engaged a wheelbarrow for that purpose. Either it was anxious to adopt the Wallower in Wealth, or he desired to study its habits in order that he too might attain eternal life. Or possibly he was determined to obtain some compensation for the lost musical box, through the possession of a genuine antique, which might with some propriety be styled the sole remaining item of the Captain's furniture.

The Dismal Gibcat said nothing whatever, although at one time he had been exceedingly loquacious. His was the only voice raised in protest against those who pillaged windows and door posts, or flitted at moonlight with joists and floorings. He publicly rebuked a poor old dame whom he caught staggering homeward with her apron full of laths. He explained the law as to wilful damage and petty larceny, and he dealt with the moral aspect of the matter till all were weary. Finally he announced his intention of protecting the property of the absentee owner by taking care of it for him: and he removed at least one half of the material and, by judicious guardianship of the same, succeeded in doubling the accommodation of his house.

George had no difficulty in speaking like a whale, but when he tried to talk like a sprat he made a mess of things. Therefore he could not bring Matilda and her mother to understand how a rascally trustee, whose name was Hunter, had sold his property and made off with the cash. They were sorry but firm; Matilda asserting it cost very little to keep a woman; while her mother pointed out with considerable fluency that matrimony was always less expensive than breach of promise actions. George gave way—having a horror of the fierce light of publicity which beats upon law courts—and became very melancholy. Nor was he much restored to gaiety by the joys of married life; for Matilda rapidly developed a flow of small talk which astounded him; when George ordered her to bring him a cup of tea she prescribed herself a glass of beer; and when he called for his slippers she threw the dirty boots at his head and told him to clean them. Matrimony was not all bee-keeping and rose-pruning for George.

Still more tragic were affairs at Drivelford, where Nellie and Sidney had come to realise that, for them at least, the married state was unattainable. Old ladies can be very selfish sometimes, and in that stimulating atmosphere, which shared with many others the distinction of being the healthiest in the land, Miss Yard grew no weaker daily. She suffered from a slight cold last winter, but was all the better for it in the spring. Indeed in merry May-time she made the shocking suggestion that Sidney should teach her to ride the bicycle.

With such dispiriting examples as the Yellow Leaf, whose longevity was becoming a public scandal, and whose conduct was disgraceful, as he would not be refused his right to wed the youngest grandchild of one of his middle-aged connections; and the giant tortoise, who found fresh lettuces more luscious than the weeds of his fifteenth century diet; and the eternal obstacle, Miss Yard, who was continually giving children's parties because she felt so young herself; with

such monuments of senile selfishness before them, Nellie and Sidney did indeed appear condemned to single blessedness.

But happily, according to the latest report from Drivelford, Miss Yard was not feeling very well. She was suffering from broken chilblains.

THE END

than the United States.

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