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Author: R. D. Blackmore

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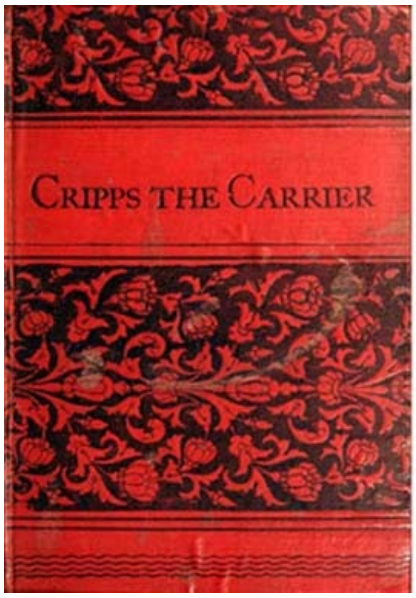

CRIPPS, THE CARRIER.

A WOODLAND TALE.

BY

RICHARD DODDRIDGE BLACKMORE,

AUTHOR OF "LORNA DOONE," "ALICE LORRAINE," ETC.

ἆρ' ἔστιν ἡμῖν λογίδιον γνώμην ἔχον,
ὑμῶν μὲν αὐτῶν οὐχὶ δεξιώτερον,
κωμῳδίας δὲ φορτικῆς σοφώτερον;
AR. VESP. 64.

NEW EDITION

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SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY,
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

LORNA DOONE.

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ALICE LORRAINE.
CLARA VAUGHAN.
CRADOCK NOWELL,
CRIPPS, THE CARRIER.
MARY ANERLEY.
EREMA: or, My Father's Sin.
CHRISTOWELL: A Dartmoor Tale.
TOMMY UPMORE.
SPRINGHAVEN.
KIT AND KITTY.

LONDON:
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY, LIMITED.
FETTER LANE. FLEET STREET, E.C.

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CRIPPS, THE CARRIER.

CHAPTER I.

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY.

The little village of Beckley lies, or rather lay many years ago, in the quiet embrace of old Stow Wood, well known to every Oxford man who loves the horn or fusil. This wood or forest (now broken up into many straggling copses) spread in the olden time across the main breadth of the highland to the north of Headington, between the valley of the Cherwell and the bogs of Otmoor. Beckley itself, though once approached by the Roman road from Alchester, must for many a century have nursed its rural quietude, withdrawn as it was from the stage-waggon track from High Wycombe to Chipping Norton, through Wheatley, Islip, and Bletchingdon, and lying in a tangle of narrow lanes leading only to one another. So Beckley took that cheerful view of life which enabled the fox to disdain the blandishments of the vintage, and prided itself on its happy seclusion and untutored honesty.

But as all sons of Adam must have something or other to say to the rest, and especially to his daughters, this little village carried on some commerce with the outer world; and did it through a carrier.

The name of this excellent man was Cripps; and the Carrier's mantle, or woolsey coat, had descended on this particular Cripps from many generations. All the Cripps family had a habit of adding largely to their number in every generation. In this they resembled most other families which have to fight the world, and therefore recruit their forces zealously; but in one great point they were very distinct—they agreed among one another. And ever since roads were made, or rather lanes began trying to make themselves, one great tradition had confirmed the dynasty of Crippses.

This was that the eldest son should take the carrying business; the second son (upon first avoidance) should have the baker's shop in Oxford over against old Balliol College; the third should have the queer old swine-farm in the heart of Stow Forest; the fourth should be the butcher of Beckley, and the fifth its shoemaker. If ever it pleased the Lord to proceed with the masculine fork of the family (as had happened several times), the sixth boy and the rest were expected to start on their travels, when big enough. As for the girls, the Carrier, being the head of the family, and holding the house and the stable and cart, was bound to take the maids, one by one, to and fro under his tilt twice a week, till the public fell in love with them.

Now, so many things come cross and across in the countless ins and outs of life, that even the laws of the Crippses failed sometimes, in some jot or tittle. Still there they stuck, and strong cause was needed ere they could be departed from. Of course the side-shoots of the family (shoemakers' sons, and so on) were not to be bound by this great code, however ambitious to be so. To deal with such rovers is not our duty. Our privilege is to trace the strict succession of the Crippses, the deeds of the Carrier now on the throne and his second best brother, the baker, with a little side-peep at the man on the farm, and a shy desire to be very delicate to the last unmarried "female."

The present head of the family, Zacchary Cripps, the Beckley carrier, under the laws of time (which are even stricter than the Cripps' code), was crossing the ridge of manhood towards the western side of forty, without providing the due successor to the ancestral driving-board. Public opinion was already beginning to exclaim at him; and the man who kept the chandler's shop, with a large small family to maintain, was threatening to make the most of this, and set up his own eldest son on the road; though "dot and carry one" was all he knew about the business. Zacchary was not a likely man to be at all upset by this; but rather one of a tarrying order, as his name might indicate.

Truly intelligent families living round about the city of Oxford had, and even to this day have, a habit of naming their male babies after the books of the Bible, in their just canonical sequence; while infants of the better sex are baptized into the Apocrypha, or even the Epistles. So that Zacchary should have been "Genesis," only his father had suffered such pangs of mind at being cut down, by the ever-strengthening curtness of British diction, into "Jenny Cripps," that he laid his thumb to the New Testament when his first man-child was born to him, and finding a father in like case, quite relieved of responsibility, took it for a good sign, and applied his name triumphantly.

But though the eldest born was thus transferred into the New Testament, the second son reverted to the proper dispensation; and the one who went into the baker's shop was Exodus, as he ought to be. The children of the former Exodus were turned out testamentarily, save those who were needed to carry the bread out till their cousin's boys should be big enough.

All of these doings were right enough, and everybody approved of them. Leviticus Cripps was the lord of the swine, and Numbers bore the cleaver, while Deuteronomy stuck to his last, when the public-house could spare him. There was only one more brother of the dominant generation, whose name was "Pentachook," for thus they pronounced the collective eponym, and he had been compendiously kicked abroad, to seek his own fortune, right early.

But as for the daughters (who took their names from the best women of the Apocrypha, and sat up successively under the tilt until they were disposed of), for the moment it is enough to say that all except one were now forth and settled. Some married farmers, some married tradesmen, one took a miller's eldest son, one had a gentleman more or less, but all with expectations. Only the youngest was still in the tilt, a very pretty girl called Esther.

All Beckley declared that Esther's heart had been touched by a College lad, who came some five years since to lodge with Zacchary for the long vacation, and was waited on by this young girl, supposed to be then unripe for dreaming of the tender sentiment. That a girl of only fifteen summers should allow her thoughts to stray, contrary to all common sense and her duty to her betters, for no other reason (to anybody's knowledge) than that a young man ate

and drank with less noise than the Crippses, and went on about the moonlight and the stars, and the rubbishy things in the hedges—that a child like that should know no better than to mix what a gentleman said with his inner meaning—put it right or left, it showed that something was amiss with her. However, the women would say no more until it was pulled out of them. To mix or meddle with the Crippses was like putting one's fingers into a steel trap.

With female opinion in this condition, and eager to catch at anything, Mrs. Exodus Cripps, in Oxford, was confined rather suddenly. She had kneaded a batch of two sacks of flour, to put it to rise for the morning, and her husband (who should not have let her do it) was smoking a pipe, and exciting her. Nevertheless, it would not have harmed her (as both the doctor and the midwife said) if only she had kept herself from arguing while about it. But, somehow or other, her husband said a thing she could not agree with, and the strength of her reason went the other way, and it served him right that he had to rush off in his slippers to the night-bell.

On the next day, although things were quite brought round, and the world was the richer by the addition of another rational animal, Mr. Exodus sent up the crumpet-boy all the way from Broad Street in Oxford to Beckley, to beg and implore Miss Esther Cripps to come down and attend to the caudle. And the crumpet-boy, being short of breath, became so full of power that the Carrier scarcely knew what to do in the teeth of so urgent a message. For he had made quite a pet of his youngest sister, and the twenty years of age betwixt them stopped the gap of rivalry. It was getting quite late in the afternoon when the crumpet-boy knocked at the Carrier's door, because he had met upon Magdalen Bridge a boy who owed him twopence; and eager as he was to fulfil his duty, a sense of justice to himself compelled him to do his best to get it. His knowledge of the world was increased by the failure of this Utopian vision, for the other boy offered to toss him "double or quits," and having no specie, borrowed poor Crumpy's last penny to do it; then, being defeated in the issue, he cast the young baker's cap over the bridge, and made off at fine speed with his coin of the realm. What other thing could Crumpy do than attempt to outvie his activity? In a word, he chased him as far as Carfax, with well-winged feet and sad labour of lungs, but Mercury laughed at Astræa, and Crumpy had a very distant view of fivepence. Recording a highly vindictive vow, he scratched his bare head, and set forth again, being further from Beckley than at his first start.

It certainly was an unlucky thing that the day of the week should be Tuesday—Tuesday, the 19th of December, 1837. For Zacchary always had to make his rounds on a Wednesday and a Saturday, and if he were to drive his poor old Dobbin into Oxford on a Tuesday evening, how could he get through his business to-morrow? For Dobbin insisted on a day in stable whenever he had been in Oxford. He was full of the air of the laziest place, and perhaps the most delightful, in the world. He despised all the horses of low agriculture after that inspiration, and he sighed out sweet grunts at the colour of his straw, instead of getting up the next morning.

Zacchary Cripps was a thoughtful man, as well as a very kind-hearted one. In the crown of his hat he always carried a monthly calendar gummed on cardboard, and opposite almost every day he had dots, or round O's, or crosses. Each of these to his very steady mind meant something not to be neglected; and being (as time went) a pretty fair scholar—ere School Boards destroyed true scholarship—with the help of his horse he could make out nearly every place he had to call at. So now he looked at the crumpet-boy, to receive and absorb his excitement, and then he turned to young Esther, and let her speak first, as she always liked to do.

"Oh, please to go back quite as fast as you can," said Esther to the Crumpy, "and say that I shall be there before you; or, at any rate, as soon as you are. And, Crumpy, there ought to be something for you. Dear Zak, have you got twopence?"

"Not I," said the Carrier, "and if I had, it would do him a deal more harm than good. Run away down the hill, my lad, and you come to me at the Golden Cross, perhaps as soon as Saturday, and I'll look in my bag for a halfpenny. Run away, boy; run away, or the bogies will be after you."

CHAPTER II.

THE SWING OF THE PICKAXE.

The baker's boy felt that his luck was askew upon this day of his existence, for Carrier Cripps was vexed so much at this sudden demand for his sister that he never even thought of asking the boy to have a glass of home-brewed ale.

"Zak, what made you send the boy away?" Esther asked, when she came downstairs, with her bonnet and short cloak on. "Of course, I am very foolish; but he would have been some little company."

"There, now, I never thought of it! I am doiled, a do believe, sometimes. Tramp with you to the Bar mysell, I wull. Sarve me right for a-doin' of it."

"Indeed, then, you won't," she answered firmly. "There's a hard day's work for you, Zak, to-morrow, with all the Christmas parcels, and your touch of rheumatics so bad last week."

"Why, bless the cheeld, I be as hearty as ever!"

"Of course you are, Zak; of course you are, and think nought of a sack of potatoes. But if you declare to come with me one step, backward is the only step I take."

"Well, well," said the Carrier, glad on the whole to escape a long walk and keep conscience clear; "when you say a thing, Etty, what good is it? Round these here parts none would harm 'ee. And none of they furriners be about just now."

"Good-night, Zak, good-night, dear," cried Esther, to shorten departure, for Cripps was a man of a slow turn of mind, and might go on for an hour or two; "I shall sleep there to-night, of course, and meet you at the Golden Cross to-morrow. When had I best be there?"

"Well, you know better than I do. It might be one o'clock, or it might be two, or it might be half-past three a'most. All you have to do is this—to leave word at the bar with Sally Brown."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," she answered; "I don't like bars, and I don't like Miss Brown. I shall look in the yard for the cart, brother."

"You'll do pretty much as you like. That much a may be cock-sure of." But before he could finish his exposition of his sister's character, she was out of sight; and he dropped his grumble, and doubted his mind about letting her go. Nor that any one at all of the neighbourhood would hurt her; but that there had been much talk about a camp of dark-skinned people in Cowley Marsh, not long ago. Therefore he laid his palm flat from his eyebrows, to follow the distance further; and seeing no more than the hedges of the lane (now growing in the cold wind naked) and the track of the lane (from wet mud slaking into light-coloured crustiness), without any figures, or sound, or shadow, or sense of life moving anywhere—he made for the best side of his cottage-door, and brightened up the firelight.

The weather had been for some few weeks in a good constitutional English state; that is to say, it had no settled tendency towards anything. Or at any rate, so it seemed to people who took little heed of it. There had been a little rain, and then a little snow, and a touch of frost, and then a sample of fog, and so on: trying all varieties, to suit the British public. True Britons, however, had grumbled duly at each successive overture; so that the winter was now resolving henceforth only to please itself. And this determined will was in the wind, the air, and the earth itself, just when night began to fall on this dark day of December.

As Esther turned the corner from the Beckley lane into the road, the broad coach road to Oxford, she met a wind that knew its mind coming over the crest of Shotover, a stern east wind that whistled sadly over the brown and barren fields, and bitterly piped in the roadway. To the chill of this blast the sere oak-leaves shivered in the dusk and rattled; the grey ash saplings bent their naked length to get away from it; and the surly stubs of the hedge went to and fro to one another. The slimy dips of the path began to rib themselves, like the fronds of fern, and to shrink into wrinkles and sinewy knobs; while the broader puddles, though skirred by the breeze, found the network of ice veiling over them. This, as it crusted, began to be capable of a consistent quivering, with a frail infinitude of spikelets, crossing and yet carrying into one another. And the cold work (marred every now and then by the hurry of the wind that urged it) in the main was going on so fast, that the face of the water ceased to glisten, and instead of ruffling lifted, and instead of waving wavered. So that, as the surface trembled, any level eye might see little splinters (held as are the ribs and harl of feathers) spreading, and rising like stems of lace, and then with a smooth, crisp jostle sinking, as the wind flew over them, into the quavering consistence of a coverlet of ice.

Esther Cripps took little heed of these things, or of any other in the matter of weather, except to say to herself now and then how bitter cold the wind was, and that she feared it would turn to snow, and how she longed to be sitting with a cup of "Aunt Exie's" caudle in the snug room next to the bakehouse, or how glad she would be to get only as far as the first house of St. Clement's, to see the lamps and the lights in the shops, and be quit of this dreary loneliness. For now it must be three market days since fearful rumours began to stir in several neighbouring villages, which made even strong men discontent with solitude towards nightfall; and as for the women—just now poor Esther would rather not think of what they declared. It was all very well to pretend to doubt it while hanging the clothes out, or turning the mangle; but as for laughing out here in the dark, and a mile away from the nearest house—Good Lord! How that white owl frightened her!

Being a sensible and brave girl, she forced her mind as well as she could into another channel, and lifted the cover of the basket in which she had some nice things for "Aunt Exie," and then she set off for a bold little run, until she was out of breath, and trembling at the sound of her own light feet. For though all the Crippses were known to be of a firm and resolute fibre, who could expect a young maid like this to tramp on like a Roman sentinel?

And a lucky thing for her it was that she tried nothing of the sort, but glided along with her heart in her mouth, and her short skirt tucked up round her. Lucky also for her that the ground (which she so little heeded, and so wanted to get over) was in that early stage of freezing, or of drying to forestall frost, in which it deadens sound as much as the later stage enlivens it, otherwise it is doubtful whether she would have seen the Christmas-dressing of the shops in Oxford.

For, a little further on, she came, without so much as a cow in the road or a sheep in a field for company, to a dark narrow place, where the way hung over the verge of a stony hollow, an ancient pit which had once been worked as part of the quarries of Headington. This had long been of bad repute as a haunted and ill-omened place; and even the Carrier himself, strong and resolute as he was, felt no shame in whispering when he passed by in the moonlight. And the name of the place was the "Gipsy's Grave." Therefore, as Esther Cripps approached it, she was half inclined to wait and hide herself in a bush or gap until a cart or waggon should come down the hill behind her, or an honest dairyman whistling softly to reassure his shadow, or even a woman no braver than herself.

But neither any cart came near, nor any other kind of company, only the violence of the wind, and the keen increase of the frost-bite. So that the girl made up her mind to put the best foot foremost, and run through her terrors at such a pace that none of them could lay hold of her.

Through yards of darkness she skimmed the ground, in haste only to be rid of it, without looking forward, or over her shoulders, or anywhere, when she could help it. And now she was ready to laugh at herself and her stupid fears, as she caught through the trees a glimpse of the lights of Oxford, down in the low land, scarcely more than a mile and a half away from her. In the joy of relief she was ready to jump and pant without fear of the echoes, when suddenly something caught her ears.

This was not a thing at first to be at all afraid of, but only just enough to rouse a little curiosity. It seemed to be nothing more nor less than the steady stroke of a pickaxe. The sound came from the further corner of the deserted quarry, where a crest of soft and shingly rock overhung a briary thicket. Any person working there would be quite out of sight from the road, by reason of the bend of the hollow.

The blow of the tool came dull and heavy on the dark and frosty wind; and Esther almost made up her mind to run on, and take no heed of it. And so she would have done, no doubt, if she had not been a Cripps girl. But in this family firm and settled opinions had been handed down concerning the rights of property—the rights that overcome all wrongs, and outlive death. The brother Leviticus of Stow Wood had sown a piece of waste at the corner of the clevice with winter carrots for his herd of swine. The land being none of his thus far, his right so to treat it was not established, and therefore likely to be attacked by any rapacious encroacher. Esther felt all such things keenly, and resolved to find out what was going on.

To this intent she gathered in the skirt of her frock and the fulling of her cloak, and fending the twigs from her eyes and bonnet, quietly slipped through a gap in the hedge. For she knew that a steep track, trodden by children in the blackberry season, led from this gap to the deep and tangled bottom of the quarry. With care and fear she went softly down, and followed the curve of the hollow.

The heavy sound of the pickaxe ceased, as she came near and nearer, and the muttering of rough voices made her shrink into a nook and listen.

"Tell 'ee, I did see zummat moving," said a man, whom she could dimly make out on the beetling ridge above her, by the light of the clearing eastern sky; "a zummat moving down yonner, I tell 'ee."

"No patience, I han't no patience with 'ee," answered a taller man coming forward, and speaking with a guttural twang, as if the roof of his mouth were imperfect. "Skeary Jem is your name and nature. Give me the pick if thee beest aveared. Is this job to be finished to-night, or not?"

The answer was only a growl or an oath, and the swing of the tool began again, while Esther's fright grew hot, and thumped in her heart, and made her throat swell. It was all she could do to keep quiet breath, and prevent herself from screaming; for something told her that she was watching a darker crime than theft of roots or robbery of a sheepfold.

In a short or a long time—she knew not which—as she still lay hid and dared not show her face above the gorse-tuft, a sound of sliding and falling shale heavily shook her refuge. She drew herself closer, and prayed to the Lord, and clasped her hands before her eyes, and cowered, expecting to be killed at least. And then she peeped forth, to know what it was about. She never had harmed any mortal body; why should she be frightened so?

In the catch of the breath which comes when sudden courage makes gulp at uncertainty, she lifted herself by a stiff old root, to know the very worst of it. Better almost to be killed and be done with, than bear the heart-pang of this terrible fear. And there she saw a thing that struck her so aback with amazement, that every timid sense was mute.

Whether the sky began to shed a hovering light, or the girl's own eyes spread and bred a power of vision from their nervous dilation—at any rate, she saw in the darkness what she had not seen till now. It was the body of a young woman (such a body as herself might be), lying, only with white things round it, in the black corner, with gravel and earth and pieces of rock rolling down on it. There was nothing to frighten a sensible person now that the worst was known perhaps. Everybody must be buried at some time. Why should she be frightened so?

However, Esther Cripps fell faint, and lay in that state long enough for tons of burying rock to fall, and secret buryers to depart.

CHAPTER III.

OAKLEAF POTATOES.

"Of all slow people in this slow place, I am quite certain that there is none so slow as Cripps, the Carrier."

This "hot spache," as the patient Zacchary would perhaps have called it, passed the lips of no less a person than old Squire Oglander. He, on the 20th day of December (the day after that we began with), was hurrying up and down the long straight walk of his kitchen garden, and running every now and then to a post of vantage, from which he could look over the top of his beloved holly hedge, and make out some of the zigzags of the narrow lane from Beckley. A bitter black frost had now set in, and the Squire knew that if he wanted anything more fetched out of his ground, or anything new put into it, it might be weeks before he got another chance of doing it. So he made a good bustle, and stamped, and ran, and did all he could to arouse his men, who knew him too well to concern themselves about any of his menaces.

"I tell you we are all caught napping, Thomas. I tell you we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. The frost is an inch in the ground already. Artichokes, carrots, parsnips, beetroot, even horse-radish for our Christmas beef—and upon my soul, a row of potatoes never even dug yet! Unless I am after you at every corner—well, I am blessed if I don't see our keeping onions!"

"Now, measter, 'ee no call to be so grum! None of they things'll be a haporth the worse. The frost'll ony swaten 'em."

"You zany, I know all your talk. Hold your tongue. Not a glass of beer will I send out, if this is all I get for it. Sweeten them, indeed! And when we want them, are we to dig them with mattocks, pray? Or do you thick-heads expect it to thaw to order, when the pot is bubbling? Stir your lazy legs, or I'll throw every one of you on the work-house the moment the first snow falls."

The three men grinned at one another, and proceeded leisurely. They knew much better than the Squire himself what his gentle nature was, and that he always expiated a scolding with a jug of beer.

"Man and boy," said the eldest of them, speaking below his breath, as if this tyranny had extinguished him; "in this here gearden have I worked, man and boy, for threescore year, and always gi'en satisfaction. Workuss! What would his father a' said, to hear tell in this gearden of workuss? Workuss! Well, let un coom, if a will! Can't be harder work, God knoweth."

"Tummuss, Tummuss, you may say that," said another lazy rascal, shaking his head, with his heel on his spade, and then wiping his forehead laboriously. "'Tis the sweat of our brow, Tummuss, none of 'em thinks on—but there, they was born to be driving of us!"

Squire Oglander made as if he heard them not; and then he hurried to the hedge again, and stood on the wall of the leaf-mould pit, and peered over the beard of hollies. And this time he spied in the distance Cripps, or at any rate the tilt of the Crippsian cart, jogging sedately to the rhythm of the feet of Dobbin.

"Hurrah!" cried the Squire, who was still as young in mind as if he had no body. "By George, we shall be just in time. Never mind what I said, my lads. I was a little bit cross, I know. Take out the crumbs from the bottom of your trenches, and go two inches deeper. Our new potatoes are come at last! Mary, come out with a gallon of ale."

Squire Oglander, having retired now from the army and all warfare, was warmly devoted to the arts of peace. Farming, planting, gardening, breeding, training of dogs, and so on—all of these quiet delights fell softly on a very active mind, when the vigour of the body began to fail. He loved his farm, and he loved his garden, and all his attempts at improvement, and nothing better than to point out his own mistakes to rash admirers. But where is the pleasure of showing things to strangers who know nothing? The old man's grand delight of all was to astonish his own daughter, his only child, Grace Oglander.

This it was that made him work so hard at the present moment. He was determined to have his kitchen garden in first-rate winter order by the time his daughter should come home from a visit to her aunt at Cowley. Now this sister, Mrs. Fermitage, had promised to bring home their joint pet Gracie in time for the dinner at five o'clock that very day, and to dine there with them; so that it was needful to look alive, and to make quick step of everything. Moreover, this good Squire had some little insight (as behoves a farmer and a sportsman) into the ways and meaning of the weather of the neighbourhood. He knew as well as a short-tailed field-mouse that a long frost was coming. The sharp dry rustle of the upturned leaves of holly and of ivy, the heavy stoop of the sullen sky, the patches of spaded mould already browning with powdery crispness, the upward shivering look of the grass, and the loss of all gloss upon everything, and the shuddering rattle in the teeth of a man who opened his mouth to the wind at all—many other things than these, as well as all of them, were here; that any man (not blind, or deaf, or choked in citied ignorance) might fall to at once, and dig every root of his potatoes.

But the strange thing, in this present matter, was that Squire Oglander was bent not only on digging potatoes, but also on planting them, this very day. Forsooth it was one of his fixed dates in the chronicles of the garden, that happen what might, or be the season whatsoever it chose to be, new potatoes and peas he would have by the last day of May, at the latest. And this without any ignoble resort to forcing-pit, hot-bed, or even cold frame; under the pure gaze of the sky, by that time they must be ready. Now, this may be easy at Ventnor, or Penzance, or even Bournemouth; but in the highlands of Oxfordshire it requires some skill and management. In the first place, both pea

and potato must be of a kind that is ready to awake right early; and then they must be humoured with a very choice place; and after that they must be shielded from the winter's rages. If all these "musts" can be complied with, and several "ifs" are solved aright, the gardener (eager as well as patient) may hope to get pleasure from his early work.

Of all men there was none perhaps more capable of hoping than this good Squire Oglander. In his garden and his household, or among his friends and neighbours, or the world at large, he not only tried to see, but saw, the very best side of everything. When things fell out amiss, he always looked very wise, and shook his head, and declared that he had predicted them; and before very long he began to find out that they were not so bad as they might have been. His ruddy face, and blue eyes, and sometimes decidedly waggish nose, as well as his crisp white hair, and way of standing to be looked at, let everybody know that here was a man of no great pretension, yet true, and of kind and happy heart, and fit to be relied upon. Ten thousand such may be found in England; and they cannot be too many.

"Inside and outside, all look alive!" cried this gentleman, running to and fro: "Gracie will be home; Miss Grace, I mean; and not a bit of fire in the drawing-room grate! No Christmas-boxes for any of you sluts! Now, I did not mean that, Mary, as you might know. Inside the women, and outside the men—now, what is this paper for, my dear?"

"That there Cripps, sir, have a sent 'un in. He be gettin' so pertikular!"

"Quite right. Quite right. Business is business. No man can be too particular. Let him sit down and have a pint of ale. He wants me to sign this paper, does he? Very well; tell him to come next week. My fingers are cramped with the wind. Tell Cripps—now, don't you be in such a hurry, Mary; Cripps is not a marrying man."

"As if I would touch him with a pair of tongs, sir! A Hookham to have a Cripps, sir!—a man who always smells as if he had been a-combing of a horse!"

"Ah, poor Mary, the grapes are sour. Tell bachelor Cripps to send in the bag. And bring me the little truck-basket, Mary; I dare say that will hold them. Just in time, they are only just in time. To-morrow would have been a day too late."

The Squire was to pay a guinea for this bushel of early oakleaf potatoes, a sort that was warranted to beat the ashleaf by a fortnight, and to crop tenfold as much. The bag had been sent by the Henley coach from a nursery near Maidenhead, and left at the Black Horse in St. Clement's, to be called for by the Beckley carrier.

"Stay now," cried the Squire; "now I think of it we will unpack the bag in the brewery, Mary. They have had a fire there all the morning. And it will save making any mess in here. Miss Grace is coming, bless her heart! And she'll give it to me, if she finds any dirt."

"But, sir, if you please, Master Cripps now just is beginning of his pint of ale. And he never hurrieth over that——"

"Well, we don't want Cripps. We only want the bag. Jem will bring it into the brewery, if you want to sit with Cripps. Cripps is tired, I dare say. These young men's legs are not fit for much. Stop—call old Thomas; he's the best, after all. If I want a thing done, I come back to the old folk, after all."

"Well, sir, I don't think you have any reason to say that. Howsomever, here cometh Mr. Kale. Mr. Kale, if you please, you be wanted."

Presently Thomas Kale, the man who had worked so long in the garden there, followed his master across the court, with the bag of potatoes on his back. The weight was a trifle, of course, being scarcely over half a hundredweight; but Thomas was too old a hand to make too light of anything.

"I've knowed the time," he said, setting down the sack on the head of an empty barrel, "when that there weight would have failed, you might say, to crook my little finger. Now, make so bold—do you know the raison?"

"Why, Thomas, we cannot expect to be always so young as we were once, you know."

"Nout to do wi' it—less nor nout. The raison lie all in the vittels, maister; the vittels is fallen from what they was."

"Thomas, you give me no peace with your victuals. You must groan to the cook, not to me, about them. Now, cut the cord. Why, what has Cripps been about?"

The bag was made of a stout grey canvas, not so thick as sacking, and as the creases of the neck began to open, under the slackening cord, three or four red stripes were shown, such as are sometimes to be found in the neck of a leather mail-bag, when the postmaster has been in a hurry, and dropped his wax too plenteously. But the stripes in these creases were not dry and brittle, as of run sealing-wax, but clammy and damp, as if some thick fluid had oozed from dripping fingers.

"I don't like the look of it," cried the old Squire. "Cripps should be more careful. He has left the bag down at his brother the butcher's. I am sure they never sent it out like this. Not that I am of a squeamish order, but still—good God! What is this that I see?"

With scarcely time for his cheeks to blanch, or his firm old hands to tremble, Squire Oglander took from the mouth of the sack a coil of long bright golden hair. The brown shade of the potatoes beneath it set off its glistening beauty. He knew it at a glance; there was no such hair in all Oxfordshire but his Gracie's. A piece of paper was roughly twisted in and out the shining wreath. This he spread in the hollow of his palm, and then put on his spectacles, and read by the waning light these words, "All you will ever see of her."

CHAPTER IV.

CRIPPS IN A QUANDARY.

Worth Oglander, now in his seventieth year, although he might be a trifle fat, was a truly hale and active man. His limbs were as sound as his conscience; and he was well content with his life and age. He had seen a good deal of the world and of enemies, in the stirring times of war. But no wrong lay in the bottom of his heart, no harm ever done to any one, except that he had killed a few Frenchmen, perhaps, as all Englishmen used to be forced to do.

Moreover, he had what most folk now, of the very best kind, have almost outlived, a staunch and steadfast faith in the management of the world by its Maker. We are too clever now for all this, of course. But it must be allowed that this fine old faith bred courage, truth, and comfort.

"Whoever has played this trick with me," said the Squire, as soon as he recovered himself, "is, to say the least of it, a blackguard. Even for a Christmas joke, it is carrying things a great deal too far. I have played, and been played, many practical jokes, when there was nothing else to do; in winter-quarters, and such like. But this is beyond—— Thomas, run and fetch Cripps. I will get to the bottom of this, I am resolved."

In a minute or two Master Cripps came in. His face was a little flushed, from the power of the compliments paid to Mary, but his eyes were quite firm, and his breeches and gaiters strictly under discipline of the legs inside them.

"Servant, sir," he said, touching his forelock, nearly of the colour of clover hay; "all correct, I hope, Squire, safe and sound and in good condition. That's how I deliver all goods, barring the will of the A'mighty."

"Tell me the meaning of this." As he spoke Mr. Oglander held up the bright wreath of hair, and pointed to the red stains on the sack. Cripps, as behoved a slow-minded man, stared at the hair, and the bag, and the Squire, the roof of the brewery, and all the tubs; and then began feeling in his hat for orders.

"Cripps, are you dumb; are you tipsy; or what? Or are you too much ashamed of yourself?"

"I ain't done nort for to be ashamed of—me, nor my father avoore me."

"Then will you tell me what this means? Are you going to keep me all night, for God's sake?"

"Squire, I never, I never see'd 'un. I know no more than a sto-un. I know no more than the dead, I do."

"Where did you get the bag? Was it like this? Who gave it to you? Have you let it out of sight? Did you see anybody come near it?"

"Squire, I can't tell 'ee such a many things. They heft up the barg to me at the Black Horse, where the bargs is alwas left for you. I took no heed of 'un, out of common. And no one have a titched him since, but me."

There was nothing more to be learned from Cripps, except that he passed the Black Horse that day a little earlier than usual, and had not brought his sister Esther, who was to have met him at the Golden Cross. He had come home by way of Elsfield, having something to deliver there, and had given a lift to old Shepherd Wakeling; but that could have naught to do with it.

It was now getting dark, and the Squire every moment grew more and more uneasy. "Keep all this nonsense to yourself now, Cripps," he said, as he stowed the bag under a tub, and carefully covered his daughter's hair, and the piece of paper, with a straining sieve; "it might annoy me very much if this joke went any further, you know. I can trust Thomas to hold his tongue, and I hope I can trust you, neighbour Cripps."

"Your honour knoweth what I be," answered the loyal Carrier. "Ever since I were a boy—but there, they all knows what I be."

Master Cripps, with his brain "a good piece doiled," as he afterwards said of it, made his way back to the cart, and mounted in his special manner. Although he was only two-score years of age, he had so much rheumatism in his right knee—whether it sprang from the mud, or the ruts, or (as he believed) from the turnpike gates—that he was bound to get up in this way. First he looked well up and down the lane, to be sure there was no other cart in sight, then he said "whoa-hoa" to Dobbin (who was always quite ready to receive that advice), and then he put his left foot on the little step, and made sure that it was quite steady. Throwing his weight on that foot, he laid hold of the crupper with his right hand, and placed his stiff knee on the flat of the shaft, never without a groan or two. At this stage he rested, to collect his powers; and then with decisive action flung his left foot upon the footboard, and casting the weight of his body thither, came down on the seat, with a thump and rattle. He was now all right, and Dobbin felt it, and acknowledged the fact with a grateful grunt. Then Carrier Cripps took up the reins, and made a little flourish with his brass-bound whip, and Dobbin put up his head, and started with his most convenient foot.

"I dunno what to make of this here start," said Cripps to himself, and his horse and cart, as soon as he had smitten his broad chest long enough to arouse circulation. "Seemeth to me a queer thing truly. But I never were a hand at a riddle. Wugg then, Dobbin! Wun'not go home to-night?"

CHAPTER V.

A RIDE THROUGH THE SNOW.

Meanwhile the old Squire, with a troubled mind, kept talking and walking about, and listening for the rumble of his sister's carriage, the clank of horses' hoofs, and the ring of wheels upon the frozen road. He could not believe that any one in the world would hurt his darling Gracie. Everybody loved her so, and the whole parish was so fond of her, and she had such a way of easing every one's perplexities, that if any villain durst even think of touching a hair of her blessed head—yet whose hair was it?—whose hair was it? And such a quantity as never could have been cut with her consent!

"This is too much! I cannot bear it!" he said to himself, after many a turn, and anxious search of the distance; "Joan's carriage should have been here long ago. My darling would have made them keep their time. I cannot stop here: I must go to meet them. But I need not startle any one."

To provide for this, he just looked in at the kitchen door, and told the old cook to keep the dinner back awhile; for the roads were so bad that the ladies were almost sure to be behind their time; and then he went quietly to the stable, where the horses were bedded down, and by the light of an old horn lantern saddled and bridled his favourite hack.

Heavy snow-clouds had been gathering all the afternoon; and now as he passed through a side-gate into the lane, and turned his mare's head eastward, the forward flakes were borne by the sharp wind into his white whiskers. "We shall have a coarse night of it, I doubt," he said to himself, as he buttoned his coat. At every turn of the lane he hoped to meet his sister's chariot labouring up the slippery track with the coal-black horses gray with snow, and somebody well wrapped up inside, to make him laugh at his childish fears. But corner after corner he turned, and met no carriage, no cart, no horse, nor even so much as a man afoot; only the snow getting thicker and sharper, and the wind beginning to wail to it. The ruts of the lane grew more distinct, as their combs of frozen mud attracted and held the driving whiteness; and the frogs of heavy cart-horses might be traced by the hoary increment. Then in three or four minutes, a silvery greyness (cast by the brown face of the roadway underlying the skin of snow) glistened between steep hedgerows wherein the depth of darkness rested. Soon even these showed traitor members, and began to hang the white feather forth, where drooping spray or jutting thicket stopped the course of the laden air. Every hoof of the horse fell softer than it had fallen the step before, and the old man stooped to heed his reins, as his hoary eyebrows crusted.

Fear struck colder to his heart than frost, as he turned the last corner of his way, without meeting presence or token of his sister or darling daughter. In the deepening snow he drew his horse up under the two great yew-trees that overhung his sister's gate, and fumbled in the dark for the handle. The close heavy gates were locked and barred; and nothing had lately passed through them. Then he hoped that the weather might have stopped the carriage, and he tugged out the heavy bronze lion's-head in the pillar, which was the bell-pull. The bell in the porch of the house clanged deeply, and the mastiff heavily bayed at him; but he had to make the bell clang thrice before any servant answered it.

"Who be you there?" at last a gruff voice asked, without stretch of courtesy. "This sort of weather, come ringing like that! If 'ee say much more, I'll let the big dog loose."

"Open the gate, you young oaf," cried the Squire. "I suppose you are one of the new lot, eh? Not to know me, Worth Oglander!"

"Why couldn't you have said so then?" the surly fellow answered, as he slowly opened one leaf of the gate, sweeping a fringe of snow back.

"Such a fellow wouldn't be with me half a day. Are you too big for your work, sir? Run on before me, you piecrust in pumps, or you shall taste my whip, sir."

The footman, for once in his life, took his feet up, and ran in a bluster of rage and terror to the front door, which he had left wide open to secure a retreat from violence. Mr. Oglander struck his mare, and she started so that he scarcely pulled her head up under the coigne of his sister's porch.

"What is all this, I would beg to know? If you think to frighten me, you are mistaken. Oh, Worth is it? Worth, whatever do you mean by making such a commotion?"

Three or four frightened maids were peeping, safe in the gloom of the entrance-hall; while the lady of the house came forward bravely in the lamp-light.

"I will speak to you presently, Joan," said the Squire, as he vainly searched, with a falling heart, for some dear face behind her. "Here, Bob, I know you at any rate; take the old mare to the stable."

Then, with a sign to his sister, he followed her softly into the dining-room. At a glance he saw that she had dined alone, and he fell into a chair, and could not speak.

"Have you brought back the stockings? Why, how ill you look? The cold has been too much for you, brother. You should not have come out. What was Grace doing to let——"

"Where is my daughter Grace?"

"Your daughter Grace! My niece Grace! Why, at home in her father's house, to be sure! Worth, are your wits wandering?"

"When did Grace leave you?"

"At three o'clock, yesterday. How can you ask, when you sent in such hot haste for her? You might be quite sure that she would not linger. I thought it rather—let me tell you——"

"I never sent for Grace. I have not seen her!"

Mrs. Fermitage looked at her brother steadily, with one hand fencing her forehead. She knew that he was of no drunken kind—yet once in a way a man might take too much—especially in such weather. But he answered her gaze with such eyes that she came up to him, and began to tremble.

"I tell you, Joan, I never sent for Grace. If you don't know where she is—none but God knows!"

"I have told you all," his sister answered, catching her breath at every word almost—"a letter came from you, overruling the whole of our arrangement—you were not ill; but you wanted her for some particular purpose. She was to walk, and you would meet her; and walk she did, poor darling! And I was so hurt that I would not send——"

"You let her go, Joan! You let her go! It was a piece of your proud temper. Her death lies at your door. And so will mine!"

Mr. Oglander was very sorry, as soon as he had spoken thus unjustly; but the deep pang of the heart devoured any qualms of conscience.

"Are you sure that you let her go? Are you sure that she is not in this house now?" he cried, coming up to his sister, and taking both hands to be sure of her. "She must be here; and you are joking with me."

"Worth, she left this house at two o'clock by that timepiece yesterday, instead of to-day, as we meant to do. She would not let any one go with her, because you were coming down the hill to meet her. Not expecting to go home that day, she had a pair of my silk stockings on, because—well, I need not go into that—and knowing what a darling little fidget she is, I thought she had sent you back with them, and to make your peace for so flurrying me."

"Have you nothing more to tell me, Joan? I shall go mad while you dwell on your stockings. Who brought that letter? What is become of it? Did you see it? Can you think of anything? Oh, Joan, you women are so quick-witted! Surely you can think of something!"

Mrs. Fermitage knew what her brother meant; but no sign would she show of it. The Squire was thinking of a little touch of something that might have grown up into love, if Grace had not been so shy about it, and so full of doubts as to what she ought to do. Her aunt had been anxious to help this forward; but not for the world to speak of it.

"Concerning the letter, I only just saw it. I was up—well, well, I mean I happened to have something to do in my own room then. The dear creature knocked at my door, and I could not let her in at the moment——"

"You were doing your wig—well, well, go on."

"I was doing nothing of the kind—your anxiety need not make you rude, Worth. However, she put the letter under the door, and I saw that it was your handwriting, and so urgent that I was quite flurried, and she was off in two minutes, without my even kissing her. Oh, poor dear! My little dear! She said good-bye through the key-hole, and could not wait for me even to kiss her!"

At this thought the elderly lady broke down, and could for the moment do nothing but sob.

"Dear heart, dear heart!" cried the Squire, who was deeply attached to his sister; "don't take on so, my dear good Joan! We know of no harm as yet—that is"—for he thought of the coil of hair, but with strong effort forbore to speak of it—"nothing I mean in any way positive, or disastrous. She may have, you know—she may have taken it into her head to—to leave us for awhile, Joan."

"To run away! To elope! Not she! She is the last girl in the world to do it. Whatever may have happened, she has not done that. You ought to know better than that, Worth."

"Perhaps I do; I have no more time to talk of that, or any other thing. I shall hurry into Oxford, and see John Smith, and let everybody know of it. What do I care what people think? Send a man on horseback to Beckley at once. Have you any man worth a pinch of salt? You are always changing so."

"I cannot keep cripples, or sots, dear brother. Take any one you please of them."

"Any one who will deign to come, you should say. Deep snow tries the mettle of new-comers."

CHAPTER VI.

THE PUBLIC OF THE "PUBLIC."

Meanwhile, Esther Cripps, who perhaps could have thrown some light on this strange affair, was very uneasy in her mind. She had not heard, of course, as yet, that Grace Oglander was missing. But she could not get rid of the fright she had felt, and the dread of some dark secret. Her sister-in-law was in such a condition that she must not be told of it; and as for her brother Exodus, it would be worse than useless to speak to him. He had taken it into his head, ever since that business with the "College gent," that his sister was not "right-minded"—that she dreamed things, and imagined things; and that anything she liked to say should be listened to, and thought no more of. And Baker Cripps was one of those men from whose minds no hydraulic power can lift an idea—laid once, laid for ever.

Esther had no one to tell her tale to. She longed to be home at Beckley; but there had been such symptoms with the baker's wife, that a woman, of the largest experience to be found in Oxford, declared that there was another coming. This was not so. But still (as all the women said) it might have been; and where was the man to lay down the law to them that had been through it?

The whole of this was made quite right in the end and everybody satisfied; but it prevented poor Esther from going to the Golden Cross, as she should have done; and the Carrier (having a little tiff with his brother about a sack of meal, as long ago as Michaelmas) left him to bake his own bread, and would rather drive over his dinner than dine with him.

The days of the week are hard to follow, as everybody must have long found out; but still, from Tuesday to Saturday is a considerable time to think of. Master Cripps had two carrying days, two great days of long voyaging. Not that he refrained from coasting here and there about the parish, or up and down a lane or two, on days of briefer enterprise; or refused to take some washings round; for he was not the man to be ashamed of earning sixpence honourably.

But now such weather had set in, that even Cripps, with his active turn and pride in his honest calling, was forced to stay at home and boil the bones the butcher sent him, and nurse his stiff knee, and smoke his pipe, and go no further than his bed of hardy kail, or Dobbin's stable. Except that when the sun went down—if it ever got up, for aught he knew—his social instincts so awoke, that he managed to go to the corner of the lane, where the blacksmith kept the "public-house." This was a most respectable house, frequented very quietly. Master Cripps, from his intercourse with the world, and leading position in Beckley, as well as his pleasant way of letting other people talk, and nodding when their words were wisdom—Cripps had long been accepted as the oracle; and he liked it.

Even there—in his brightest moments, when he smoked his pipe and thought, leaving emptier folk to waste the income of their brain in words, and even when he had been roused up to settle some vast question by a brief emphatic utterance—his satisfaction was now alloyed. Not from any threat of rival wisdom—that was hopeless—but from the universal call for a guiding judgment from him. The whole of Beckley village now was more upset than had been known for thirty years and upward. Ever since Napoleon had been expected to encamp at Carfax, and all the University went into white gaiters against him, there had been no such stir of parochial mind as now was heaving. Cripps could remember the former movement, and how his father had lost wisdom by saying that nothing would come of it—whereas the greatest things came of it; the tailor was bankrupt by making breeches which the Government would not pay for, the publican bought a horse and defied his brewer on the strength of it, and the parish-clerk limped for the rest of his life through the loss of two toes when tipsy—therefore Zacchary Cripps was now determined to hide his opinion.

When the mind is in this uncertain state, it fails of receiving that consideration which it is slowly exerting. If Cripps had stood up, and rashly spoken, he must have carried all before him: whereas now he felt, and was grieved to feel, that shallow fellows were taking his place, by dint of decisive ignorance. This Friday evening, everybody, who had teeth to face the arrowy wind, came into the Dusty Anvil, well laden with enormous rumours.

Phil Hiss, the blacksmith, had a daughter, who served him as a barmaid, Amelia, or Mealy Hiss; a year or two older than Miss Oglander, and in the simple country fashion (setting birth and rank aside) a true ally and favourite. Now, some old woman in Beckley had said, as long ago as yesterday, that she could not believe but what Mealy Hiss, who dressed herself so outrageous, knew a deal more than she dared speak out concerning that wonderful unkid thing about the Squire's daughter. For her part, this old woman was sure that a young man lay at the bottom of it. Them good young ladies that went to the school, and made up soup and such-like, was not a bit better than the rest of us; and if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, pitchforks wouldn't choke them. She would say no more, it was no concern of hers; and everybody knew what she was. But as sure as her copper burst that morning, something would come out ere long; and Mealy would be at the bottom of it!

Miss Amelia Hiss, before she lit her two tallow-candles—which never was allowed to be done till a quart of beer had been called for—knew right well that all her wits must be brought into use that evening. A young man, who had a liking for her, which she was beginning to think about, came in before his time to tell her all that Gammer Gurdon said. Wherefore she put on her new neck-ribbon (believed to have come express from London) and her agate brooch, and other most imposing properties. With the confidence of all these, she drew the ale, and kept her distance.

For an hour or so these tactics answered. Young men, old men, and good women (who came of course for their husbands' sakes), soberly took their little drop of beer, nodded to one another, and said little. Pressure lay on heart and mind; and nature's safety-valve, the tongue, was sat upon by prudence. But this, of course, could not last long.

Little jerkings of short questions broke the crust of silence; lips from blowing froth of beer began to relax their grimness; eyelids that had drooped went up, and winks grew into friendly gaze; and everybody began to beg everybody's pardon less. The genial power of good ale, and the presence of old friends, were working on the solid English hearts; and every man was ready for his neighbour to say something.

Hiss, the blacksmith and the landlord, felt that on his heavy shoulders lay the duty of promoting warmth and cordiality. He sat without a coat, as usual, and his woolsey sleeves rolled back displayed the proper might of arm. In one grimy hand he held a pipe, at which he had given the final puff, and in the other a broad-rimmed penny, ready to drop it into the balance of the brass tobacco-box, and open it for a fresh supply. First he glanced at the door, to be sure that his daughter Mealy could not hear; for ever since her mother's death he had stood in some awe of Mealy; and then receiving from Zacchary Cripps a nod of grave encouragement, he fixed his eyes on him through the smoke, and uttered what all were inditing of.

"I call this a very rum start, I do, about poor Squire's daughter."

The public of the public gazed with admiring approval at him. The sentiment was their own, and he had put it well and briefly. In different ways, according to the state and manner of each of them, they let him know that he was right, and might hold on by what he said. Then Master Hiss grew proud of this, and left it for some other body to bear the weight of thinking out. But even before his broad forefinger had quite finished with his pipe, and pressed the crown of fuel flat, a man of no particular wisdom, and without much money, could not check a weak desire to say something striking. His name was Batts, and he kept a shop, and many things in it which he could not sell. Before he spoke, he took precautions to secure an audience, by standing up, and rapping the table with the heel of his half-pint mug. "Hear, hear!" cried some young fellow; and Batts was afraid that he had gone too far.

"Gentlemen," said Grocer Batts, the very same man who had threatened to put his son into the carrying line, "I bows, in course, to superior wisdom, and them as is always to and fro. But every man must think his thoughts, right or wrong, and speak them out, and not be afeared of no one. And my mind is that in this here business, we be all of us going to work the wrong way altogether."

As no one had any sense as yet of having gone to work at all, in this or any other matter, and several men had made up their minds to be thrown out of work on the Saturday night if the bitter weather lasted, this great speech of Grocer Batts created some confusion.

"Let 'un go to work, hisself!" "What do he know about work?" "Altogether wrong! Give me the saw-dust for to clear my throat!" These and stronger exclamations showed poor Batts that it would have been better for trade if he had held his tongue. He hid his discomfiture in his mug, and made believe to drink, although it had ever so long been empty.

But Carrier Cripps had a generous soul. He did not owe so much as a halfpenny piece to Master Batts, neither did he expect to make a single halfpenny out of him—quite the contrary, in fact; and yet he came to his rescue.

"Touching what neighbour Batts have said," he began in his slow and steadfast voice, "it may be neither here nor there; and all of us be liable, in our best of times, to error. But I do believe as he means well, and hath a good deal inside him, and a large family to put up with. He may be right, and all us in the wrong. Time will show, with patience. I have knowed so many things as looked at first unlikely, come true as Gospel in the end, and so many things I were sure of turn out quite contrairy, that whenever a man hath aught to say, I likes to hearken to him. There now, I han't no more to say; and I leave you to make the best of it."

Zacchary rose, for his time was up; he saw that hot words might ensue, and he detested brawling. Moreover, although he did not always keep strict time with his horse and cart, no man among the living could be more punctual to his pillow. With kind "good-nights" from all, he passed, and left the smoky scene behind. As he stopped at the bar to say good-bye, and to pay his score to Amelia, for whom he had a liking, a short, quick, rosy man came in, shaking snow from his boots, and seeming to have lost his way that night. By the light from the bar, the Carrier knew him, and was about to speak to him, but received a sign to hold his tongue, and pass on without notice. Clumsily enough he did as he was bidden, and went forth, puzzled in his homely pate by this new piece of mystery.

For the man who passed him was John Smith, not as yet well-known, but held by all who had experience of him to be the shrewdest man in Oxford. This man quietly went into the sanded parlour, and took his glass, and showed good manners to the company. They set him down as a wayfarer, but a pleasant one, and well to do; and as words began to kindle with the friction of opinions, he listened to all that was said, but did not presume to side with any one.

CHAPTER .

THE BEST FOOT FOREMOST.

The arrows of the snowy wind came shooting over Shotover. It was Saturday now of that same week with which we began on Tuesday. The mercury during those four days had not risen once above 28° of Fahrenheit, and now it stood about 22°, and lower than that in the river meadows. Trusty and resolute Dobbin never had a harder job than now. Some parts of Headington Hill give pretty smart collar-work in the best of times; and now with deep snow scarred by hoofs, and ridged by wheels, but not worn down, hard it seemed for a horse, however sagacious, to judge what to do. Dobbin had seen snow ere now, and gone through a good deal of it. But that was before the snow had fallen so thickly on his own mane and tail, and even his wise eyebrows. That was in the golden days, when youth and quick impatience moved him, and the biggest flint before his wheel was crushed, with a snort at the road-surveyor.

But now he was come to a different state of body, and therefore of spirit too. At his time of life it would not do to be extravagant of strength; it was not comely to kick up the heels; neither was it wise to cherish indignation at the whip. So now on the homeward road, with a heavy Christmas-laden cart to drag, this fine old horse took good care of himself, and having only a choice of evils, chose the least that he could find.

Alas, the smallest that he could find were great and very heavy ills. Scarcely any man stops to think of the many weary cares that weigh upon the back of an honest horse. Men are eloquent on the trouble that sits behind the horseman; but the silent horse may bear all that, and the troublesome man in the saddle to boot, without any poet to pity him. Dobbin knew all this, but was too much of a horse to dwell on it. He kept his tongue well under bit, and his eyes in sagacious blinkers, and sturdily up the hill he stepped, while Cripps, his master, trudged beside him.

Every "talented" man must think, whenever he walks beside a horse, of the superior talents of the horse—the bounty of nature in four curved legs, the pleasure there must be in timing them, the pride of the hard and goutless feet, the glory of the mane (to which the human beard is no more than seaweed in a billow), the power of blowing (which no man has in a comely and decorous form); and last, not least, the final blessing of terminating usefully in a tail. Zacchary Cripps was a man of five talents, and traded with them wisely; but often as he walked beside his horse, and smelled his superiority, he became quite humble, and wiped his head, and put his whip back in the cart again. The horse, on the other hand, looked up to Zacchary with soft faith and love. He knew that his master could not be expected quite to understand the ways a horse is bound to have of getting on in harness—the hundreds of things that must needs be done—and done in proper order, too—the duty of going always like a piece of the finest music, with chains, and shafts, and buckles, and hard leather to be harmonized, and the load which men are not born to drag, until they make it for themselves. Dobbin felt the difference, but he never grumbled as men do.

He made the best of the situation; and it was a hard one. The hill was strong against the collar; and, by reason of the snow, zigzag and the corkscrew tactics could not be resorted to. At all of these he was a dab, by dint of steep experience; but now the long hill must be breasted, and both shoulders set to it. The ruts were as slippery as glass, and did not altogether fit the wheels he had behind him; and in spite of the spikes which the blacksmith gave him, the snow balled on his hairy feet. So he stopped, and shook himself, and panted with large resolutions; and Cripps from his capacious pockets fetched the two oak wedges, and pushed one under either wheel; while Esther, who was coming home at last, jumped from her seat, to help the load, and patted Dobbin's kind nose, and said a word or two to cheer him.

"The best harse as ever looked through a bridle," Zacchary declared across his mane; "but he must be hoomered with his own way now, same as the rest on us, when us grows old. Etty, my dear, no call for you to come down and catch chilblains."

"Zak, I am going to push behind. I am not big enough to do much good. But I would rather be alongside of you, through this here bend of the road, I would."

For now the dusk was gathering in, as they toiled up the lonesome and snowy road where it overhung the "Gipsy's Grave."

"This here bend be as good as any other," said Cripps, though himself afraid of it. "What ails you, girl? What hath ailed you, ever since out of Oxford town you come? Is it a jail thou be coming home to? Oxford turns the head of thee!"

"Now, Zak, you know better than that. I would liefer be at Beckley any day. But I have been that frightened since I passed this road on Tuesday night that scarce a morsel could I eat or drink, and never sleep for dreaming."

"Frightened, child? Lord, bless my heart! you make me creep by talking so. There, wait till we be in our own lane—can't spare the time now to speak of it."

"Oh, but, Zak, if you please, you must. I have had it on my mind so long. And I kept it for you, till we got to the place, that you might go and see to it."

"Etty, now, this is childish stuff; no time to hearken to any such tell-up. Enough to do, the Lord knows there be, without no foolish stories."

"It is not a foolish story, Zak. It is what I saw with my own eyes. We are close to the place; it was in a dark hollow,

just below the road on here. I will show you; and then I will stand by the cart, while you go and seek into it."

"I wun't leave the haigh road for any one, I tell 'ee. All these goods is committed to my charge, and my dooty is to stick to them. A likely thing as I'd leave the cart to be robbed in that there sort of way. Ah, ha! they'd soon find out, I reckon, what Zacchary Cripps is made of."

"Ah, we all know how brave you are, dear Zak. And perhaps you wouldn't like to leave me, brother?"

"No, no; of course not. How could I do it? All by yourself, and the weather getting dark. Hup! Hup! Dobbin, there. Best foot foremost kills the hill."

But Esther was even more strongly set to tell the story and relieve her mind, than Zacchary was to relieve his mind by turning a deaf ear to all of it. Nevertheless, she might have failed, if it had not been for a lucky chance. Dobbin, after a very fine rush, and spirited bodily tug at the shafts, was suddenly forced to pull up and pant, and spread his legs, to keep where he was, until his wind should come back again. And he stopped with the off-wheel of the cart within a few yards of the gap in the hedge, where Esther began her search that night. She knew the place at a glance, although in the snow it looked so different; and she ran to the gap, and peeped as if she expected to see it all again.

In all the beauty of fair earth, few things are more beautiful than snow on clustering ivy-leaves. Wednesday's fall had been shaken off; for even in the coldest weather, jealous winds and evaporation soon clear foliage of snow. But a little powdery shed of flakes had come at noon that very day, like the flitting of a fairy; and every delicate star shone crisply in its cupped or pillowed rest. The girl was afraid to shake a leaf, because she had her best bonnet on; therefore she drew back, and called the reluctant Zacchary to gaze.

"Nort but a sight of snow," said he; "it hath almost filled old quarry up. Harse have rested, and so have we. Shan't be home by candlelight. Wugg then! Dobbin—wugg then! wilt 'a?"

"Stop, brother, stop! Don't be in such a hurry. Something I must tell you now, that I have been feared to tell anybody else. It was so dreadfully terrible! Do you see anything in the snow down there?"

"As I am a sinner, there be something moving. Jump up into the cart, girl. I shall never get round with my things to-night."

"There is something there, Zak, that will never move again. There is the dead body of a woman there!"

"No romantics! No romantics!" the Carrier answered as he turned away; but his cheeks beneath a week's growth of beard turned as white as the snow in the buckthorn. No living man might scare him—but a woman, and a dead one ——

"Come, Zak," cried Esther, having seen much worse than she was likely now to see, "you cannot be afraid of 'romantics,' Zak. Come here, and I will show thee."

Driven by shame and curiosity, the valiant Cripps came back to her, and even allowed himself to be led a little way through the gap into the deep untrodden and drifted snow. She took him as far as a corner, whence the nook of the quarry was visible; and there with trembling fingers pointed to a vast billow of pure white, piled by the driving east wind over the grave, as she thought, of the murdered one.

"Enough," he said, having heard her tale, and becoming at once a man again in the face of something real; "my dear, what a fright thou must have had! How couldst thou have kept it all this time? I would not tell thee our news at home, for fear of tarrifying thee in the cold. Hath no one to Oxford told thee?"

"Told me what? Oh, Zak, dear Zak, I am so frightened, I can hardly stand."

"Then run, girl, run! We must go home, fast as ever we can, for constable."

He took her to the cart, and reckless of Dobbin's indignation, lashed him up the hill, and made him trot the whole length of Beckley lane, then threw a sack over his loins and left his Christmas parcels in the frost and snow, while he hurried to Squire Oglander.

CHAPTER VIII.

BALDERDASH.

Worth Oglander sat in his old oak chair, weary, and very low of heart, but not altogether broken down. He had not been in bed since last Monday night, and had slept, if at all, in the saddle, or on the roof of the Henley and Maidenhead coach. For miles he had scoured the country round, until his three horses quite broke down, with the weather so much against them; and all the bran to be got in the villages was made away with in mashes. One of these horses "got the pipes;" and had to be tickled before he could eat.

The Squire cared not a button for this. The most particular of mankind concerning what is grossly and contemptuously (if not carnivorously) spoken of as "horseflesh," forgets his tender feelings towards the noblest of all animals when his own flesh and blood come into competition with them. But ride, and lash, and spur as he might, the old Squire made no discovery.

His daughter, his only child, in whom all the rest of his old life lived and loved, was gone and lost; not even leaving knowledge of where she lay, or surety of a better meeting. His faith in God was true and firm; for on the whole he was a pious man, although no great professor: and if it had pleased the Lord to take his only joy from his old age, he could have tried to bear it.

But thus to lose her, without good-bye, without even knowing how the loss befell, and with the deep misery of doubting what she might herself have done—only a chilly stoic, or a remarkably warm Christian, could have borne it with resignation. The Squire was neither of these; but only a simple, kind, and loving-hearted gentleman; with many faults, and among them, a habit of expecting the Lord to favour him perpetually. And of this he could not quit himself, in the deepest tribulation; but still expected all things to be tempered to his happiness, according to his own ideas of what happiness should be. The clergyman of the parish, a good and zealous man, had called upon him, and with many words had proved how thankful he was bound to be for this kindly-ordered chastisement. The Squire, however, could not see it. He listened with his old politeness, but a sad and weary face, and quietly said that the words were good, but he could not yet enter into them. Hereat the parson withdrew, to wait for a softer and wiser season.

And now, in the dusk of this cold dark day, Squire Oglander sat gazing from the window of his dining-room; with his head fallen back, and his white chin up, and hard-worn hands clasped languidly. His heavy eyes dwelled on the dreary snow that buried his daughter's handiwork—the dwarf plants not to be traced, and the tall ones only as soft hillocks, like the tufts in a great white counterpane. And more and more, as the twilight deepened, and the curves of white grew dim, he kept repeating below his voice, "Her winding-sheet, her winding-sheet; and her pretty eyes wide open perhaps!"

"Now, sir, if you please, you must—you must," cried Mary Hookham, his best maid, trotting in with her thumbs turned back from a right hot dish, and her lips up as if she were longing to kiss him, to let out her feelings. "Here be a duster, by way of a cloth, not to scorch the table against Miss Grace comes home again. Sir, if you please, you must ate a bit. Not a bit have you aten sin' Toosday, and it is enough to kill a carrier's horse. 'Take on,' as my mother have often said; 'take on, as you must, if your heart is right, when the hand of the Lord is upon you; but never take off with your victuals.' And a hearty good woman my mother is, and have seen much tribulation. You never would repent, sir, of hearkening to me, and of trying of her, till such time as poor Miss Grace comes back. And not a penny would she charge you."

"Let her come, if she will," he answered, without thinking twice about it; for he paid no heed to household matters in his present trouble. "Let her come, if you wish it, Mary. At any rate, she can do no harm."

"She will do a mort of good, sir. But now do try to ate a bit. My mother will make you, if you have her, sir."

The old man did his best to eat; for he knew that he must keep his strength up, to abide the end of it. And Mary, without asking leave, lit four good candles, and drew the curtains, and made the fire cheerful. "All of us has our troubles," said Mary; "but these here pickles is wonderful."

"You are a good girl," answered the Squire; "and you deserve a good husband. Now, if either the man from Oxford or young Mr. Overshute should come, show them in directly; but I can see no other person. No more, thank you. Take all away, Mary."

"Oh my! what a precious little bit you've had! But as sure as my name is Mary Hookham, you shall have three glasses of port, sir. You don't keep no butler, because you knows better; and no housekeeper, because you don't know mother. Likewise, Miss Grace is so clever—but there, now, if she stay long for her honeymoon, a housekeeper you must have, sir."

The master was tempted to ask what she meant, but he scarcely thought it worth while, perhaps. By pressure of advice from all the womankind within his doors (whenever they could get hold of him) he had been sped on many bootless errands, as was natural. For without any ground, except that of their hearts, all the gentler bosoms of the place were filled with large belief that this was only a lovely love affair.

Russel Overshute, the heir of the Overshutes of Shotover, was a young man who could speak for himself, and did it sometimes too strongly. He had long been taken prisoner by the sweet spell of Grace Oglander; and being of a bold

and fearless order, he had so avowed himself. But her father had always been against him; not from personal dislike, but simply because he could not bear his "wild political sentiments." Worth Oglander was as staunch an old Tory as ever stood in buckram, although in social and domestic matters perhaps almost too gentle. Radical and rascal were upon his tongue the self-same word; and he passed the salt with the back of his hand to even a mild Reformer.

And now, as he drank his glass of port, by dint of Mary's management, and did his best to think about it, as he always used to do, the door of the room was thrown open strongly, and in strode Russel Overshute.

"Will you kindly leave the room," he said to the sedulous Mary. "I wish to say a few words to the Squire of a private nature."

This young gentleman was a favourite with maid-servants everywhere, because he always spoke to them "just the same as if they was ladies." Every housemaid now demands this, in our advanced intelligence; and doubtless she is right; but forty years ago it was otherwise, and "Polly, my dear," and a chuck of the chin, were not as yet vile antiquity. Mary made a bob of the order still taught at the village-school, and set a glass for the gentleman, and simpered, and departed.

"Shake hands with me, Squire," said Overshute, as Mr. Oglander arose, with cold dignity, and bowed to him. "You have sent for me; I rode over at once, the moment that I heard of it. I returned from London this afternoon, having been there for a fortnight. When I heard the news, I was thunderstruck. What can I do to help you?"

"I will not shake hands with you," answered the Squire, "until you have solemnly pledged your honour, that you know nothing of this—of this—there, I have no word for it!" Mr. Oglander trembled, though his eyes were stern. His last hope of his daughter's life lay in the young man before him; and bitterly as he would have felt the treachery of his only child, and deeply as he despised himself for harbouring such a suspicion—yet even that disgrace and blow would be better than the alternative, the only alternative—her death.

"I should have thought it quite needless," young Overshute answered, with some disdain, until he observed the father's face, so broken down with misery; "from any one but you, sir, it would have been an insult. If you do not know the Overshutes, you ought to know your own daughter."

"But against her will—against her will. Say that you took her against her will. You have been from home. For what else was it? Tell me the truth, Russel Overshute—only the truth, and I will forgive you."

"You have nothing to forgive, sir. Upon the word of an Englishman, I hadn't even heard of it."

The old man watched his clear keen eyes, with deep tears gathering in his own. Then Russel took his hand, and led him tenderly to his hard oak chair.

For a minute or two not a word was said: the young man doubting what to say, and the old one really not caring whether he ever spoke again. At last he looked up and spread both hands, as if he groped forth from a heavy dream; and the rheumatism from so much night-work caught him in both shoulder-blades.

"What is it?—what is it?" he cried. "I have lived a long time in this wicked world, and I have not found it painful."

"My dear sir," his visitor answered, pitying him sincerely, and hiding (like a man) his own deep heart-burn of anxiety, "may I say, without your being in the least degree offended, what I fancy—or at least, I mean a thing that has occurred to me? You will take it for its worth. Most likely you will laugh at it; but taking my chance of that, may I say it? Will you promise not to be angry?"

"I wish I could be angry, Russel. What have I to be angry for?"

"A terrible wrong, if I am right, but not a purely hopeless one. I have not had time to think it out, because I have been hurried so. But, right or wrong, what I think is this—the whole is a foul scheme of Luke Sharp's."

"Luke Sharp! My own solicitor! The most respectable man in Oxford! Overshute, you have made me hope, and then you dash me with balderdash!"

"Well, sir, I have no evidence at all; but I go by something I heard in London, which supplies the strongest motive; and I know, from my own family affairs, what Luke Sharp will do when he has strong motive. I beg you to keep my guess quite secret. Not that I fear a score of such fellows, but that he would be ten times craftier if he thought we suspected him; and he is crafty enough without that, as his principal client, the Devil, knows!"

"I will not speak of it," the Squire answered; "such a crotchet is not worth speaking of, and it might get you into great trouble. With one thing and another now, I am so knocked about, that I cannot put two and two together. But one thing really comforts me."

"My dear sir, I am so glad! What is it?"

"That a man of your old family, Russel, and at the same time of such new ways, is still enabled by the grace of God to retain his faith in the Devil."

"While Luke Sharp lives I cannot lose it," he answered, with a bitter smile. "That man is too deep and consummate a villain to be uninspired. But now, sir, we have no time to lose. You tell me what you have done, and then I will tell you what I have been thinking of, unless you are too exhausted."

For the old man, in spite of fierce anxiety, long suspense, and keen excitement, began to be so overpowered with downright bodily weariness that now he could scarcely keep his head from nodding, and his eyes from closing. The

hope which had roused him, when Overshute entered, was gone, and despair took the place of it; tired body and sad mind had but a very low heart to work them. Russel, with a strong man's pity, and the love which must arise between one man and another whenever small vanity vanishes, watched the creeping shades of slumber soften the lines of the harrowed face. As evening steals along a hill-side where the sun has tyrannised, and spreads the withering and the wearying of the day with gentleness, and brings relief to rugged points, and breadth of calm to everything; so the Squire's fine old face relaxed in slumber's halo, and tranquil ease began to settle on each yielding lineament; when open flew the door of the room, and Mary, at the top of her voice, exclaimed—

"Plaize, sir, Maister Cripps be here."

CHAPTER IX.

CRIPPS IN AFFLICTION.

"Confound that Cripps!" young Overshute cried, with irritation getting the better of his larger elements; while the Squire slowly awoke and stared, and rubbed his gray eyelashes, and said that he really was almost falling off, and he ought to be quite ashamed of himself. Then he begged his visitor's pardon for bad manners, and asked what the matter was. "Sir, it is only that fool Cripps," said the young man, still in vexation, and signing to Mary to go, and to shut the door. "Some trumpery parcel, of course. They might have let you rest for a minute or two."

"No, sir, no; if you plaize, sir, no!" cried Mary, advancing with her hands up. "Maister Cripps have seen something terrible, and he hath come straight to his Worship. He be that out of breath that he was aforced to lay hold of me, before he could stand a'most! He must have met them sheep-stealers!"

"Sheep-stealing again!" said Mr. Oglander, who was an active magistrate. "Well, let him come in. I have troubles of my own; but I must attend to my duty."

"Let me attend to it," interposed the other, being also one of the "great unpaid." "You must not be pestered with such things now. Try to get some little rest while I attend to this Cripps affair."

"I am much obliged to you," answered the Squire, rising, and looking wide-awake; "but I will hear what he has to say myself. Of course, I shall be too glad of your aid if you are not in a hurry."

Mr. Overshute knew that this fine old Justice, although so good in the main, was not entirely free from foibles, of which there was none more conspicuous than a keen and resolute jealousy if any brother magistrate dared to meddle with Beckley matters. Therefore Russel for the time withdrew, but promised to return in half an hour, not only for the sake of consulting with the Squire, but also because he suspected that Cripps might be come on an errand different from what Mary had imagined.

Meanwhile, the Carrier could hardly be kept from bursting in head-foremost. Betty, the cook, laid hold of him in the passage, while he was short of breath; but he pushed at even her, although he ought to have known better manners. Betty was also in a state of mind at having cooked no dinner worth speaking of since Tuesday; and Cripps, if his wits had been about him, must have yielded space and bowed. Betty, however, was nearly as wide, and a great deal thicker than he was; and she spread forth two great arms that might have stopped even Dobbin with a load downhill.

At last the signal was passed that Cripps might now come on, and tell his tale; and he felt as if he should have served them right by refusing to say anything. But when he saw the Squire's jovial face drawn thin with misery, and his sturdy form unlike itself, and the soft puzzled manner in lieu of the old distinct demand to know everything, Zacchary Cripps came forward gently, and thought of what he had to tell, with fear.

"What is it, my good fellow?" asked the Squire, perceiving his hesitation. "Nothing amiss with your household, I sincerely hope, my friend? You are a fortunate man in one thing—you have had no children yet."

"Ay, ay; your Worship is right enough there. The Lord lends they, and He takes them away. And the taking be worse than the giving was good."

"Now, Master Cripps, we must not talk so. All is meant for the best, I doubt."

"Her may be. Her may be," Cripps replied. "The Lord is the one to pronounce upon that, knowing His own maning best. But He do give very hard measure some time to them as have never desarved it. Now, there be your poor Miss Grace, for instance. As nice a young lady as ever lived; the purtiest ever come out of a bed; that humble, too, and gracious always, that 'Cripps,' she would say—nay 'Master Cripps'—she always give me my proper title, even on a dirty linen day—'Master Cripps,' her always said, 'let me mark it off, in your hat, for you'—no matter whether it was my best hat, or the one with the grease come through—'Master Cripps,' she always say, 'let me mark it out for you.'"

"Very well, Cripps. I know all that. It is nothing to what my Grace was. And I hope, with God's blessing, she will do it again. But what is it you are so full of, Cripps?"

The Carrier felt in the crown of his hat, and then inside the lining; as if he had something entered there, to help him in this predicament. And then he turned away, to wipe—as if the weather was very wet—the drops of the hedge from the daze of his eyes; and after that he could not help himself, but out with everything.

"I knows where Miss Gracie be," he began with a little defiance, as if, after all, it was nothing to him, but a thing that he might have a bet about. "I knows where our Miss Gracie lies—dead and cold—dead and cold—without no coffin, nor a winding-sheet—the purty crature, the purty crature—there, what a fool I be, good Lord!"

Master Cripps, at the picture himself had drawn, was taken with a short fit of sobs, and turned away, partly to hunt for his "kercher," and partly to shun the poor Squire's eyes. Mr. Oglander slowly laid down the pen, which he had taken for notes of a case, and standing as firm as his own great oak-tree (famous in that neighbourhood), gave no sign of the shock, except in the colour of his face, and the brightness of his gaze.

"Go on, Cripps, as soon as you can," he said in a calm and gentle voice. "Try not to keep me waiting, Cripps."

"I be trying; I be trying all I knows. The blessed angel be dead and buried, close to Tickuss's tatie crop, in the corner

of bramble quarry. At least, I mean Tickuss's taties was there; but he dug them a fortnight, come Monday, he did."

"The corner of the 'Gipsy's Grave,' as they call it. Who found it? How do you know it?"

"Esther was there. She seed the whole of it. Before the snow come—last Tuesday night."

"Tuesday night! Ah, Tuesday night!"—for the moment, the old man had lost his clearness. "It can't have been Tuesday night—it was Wednesday when I rode down to my sister's. Cripps, your sister must have dreamed it. My darling was then at her aunt's, quite safe. You have frightened me for nothing, Cripps."

"I am glad with all my heart," cried Zacchary; "I am quite sure it were Tuesday night, because of Mrs. Exie. And your Worship knows best of the days, no doubt. Thank the Lord for all His mercies! Well, seeing now it were somebody else, in no ways particular, and perhaps one of them gipsy girls as took the fever to Cowley, if your Worship will take your pen again, I will tell you all as Esther seed:—Two men with a pickaxe working, where the stone overhangeth so, and the corpse of a nice young woman laid for the stone to bury it natural. No harm at all in the world, when you come to think, being nought of a Christian body. And they let go the rock, and it come down over, to save all infection. Lord, what a turn that Etty gived me, all about a trifle!" The Carrier wiped his forehead, and smiled. "And won't I give it well to her?"

"Poor girl! It is no trifle, Cripps, whoever it may have been. But stop—I am all abroad. It was Tuesday afternoon when my poor darling left Mrs. Fermitage. And to the quarry, across the fields, from the way she would come, is not half a mile—half a mile of fields and hedgerows—— Oh, Cripps, it was my daughter!"

"Her maight a' been, sure enough," said Cripps, in whom the reflective vein, for the moment, had crossed the sentimental—"sure enough, her maight a' been. A pasture meadow, and a field of rape, and Gibbs's turnips, and then a fallow, and then into Tickuss's taties—half an hour maight a' done the carrying—and consarning of the rest—your Worship, now when did she leave the lady? Can you count the time of it?"

"Zacchary now, the will of the Lord be done, without calculation! My grave is all I care to count on, if my Grace lies buried so. But before I go to it, please God, I will find out who has done it!"

CHAPTER X.

ALL DEAD AGAINST HIM.

"Now, do 'ee put on a muffler, sir," cried Mary, running out with her arms full, as Mr. Oglander set forth in the bitter air, without overcoat, but ready to meet everything. At the door was his old Whitechapel cart, with a fresh young colt between the shafts, pawing the snow, and snorting; the only one of his little stud not lamed by rugged travelling. The floor of the cart was jingling with iron tools, as the young horse shook himself; and the Squire's groom, and two gardeners, were ready to jump in, when called for. They stamped a little, and flapped their bodies, as if they would like a cordial; but their master was too busy with his own heart to remember it.

"If we be goin' to dig some hours in such weather as this be," Mr. Kale managed to whisper—"best way put in a good brandy flask, Mary, my dear, with Master's leave. Poor soul, a' can't heed everything."

"Go along," answered Mary; "you have had enough. Shamed I be of you, to think of such things, and to look at that poor Hangel!"

"So plaize your Worship, let me drive," said Cripps, who was going to sit in front. "A young horse, and you at your time of life, and all this trouble over you!"

"Give me the reins, my friend," cried his Worship; and Cripps, in some dread for his neck, obeyed. The men jumped in, and the young horse started at a rather dangerous pace. Many a time had Miss Grace fed him, and he used to follow her, like a lamb.

"He will take us safe enough," said the Squire; "he seems to know what he is going for."

Not another word was spoken, until they came to the gap at the verge of the quarry, where the frosty moon shone through it. "Tie him here," said the master shortly, as the groom produced his ring-rope; "and throw the big cloth over him. Now, all of you come; and Cripps go first."

Scared as they were, they could not in shame decline the old man's orders; and the sturdy Cripps, with a spade on his shoulders, led through the drifted thicket. Behind him plodded the Squire, with an unlit lantern in one hand, and a stout oak staff in the other; the moonlight glistening in his long white hair, and sparkling frost in his hoary beard. The snow before them showed no print larger than the pad of an old dog-fox pursuing the spluttering track of a pheasant's spurs; and it crunched beneath their boots with the crusty impact of crisp severance. All around was white and waste with depth of unknown loneliness; and Master Cripps said for the rest of his life, that he could not tell what he was about, to do it!

After many flounderings in and out of hollow places, they came to the corner of the quarry-dingle, and found it entirely choked with snow. The driving of the north-east wind had gathered as into a funnel there, and had stacked the snow of many acres in a hollow of less than half a rood. The men stopped short, where the gaunt brown fern, and then the furze, and then the hazels, in rising tier waded out of sight; and behind them even some ash-saplings scarcely had a knuckled joint to lift from out their burial. Over the whole the cold moon shone, and made the depth look deeper. The men stopped short, and looked at their shovels, and looked at one another. They may not have been very bright of mind, or accustomed to hurried conclusions; and doubtless they were, as true Englishmen are, of a tough unelastic fibre. All powers of evil were banded against them, and they saw no turn to take; still it was not their own wish to go back, without having struck a blow for it.

"You can do nothing," said the Squire, with perhaps the first bitter feeling he had yet displayed. "All things are dead against me; I must grin, as you say, and bear it. It would take a whole corps of sappers and miners a week to clear this place out. We cannot even be sure of the spot; we cannot tell where the corner is; all is smothered up so. Ill luck always rides ill luck. This proves beyond doubt that my child lies here!"

The men were good men, as men go, and they all felt love and pity for the lost young lady and the poor old master. Still their fingers were so blue, and their frozen feet so hard to feel, and the deep white gulf before them surged so palpably invincible, that they could not repine at a dispensation which sent them home to their suppers.

"Nort to be done till change of weather," said Cripps, as they sat in the cart again; "I reckon they villains knew what was coming, better nor I, who have kept the road, man and boy, for thirty year. The Lord knoweth best, as He always do! But to my mind He maneth to kape on snowing and freezing for a month at laste. Moon have changed last night, I b'lieve; and a bitter moon we shall have of it."

And so they did; the bitterest moon, save one, of the present century. And old men said that there had not been such a winter, and such a sight of snow, since the one which the Lord had sent on purpose to discomfit Bony.

Mr. Oglander, in his lonely home, strove bravely to make the best of it. He had none of that grand religious consolation which some people have (especially for others), and he grounded his happiness perhaps too much upon his own hearthstone. His mind was not an extraordinary one, and his soul was too old-fashioned to demand periods of purging.

Moreover, his sister Joan came up—a truly pious and devoted woman, the widow of an Oxford wine-merchant. Mrs. Fermitage loved her niece so deeply that she had no patience with any selfish pinings after her. "She is gone to the better land," she said; "the shores of bliss unspeakable!—unless Russel Overshute knows about her a great deal more

than he will tell. I have far less confidence in that young man since he took to wear india-rubber. But to wish her back is a very sinful and unchristian act, I fear."

"Now, Joan, you know that you wish her back every time that you sit down, or get up, or go to tea without her."

"Yes, I know, I know, I do. And most of all when I pour it out—she used to do it for me. But, Worth, you can wrestle more than I can. The Lord expects so much more of a man!"

Being exhorted thus, the Squire did his best to wrestle. Not that any words of hers could carry now their former weight; for if he had no daughter left, what good was money left to her? The Squire did not want his sister's money for himself at all. Indeed, he would rather be without it. Dirty money, won by trade!—but still it had been his duty always to try to get it for his daughter. And this is worth a word or two.

At the Oxford bank, and among the lawyers and the leading tradesmen, it had been a well-known thing that old Fermitage had not died with less than £150,000 behind him. Even in Oxford there never had been a man so illustrious for port wine. "Fortiter occupa portum" was the motto over the door to his vaults, and he fortified port impregnably. Therefore he supplied all the common-room cellars, which cannot have too much geropiga; and among the undergraduates his name was surety for another glass. And there really was a port wine basis; so that nobody died of him.

All these things are beside the mark. Mr. Fermitage, however, went on, and hit his mark continually; and his mark was that bull's eye of this golden age, a yellow imprint of a dragon. So many of these came pouring in that he kept them in bottles without any "kicks," sealed, and left to mature, and acquire "the genuine bottle flavour." When he had bottled half a pipe of these, and was thinking of beginning now to store them in the wood, a man coming down with a tap found him dead; and was too much scared to steal anything.

This man reproached himself, ever afterwards, for his irresolute conscience; and the two executors gave him nothing but blame for his behaviour. People in Holiwell said that these two took a dozen bottles of guineas between them, to toast their testator's memory; but Holiwell never has been famous for the holy thing lying at the bottom of the well. Enough that he was dead; and every man, seeing his funeral, praised him.

CHAPTER XI.

KNOCKER VERSUS BELL-PULL.

There is, or was, a street in Oxford, near the ruins of the ancient castle, and behind the new county jail, where one of the many offsets of the Isis filters its artificial way beneath low arches and betwixt dead walls; and this street (partly destroyed since then) was known to the elder generation by the name of "Cross Duck Lane." Of course what remains of it now exults in an infinitely grander title, though smelling thereby no sweeter. With that we have nothing to do; the street was "Cross Duck Lane" in our time.

Here, in a highly respectable house, a truly respectable man was living, with his business and his family. "Luke Sharp, gentleman," was his name, description, style, and title; and he was not by any means a bad man, so as to be an Attorney.

This man possessed a great deal of influence, having much house-property; and he never in the least disguised his sentiments, or played fast and loose with them. Being of a commanding figure, and fine straightforward aspect, he left an impression, wherever he went, of honesty, vigour, and manliness. And he went into very good society, as often as he cared to do so; for although not a native of Oxford, but of unknown (though clearly large) origin, he now was the head, and indeed the entirety, of a long-established legal firm. He had married the daughter of the senior partner, and bought or ousted away the rest; and although the legend on his plate was still "Piper, Pepper, Sharp, and Co.," every one knew that the learning, wealth, and honour of the whole concern were now embodied in Mr. Luke Sharp. Such a man was under no necessity ever to blow his own trumpet.

His wife, a fat and goodly person, Miranda Piper of former days, happened to be the first cousin and nearest relative of a famous man—"Port-wine Fermitage" himself; and his death had affected her very sadly. For she found that he had provided for himself a most precarious future, by unjust disposal of his worldly goods, which he could not come back to rectify. To his godson, her only child and her idol, Christopher Fermitage Sharp, he had left a copy of Dr. Doddridge's "Expositor," and nothing else! A golden work, no doubt—but still golden precepts fill no purse, but rather tend to empty it. Mrs. Luke Sharp, though a very good Christian, repacked and sent back the "Expositor."

If Mr. Sharp had been at home, he would not have let her do so. He was full at all times of large generous impulse, but never yet guilty of impulsive acts. It had always been said that his son was to have the bottled half-pipe of gold, or the chief body of it, after the widow's life-interest. Whereas now, Mrs. Fermitage, if she liked, might roll all the bottles down the High Street. She, however, was a careful woman; and it was manifest where the whole of this Côte d'Or vintage would be binned away—to wit, in the cellars of Beckley Barton, with the key at Grace Oglander's very pretty waist. Mr. Sharp at the moment could descry no cure; but still to show temper was a vulgar thing.

Now, upon the New Year's Day of 1838, the bitter weather continuing still, and doing its best to grow more bitter, Mr. Sharp, being of a festive turn, had closed his office early. The demand for universal closing and perpetual holiday had not yet risen to its present height, and the clerks, though familiar with the kindness of their principal, scarcely expected such a premature relief. But this only added to the satisfaction with which they went home to their New Year dinners.

But Mr. Sharp, though of early habits, and hungry at proper seasons, was not preparing for his dinner now. He had ordered his turkey to be kept back, and begged his wife to see to it until he could make out and settle the import of a letter which reached him about one o'clock. It had been delivered by a groom on horseback, who had suffered some inward struggle before he had stooped to ring the Attorney's bell. For "Cross Duck House," though a comfortable place, was not of an aristocratic cast. The letter was short, and expounded little.

> "Sir,—I shall do myself the honour of calling upon you at four o'clock this afternoon, upon some important business.
>
> "Obediently yours,
>
> "Russel Overshute."

It is not altogether an agreeable thing, even for a man with the finest conscience, such as Mr. Sharp was blest with, to receive a challenge upon an unknown point, curtly worded in this wise. And the pleasure does not increase, when the strong correspondent is partly suspected of holding unfavourable views towards one, and the gaze of self-inspection needs a little more time to compose itself. Luke Sharp had led an unblemished life, since the follies of his youth subsided; he subscribed to inevitable charities; and he waited for his rents, when sure of them. Still he did not like that letter.

Now he took off the coat which he wore at his desk, and his waistcoat of the morning, and washed his nice white hands, and clothed himself in expensive dignity. Then he opened his book of daily entries, and folded blotting-paper, and prepared to receive instructions, or give advice, or be wise abstractedly. But he thought it a sound precaution to have his son Christopher within earshot; for young Overshute was reputed to be of a rather excitable nature; therefore Kit Sharp was commanded to finish the cleaning of his gun—which was his chief delight—in his father's closet adjoining the office, and to keep the door shut, unless called for.

The lawyer was not kept waiting long. As the clock of St. Thomas struck four, the shoes of a horse rang sharply on

the icy road, and the office-bell kicked up its tongue, with a jerk showing great extra-mural energy. "Let him ring again," said Mr. Sharp; "I defy him to ring much harder."

The defiance was soon proved to be unsound; for in less than ten seconds, the bell, which had stood many years of strong emotion, was visited with such a violent spasm that nothing short of the melting-pot restored its constitution. A piece clinked on the passage floor, and the lawyer was filled with unfeigned wrath. That bell had been ringing for three generations, and was the Palladium of the firm.

"What clumsy clod-hopper," cried Mr. Sharp, rushing out, as if he saw nobody—"what beggarly bumpkin has broken my bell? Mr. Overshute!—oh! I beg pardon, I am sure!"

"We must make allowance," said Russel calmly, "for fidgety animals, Mr. Sharp; and for thick gloves in this frosty weather. John, take my horse on the Seven-bridges road, and be back in exactly fifteen minutes. How kind of you to be at home, Mr. Sharp!"

With the words, the young man bestowed on the lawyer a short sharp glance, which entirely failed to penetrate the latter.

"Shut out this cold wind, for Heaven's sake!" he exclaimed, as he shut in his visitor. "You young folk never seem to feel the cold. But you carry it a little too far sometimes. Ah, I must have been about your age when we had such another hard winter as this, four and twenty years ago. Scarcely so bitter, but a deal more snow; snow, snow, six feet everywhere. I was six and twenty then—about your age, I take it, sir?"

"My age to a tittle," said Overshute; "but I am generally taken for thirty-two. How can you have guessed it so?"

"Early thought, sir, juvenile thought, and advanced intelligence make young people look far in front of their age. When you come to my time of life, young sir, your thoughts and your looks will be younger. Now take this chair. Never mind your boots; let them hiss as they will on the fender. I like to hear it—a genial sound—a touch of emery paper in the morning, and there we are, ready for other boots. I have had men here come fifty miles across country, as the crow flies, to see me, when the floods were out; and go away with minds comforted."

"I have heard of your skill in all legal points. But I am not come on that account. Quibbles and shuffles I detest."

"Well, Mr. Overshute, I have met with a good deal of rudeness in my early days; before I was known, as I am now. It was worth my while to disarm it then. It is not so now, in your case. You belong to a very good county family; and although you are committed to inferior hands, if you had come in a friendly spirit, I would have been glad to serve you. As it is, I can only request you to say what your purpose is, and to settle it."

Russel Overshute, with his large and powerful eyes, gazed straight at Sharp; and Mr. Sharp (who had steely eyes—the best of all for getting on with—not very large, but as keen as need be) therewith answered complacently, and as if he saw hope of amusement.

"You puzzle me, Sharp," said Overshute—about the worst thing he could have said; and he knew it before the words had passed.

"I am called, for the most part, 'Mister Sharp,' except by gentlemen of my own age, or friends who entirely trust me. Mr. Russel Overshute, explain how I have puzzled you."

"Never mind that. You would never understand. Have you any idea what has brought me here?"

"Yes, to be plain with you, I have. One of your least, but very oldest tenants, has been caught out in poaching. You hate the game-laws; you are a Radical, ranter, and reformer. You know that your lawyer is good and active, but too well known as a Liberal. It requires a man of settled principles to contest with the game-laws."

"You could not be more wide astray!" cried young Overshute triumphantly, taking in every word the other had said, as a piece of his victory. "No, no, thank goodness, we are not come so low that we cannot get off our tenants, in spite of any evidence; you must indeed think that our family is quite reduced to the dirt, if we can no longer do even that much."

"Not at all, sir. You are much too hot. I only supposed for the moment that your principles might have stopped you."

"Oh dear, no! My mother could not take it at all, in that way. Now, where have you put Grace Oglander?"

Impetuous Russel, with his nostrils quivering, and his eyes fixed on the lawyer's, and his right hand clenching his heavy whip, purposely fired his question thus, like a thunderbolt out of pure heaven. He felt sure of producing a grand effect; and so he did, but not the right one.

"You threaten me, do you?" said Mr. Sharp. "I think that you make a mistake, young man. Violence is objectionable in every way, though natural with fools, who believe they are the stronger. I am sorry to have spoiled your whip; but you will acknowledge that the fault was yours. Now, I am ready for reason—if you are."

With a grave bow, Luke Sharp offered Russel the fragments of his pet hunting-crop, which he had caught from his hand, and snapped like a stick of peppermint, as he spoke. Overshute thought himself a fine, strong fellow, and with very good reason; but the quickness of his antagonist left him gasping.

"I want no apologies," Mr. Sharp continued, going to his desk; while the young man looked sadly at his brazen-knockered butt, for he had been at that admirable college, and cherished his chief reminiscence of it thus. "Apologies are always waste of time. You have threatened me, and you have found your mistake. Such a formidable antagonist

makes one's hand shake. Still, I think that I can hit my key-hole."

"You can always make your keys fit, I dare say. But you never could do that to me again."

"Very likely not. I shall never care to try it. Physical force is always low. But, as a gentleman, you must own that you first offered violence."

"Mr. Sharp, I confess that I did. Not in word, or deed; but still my manner fairly imported it. And the first respect I ever felt for you, I feel now, for your quickness and pluck."

"I am pleased with any respect from you; because you have little for anything. Now, repeat your question, moderately."

"Where have you put Grace Oglander?"

"Let me offer you a chair again. Striding about with frozen feet is almost the worst thing a man can do. However, you seem to be a little excited. Have you brought me a letter from my client, to authorize this inquiry?"

"From Mr. Oglander? Oh no! He has no idea of my being here."

"We will get over that. You are a friend of his, and a neighbour. He has asked you, in a general way, to help him in this sad great trouble."

"Not at all. He would rather not have my interference. He does not like its motive."

"And the motive is, that like many other people, you were attached to this young lady?"

"Certainly, I am. I would give my life at any moment for her."

"Well, well; I will not speak quite so strongly as you do. Life grows dearer as it gets more short. But still, I would give my best year remaining to get to the bottom of this problem."

"You would?" cried young Overshute, looking at him, with admiration of his strength and truth. "Give me your hand, sir? I have wronged you! I see that I am but a hasty fool!"

"You should never own that," said the lawyer.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. JOHN SMITH.

Meanwhile all Beckley and villages around were seething with a ferment of excitement and contradiction. Esther Cripps had been strictly ordered by the authorities to hold her tongue; and so far as in her lay she did so. But there were others—the Squire's three men, and even the Carrier himself, who had so many things to think, that they were pretty sure to say some of them. One or two of them had wives; and though these women could not be called by their very worst friends "inquisitive," it was not right and lawful that they should be debarred of everything. They did all they could not to know any more than they were really bound to know; and whatever was forced upon them had no chance of going any further.

This made several women look at one another slyly, each knowing more than the other, and nodding while sounding the other's ignorance. Until, with one accord they grew provoked at being treated so; and truth being multiplied to its cube became, of course, infinite error.

Now, Mrs. Fermitage having been obliged to return to Cowley, Mary Hookham's mother had established her power by this time; and being, as her daughter had pronounced, a conspicuous member of the females, she exerted herself about all that was said, and saw the other side of everything. She never went to no public-house—nobody could say that of her; but perhaps she could put two and two together every bit as well as them that did. It had been her fortune to acquire exceptional experience—or, as she put it more plainly, "she had a seed a many things;" and the impressions left thereby upon her idiosyncrasy (or, in her own words, "what she come to think") was and were that nothing could be true that she had not known the like of. This was the secret of her success in life—which, however, as yet bore no proportion to her merits. She frankly scouted as "a pack of stuff" everything to which her history afforded no vivid parallel. In a word, she believed only what she had seen.

Now, incredulity is a grand power. To be able to say, "Oh, don't tell me," or "None of your stuff!" when the rest of the audience, stricken with awe, is gaping, confers at once the esteem of superior intellect and vigour. And when there are good high people, who derive comfort from the denial, the chances are that the active sceptic does not get the worst of it.

Mrs. Hookham plainly declared that Esther's tale was neither more nor less than a trumpery cock-and-bull story. She would not call it a parcel of lies, because the poor girl might have dreamed it. Walking in the snow was no more than walking in one's sleep; she knew that, from her own experience; and if there had been no snow as yet, that made her all the more sure to be right; the air was full of it, and of course it would have more power overhead. Depend upon it, she had seen a bush, if indeed she did see anything, and being so dazed by the weather, she had gone and dreamed the rest of it.

Beckley, on the other hand, having known Esther ever since she toddled out of her cradle, and knowing her brothers, the carrier, the baker, and the butcher, and having no experience yet of Mother Hookham's wisdom, as good as told the latter lady not to be "so bounceable." She must not come into this parish, and pretend to know more about things that belonged to it than those who were bred and born there.

But Mrs. Hookham's opinion was, in one way, very important, however little weight it carried at the Dusty Anvil. Mr. Oglander himself had to depend for his food entirely on Mrs. Hookham's efforts; for Betty, the cook, went purely off her head, after all she had gone through; and they put her in bed with a little barley-water, and much malt liquor in a nobler form. And though Mrs. Hookham at her time of life was reluctant so to demean herself, she found all the rest such a "Noah's compass," that she roused up the fires of departed youth, and flourished with the basting-ladle. A clever well-conditioned dame, with a will of her own, is somebody.

"Now, sir," she cried, rushing in to the Squire, with a basin of first-rate ox-tail soup, upon that melancholy New Year's Day, "you have been out in the snow again! No use denying of it, sir; I can see it by the chattering of your teeth. I call it a bad, wicked thing to go on so. Flying in the face of the Lord like that!"

"You are a most kind and good soul, Mrs. Hookham. But surely you would not have me sit with my hands crossed, doing nothing."

"No, no; surely not. Take the spoon in one hand, and the basin in the other. You owe it to yourself to keep up your strength, and to some one else as well, good sir."

"I have no one else now to owe it to," the old man answered, sadly tucking his napkin into his waistcoat pockets.

"Yes, you have. You have your Miss Gracie, alive and kicking, as sure as I be; and with a deal more of life in front of her; though scarce a week passes but what I takes my regular dose of calumny. Ah, if it had not been for that, I never could have been twenty year a widow."

"Don't cry, Mrs. Hookham. I beg you not to cry. You have many good children to look after; and there still is abundance of calomel. But why do you talk so about my darling?"

"Because, sir, please God, I means to see you spend many a happy year together. Lord have mercy, if I had took for granted every trouble as come upon me, who could a' tried for to cheat me this day? My goodness, don't go for to swallow the bones, sir!"

"To be sure not. No, I was not thinking. Of course there are bones in every tail."

"And a heap of bones in them Crippses' tale, sir, as won't go down with me nohow. Have faith in the mercy of the Lord, sir; and in your own experience."

"That is exactly what I try to do. There cannot be any one in the world so bad as to hurt my Gracie. Mrs. Hookham, you never can have seen anybody like her. She was so full of life and kindness that everybody who knew her seemed to have her in their own family. She never made pretence to be above herself, or any one; and she entered into everybody's trouble quite as if she had brought it on. She never asked them any questions, whether it might have been their own fault; and she gave away all her own money first before she came to me for more. She was so simple, and so pleasant, and so full of playful ways—but there, when I think of that, it makes me almost as bad as you women are. Take out the dish. I am very much obliged to you."

"Not a bit, sir, not a bit as yet," the brisk dame answered, with tears on her cheeks. "But before very long, you will own that you was; when you find every word I say come true. Oh my! How that startled me! Somebody coming the short way from the fields! That wonderful man, as is always prowling about, unbeknown to any one. They don't like me in the village much, civil as I am to all of them. But as sure as six is half a dozen, that Smith is the one they ought to hate."

"If he is there, show him in at once," said the Squire, without further argument; "and let no one come interrupting us."

This was very hard upon Mrs. Hookham; and she could not help showing it in her answer.

"Oh, to be sure, sir! Oh, to be sure not! What is my poor opinion compared to his? Ah well, it is a fine thing to be a man!"

The man, for whose sake she was thus cast out, seemed to be of the same opinion. He walked, and looked, and spoke as if it was indeed a fine thing to be a man; but the finest of all things to be the man inside his own cloth and leather. Short and thick of form he was, and likely to be at close quarters a dangerous antagonist. And the set of his jaws, and the glance of his eyes, showed that no want of manhood would at the critical moment disable him. His face was of a strong red colour, equally spread all over it, as if he lived much in the open air, and fed well, and enjoyed his food.

"John Smith, your Worship—John Smith," he said, without troubling Mrs. Hookham. "I hope I see your Worship better. Don't rise, I beg of you. May I shut the door? Oh, Mary, your tea is waiting."

"Mary, indeed!" cried widow Hookham, ungraciously departing; "young man, address my darter thus!"

"Now, what have you done, Smith, what have you done?" the old gentleman asked, stooping over him. "Or have you done nothing at all as usual? You tell me to have patience every day, and every day I have less and less."

"The elements are against us, sir. If the weather had been anything but what it is, I must have known everything long ago. Stop, sir, stop; it is no idle excuse, as you seem to fancy. It is not the snow that I speak of; it is the intense and deadly cold, that keeps all but the very strong people indoors. How can any man talk when his beard is frozen? Look, sir!"

From his short brown beard he took lumps of ice, beginning to thaw in the warmth of the room, and cast them into the fire to hiss. Mr. Oglander gazed as if he thought that his visitor took a liberty, but one that could not matter much. "Go on, sir, with your report," he said.

"Well, sir, in this chain of crime," Mr. Smith replied in a sprightly manner, "we have found one very important link."

"What is it, Smith? Don't keep me waiting. Don't fear me. I am now prepared to stand anything whatever."

"Well, sir, we have discovered, at last, the body of your Worship's daughter."

The Squire bowed, and hid his face. By the aid of faith, he had been hoping against hope, till it came to this. Then he looked up, with his bright old eyes for the moment very steady, and said with a firm though hollow voice—

"The will of the Lord be done! The will of the Lord be done, Smith."

"The will of the Lord shall not be done," cried Mr. Smith emphatically, and striking his thick knees with his fist, "until the man who has done it shall be swung, Squire, swung! Make up your mind to that, your Worship. You may safely make up your mind to that."

"What good will it do me?" the father asked, talking with himself alone. "Will it ever bring back my girl—my child? Bereaved I am, but it cannot be long! I shall meet her in a better world, Smith."

"To be sure your Worship will, with the angels and archangels. But to my mind that will be no satisfaction, till the man has swung for it."

"Excuse me for a moment, will you, Mr. Smith, excuse me? I have no right to be overcome, and I thought I had got beyond all that. Ring the bell, and they will bring you cold sirloin and a jug of ale. Help yourself, and don't mind me. I will come back directly. No, thank you; I can walk alone. How many have had much worse to bear! You will find the under-cut the best."

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. SMITH IS ACTIVE.

Mr. John Smith was a little upset at seeing the Squire so put out. But he said to himself: "It is natural—after all, it is natural. Poor old chap! he has taken it as well as could be expected. However, we must all live; and I feel uncommonly peckish just now. I declare I would rather have had something hot, this weather. But in such a case, one must put up with things. I wonder if they have got any horseradish. All frozen hard in the ground, I fear—no harm, at any rate, in asking."

With this self-commune he rang the bell; and Mary, by her mother's order, answered. "I'll not go nigh the baste!" cried widow Hookham, still indignant. Mary, like a good maid, laid the cloth without a syllable, and, like a good young woman, took the keenest heed of Mr. Smith, without letting him dream that she peeped at him.

"Thank you, Mary," said Mr. Smith, to open conversation.

"My mother's name is Mary," she answered, "and perhaps you would like some pickles."

"By all means, as there is no horseradish. Bring onions, gherkins, and walnuts, Mary. But above all things, walnuts."

"You must have what you can get," said Mary. "I will go and tell master what you require."

"On no account, Mary; on no account! He is gone away to pray, I believe. On no account disturb him."

"Poor dear, I should hope not. Perhaps you can manage with what I have set before you."

"I will do my best," he answered.

"The scum of the earth!" said Mary to herself; good servants being the most intensely aristocratic of all the world.

"He never dined at a gentleman's table before, and his head is turned with it. Our kitchen is too good for him. But poor master never heeds nothing now."

As soon, however, as Mr. Smith had appeased the rage of hunger, and having called for a glass of hot brandy and water, was clinking the spoon in it, the Squire showed that he did heed something, by coming back calmly to talk with him. Mr. Oglander had passed the bitterest hour of his long life yet; filled at every turn of thought with yearning to break down and weep. Sometimes his mind was so confused that he did not know how old he was, but seemed to be in the long past days, with his loving wife upon his arm, and their Gracie toddling in front of them. He spoke to them both as he used to do, and speaking cleared his thoughts again; and he shook away the dreamy joy in the blank forlorn of facts. At last he washed his face, and brushed his silver hair and untended beard, and half in the looking-glass expected to see his daughter scolding him, because he knew that he had neglected many things she insisted on; and his conscience caught him when he seemed to be taking a low advantage.

"I hope you have been treated well," he said, with his fine old-fashioned bow, to Smith, as he came back again. "I do not often leave my guests to attend to themselves in this way."

"Don't apologize, Squire, I beg you. I have done first chop, I assure you, sir. I have not tasted real mustard, ground at home as yours is, since I was up in Durham county, where they never grow it."

"Well, Mr. Smith," said the Squire, trying to smile at his facetiousness, "I am very glad that you have done well. In weather like this, a young man like you must want a good deal of nourishment. But now, will you—will you tell me ——"

"Yes, your Worship, everything! Of course you are anxious; and I thoroughly enter into your feelings. There are none of the women at the door, I hope?"

"Such things do not happen in my house. I will not interrupt you."

"Very well, sir; then sit down here. You must be aware in the first place, then, that I was not likely to be content with your way of regarding things. The Lord is the Lord of the weather, of course, and does it without consulting us. Nevertheless, He allows us also to do our best against it. So I took the bull by the horns, as John Bull, by his name, has a right to do. I just resolved to beat the weather, and have it out with everything. So I communicated with the authorities in London. You know we are in a transition state—a transition state at present, sir—between the old system and the new."

"Yes, yes, of course I know all that."

"Very well, your Worship, we are obliged, of course, to be doubly careful. In London, we are quite established; but down here, we must feel our way. The magistrates, saving your Worship's presence, look upon us with dislike, as if we were superseding them. That will wear off, your Worship, and the new system will work wonders."

"Yes, so you all say. But now, be quick. What wonders have you wrought, John Smith?"

"Well, I was going to tell your Worship when you interrupted me. You know that story of Cripps, the Carrier, and his sister—what's her name? Well, some folk believed it, and some bereaved it. I did neither of the two, but resolved to

get to the bottom of it. Your Worship was afraid, you remember—well, then, let us say daunted, sir—or, if you will not have that, we may say, that you trusted in Providence."

"It was not quite that; but still, Mr. Smith——"

"Your Worship will excuse me. Things of that sort happen always, and the people are always wrong that do it. I trusted in Providence once myself, but now I trust twice in my own self first and leave Providence to come after me. Ha, ha! I speak my mind. No offence, your Worship. Well then, this was what I did. A brave regiment of soldiers having newly returned from India, was ordered to march from London to the Land's End for change of temperature. They had not been supplied, of course, with any change of clothes for climate, and they felt it a little, but were exhorted not to be too particular. Two companies were to be billeted at Abingdon last evening; and having, of course, received notice of that, I procured authority to use them. They shivered so that they wanted work; and there is nothing, your Worship, like discipline."

"Of course, I know that from my early days. Will you tell your story speedily?"

"Sir, that is just what I am doing. I brought them without many words to the quarry, where ten times the number of our clodhoppers would only have shovelled at one another. Bless my heart! they did work, and with order and arrangement. Being clothed all in cotton, they had no time to lose, unless they meant to get frozen; and it was a fine sight, I assure your Worship, to see how they showed their shoulder-blades, being skinny from that hot climate, and their brown-freckled arms in the white of the drift, and the Indian steam coming out of them! In about two hours all the ground was clear, and the trees put away, like basket-work; and then we could see what had happened exactly, and even the mark of the pickaxes. Every word of that girl was proved true to a tittle! I never heard finer evidence. We can even see that two men had been at work, and the stroke of their tools was different. You may trust me for getting up a case; but I see that you have no patience, Squire. We shovelled away all the fallen rock, and mould, and stumps, and furze-roots; and, at last, we came to the poor, poor innocent body, as fresh as the daylight!"

"I can hear no more! You have lost no child—if you have, perhaps you could spare it. Tell me nothing—nothing more! But prove that it was my child!"

"Lord a' mercy, your Worship! Why, you are only fit to go to bed! Here, Mary! Mary! Mother Hookham! Curse the bell—I have broken it! Your master is taken very queer! Look alive, woman! Stir your stumps! A pot of hot water and a foot-tub! Don't get scared—he will be all right. I always carry a fleam with me. I can bleed him as well as any doctor. Hold his head up. Let me feel. Oh, he is not going to die just yet! Stop your caterwauling! There, I have relieved his veins. He will know us all in a minute again. He ought to have had a deal more spirit. I never could have expected this. I smoothed off everything so nicely—just as if it was a lady——"

"Did you, indeed! I have heard every word," said widow Hookham sternly. "You locked the door, or I would have had my ten nails in you long ago! Poor dear! What is a scum like you? And after all, what have you done, John Smith?"

CHAPTER XIV.

SO IS MR. SHARP.

On the very next day it was known throughout the parish and the neighbourhood that the ancient Squire had broken down at last, under the weight of anxieties. Nobody blamed him much for this, except his own sister and Mr. Smith. Mrs. Fermitage said that he ought to have shown more faith and resignation; and John Smith declared that all his plans were thrown out by this stupidity. What proper inquiry could be held, when the universal desire was to spare the feelings and respect the affliction of a poor old man?

Mr. Smith was right. An inquest truly must be held upon the body which had been found by the soldiers. But the Coroner, being a good old friend and admirer of the Oglanders, contrived that the matter should be a mere form, and the verdict an open nullity. Mr. Luke Sharp appeared, and in a dignified reserve was ready to represent the family. He said a few words, in the very best taste, and scarcely dared to hint at things which must be painful to everybody left alive to think of them. How the crush of tons of rock upon an unprotected female form had made it impossible to say—and how all the hair (which more than any other human gift survived the sad, sad change), having been cut off, was there no longer—and how there was really nothing except a pair of not over new silk stockings, belonging to a lady of lofty position in the county, and the widow of an eminent gentleman, but not required, he might hope, to present herself so painfully. Mr. Sharp could say no more; and the jury felt that he now must come, or, failing him, his son, Kit Sharp, into the £150,000 of "Port-wine Fermitage."

Therefore they returned the verdict carried in his pocket by them, "Death by misadventure of a young lady, name unknown." Their object was to satisfy the Squire and their consciences; and they found it wise, as it generally is, not to be too particular. And the Coroner was the last man to make any fuss about anything.

"Are you satisfied now, Mr. Overshute?" asked Lawyer Sharp, as Russel met him in the passage of the Quarry Arms, where the inquest had been taken. "The jury have done their best, at once to meet the facts of the case, and respect the feelings of the family."

"Satisfied! How can I be? Such a hocus-pocus I never knew. It is not for me to interfere, while things are in this wretched state. Everybody knows what an inquest is. No doubt you have done your duty, and acted according to your instructions. Come in here, where we can speak privately."

Mr. Sharp did not look quite as if he desired a private interview. However, he followed the young man with the best grace he could muster.

"I am going to speak quite calmly, and have no whip now for you to snap," said Russel, sitting down, as soon as he had set a chair for Mr. Sharp; "but may I ask you why you have done your utmost to prevent what seemed, to an ordinary mind, the first and most essential thing?"

"The identification? Yes, of course. Will you come and satisfy yourself? The key of the room is in my pocket."

"I cannot do it. I cannot do it," answered the young man, shuddering. "My last recollection must not be——"

"Young sir, I respect your feelings. And need I ask you, after that, whether I have done amiss in sparing the feelings of the family? And there is something more important than even that at stake just now. You know the poor Squire's sad condition. The poor old gentleman is pretty well broken down at last, I fear. What else could we expect of him? And the doctor his sister had brought from London says that his life hangs positively upon a thread of hope. Therefore we are telling him sad stories, or rather, I ought to say, happy stories; and though he is too sharp to swallow them all, they do him good, sir—they do him good."

"I can quite understand it. But how does that bear—I mean you could have misled him surely about the result of this inquest?"

"By no means. He would have insisted on seeing a copy of *The Herald*. In fact, if the jury could not have been managed, I had arranged with the editor to print a special copy giving the verdict as we wanted it. A pious fraud, of course; and so it is better to dispense with it. This verdict will set him up again upon his poor old legs, I hope. He seemed to dread the final blow so, and the bandying to and fro of his unfortunate daughter's name. I scarcely see why it should be so; but so it is, Mr. Overshute."

"Of course it is. How can you doubt it? How can it be otherwise? You can have no good blood in you—I beg your pardon, I speak rashly; but I did not mean to speak rudely. All I mean to say is that you need no more explain yourself. I seem to be always doubting you; and it always shows what a fool I am."

"Now, don't say that," Mr. Luke Sharp answered, with a fine and genial smile. "You are acknowledged to be the most rising member of the County Bench. But still, sir, still there is such a thing as going too far with acuteness, sir. You may not perceive it yet; but when you come to my age, you will own it."

"Truly. But who can be too suspicious, when such things are done as these? I tell you, Sharp, that I would give my head off my shoulders, this very instant, to know who has done this damned villainy!—this infernal—unnatural wrong, to my darling—to my darling!"

"Mr. Overshute, how can we tell that any wrong has been done to her?"

"No wrong to take her life! No wrong to cut off all her lovely hair, and to send it to her father! No wrong to leave us as we are, with nothing now to care for! You spoke like a sensible man just now—oh, don't think that I am excitable."

"Well, how can I think otherwise? But do me the justice to remember that I do not for one moment assert what everybody takes for granted. It seems too probable, and it cannot for the present at least be disproved, that here we have the sad finale of the poor young lady. But it must be borne in mind that, on the other hand, the body——"

"The thing could be settled in two minutes—Sharp, I have no patience with you!"

"So it appears; and, making due allowance, I am not vexed with you. You mean, of course, the interior garments, the nether clothing, and so on. There is not a clue afforded there. We have found no name on anything. The features and form, as I need not tell you——"

"I cannot bear to hear of that. Has any old servant of the family; has the family doctor——"

"All those measures were taken, of course. We had the two oldest servants. But the one was flurried out of her wits, and the other three-quarters frozen. And you know what a fellow old Splinters is, the crustiest of the crusty. He took it in bitter dudgeon that Sir Anthony had been sent for to see the poor old Squire. And all he would say was, 'Yes, yes, yes; you had better send for Sir Anthony. Perhaps he could bring—oh, of course he could bring—my poor little pet to life again!' Then we tried her aunt, Mrs. Fermitage, one of the last who had seen her living. But bless you, my dear sir, a team of horses would not have lugged her into the room. She cried, and shrieked, and fainted away."

"'Barbarous creatures!' she said, 'you will have to hold another inquest, if you are so unmanly. I could not even see my dear husband,' and then she fell into hysterics, and we had to send two miles for brandy. Now, sir, have we anything more to do? Shall we send a litter or a coffin for the Squire himself?"

"You are inclined to be sarcastic. But you have taken a great deal upon yourself. You seem to have ordered everything. Mr. Luke Sharp everywhere!"

"Will you tell me who else there was to do it? It has not been a very pleasant task, and certainly not a profitable one. I shall reap the usual reward—to be called a busybody by every one. But that is a trifle. Now, if there is anything you can suggest, Mr. Overshute, it shall be done at once. Take time to think. I feel a little tired and in need of rest. There has been so much to think of. You should have come to help us sooner. But, no doubt, you felt a sort of delicacy about it. The worthy jurymen's feet at last have ceased to rattle in the passage. My horse will not be here just yet. You will not think me rude, if I snatch a little rest, while you consider. For three nights I have had no sleep. Have I your good permission, sir? Here is the key of that room, meanwhile."

Russel Overshute was surprised to see Mr. Sharp draw forth a large silk handkerchief, with spots of white upon a yellow ground, and spread it carefully over the crown of his long, deep head, and around his temples down to the fine grey eyebrows. Then lifting gaitered heels upon the flat wide bar of the iron fender—the weather being as cold as ever—in less than a minute Mr. Luke Sharp was asleep beyond all contradiction. He slept the sleep of the just, with that gentle whisper of a snore which Aristotle hints at to prove that virtue being, as she must be, in the mean, doth in the neutral third of life maintain a middle course between loud snore and silent slumber.

If Mr. Sharp had striven hard to produce a powerful effect, young Overshute might have suspected him; but this calm, good sleep and pure sense of rest laid him open for all the world to take a larger view of him. No bad man could sleep like that. No narrow-minded man could be so wide to nature's noblest power. Only a fine and genial soul could sweetly thus resign itself. The soft content of well-earned repose spoke volumes in calm silence. Here was a good man (if ever there was one), at peace with his conscience, the world, and heaven!

Overshute was enabled thus to look at things more loftily;—to judge a man as he should be judged, when he challenges no verdict;—to see that there are large points of view, which we lose by worldly wisdom, and by little peeps through selfish holes, too one-eyed and ungenerous. Overshute could not bear the idea of any illiberality. He hated suspicion in anybody, unless it were just; as his own should be. In this condition of mind he pondered, while the honest lawyer slept. And he could not think of anything neglected, or mismanaged much, in the present helpless state of things.

CHAPTER XV.

A SPOTTED DOG.

When at last the frost broke up, and streams began to run again, and everywhere the earth was glad that men should see her face once more; and forest-trees, and roadside pollards, and bushes of the common hedgerow, straightened their unburdened backs, and stood for spring to look at them; a beautiful young maiden came as far as she could come, and sighed; as if the beauty of the land awaking was a grief to her.

This pretty lady, in the young moss-bud, and slender-necked chalice of innocence, was laden with dews of sorrow, such as nature, in her outer dealings with the more material world, defers until autumnal night and russet hours are waiting. Scarcely in full bloom of youth, but ripe for blush or dreaminess, she felt the power of early spring, and the budding hope around her.

"Am I to be a prisoner always, ever more a prisoner?" she said, as she touched a willow catkin, the earliest of all, the silver one. She stroked the delicate silken tassel, doubtful of its prudence yet; and she looked for leaves, but none there were, and nothing to hold commune.

The feeble sun seemed well content to have a mere glimpse of the earth again, and spread his glances diffidently, as if he expected shadow. Nevertheless, there he was at last; and the world received him tenderly.

"It has been such a long, long time. It seems to grow longer, as the days draw out, and nobody comes to talk to me. My place it is to obey, of course—but still, but still—there he is again!"

The girl drew back; for a fine young man, in a grand new velvet shooting-coat, wearing also a long shawl waistcoat and good buck-skin breeches, which (combined with calf-skin gaiters) set off his legs to the uttermost,—in all this picturesque apparel, and swinging a gun right gallantly, there he was, and no mistake! He was quietly trying through the covert, without any beaters, but with a brace of clever spaniels, for woodcock, snipe, or rabbit perhaps; the season for game being over. A tall, well-made, and rather nice young man (so far as a bashful girl might guess) he seemed at this third view of him; and of course it would be an exceedingly rude and pointed thing to run away. Needless, also, and indeed absurd; because she was sure that when last they met, he was frightened much more than she was. It was nothing less than a duty now, to find out whether he had recovered himself. If he had done so, it would be as well to frighten him even more this time. And if he had not, it would only be fair to see what could be done for him.

One of his dogs—a "cocking spannel," as the great Mr. Looker warranted—a good young bitch, with liver-coloured spots, and drop ears torn by brambles, and eyes full of brownish yellow light, ran up to the girl confidentially, and wagged a brief tail, and sniffed a little, and with sound discretion gazed. Each black nostril was like a mark of panting interrogation, and one ear was tucked up like a small tunnel, and the eye that belonged to it blinked with acumen.

"You pretty dear, come and let me pat you," the young lady cried, looking down at the dog, as if there were nobody else in the world. "Oh, I am so fond of dogs—what is your name? Come and tell me, darling."

"Her name is 'Grace,'" said the master, advancing in a bashful but not clumsy way. "The most beautiful name in the world, I think."

"Oh, do you think so, Mr.—— but I beg your pardon, you have not told me what your own name is, I think."

"I hope you are quite well," he answered, turning his gun away carefully; "quite well this fine afternoon. How beautiful it is to see the sun, and all the things coming back again so!"

"Oh yes! and the lovely willow-trees! I never noticed them so before. I had no idea that they did all this." She was stroking the flossiness as she spoke.

"Neither had I," said the young man, trying to be most agreeable, and glancing shyly at the haze of silver in lily fingers glistening; "but do not you think that they do it because—because they can scarcely help themselves?"

"No! how can you be so stupid? Excuse me—I did not mean that, I am sure. But they do it because it is their nature; and they like to do it."

"You know them, no doubt; and you understand them, because you are like them."

He was frightened as soon as he had said this; which he thought (while he uttered it) rather good.

"I am really astonished," the fair maid said, with the gleam of a smile in her lively eyes, but her bright lips very steadfast, "to be compared to a willow-tree. I thought that a willow meant—but never mind, I am glad to be like a willow."

"Oh no! oh no! You are not one bit—I am sure you will never be like a willow. What could I have been thinking of?"

"No harm whatever, I am sure of that," she answered, with so sweet a look, that he stopped from scraping the toe of his boot on a clump of moss; and in his heart was wholly taken up with her—"I am sure that you meant to be very polite."

"More than that—a great deal more than that—oh, ever so much more than that!"

She let him look at her for a moment, because he had something that he wanted to express. And she, from pure natural curiosity, would have been glad to know what it was. And so their eyes dwelt upon one another just long enough for each to be almost ashamed of leaving off; and in that short time they seemed to be pleased with one another's nature. The youth was the first to look away; because he feared that he might be rude; whereas a maiden cannot be rude. With the speed of a glance she knew all that, and she blushed at the colour these things were taking. "I am sure that I ought to go," she said.

"And so ought I, long and long ago. I am sure I cannot tell why I stop. If you were to get into any trouble——"

"You are very kind. You need not be anxious. If you do not know why you stop—the sooner you run away at full speed the better."

"Oh, I hope you won't say that," he replied, being gifted by nature with powers of courting, which only wanted practice. "I really think that you scarcely ought to say so unkind a thing as that."

"Very well, then. May I say this, that you have important things to attend to, and that it looks—indeed it does—as if it was coming on to rain?"

"I assure you there is no fear of that—although, if it did, there is plenty of shelter. But look at the sun—how it shines in your hair! Oh, why do you keep your hair so short? It looks as if it ought to be ten feet long."

"Well, suppose that it was—not quite ten feet, for that would be rather hard to manage—but say only half that length, and then for a very good reason was all cut off—but that is altogether another thing, and in no way can concern you. I give you a very good day, sir."

"No, no! you will give me a very bad day, if you hurry away so suddenly. I am anxious to know a great deal more about you. Why do you live in this lonely place, quite as if you were imprisoned here? And what makes you look so unhappy sometimes, although your nature is so bright? There! what a brute I am! I have made you cry. I ought to shoot myself."

"You must not talk of such wicked things. I am not crying; I am very happy—at least, I mean quite happy enough. Good-bye! or I never shall bear you again."

As she turned away, without looking at him, he saw that her pure young breast was filled with a grief he must not intrude upon. And at the same moment he caught a glimpse through the trees of some one coming. So he lifted his smart Glengarry cap, and in sad perplexity strode away. But over his shoulder he softly said—"I shall come again—you must let me do that—I am sure that I can help you."

The young lady made no answer; but turned as soon as she thought he was out of sight, and wistfully looked after him.

"Here comes that Miss Patch, of course," she said. "I wonder whether she has spied him out. Her eyes are always everywhere."

"Oh, my darling child," cried Miss Patch, an elderly lady of great dignity; "I had no idea you were gone so far. Come in, I beg of you, come this moment; what has excited you like this?"

"Nothing at all. At least, I mean, I am not in the least excited. Oh! look at the beautiful sunset!"

Miss Patch, with deep gravity, took out her spectacles, placed them on her fine Roman nose, and gazed eastward to watch the sunset.

"Oh dear no! not there," cried her charge in a hurry; "here, it is all in this direction."

"I thought that I saw a spotted dog," the lady answered, still gazing steadily down the side of the forest by which the youth had made his exit; "a spotted dog, Grace, I am almost sure."

"Yes, I dare say. I believe that there is a dog with some spots in the neighbourhood."

CHAPTER XVI.

A GRAND SMOCK-FROCK.

Upon the Saturday after this, being market-day at Oxford, Zacchary Cripps was in and out with the places and the people, as busy as the best of them. The number of things that he had to do used to set his poor brain buzzing; until he went into the Bar—not the grand one, but the Hostler's Bar, at the Golden Cross—and left dry froth at the bottom of a pewter quart measure of find old ale. At this flitting trace of exhaustion he always gazed for a moment as if he longed to behold just such another, and then, with a sigh of self-dedication to all the great duties before him, out he pulled his leather bag, and counted fourpence four times over (without any multiplication thereof, but a desire to have less subtraction), and then he generally shook his head, in penitence at his own love of good ale, and the fugitive fate of the passion. The last step was to deposit his fourpence firmly upon the metal counter, challenging all the bad pence and half-pence pilloried there as a warning; and then with a glance at the barmaid Sally, to encourage her still to hope for him, away went Cripps to the duties of the day.

These always took him to the market first, a crowded and very narrow quarter then, where he always had a great host of commissions, at very small figures, to execute. His honesty was so broadly known that it was become quite an onerous gift, as happens in much higher grades of life. Folk, all along both his roads of travel, naturally took great advantage of it; being certain that he would spend their money quite as gingerly as his own, and charge them no more than he was compelled by honesty towards himself to charge.

Farmers, butchers, poulterers, hucksters, chandlers, and grocers—black, yellow, and green—all knew Zacchary Cripps, and paid him the compliment of asking fifty per cent. above what they meant, or even hoped to take. Of this the Carrier was well aware, and upon the whole it pleased him. The triumph each time of rubbing down, by friction of tongue and chafe of spirit, eighteen-pence into a shilling, although it might be but a matter of course, never lost any of its charms for him. His brisk eyes sparkled as he pulled off his hat, and made the most learned annotations there—if learning is (as generally happens) the knowledge of what nobody else can read.

But now, before he had filled the great leathern apron of his capacities—which being full, his hat had no room for any further entries—a thing came to pass which startled him; so far at least as the road and the world had left him the power of starting. He saw his own brother, Leviticus, standing in friendly talk with a rabbit-man; a man whose reputation was not at a hopeless distance beyond reproach; a man who had been three times in prison—whether he ought or ought not to have been, this is a difficult point to debate. His friends contended that he ought not—if so, he of course was wrong to go there. His enemies vowed that he ought to be there—if so, he could rightly be nowhere else. The man got the benefit of both opinions, in a powerfully negative condition of confidence on the part of the human brotherhood. But for all that, there were bigger rogues to be found in Oxford.

Cripps, however, as the head of the family, having seigneurial rights by birth—as well as, in his own opinion, force of superior intellect—saw, and at once discharged, his duty. No taint of poached rabbits must lie, for a moment, on the straightforward path of the Crippses. Zacchary, therefore, held up one hand, as a warning to Tickuss to say no more, until he could get at him—for just at this moment a dead lock arose, through a fight of four women about a rotten egg—but when that had lapsed into hysterics, the Carrier struggled to his brother's elbow.

Leviticus Cripps was a large, ruddy man, half a head taller than the heir of the house, but not so well built for carrying boxes. His frame was at the broadest and thickest of itself at that very important part of the human system which has to do with aliment. But inasmuch as all parts do that, more or less directly, accuracy would specify (if allowable) his stomach. Here he was well developed; but narrowed or sloped towards less essential points; whereas the Carrier was at his greatest across and around the shoulders. A keen physiologist would refer this palpable distinction to their respective occupations. The one fed pigs and fed upon them, and therefore required this local enlargement for sympathy, and for assimilation. The other bore the burden of good things for the benefit of others; which is anything but fattening.

Be that as it will, they differed thus; and they differed still more in countenance. Zacchary had a bright open face, with a short nose of brave and comely cock, a mouth large, pleasant, and mild as a cow's, a strong square forehead, and blue eyes of great vivacity, and some humour. He had true Cripps' hair, like a horn-beam hedge in the month of January; and a thick curly beard of good hay colour, shaven into three scollops like a clover leaf. His manner of standing, and speaking, and looking was sturdy, and plain, and resolute; and he stuck out his elbows, and set his knuckles on his hips, whenever both hands were empty.

On the contrary, Tickuss, his brother, looked at every one, and at all times, rather as if he were being suspected. Wrongly suspected, of course, and puzzled to tell at all why it should be so; and as a general rule, a little surly at such injustice. The expression of his face was heavy, slow-witted, and shyly inquisitive; his hair was black, and his eyes of a muddy brown with small slippery pupils; and he kept his legs in a fidgety state, as if prone to be wanted for running away. In stature, however, and weight this man was certainly above the average; and he would rather do a good than a bad thing, whenever the motives were equivalent.

But if his soul could not always walk in spotless raiment, his body at least was clad in the garb of innocence. No man in Oxford market wore a smock that could be compared with his. For on such great occasions Leviticus came in a noble shepherd's smock, long and flowing around him well, a triumph of mind in design and construction, and a marvel of hand in fine stitching and plaiting, goffering, crimping, and ironing. The broad turned-over collar was like

a snow-drift tattooed by fairies, the sleeves were gathered in as religiously as a bishop's gossamer; and the front was four-square with cunning work; a span was the length, and a span the breadth, like the breastplate over the ephod. As for Tickuss himself, he cared no more than the wool of a pig for such trifles; beyond this, that he liked to have his neighbours looking up to, and the women looking after, him. Even in the new unsullied sanctity of this chasuble, he would grasp by the tail an Irish pig, if sore occasion befell them both. It was Mrs. Leviticus who adorned him (after a sea of soap-suds and many irons tested ejectively) with this magnificent vesture, suggested to feminine capacity, perhaps, in the days of the Tabernacle.

"Leviticus," said Zacchary sternly, leading him down a wet red alley, peopled only with cooped chicks, and paved with unsaleable giblets; "Leviticus, what be thou doing, this day? Many queer things have I seed of thee—but to beat this here—never nothing!"

"I dunno what dost mean," Tickuss answered unsteadily.

"Now, I call that a lie," said the Carrier firmly but mildly, as if well used thereto; as a dog is to fleas in the summer time.

"A might be; and yet again a might not," Tickuss replied, with keen sense of logic, but none of impeached ethics.

"Do 'ee know, or do 'ee not?"—the ruthless Carrier pressed him—"that there hosebird have a been in jail?"

"Now, I do believe; let me call to mind"—said Tickuss, with his duller eyes at bay—"that I did hear summat as come nigh that. But, Lord bless you, the best of men goes to jail sometimes! Do you call to mind old Squire Dempster——"

"Naught to do wi' it! naught to do wi' it?" Zacchary cried, with a crack of his thumb. "That were an old gentleman's misfortune; the same as Saint Paul and Saint Peter did once. But that hosebird I see you talking along of, have been in jail three times—three times I tell 'ee—and no miracle. And if ever I sees you dealing with him——" he closed his sentence emphatically, by shaking his fist in the immediate neighbourhood of his brother's retiring nose.

"Well, well! no need to take on so, Zak," cried the bigger man at safe distance; "you might bear in mind that I has my troubles, and no covered cart at the tail of me. And a family, Zak, as wears out more boots than a tanyard a week could make good to 'em. But there, I never finds anybody gifted with no consideration. Why, if I was to talk till to-morrow night——"

"If you was to talk to next Leap-year's day, you could not fetch right out of wrong, Tickuss. And you know pretty well what I be. Now, what was you doing of with that black George? Mind, no lies won't go down with me."

"Best way go and get him to tell 'ee," the younger brother answered sulkily. "It will do 'ee good like, to get it out of he."

"No harm to try," answered Cripps with alacrity; "no fear for me to be seen along of un; only for the likes of you, Tickuss."

The Carrier set off, to stake his higher repute against lowest communications; but his brother, with no "heed of smock or of crock," took three long strides and stopped him.

"Hearken me, hearken me, Zak!" he cried, with a start at a cock that crowed at him, and his face like the wattles of chanticleer—"Zak, for the sake of the Lord in heaven, and of my seven little ones,—stop a bit!"

"I bain't in no hurry that I know on," replied the Cripps of pure conscience; "you told me to ask of him, and I were a-goin' on the wag to do so."

"Come out into the Turl, Zak; come out into the Turl a minute; there is nobody there now. They young College-boys be all at their lessons, or hunting. There is no place to come near the Turl for a talk, when they noisy College chaps are gone."

By a narrow back lane they got into the Turl, at that time of day little harassed by any, unless it were the children of the porter of Lincoln or Exeter. "Now, what is it thou hast got to say?" asked Zacchary. But this was the very thing the younger brother was vainly seeking for.

"Nort, nort, Zak; nort of any 'count," he stammered, after casting in his slow imagination for a good, fat, well-seasoned lie.

"Now spake out the truth, man, whatever it be," said the Carrier, trying to encourage him; "Tickuss, thou art always getting into scrapes by manes of crooked dealing. But I'll not turn my back on thee, if for once canst spake the truth like a man, brother."

Leviticus struggled with his nature, while his little eyes rolled slowly, and his plaited breastplate rose and fell. He stole some irresolute glances at his brother's clear, straight-forward face; and he might have saved himself by doing what he was half-inclined to do. But circumstances aided nature to defeat his better star. The wife of the porter of Lincoln College had sent forth one of her little girls to buy a bunch of turnips. She knew that turnips would be very scarce after so much hard weather; but her stew would be no good without them; and among many other fine emotions, anxiety was now foremost. So she thrust forth her head from the venerable porch, and at the top of her voice exclaimed—"Turmots, turmots, turmots!"

At that loud cry, Leviticus Cripps turned pale—for his conscience smote him. "She meaneth me, she meaneth me, she meaneth my turmot-field;" he whispered, with his long legs bent for departure; "'tis a thousand pound they have offered, Zak. Come away, come away, down Ship Street; there is a pump, and I want some water."

"But tell me what thou wast agoing to say," cried his brother, laying hold of him.

"Dash it! I will tell thee the truth, then, Zak. I just went and cut up a maisly sow—as fine a bit of pork as you ever clapped eyes on, but for they little beauty spots. And the clerk of the market bought some for his dinner; and he have got a bad cook, a cantankerous woman, and now I be in a pretty mess!"

"Not a word of all that do I believe," said Cripps.

CHAPTER XVII.

INSTALLED AT BRASENOSE.

Master Cripps was accustomed mainly to daylight roads and open ways. It was true that he had a good many corners to turn between Beckley and Oxford, whether his course were through Elsfield and Marston, or the broader track from Headington. But for all sharp turns he had two great maxims—keep on the proper side, and go slowly. By virtue of these, he had never been damaged himself, or forced to pay damages; and when he was in a pleasant vein, at the Dusty Anvil, or anywhere else, it was useless to tell him that any mischance need happen to a man who heeded this—that is to say, if he drove a good horse, and saw to the shoeing of the nag himself. Of course there was also the will of the Lord. But that was quite sure to go right, if you watched it.

If he has any good substance in him, a man who spends most of his daylight time in the company of an honest horse, is sure to improve so much that none of his bad companions know him—supposing that he ever had any. The simplicity and the good will of the horse, his faith in mankind, and his earnest desire to earn his oats, and have plenty of them; also the knowledge that his time is short, and his longest worn shoes will outlast him; and that when he is dead, quite another must be bought, who will cost twice as much as he did—these things (if any sense can be made of them) operate on the human mind, in a measure, for the most part, favourable.

Allowance, therefore, must be made for Master Leviticus Cripps and his character, as often as it is borne in mind that he, from society of good horses, was (by mere mischance of birth) fetched down to communion with low hogs. Not that hogs are in any way low, from a properly elevated gazing-point; and taking, perhaps, the loftiest of human considerations, they are, as yet, fondly believed to be much better on a dish than horses.

But that—as Cripps would plainly put it—is neither here nor there just now; and it is ever so much better to let a man make his own excuses, which he can generally do pretty well.

"Cripps, well met!" cried Russel Overshute, seizing him by the apron, as Zacchary stood at the corner of Ship Street, to shake his head after his brother, who had made off down the Corn Market; "you are the very man I want to see!"

"Lor' a mercy now, be I, your Worship? Well, there are not many gentlemen as it does me more good to look at."

Without any flattery he might say that. It was good, after dealing with a crooked man, to set eyes upon young Overshute. In his face there was no possibility of lie, hidden thought, or subterfuge. Whatever he meant was there expressed, in quick bold features, and frank bright eyes. His tall straight figure, firm neck, and broad shoulders helped to make people respect what he meant; moreover, he walked as if he had always something in view before him. He never turned round to look after a pretty girl, as weak young fellows do. He admired a pretty girl very much; but had too much respect for her to show it. He had made his choice, once for all in life; and his choice was sweet Grace Oglander.

"I made sure of meeting you, Master Cripps; if not in the market, at any rate where you put up your fine old horse. I like a man who likes his horse. I want to speak to you quietly, Cripps."

"I am your man, sir. Goo where you plaiseth. Without no beckoning, I be after you."

"There is nothing to make any fuss about, Cripps. And the whole world is welcome to what I say, whenever there is no one else concerned. At present, there are other people concerned;—and get out of the way, you jackanapes!"

In symmetry with his advanced ideas, he should not have spoken thus—but he spake it; and the eavesdropper touched his hat, and made off very hastily.

Russel was not at all certain of having quite acted up to his better lights, and longed to square up all the wrong with a shilling; but, with higher philosophy, suppressed that foolish yearning. "Now, Cripps, just follow me," he said.

The Carrier grumbled to himself a little, because of all his parcels, and the change he was to call for somewhere, and a woman who could not make up her mind about a bullock's liver—not to think of more important things in every other direction. No one thought nothing of the value of his time; every bit the same as if he was a lean old horse turned out to grass! In spite of all that, Master Cripps did his best to keep time with the long legs before him. Thus was he led through well-known ways to the modest gate of Brasenose, which being passed, he went up a staircase near the unpretentious hall of that very good society. "Why am I here?" thought Cripps, but, with his usual resignation, added, "I have aseed finer places nor this." This, in the range of his great experience, doubtless was an established truth. But even his view of the breadth of the world received a little twist of wonder, when over a narrow dark doorway, which Mr. Overshute passed in silence, he read—for read he could—these words, "Rev. Thomas Hardenow." "May I be danged," said Cripps, "if I ever come across such a queer thing as this here be!"

However, he quelled his emotions and followed the lengthy-striding Overshute into a long low room containing uncommonly little furniture. There was no one there, except Overshute, and a scout, who flitted away in ripe haste, with an order upon the buttery.

"Now, Cripps, didst thou ever taste college ale?" Mr. Overshute asked, as he took a chair like the dead bones of Ezekiel. "Master Carrier, here thou hast the tokens of a new and important movement. In my time, chairs were comfortable. But they make them now, only to mortify the flesh."

"Did your Worship mean me to sit down?" asked Cripps, touching the forelock which he kept combed for that purpose.

"Certainly, Cripps. Be not critical; but sit."

"I thank your Worship kindly," he answered with little cause for gratitude. "I have a-druv many thousand mile on a seat no worse nor this, perhaps."

"Your reservation is wise, my friend. Your driving-board must have been velvet to this. But the new lights are not in our Brewery yet. If they get there, they will have the worst of it. Here comes the tankard! Well done, old Hooper. Score a gallon to me for my family."

"With pleasure, sir," answered Hooper, truly, while he set on the table a tray filled with solid luncheon. "Ah, I see you remember the good old times, when there was those in this college, sir, that never thought twice about keeping down the flesh; and better flesh, sir, they had ever so much than these as are always a-doctoring of it. Ah, when I comes to recall to my mind what my father said to me, when fust he led me in under King Solomon's nose—'Bob, my boy,' he says to me——"

"Now, Hooper, I know that his advice was good. The fruit thereof is in yourself. You shall tell me all about it the very next time I come to see you."

"Ah, they never cares now to hearken," said Hooper to himself, as, with the resignation of an ancient scout, he coughed, and bowed, and stroked the cloth, and contemplated Cripps with mild surprise, and then made a quiet exit. As for listening at the door, a good scout scorns such benefit. He likes to help himself to something more solid than the words behind him.

"If I may make so bold," said the Carrier, after waiting as long as he could, with Overshute clearly forgetting him; "what was it your Worship was going to tell me? Time is going by, sir, and our horse will miss his feeding."

"Attend to your own, Cripps, attend to your own. I beg your pardon for not helping you. But that you can do for yourself, I dare say. I am trying to think out something. I used to be quick; I am very slow now."

Cripps made a little face at this, to show that the ways of his betters had good right to be beyond him; and then he stood upon his sturdy bowed legs, and turned a quick corner of eye at the door, in fear of any fasting influence, and seeing nothing of the kind, with pleasure laid hold of a large knife and fork.

"Lay about you, Cripps, my friend; lay about you to your utmost." So said Mr. Overshute, himself refusing everything.

"Railly now, I dunno, your Worship, how to get on, all a-ating by myself. Some folk can, and some breaks down at it. I must have somebody to ate with me—so be it was only now a babby, or a dog."

"I thank you for the frank comparison, Cripps. Well, help me, if you must—ah, I see you can carve."

"I am better at the raw mate, sir; but I can make shift when roasted. Butcher Numbers my brother, your Worship—but perhaps you never heered on him?"

"Oh yes, I know, Cripps. A highly respectable thriving man he is too. All your family thrive, and everybody speaks so well of them. Why, look at Leviticus! They tell me he has three hundred pigs!"

Like most men who have the great gift of gaining good will and popularity, Russel Overshute loved a bit of gossip about his neighbours.

"Your Worship," said Cripps, disappointing him of any new information, "pigs is out of my way altogether. When I was a young man of tender years, counteracted I was for to carry a pig. Three pounds twelve shillings and four pence he cost me, in less than three-quarters of a mile of road; and squeak, squeak, all the way, as if I was a-killing of him, and not he me. Seemeth he smelled some apples somewhere, and he went through a chaney clock, and a violin, and a set of first-born babby-linen for Squire Corser's daughter; grown up now she is, your Worship must a met her riding. And that was not the worst of it nother——"

"Well, Cripps, you must tell me another time. It was terribly hard upon you. But, my friend, the gentleman who lives here will be back for his hat, when the clock strikes two. Cap and gown off, when the clock strikes two. From two until five he walks fifteen miles, whatever the state of the weather is."

"Lord bless me, your Worship, I could not travel that, with an empty cart, and all downhill!"

"Never mind, Cripps. Will you try to listen, and offer no observation?"

"To say nort,—does your Worship mean? Well, all our family be esteemed for that."

"Then prove the justice of that esteem; for I have a long story to tell you, Cripps, and no long time to do it in."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FLASH OF LIGHT.

The Carrier, with a decisive gesture, ceased from both solid and liquid food, and settled his face, and whole body, and members into a grim and yet flexible aspect, as if he were driving a half-broken horse, and must be prepared for any sort of start. And yet with all this he reconciled a duly receptive deference, and a pleasant readiness, as if he were his own Dobbin, just fresh from stable.

"I need not tell you, Master Cripps," said Russel, "how I have picked up the many little things, which have been coming to my knowledge lately. And I will not be too positive about any of them; because I made such a mistake in the beginning of this inquiry. All my suspicions at first were set on a man who was purely innocent—a legal gentleman of fair repute, to whom I have now made all honourable amends. In the most candid manner he has forgiven me, and desires no better than to act in the best faith with us."

"Asking your pardon for interrupting—did the gentleman happen to have a sharp name?"

"Yes, Cripps, he did. But no more of that. I was over sharp myself, no doubt; he is thoroughly blameless, and more than that, his behaviour has been most generous, most unwearying, most—— I never can do justice to him."

"Well, your Worship, no—perhaps not. A would take a rare sharp un to do so."

"You hold by the vulgar prejudice—well, I should be the last to blame you. That, however, has nothing to do with what I want to ask you. But first, I must tell you my reason, Cripps. You know I have no faith whatever in that man John Smith. At first I thought him a tool of Mr.—never mind who—since I was so wrong. I am now convinced that John Smith is 'art and part' in the whole affair himself. He has thrown dust in our eyes throughout. He has stopped us from taking the proper track. Do you remember what discredit he threw on your sister's story?"

"He didn't believe a word of un. Had a good mind, I had, to a' knocked un down."

"To be sure, Cripps, I wonder that you forbore. Though violent measures must not be encouraged. And I myself thought that your sister might have made some mistakes through her scare in the dark. Poor thing! Her hair can have wanted no bandoline ever since, I should fancy. What a brave girl too not to shriek or faint!"

"Well, her did goo zummut queer, sir, and lie down in the quarry-pit. Perhaps 'twas the wisest thing the poor young wench could do."

"No doubt it was—the very wisest. However, before she lost her wits she noticed, as I understand her to say—or rather she was particularly struck with the harsh cackling voice of the taller man, who also had a pointed hat, she thinks. It was not exactly a cackling voice, nor a clacking voice, nor a guttural voice, but something compounded of all three. Your sister, of course, could not quite so describe it; but she imitated it; which was better."

"Her hath had great advantages. Her can imitate a'most anything. Her waited for months on a College-chap, the very same in whose house we be sitting now."

"Cripps, that is strange. But to come back again. Your sister, who is a very nice girl, indeed, and a good member of a good family——"

"Ay, your Worship, that her be. Wish a could come across the man as would dare to say the contrairy!"

"Now, Cripps, we never shall get on, while you are so horribly warlike. Are you ready to listen to me, or not?"

"Every blessed word, your Worship, every blessed word goeth down; unto such time as you begins to spake of things at home to me."

"Such dangerous topics I will avoid. And now for the man with this villainous voice. You knew, or at any rate now you know, that I never was satisfied with that wretched affair that was called an 'Inquest.' Inquest a non inquirendo—but I beg your pardon, my good Cripps. Enough that the whole was pompous child's play, guided by crafty hands beneath; as happens with most inquests. I only doubted the more, friend Cripps; I only doubted the more, from having a wrong way taken to extinguish doubts."

"To be sure, your Worship; a lie on the back of another lie makes un go heavier."

"Well, never mind; only this I did. For a few days perhaps I was overcome; and the illness of my dear old friend, the Squire, and the trouble of managing so that he should not hear anything to kill him; and my own slowness at the back of it all; for I never, as you know, am hasty—these things, one and another, kept me from going on horseback anywhere."

"To be sure, your Worship, to be sure. You ought to be always a-horseback. I've a-seed you many times on the Bench; but you looks a very poor stick there compared to what 'ee be a-horseback."

"Now, Cripps, where is your reverence? You call me 'your Worship,' and in the same breath contemn my judicial functions. I must commit you for a week's hard labour at getting in and out of your own cart, if you will not allow me to speak, Cripps. At last I have frightened you, have I? Then let me secure the result in silence. Well, after the

weather began to change from that tremendous frost and snow, and the poor Squire fell into the quiet state that he has been in ever since, I found that nothing would do for me, my health not being quite as usual——"

"Oh, your Worship was wonderfully kind; they told me you was as good as any old woman in the room almost!"

"Except to take long rides, Cripps, nothing at all would do for me. And, not to speak of myself too much, I believe that saved me from falling into a weak, and spooney, and godless state. I assure you there were times—however, never mind that, I am all right now, and——"

"Thank the Lord! you ought to say, sir; but you great Squires upon the bench——"

"Thank the Lord! I do say, Cripps; I thank Him every day for it. But if I may edge in a word, in your unusually eloquent state, I will tell you just what happened to me. I never believed, and never will, that poor Miss Oglander is dead. The coroner and the jury believed that they had her remains before them, although for the Squire's sake they forbore to identify her in the verdict. Your sister, no doubt, believed the same; and so did almost every one. I could not go, I could not go—no doubt I was a fool; but I could not face the chance of what I might see, after what I had heard of it. Well, I began to ride about, saying nothing of course to any one. And the more I rode, the more my spirit and faith in good things came back to me. And I think I have been rewarded, Cripps; at last I have been rewarded. It is not very much; but still it is like a flash of light to me. I have found out the man with the horrible voice."

"Lord have mercy upon me! your Worship—the man as laid hold of the pick-axe!"

"I have found him, Cripps, I do believe. But rather by pure luck than skill."

"There be no such thing as luck, your Worship; if you will excoose me. The Lord in heaven is the master of us!"

"Upon my word, it looks almost like it, though I never took that view of things. However, this was the way of it. To-day is Saturday. Well, it was last Wednesday night, I was coming home from a long, and wet, and muddy ride to Maidenhead. That little town always pleases me; and I like the landlord and the hostler, and I am sure that my horse is fed——"

"Your Worship must never think such a thing, without you see it mixed, and feel it, and watch him a-munching, until he hath done."

"More than that, I have always fancied, ever since that story was about the bag of potatoes you brought, without knowing any more of it—ever since I heard of that, it has seemed to me that more inquiries ought to be made at Maidenhead. I need not say why; but I know that the Squire's opinion had been the same, as long as—I mean while—his health permitted. On Wednesday I went to the foreman of the nursery whence the potatoes came. It was raining hard, and he was in a shed, with a green baize apron on, seeing to some potting work. I got him away from the other men, and I found him a very sharp fellow indeed. He remembered all about those potatoes, especially as Squire Oglander had ridden from Oxford, in the snowy weather, to ask many questions about them. But the Squire could not put the questions I did. The poor old gentleman could not bear, of course, to expose his trouble. But I threw away all little scruples (as truly I should have done long ago), and I told the good foreman every word, so far as we know it yet, at least. He was shocked beyond expression—people take things in such different ways—not at the poor Squire's loss and anguish, but that anybody should have dared to meddle with his own pet 'oakleafs,' and, above all, his new pet seal.

"'I sealed them myself,' he said, 'sealed them myself, sir, with the new coat of arms that we paid for that month, because of the tricks of the trade, sir! Has anybody dared to imitate——' 'No, Mr. Foreman,' I said, 'they simply cut away your seal altogether, and tied it again, without any seal.' 'Oh, then,' he replied, 'that quite alters the case. If they had only meddled with our new arms, while the money was hot that we paid for them, what a case we might have had! But to knock them off—no action lies.'

"Cripps, it took me a very long time to warm him up to the matter again, after that great disappointment. He was burning for some great suit at law against some rival nursery, which always pays the upstart one; but I led him round, and by patient words and simple truth brought him back to reason. The packing of the bag he remembered well, and the pouring of a lot of buck-wheat husks around and among the potato sets, to keep them from bruising, and to keep out frost, which seemed even then to be in the air. And he sent his best man to the Oxford coach, the first down coach from London, which passed by their gate about ten o'clock, and would be in Oxford about two, with the weather and the roads as usual. In that case, the bag could scarcely have been at the Black Horse more than half an hour before you came and laid hold of it; and being put into the bar, as the Squire's parcels always are, it was very unlikely to be tampered with."

"Lord a' mercy! your Worship, it was witchcraft then! The same as I said all along; it were witches' craft, and nothing else."

"Stop, Cripps, don't you be in such a hurry. But wait till you hear what I have next to tell. But oh, here comes my friend Hardenow, as punctual as the clock strikes two! Well, old fellow, how are you getting on?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A STORMY NIGHT.

The Rev. Thomas Hardenow, fellow and tutor of Brasenose, strode into his own room at full speed, and stopped abruptly at sight of the Carrier. "Of all men, most I have avoided thee," was in his mind; but he spoke it not, though being a strongly outspoken man. Not that he ever had done any wrong to make him be shy of the Cripps race; but that he felt in his heart a desire for commune, which must be dangerous. He knew that in him lurked a foolish tendency towards Esther; and (which was worse) he knew that she had done her best to overcome a still more foolish turn towards him.

Cripps, however (who would have fed the doves of Venus on black peas), looked upon any little bygone "coorting" as a social and congenial topic, enabling a quiet man to get on (if he only had a good memory) with almost any woman. Like a sensible man, he had always acquitted Hardenow of any blame in the matter, knowing that young girls' fancies may be caught without any angling. "If her chose to be a fool, how were he to blame for it?" And the Carrier never forgot the stages of social distinction. "Servant, sir," he therefore said, with his usual salaam; "hope I see you well, sir."

"Thank you, Zacchary," said Mr. Hardenow, taking the Carrier's horny palm (which always smelled of straps and buckles), and trying to squeeze it, with a passive result, "I am pretty well, Zacchary, thank you."

"Then you don't look it, sir, that you doesn't. We heerd you was getting on wonderful well. But the proof of the puddin' ain't in you, sir."

"That's right, Cripps," cried Overshute; "give it to him, Cripps! Why, he starves himself! Ever since he took his first and second, and got his fellowship and took orders, he hasn't known what a good dinner is. He keeps all the fasts in the calendar, and the vigils of the festivals, and he ought to have an appetite for the feasts; but he overstays his time, and can't keep anything on his stomach!"

"Now, Russel, as usual!" Hardenow answered, with a true and pleasant smile; "what a fine fellow you would be, if you only had moderation! But I see that you want to talk to Cripps; and I have several men waiting in the quad. Where is my beaver? Oh! here, to be sure! Will you come with us? No, of course you can't. Will you dine in hall with me?"

"Of course, I won't. But come you and dine with me on Sunday—the only day you dare eat a bit—and my mother will do her best to strengthen you, build you up, establish you, for a fortnight of macaroni. Will you come?"

"Yes, yes, to-morrow—to be sure—I have many things I want to say to you. Good-bye for the present; good-bye, Master Cripps."

"There goes one of the finest fellows, of all the fine fellows yet ruined by rubbish!" With these words Russel Overshute ran to the window and looked out. A dozen or more of young men were waiting, the best undergraduates of the college, for Mr. Hardenow to lead them for fifteen miles, without a word.

"Well, every man to his liking," said Russel; "but that would be about the last of mine. Now, Cripps, most patient of carriers, are you ready for me to go on or not?"

"I hath a been thinking about my horse. How greedy o' me to be ating like this"—for the thought of so much fasting had made him set to again, while he got the chance—"drinking likewise of college ale—better I have tasted, but not often—and all this time, as you might say, old Dobbin easing of his dainty foot, with no more nor a wisp of hay to drag through his water—if he hath any."

"An excruciating picture, Cripps, drawn by too vivid a conscience. Dobbin is as happy as he can be, with twenty-five horses to talk to him. At this very moment I behold him munching choicest of white oats and chaff."

"Your Worship can see through a stone-wall, they say; but they only keeps black oats at the Cross just now, along of a contract the landlord have made—and a blind sort of bargain, to my thinking——"

"Never mind that—let him have black oats then, or Irish oats, or no oats at all. But do you wish to hear my story out, or will you leave it till next Saturday?"

"Sir, you might a' seen as I was waiting, until such time as you plaze to go on wi' un."

"Very well, Cripps, that satisfies the most exacting historian. I will go on where I left off, if that point can be established. Well, I left the foreman of the nursery telling me about the man he sent with the bag of potatoes to the Oxford coach. He told me he was one of his sharpest hands, who had been off work for a week or two then, and had only returned that morning. 'Joe Smith' was his name; and when they could get him to work, he would do as much work as any two other men on the place. He might be trusted with anything, if he only undertook it; but the worst of him was that he never could be got to stick long to anything. Here to-day and gone to-morrow had always been his character; and they thought that he must be of gipsy race, and perhaps had a wandering family.

"This made me a little curious about the man; and I asked to see him. But the foreman said that for some days now he had not been near the nursery, and they thought that he was on the Oxford road, in the neighbourhood of

Nettlebed; and another thing—if I did see him, I could not make out more than half he said, for the man had such a defect in his voice, that only those who were used to him could be certain of his meaning. Suddenly I thought of your sister's tale, and I said to the foreman, 'Does he speak like this?' imitating as well as I could your sister's imitation of him. 'You know the man, sir,' the foreman answered; 'you have got him so exactly, that you must have heard him many times.' I told him no more, but asked him to describe Joe Smith's appearance. He answered that he was a tall, dark man, loosely built, but powerful, with a stoop in his neck, and a long sharp nose; and he generally wore a brown pointed hat.

"Cripps, you may well suppose that my suspicions were strong by this time. Here was your sister's description—so far as the poor girl could see in the dusk and the fright—confirmed to the very letter; and here was the clear opportunity offered for slipping the wreath of hair into the bag."

"Your Worship, now, your Worship! you be a bit too sharp! If that there man were at Headington quarry at nightfall of the Tuesday, how could he possible a' been to Maidenhead next morning? No, no, your Worship are too sharp."

"Too thick, you mean, Cripps; and not sharp enough. But listen to me for a moment. Those long-legged gipsies think very little of going thirty miles in a night; though they never travel by day so. And then there is the up mail-coach. Of course he would not pay his fare, but he might hang on beneath the guard's bugle, with or without his knowledge, and slip away at the changing-houses. Of that objection I think nothing. It serves to my mind as a confirmation."

"Very well, sir," said Cripps discreetly; "who be I for to argify?"

"No, Cripps, of course not. But still I wish to allow you to think of everything. You may not be right; but still I like you to speak when you think of anything. That is what I have always said, and contended for continually—let every man speak—when sensible."

"Your Worship hath hit the mark again. The old Squire saith, 'let no man speak,' as St. Paul sayeth of the women. But your Worship saith 'let all men speak, all women likewise, as hath a tongue'—and then you stoppeth us both the more, by restirrecting all on us, women or men, whichever a may happen, till such time as all turns up sensible. Now, there never could ever be such a time!"

"Carrier, you are satirical. Keep from the Dusty Anvil, Cripps. Marry a wife, and you will have a surfeit of argument at home. But still you have been very good on the whole, and you never will get home to-night. At any rate, I was so convinced, in spite of all smaller difficulties, that I bound the foreman to let me know, by a man on horseback, at any expense, the moment he saw Joe Smith again. And his parting words to me were these—'Well, sir, don't you think harm of Joe without sure proof against him. He is a random chap, I know; but I never saw a better man to earn his wages.'

"Well, I went back to the inn at once, and rode leisurely to Henley. It was raining hard, and the river in flood with all the melted snow and so on, when I crossed that pretty bridge. I had been trying in vain to think what was the best thing I could do; not liking to go home, and leave my new discovery so vague. But being soaked and chilly now, I resolved to have a glass of something hot, for fear of taking a violent cold, and losing perhaps a week by it. So I went into the entrance of that good inn by the waterside, and called for some brandy and water hot. The landlord was good enough to come out; and knowing me from old boating days, he got into a talk with me. I had helped him at the sessions about a house of his at Dorchester; and nothing could exceed his good will. Remembering how the gipsies hang about the boats and the waterside, I asked him (quite as a random shot) whether any of them happened to be in the neighbourhood just now. He thought perhaps that I was timid about my dark ride homeward, and he told me all he knew of them. There was one lot, as usual, in the open ground about Nuneham, and another large camp near Chalgrove, and another, quite a small pitch that, on the edge of the firs above Nettlebed.

"This last was the lot for me; and I pressed him so about them, that he looked at me with a peculiar grin. 'What do you mean by that?' I asked. 'Now, Squire Overshute, as if you did not know!' he answered. 'Doth your Worship happen to remember Cinnaminta's name?'

"Cripps, I assure you I was astonished. Of course you knew Cinnaminta—well, I don't want to be interrupted. No one could say any harm of her; and a lovelier girl was never seen. The landlord had heard some bygone gossip about Cinnaminta and myself. I did admire her. I am not ashamed to say that I greatly admired her. And so did every young fellow here, who had got a bit of pluck in him. I will not go into that question; but you know what Cinnaminta was."

Cripps nodded, with a thick mixture of feelings. His poetical self had been smitten more with Cinnaminta than he cared to tell; and his practical self was getting into a terrible hubbub about his horse. "To be sure, your Worship," was all he said.

"Very well, now you understand me. To hear of Cinnaminta being in that camp at Nettlebed made me so determined that I laid hold of the landlord by the collar without thinking. He begged me not to ride off with him, or his business would be ruined; and feeling that he weighed about eighteen stone, I left him on his threshold.

"I could not bear to ask him now another word of anything. Knowing looks, and winks, and reeking jokes so irritate me, when I know that a woman is pure and good. You remember how we all lost Cinnaminta. Three or four score of undergraduates, reckless of parental will, had offered her matrimony; and three or four newly-elected fellows were asking whether they would vacate, if they happened to jump the broomstick."

"All that were too fine to last," muttered Cripps, most sensibly. "But her ought to a' had a sound man on the road—a man with a horse well seasoned, and a substantial cart—her ought."

"Oh, then, Cripps, you were smitten too! A nice connection for light parcels! Well, never mind. The whole thing is

over. We all are sadder and wiser men; but we like to know who the chief sufferer is—what man has won the beauty. And with this in my mind, I rode up the hill, and resolved to go through with my seeking.

"When I got to the end of 'the fair-mile,' the night came down in earnest. You know my young horse 'Cantelupe,' freckled like a melon. He knows me as well as my old dog; and a child can ride him. But in the dark he gets often nervous, and jumps across the road, if he sees what he does not consider sociable. So that one must watch his ears, whatever the weather may be. And now the weather was as bad as man or horse could be out in.

"All day, there had been spits of rain, with sudden puffs of wind, and streaks of green upon the sky, and racing clouds with ragged edges. You remember the weather of course; Wednesday is one of your Oxford days. Well, I hope you were home before it began to pelt as it did that evening. For myself I did not care one fig. I would rather be drenched than slowly sodden. But I did care for my horse; because he had whistled a little in the afternoon, and his throat is slightly delicate. And the whirr of the wind in the hedge, and the way it struck the naked branches back, like the clashing of clubs against the sky, were enough to make even a steady old horse uneasy at the things before him. Moreover, the road began to flash with that peculiar light which comes upward or downward—who can tell?—in reckless tumults of the air and earth. The road was running like a river; come here and go there, like glass it shone with the furious blows of the wind striking a pale gleam out of it. I stooped upon Cantelupe's neck, or the wind would have dashed me back over his crupper.

"Suddenly in this swirl and roar, my horse stood steadfast. He spread his fore legs and stooped his head to throw his balance forward; and his mane (which had been lashing my beard) swished down in a waterfall of hair. I was startled as much as he was, and in the strange light stared about. 'You have better eyes than I have,' I said, 'or else you are a fool, Canty.'

"I thought that he was a fool, until I followed the turn of his head, and there I saw a white thing in the ditch. Something white or rather of a whity-brown colour was in the trough, with something dark leaning over it. 'Who are you there?' I shouted, and the wind blew my voice back between my teeth.

"'Nort to you, master. Nort to you. Go on, and look to your own consarns.'

"This rough reply was in a harsh high cackle, rather than a human voice; but it came through the roar of the tempest clearly, as no common voice could come. For a moment, I had a great mind to do exactly as I was ordered. But curiosity, and perhaps some pity for the fellow, stopped me. 'I will not leave you, my friend,' I said, 'until I am sure that I can do no good.' The man was in such trouble, that he made no answer which I could hear, so I jumped from my horse, who would come no nearer; and holding the bridle, I went up to see.

"In as sheltered a spot as could be found, but still in a dripping and weltering place, lay, or rather rolled and kicked, a poor child in a most violent fit. 'Don't 'ee now, my little Tom; don't 'ee, that's a deary, don't!' The man kept coaxing, and moaning, and trying to smooth down little legs and arms. 'Let it have its way,' I said; 'only keep the head well up; and try to put something between the teeth.' Without any answer, he did as I bade; and what he put betwixt the teeth must have been his own great thumb. Of course he mistook me for a doctor. None but a doctor was likely to be out riding on so rough a night."

"Ah, how I do pity they poor chaps!" cried Carrier Cripps, who really could not wait one minute longer. "Many a naight I mates 'em a starting for ten or twenty maile of it, just when I be in the smell o' my supper, and nort but nightcap arterward. Leastways, I mean, arter pipe and hot summat. Your Worship'll 'scoose me a-breakin' in. But there's half my arrands to do yet, and the sun gone flat on the Radcliffe! The Lord knows if I shall get home to-night. But if I doos—might I make so bold—your Worship be coming to see poor Squire? Your Worship is not like some worships be—and I has got a rare drop of fine old stuff! Your Worship is not the man to take me crooked. I means no liberty, mind you."

"Of that I am certain," Mr. Overshute answered. "Cripps, your suggestion just hits the mark. I particularly want to see your sister. That was my object in seeking you. And I did not like to see her, until you should have had time to prepare her. I have several things to see to here, and then I will ride to Beckley. Mrs. Hookham will give me a bit of dinner, when I have seen my dear friend the Squire. At night, I will come down, and smoke a pipe, and finish my story with you, as soon as I am sure you have had your supper."

"Never you pay no heed at all," said Master Cripps, with solemnity, "to no thought of my zupper, sir. That be entire what you worships call a zecondary consideration. However, I will have un, if so be I can. And you mustn't goo for to think, sir, that goo I would now, if stay I could. I goes with that there story, the same as the jog of a cart to the trot of the nag. My wits kapes on agoin' up and down. But business is a piece of the body, sir. But no slape for me; nor no church to-morrow; wi'out I hears the last of that there tale!"

CHAPTER XX.

CRIPPS DRAWS THE CORK.

Any kind good-natured person, loving bright simplicity, would have thought it a little treat to look round the Carrier's dwelling-room, upon that Saturday evening, when he expected Mr. Overshute. Not that Cripps himself was over-tidy, or too particular. He was so kindly familiar now with hay, and straw, and bits of string, and chaff, and chips, and promiscuous parcels, that on the whole he preferred a litter to any exertions of broom or brush. But Esther, who ruled the house at home, was the essence of quick neatness, and scorned all comfort, unless it looked—as well as was—right comfortable. And now, expecting so grand a guest, she had tucked up her sleeves, and stirred her pretty arms to no small purpose.

The room was still a kitchen, and she had made no attempt to disguise that much. But what can look better than a kitchen, clean, and bright, and well supplied with the cheery tools of appetite. It was a good-sized room, and very picturesque with snugness. Little corners, in and out, gave play for light and shadow; the fireplace retired far enough to well express itself; and the dresser had brass-handled drawers, that seemed quietly nursing table-cloths. Well, above these, upon lofty hooks, the chronicles of the present generation might be read on cups. Zacchary headed the line, of course; and then—as Genesis is ignored by grander generations—Exodus, and Leviticus (the fount of much fine movement), and Numbers, and a great many more, showed that the Carrier's father and mother had gladly baptized every one.

In front of the fire sat the Carrier, with nearly all of his best clothes on, and gazing at a warming-pan. He had been forbidden to eat his supper, for fear of making a smell of it; and he had a great mind to go to bed, and have some hot coals under him. For nearly five miles of uphill work and laying his shoulder against the spokes, he had been promising himself a rare good supper, and a pipe to follow; and now where were they? In the far background. He had no idea of rebellion; still that saucepan on the simmer made the most provoking movements. Therefore he put up his feet upon a stump of oak (which had for generations cooled down pots), and he turned with a shake of his head toward the fire, and sniffed the sniff of Tantalus, and muttered—"Ah, well! the Lord knoweth best!" and thought to himself that if ever again he invited the quality to his house, he would wait till he had his own quantity first.

Esther was quite in a flutter; although she was ready to deny it stoutly, and to blush a bright red in doing so. To her, of course, Justice Overshute was simply a great man, who must have the chair of state, and the talk of restraint, and a clean dry hearth, and the curtsy, and the best white apron of deference. To her it could make not one jot of difference, that Mr. Overshute happened to be the most intimate friend of some other gentleman, who never came near her, except in dreams. Tush, she had the very greatest mind, when the house was clean and tidy, to go and spend the evening with her dear friend Mealy at the Anvil. But Zacchary would not hear of this; and how could she go against Zacchary?

So she brought the grand chair, the arm-chair of yew-tree—the tree that used to shade the graves of unrecorded Crippses—a chair of deepest red complexion, countenanced with a cushion. The cushion was but a little pad in the dark capacious hollow; suggesting to an innocent mind, that a lean man had left his hat there, and a fat man had sat down on it. But the mind of every Cripps yet known was strictly reverential; and this was the curule chair, and even the Olympian throne of Crippses.

Russel Overshute knocked at the door, in his usual quick and impetuous way. In the main he was a gentleman; and he would have knocked at a nobleman's door exactly as he did at the Carrier's. But all radical theories, fine as they are, detract from gentle practice; and the too-large-minded man, while young, takes a flying leap over small niceties. He does not remember that poor men need more deference than rich men, because they are not used to it. To put it more plainly—Overshute knocked hard, and meant no harm by it.

"Come in, sir, and kindly welcome!" Cripps began, as he showed him in; "plaize to take this chair, your Worship. Never mind your boots; Lor' bless us! the mud of three counties cometh here."

"Then it goes away again very quickly! Miss Cripps, how are you? May I shake hands?"

Esther, who had been shrinking into the shade of the clock and the dresser, came forward with a brave bright blush, and offered her hand, as a lady might. Russel Overshute took it kindly, and bowed to her curtsy, and smiled at her. In an honest manly way, he admired pretty Esther.

"Master Cripps, you are too bad; and your sister in the conspiracy too! I do believe that your mind is set to make me as tipsy as a king to-night!"

"They little things!" said the Carrier, pointing to the old oak table, where a bottle of grand old whiskey shone with the reflected gleam of lemons, and glasses danced in the firelight—"they little things, sir, was never set for so good a gentleman afore, nor a one to do such honour to un. But they might be worse, sir, they might be worse, to spake their simple due of un. And how is poor Squire to-night, your Worship?"

"Well, he is about as usual. Nothing seems to move him much. He sits in his old chair, and listens for a step that never comes. But his patience is wonderful. It ought to be a lesson to us; and I hope it has been one to me. He trusts in the Lord, Cripps, as strongly as ever. I fear I should have given up that long ago, if I were laid on my back as he is."

"Young folk," answered Cripps, as he drew the cork—"meaning no disrespect to you, sir—when they encounters trouble, is like a young horse a-coming to the foot of a hill for the fust time wi' a heavy load. He feeleth the collar beginning to press, and he tosseth his head, and that maketh un worse. He beginneth to get into fret and fume, and he shaketh his legs with anger, and he turneth his head and foameth a bit, and champeth, to ax the maning o' it. And then you can judge what the stuff of him is. If he be bad stuff, he throweth them back, and tilteth up his loins, and spraddleth. But if he hath good stuff, he throweth out his chest, and putteth the fire into his eyes, and closeth his nostrils, and gathereth his legs, and straineth his muscles like a bowstring. But be he as good as a wool, he longeth to see over the top of that there hill, afore he be half-way up it."

"Well, Cripps, I have done that, I confess. I have longed to see over the top of the hill; and Heaven only knows where that top is! But as sure as we sit here and drink this glass of punch to your sister's health, and to yours, good Carrier, so surely shall our dear old friend receive the reward of his faith and courage; whether in this world or the next!"

"Thank 'ee kindly, sir. Etty, is that the best sort of curtsy they teaches now? Now, don't blush, child, but make a betterer. But as to what your Worship was a-saying of, I virtually hopes a may come to pass in this world we be living in. Otherwise, maybe, us never may know on it, the kingdom of Heaven being such a size."

"Cripps, I believe it will be in this world. And I hope that I am on the straight road now towards making out some part of it. You have told your sister all I told you at Brasenose this morning according to my directions? Very well, then; I may begin again at the point where I left off with you. Where did I break it? I almost forget."

"With the man's big thumb in the mouth of the cheeld, while you was a-looking at him, sir; and the wind and the rain blowing furious."

"Ah yes, I remember; and so they were. I thought that the crest of the hedge would fall over, and bury the whole of us out of the way. And when the poor boy had kicked out his convulsions, and fallen into a senseless sleep, the rough man turned on me savagely, as if I could have prevented it. 'A pretty doctor you be!' he exclaimed. But I took the upper hand of him. 'Stand back there!' I said; and I lifted the child (expecting him to strike me all the while), and placed the poor little fellow on my horse, and managed to get up into my saddle before the wind blew him off again. 'Now lead the way to your home,' I said. And muttering something, he set off.

"He strode along at such a pace that, having to manage both child and horse, it was all I could do to keep up with him. But I kept him in sight till he came to a common, and there he struck sharply away to the right. By the light of the wind and the rain, and a star that twinkled where the storm was lifting, I followed him, perhaps for half a mile, through a narrow track, in and out furze and bramble. At last he turned suddenly round a corner, and a shadow fell behind him—his own shadow thrown by a gusty gleam of fire. Cantelupe—that is my horse, Miss Esther—has not learned to stand fire yet, and he shied at the light, and set off through the furze, as if with the hounds in full cry before him. We were very lucky not to break our necks, going headlong in the dark among rabbit-holes. I thought that I must have dropped the child, as the best thing to be done for him; but the shaking revived him, and he clung to me.

"I got my horse under command at last; but we must have gone half a mile anywhere, and to find the way back seemed a hopeless task. But the quick-witted people (who knew what had happened, and what was likely to come of it) saved me miles of roundabout by a very simple expedient. They hoisted from time to time a torch of dry furze blazing upon a pole; and though the light flared and went out on the wind, by the quick repetition they guided me. In the cold and the wet, it rejoiced my heart to think of a good fire somewhere."

"Etty, stir the fire up," the hospitable Cripps interrupted. "His Worship hath shivers, to think of it. When a man, or, beg pardon, a gentleman, feeleth the small of his back go creeping, he needeth good fire to come up his legs, and a hot summat to go down him. Etty, be quick with the water now."

"Cripps, Cripps, Carrier Cripps! do you want to have me spilled on the road to-night? I am trying to tell things in proper order. But how can I do it, if you go on so? However, as I was beginning to say, Cantelupe, and the child, and I, fetched back to the place at last, where the flash of light had started us. And we saw, not a flash, but a glow this time, a steadfast body of cheerful fire, with pots and cauldrons over it. So well had the spot been chosen, in the lee of ground and growth, that the ash of the fire lay round the embers, as still as the beard of an oyster; while thicket and tree but a few yards off were threshing in the wind and wailing. Behind this fire, and under a rick-cloth sloping from a sandstone crest, women and children, and one or two men, sat as happy and snug as could be: dry, and warm, and ready for supper, and pleased with the wind and the rain outside, which improved their comfort and appetite. And now and then the children seemed to be pulling at an important woman, to hurry her, perhaps, in her cookery.

"But while I was watching them, keeping my horse on the verge of light and shadow, a woman, quite different from the rest, came out of the darkness after me. Heedless of weather, and reckless of self, she had been seeking for me, or rather for my little burden. Her hair was steeped with the drenching rain, for she wore no hat or bonnet; and her dark clothes hung on the lines of her figure, as women hate to let them do. Her eyes and face I could not see because of the way the light fell; but I seemed to know her none the less.

"While I gazed in doubt, my little fellow slipped like an eel from my clasp and the saddle; and almost before I could tell where he was—there he was in the arms of his mother! Wonders of love now began to go on; and it struck me that I was one too many in a scene of that sort; and I turned my good horse, to be off and away. But the woman called out, and a man laid hold of my bridle, and took his hat off, when, with the usual impulse of a stopped Briton, I was going to strike at him. I saw that it was my good friend of the ditch, and I came to parley with him.

"What with his scarcity of manners, and of polished language, and worst of all his want of palate, I found it hard, with so much wind blowing out here all around us, to understand his meaning. This was rude of me to the last

degree, for the queerly-voiced man was doing no less than inviting me, with all his heart, to an uncommonly good dinner!"

CHAPTER XXI.

CINNAMINTA.

"Now that," said Cripps, "is what I call the proper way of doing things. Arter all, they hathens knows a dale more than we credit 'em."

"Well, Miss Esther," asked Russel, turning to his other listener, "what do you think about it now?"

"Sir," she replied, with her round cheeks coloured by the excitement of his tale, and shining in the firelight, "I do not know what the manners may be among the gentry in such things. But if it had been one of us, we never could have supped with him."

"You are right," answered Overshute; "so I felt. Starving as I was, I could not break bread with a man like that, until he should have cleared himself. He did not seem to be conscious of any dark mistrust on my part; and that was natural enough, as he did not even know me. But when I said that I must ride home as fast as I could, he asked me first to come and have a look at the poor little child. This I could not well refuse; so I gave my horse to a boy to hold, and followed him into the warm dry place, and into his own corner. As I passed, and the people made way for me, I saw that they were genuine gipsies, not mere English vagabonds. There was no mistaking the clearly-cut features, and the olive complexions, and the dark eyes, lashed both above and below. My gruff companion raised a screen, and showed me into his snuggery.

"It was dimly lit by a queer old lamp of red earthenware, and of Roman shape. Couches of heather, and a few low stools, and some vessels were the only furniture; but the place was beautifully clean, and fragrant with dry fern and herbs. In the furthest corner lay little Tom, with a woman bending over him. At the sound of our entry she turned to meet us, and I saw Cinnaminta. Her hair, and eyes, and graceful carriage were as grand as ever, and her forehead as clear and noble; but her face had lost the bright puzzle of youth, and the flush of damask beauty. In a word, that rich mysterious look, which used to thrill so many hearts, was changed into the glance of fear, and the restless gaze of anxiety.

"She knew me at once, and asked, with a very poor attempt at gaiety—'Are you come to have your fortune told, sir?'

"Before I could answer, her husband spoke some words in her own language, and the 'Princess,' as we used to call her, took my hand in both of hers, and kissed it, and poured forth her thanks. She had been so engrossed with her poor sick child that she had not known me on horseback. Having done so little to deserve her thanks, I was quite surprised at such gratitude; and it made me fear that she must be now unaccustomed to kind treatment. I asked how her grandmother was, who used to sit up so proudly at Cowley, as well as her sister, the little thing that used to run in and out so. As I spoke of them, she shook her head and gazed at some long distance, to tell me that they were no more. I could not remember the rest of her people, except her Uncle Kershoe, as fine a fellow as ever stole a horse. When I spoke of him, she laughed as if he were going on as well as ever; and I hoped that it might be no son of his to whom I had trusted Cantelupe. But of course I knew that gipsy honour would hold him sacred for the time, even if he were Bay Middleton. Then I asked her about her own children, and again she shook her head and said—'Three, all three in one are now; and that is the one you saved.' With that, while her husband left the tent, Cinnaminta led me to look at the poor little fellow in his deep warm sleep. A beautiful little boy it was; a real Princess might yearn in vain for such a lovely offspring, if only the stamp of health had been on him. But the glow of airy health and breezy vigour was not on him; neither will it ever be, so far as one may judge by skin. Clear, transparent, pearly skin, all whose colour seems to come from under, instead of over it; the more the wind or the sun strikes on it, the more its colour evaporates. I fear that poor Cinnaminta's child will go the way of the younger ones."

"Poor dear! poor dear!" exclaimed the Carrier, rubbing his nose in a sad slow way. "I can guess what her would be to them. If her loseth that little un, mind—well then, you will see if her dothn't go arter un."

"I believe that she will," replied Overshute; "I never saw any one so wrapped up in another being as she is. As for Joe Smith, her husband, and the way she treats him, I couldn't—no, I never could put up with it, even if it were—— But, Miss Esther, why do you look with such a curious smile at me? Of such matters what can you know? However, there goes your clock again! Cripps, I shall never get home to-night; and my mother will think I was poaching. Because I will not send the poachers to prison, she believes that I must be a poacher myself!"

"Now, verily, your Worship, that bates all I have ever heerd of! How could a Justice go a-poaching, howsomever he tried his best?"

"Cripps, he might. I believe he might, if he really did his best for it. However, let that question pass; although it is highly interesting. I will try, at my leisure, to solve it. But how can I think of such little things in the middle of great sad ones? It really made me feel as if I never should laugh again almost, when I saw this fine unselfish woman controlling herself, and commanding herself, in the depth of her misery about her child. And when I thought how she might have got on, if she only had liked education, and that; and to marry a fellow of Oriel; I assure you, Miss Esther, I began to feel how women throw away their chances. Of course, I could not hint at things disloyal—or what shall I call them? Unconjugal, perhaps, is what I mean; unuxorial, or what it may be. But although I am slow at seeing things; because I used to think myself too quick, and have made false charges through it; I really could not help feeling sure that poor Cinnaminta had made an awkward tally with her husband. However, that was no concern of mine. She had made her own choice, and must stick to it. But to think of it made me uncomfortable, and I could not

speak then of what I wished to speak of, but took short leave and rode away. First, however, I got permission to come over again on the Friday—yesterday, I mean; and now I will tell you exactly what happened then."

"Your Worship do tell a tale," said Cripps; "that wonderful, that us be almost there! They women takes a man, whether or no he wool; and when they gets tired of un, they puts all the fault on he, they do! There was a woman as did the washing, over to Squire Pemberton's; nothing to look at—unless you hadn't seen done-up hair for a twelve-month, the same as happens to the sailors; and in her go-roundings of no account, for to catch the notice of a man much. But that very woman, I'm danged if her didn't——"

"Zacchary, hush!" said Esther; and the Carrier muttered, "Of course, of course! No chance of fair play wi' un! Well, go on, your Worship."

"I have very little more to tell you, as yet," Overshute answered, with a smile at both. "You have listened with wonderful patience to me; and I am surprised at remembering half of what happened to me in a hurry so. I shall make more allowance for witnesses now, when they get confused and hesitate. But, as I was going to say, I rode over to Nettlebed Common, or whatever it is called, in good time yesterday, so as to have a long quiet talk with Cinnaminta; knowing that if she would not tell me the truth, she would tell no falsehood. As I rode along in that fine spring sun, my mind was unusually clear and bright. I saw to a nicety what questions I ought to put, and how to put them; and nothing of all the ins and outs of this matter could escape me. When the sun threw my shadow, as sharp as a die, I could not help laughing to the open road and the clear long breadth of prospect, at the narrow stupid thoughts we had been thinking throughout the winter. In a word, I was sure, as I am of my life, of finding sweet Grace Oglander, and restoring her father to his fine old health, and spreading great happiness everywhere; and thus I rode up to the gipsy-camp—and there was not a shadow or a trace of it!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A DELICATE SUBJECT.

The log had burned down, and the fire was low, when Russel thus ended his story. Cripps was indignant, because he had made up his mind for "summat of a zettlement;" and Esther was full of young womanly thoughts about Cinnaminta and her poor child. But even before they could consult one another, or cross-examine, a loud, sharp knock at the door was heard, and in ran Mary Hookham.

"Oh, if you please, sir—oh, if you please, sir!" she exclaimed with both hands up, and making the most of her shawl fringe, "such a thing have turned up!—I never! Them stockings! Oh, them silk stockings, sir! Your Worship—oh, them silk stockings, sir!"

"My dear," said Cripps in a fatherly tone, and with less contemporary feeling than Mary might wish to inspire him with—"my dear good maid, you be that upset, that to spake, without sloping the spout of the kettle, might lade to a'most anything. Etty, you ain't had a drap of nort—and all the better for 'ee. Give over your glass, girl. Now, Miss Mary, the laste little drap, and then you spakes; and then you has another drap. 'Scoose me, your Worship, to make so bold; but a young man can't see them things in the right light."

"Oh, Master Cripps, now!" cried Mary Hookham, "what but a young man be you yourself? And none of they young men can point their tongues, to compare with you, to my mind. But I beg your pardon, sir, Mr. Russel—your name come so familiar to me, through our dear young lady. I forgot what I was a-doing, your Worship, to be sitting down in your presence so!"

"Mary, if you get up I shall get up also, and go away. We are both enjoying the hospitality of our good friend, Master Cripps. Now, Mary, by no means hurry yourself; but tell me at your leisure why you came, and what your news is."

"Silk stockings, forsooth!" cried Master Cripps, being vexed at this break of the evening. "Why, my grandmother had a whole pair of they! I belave I could find 'em now, I do! Silk stockings, to break up one's comfort for! Not but what I be glad to see you. Mary, my dear, I drink your good health, touching spoons in lack of lips."

"Oh, Mr. Cripps, you are so funny! And you do make me fell things in such a way! Bless me, if I haven't dropped my comb! Oh, I am so shocked to trouble you! Natteral hair are so provoking, compared to what most people wears now-a-days. But about what I come for—oh, your Worship, stockings is not what I ought to speak of, except in the ear of females."

"Stockings are a very good subject, Mary; particularly if they are silk ones."

"Lor, sir! Now, I never thought of that! To be sure, that makes all the difference! Well then, your Worship must know all, and Master Cripps, and Miss Esther, too. It seemeth that Mrs. Fermitage, master's own sister, you know, sir, have never been comfortable in her mind about her behaviour when the 'quest was held. Things lay on her nerves at that time so, that off and on she hardly seemed to know where she was, or how dooty lay to her. Not that she is at all selfish, if you please to understand me—no more selfish than I myself be, or any one of us here present. But ladies requires allowance; and it makes me have a pain to think of it. You could not expect her—could you now?—to go through it, as if she was a man; or rather, I should say, a gentleman."

"Of course we could not," answered Overshute; and the Carrier began to think, why not.

"However, she did go through it," said Mary, "as well as the very best man could have done. She covered her feelings, as you might say, with a pint pot, or with less than that."

"With a wine-glass of brandy, I did hear tell," said Master Cripps inquiringly.

"No, no; that was a shocking story. It makes me ashamed of the place as we live in whenever I heer such scandalies!"

"Miss Mary, my dear, I beg your pardon. Lord knows I only say what I heers! Take a little drop, Miss, and go on."

"It makes one afeared to touch a drop of most hinnocent mixture as ever was," continued poor Mary, after one good gulp; "and at the same time most respectable waters—when people as never had opportunity of forming no judgment about them—people as only can spit out their tongues at them as have some good taste in theirn, when such folk—for people they are not—dareth to go forth to say—— But I see you are laughing at me, your Worship; and perhaps I well deserve it, sir. It is no place of mine to convarse of such subjects—me who never deals with 'em! But, one way or other, that good lady (as, barring her way with her servants, she is, which our good master have many a time, up and given it to her about), well, this very day, sir, in she come when I was a-doing of my morning doos—every bit as partiklar, sir, as if I had a mistress over me; and she say to me, 'Mary Hookham!' and I says, 'Yes, ma'am; at your service.' And she ask me without any more to do—the just words I cannot now call to mind—for to send at once, without troubling poor master, to fetch they stockings as was put by, to the period of the coroner's 'quest. Poor master have never been allowed to see them, no more has none of us, sir; for fear of setting on foot some allowance of vulgar curiosity. And all of us is not above it, I know; but that is a natteral error in places where few has had much eddication."

"I don't hold much with that there eddication," cried the Carrier rather gloomily. "A may suit some people, but not many. They puts it on 'em all alike wi'out trial of constitootion. Some goes better for it; but most volk worse."

"Well, you know best, Mr. Cripps, of course. Up and down the road as you be, every door give you a hinstance. His Worship is all for eddication; and no one need swaller it, unless they likes. But pretty well schooled as I have been, sir, I looks down on no one. And now, when master's sister made that sudden call upon me, I assure you, sir, and Master Cripps, and Miss Esther in the corner there, the very first thing as I longed for was more knowledge of the ways of the kingdom. More sense, I mean, of where the powers puts the things that have been called up and laid at the feet of the law-courts. They stockings was more lost to me, than gone to be washed by the gipsies.

"It never would have done for me to say that much to Mrs. Fermitage. She would have been out in a wrath at once, for she is not sweet like master; so I gave her all 'yes' instead of 'why' or 'how,' as we do to quick-tempered gentlefolk. And then I ran away to ask my mother, and she no more than laughed at me. 'You silly child,' says mother, quite as if there had never been a fool till now; 'when the law getteth hold of a thing, there be only two places for to find it in.' 'Two places, mother! What two places?' said I, without construction. 'Why, the right-hand or the left-hand pocket of a lawyer's breeches,' mother answered, just as if she had served all her time with a tailor. Now, don't laugh, Mr. Overshute; it is true, every word as I tell you."

"Ay, that her be," cried Cripps, with a smack of one hand on the other. "Your mother is a wonderful woman for truth and sense, my deary."

"Well, well," replied Mary, with a broad knowing smile, as much as to say, "You had better try her" "at her time of life her ought to be, if ever they seek to attain it. So I acted according to mother's directions, letting her always speak foremost. And between us we got Master Kale to go, on his legs, all the way to Oxford with the hope of a lift back with you, Master Cripps; but, late as you was, he were later. He carried a letter from Mrs. Fermitage, couched in the thirtieth person, to Mrs. Luke Sharp of Cross-Duck House, the very one as sent that good book back. Master's sister have felt below contempt towards her since that time, and in dignity could do no otherwise. And now she put it short and sharp, as no less could be expected—and word for word can I say of it—

"'Mrs. Fermitage has the honour of presenting her compliments to Mrs. Sharp, and begs to express her surprise at the strange retention by Mrs. S. of a pair of valuable silk stockings, which are the property of Mrs. F. If they are not in use, it is begged that they may be returned by the bearer.—Postscript: Mrs. F. takes this opportunity of acknowledging the return of a book, which, being filled only with the word of God, was perhaps of less practical value to Mrs. S. than silk stockings appear to be.'

"'That will fetch them,' said my mother; 'if they be in the house, that will fetch them, ma'am. No lady could stand against them inawindows.' And, sure enough, back they come by Mr. Kale, about an hour after you left our house, sir. It seems that Mr. Luke Sharp was gone to dine with the Corporation, or likely they never would have come at all. And they never would have come at all, because Mrs. Sharp could not have found them, if it hadn't been that Master Sharp, the boy they think such wonders of, just happened to come in from shooting, where the whole of his time he spends. He found his mother in the hystrikes of a heart too full for tears, as she expressed it bootifully to both cook and housemaid; and they pointed to the letter, and he read it; and he were that put out, that Master Kale, seeing the two big barrels of his gun, were touched in his conscience, and ran away and got under the mangle. What happened then, he were afeard to be sure of; but the cook and the housemaid brought him out, and they locked him in, to eat a bit, which he did with trembles of thankfulness. And, almost afore he had licked his knife as clean as he like to leave it, that wicked young man he kicked open the door, and flung a parcel at him.

"'Tell your d—d missus,' he says—your Worship, I hopes no offence to the statues—'tell her,' he says, 'that her rubbish is there! And add, without no compliments, that a lady of her birth should a' known better than to insult another lady so!'"

"Well done, Kit Sharp!" exclaimed Overshute. "I rather admire him for that. Not that he ought to have sworn so, of course. But I like a young fellow to get in a rage when he thinks that his mother is trampled on."

"Then you might a' been satisfied with him, sir. In a rage he were, and no mistake! So much so that our Mr. Kale made off by the quickest door out of the premises. But the cook, she ran after him out to the steps, when there was the corners between them, and she begged him not to give a bad account, but to put a Christian turn to it. And she told poor Tummuss that she had a manner of doing veal fit to surprise him; and if he could drop in on Sunday week, he might go home the wiser. The Lord knows how she hit so quick upon his bad propensities; for he do pay attention to his victuals, whatever his other feelings be. However, away he come at last; and I doubt if he goeth in a hurry again.

"Of course he knowed better than give the broken handles of his message. It is only the boys and the girls does that, for the pleasure of vexing their betters. Master Kale sent his parcel in by me, together with Mrs. Sharp's compliments; leaving the truth in the kitchen to strengthen, and follow to the parlour, as the cat comes in. And so master's sister, she put out her hand all covered with rings, and no shaking; and I makes my best entry just like this, excusing your presence, Mr. Russel, sir; and she nod to me pleasantly, and take it. 'Mary, you may go,' she said; and for sure, I am not one of those who linger.

"There happened, however, to be a new candle full of thieves and guttering; and being opposite a looking-glass made it more reproachful. So back I turned by the corner of a screen, for to right it without disturbance. I had no more idea, bless you, Master Cripps, of cooriosity, than might have happened to yourself, sir! But I pulled a pair of scissors out of my pocket, no snuffers being handy; and then I heer'd a most sad groan.

"To my heart it went, like a clap of thunder, having almost expected it, which made it worse; and back I ran to do my dooty, if afforded rightly. And sure enough there was poor Mrs. Fermitage afell back well into the long-backed chair, with her legs out straight, and her hands to her forehead, and a pair of grey stockings laid naked on her lap! 'Is it they things, ma'am? Is it they?' I asked, and she put up her chin to acknowledge it. By the way they were lying upon

her lap, I was sure that she was vexed with them. 'Oh, Mary,' she cried out; 'oh, Mary Hookham, I am both as foolish and a wicked woman, if ever in the world there was one!'

"So deeply was I shocked by this, master's own sister, and a mint of money, going the wrong way to kingdom come—that I give her both ends of the smelling-bottle, open, and running on her velvet gown, as innocent as possible. 'Oh, you wicked, wicked girl!' she says, coming round, before I could stop; 'do you know what it cost a yard, you minx?'

"This gave me good hopes of her, being so natteral. Twice the price comes always into ladies' minds, when damage is; if anybody can be made to pay. But it did not become me to speak one word, as you see, Mr. Russel, and Master Cripps. And there was my reward at once.

"'I must have a magistrate,' she cries; 'a independent justice of the peace. Not my poor brother—too much of him already. Where is that boy Overshute?' she says, saving, of course, your Worship's presence. 'I heered he were gone to that low carrier's. Mary, run and fetch him!'"

"My brother to be called a low carrier!" young Esther exclaimed, with her hand on her heart. "What carrier is to Compare with him?"

"Never you mind, cheel," answered Cripps, with a smile that shone like a warming-pan; "the womens may say what they pleases on me, so long as I does my dooty by 'em. Squaze the lemon for his Worship, afore un goeth."

CHAPTER XXIII.

QUITE ANOTHER PAIR OF SOCKS!

Mr. Overshute had always been on good terms with Mrs. Fermitage, his "advanced ideas" marching well with her political sentiments, so far as she had any. And upon a still more tender subject, peace and good-will throve between them. The lady desired no better suitor for her niece than Russel Overshute, and had laboured both by word and deed to afford him fair opportunity. Moreover, it was one of her great delights, when time went heavily with her, to foster a quiet little fight between young Russel and his mother. Those two, though filled with the deepest affection and admiration for each other, could scarcely sit half an hour together without a warm argument rising. The late Mr. Overshute had been for years a knight of the shire, and for some few months a member of the Tory Government; and this conferred on his widow, of course, authority paramount throughout the county upon every political question. How great, then, was her indignation, to find subversive and radically erroneous principles coming up, where none but the best seed had been sown. Three generations ago, there had been a very hasty Overshute; but he had been meted with his own measure, and his balance struck upon the block. This had a wholesome influence on the family, while they remembered it; and child after child had been brought up with the most correct opinions. But here was the young head of the house, with a stiff neck, such as used to be adjusted in a nick upon Tower-hill. Mrs. Overshute therefore spent much of her time in lamenting, and the rest in arguing.

For none of these things Mrs. Fermitage cared. With her, the idea of change was free. She had long rebelled against her brother's dictation of the Constitution, and believed they were rogues, all the lot of them, as her dear good husband used to say. "Port-wine Fermitage" went too far when he laid down this law for the females. Without a particle of ill-meaning, he did a great deal of mischief.

Now Mrs. Fermitage sat well up, in a chair that had been newly stuffed. She was very uncomfortable; and it made her cross, because she was a good-sized woman. She kept on turning, but all for the worse; and her mind was uneasy at her brother's house. The room was gone dark, and the lights going down, while Miss Mary Hookham was revelling in the mansion of the Carrier. Nobody cared to hurry for the sake of anybody else, of course; and Mrs. Fermitage could not see what the good of all her money was.

The lady was all the more vexed with others, because her own conscience was vexed with her; and as Overshute came with his quick, firm step, she spoke to him rather sharply.

"Well, Russel Overshute, there was a time when you would not have left me to sit in this sad way by myself all the evening. But that was when I had pretty faces near me. I must not expect such attentions now!"

"My dear Mrs. Fermitage, I had no idea that you were even in the house. The good Squire sent me a very nice dinner; but you did not grace it with your presence."

"And for a very good reason, Russel. I have on my mind an anxiety which precludes all idea of eating."

"Oh, Mrs. Fermitage, never say that! You have been brought up too delicately."

"Russel, I believe that is too true. The world has conspired to spoil me. I seem to be quite in a sad position, entirely for the sake of others. Now, look at me, Russel; and just tell me what you think."

Overshute always obeyed a lady in little things of this kind. He looked at Mrs. Fermitage, which really was a pleasant thing to do; and he thought to himself that he never had seen a lady of her time of life more comfortable, nicely fat, and thoroughly well dressed and fed.

"My opinion is," he proceeded with a very pretty salaam and smile, "that you never looked better in your life, ma'am! And that is a very great deal to say!"

"Well, Russel, well," she answered, rising in good old fashion, and curtsying; "your opinions have not spoiled your manners, whatever your dear mother may say. You always were a very upright boy; and you always say exactly what you think. This makes your opinion so valuable. I shall shake off ten years of my life. But I really was quite low-spirited, and down at heart, when you came in. I fear that I have not quite acted for the best, entirely as I meant to do so. You remember that horrible state of things, nearly two months ago, and my great distress?"

"At the time of that wretched inquest? Yes; you were timid, as well you might be."

"It was not only that. But the weather was so cold that I scarcely knew what I was doing at all. Hard weather is to me as it is to a plant, a delicate fern, or something. My circulation no longer is correct; even if it goes on at all. I scarcely can answer for what I am doing when they put me into cold rooms and bitter draughts. I feel that the organs of my face are red, and that every one is looking at me. And then such a tingle begins to dawn through the whole of my constitution, that to judge me by ordinary rules is barbarous and iniquitous."

"To be sure, to be sure!" answered Overshute, laying one finger on his expressive nose, and wondering what was next to come.

"Yes, and that is the manner in which justice is now administered. The canal was frozen, and the people of the inn grudged a quarter of a hundredweight of coal. The people at the yards had put it up so, that it would have been wrong to encourage them. I had ordered my own stumps to be burned up, and the flower-baskets, and so on.

Anything rather than order coals, till the swindling dealers came down again. And the Coroner sided with the price of coals, because he had three top-coats on. The jury, however, with their teeth all chattering, wanted only to be done and go. They were only too glad, when any witness failed to answer when called upon; and having all made up their minds outside, they were shivering to declare them. I speak now, from what I heard afterwards."

"You speak the bare truth, Mrs. Fermitage. You have the best authority. The foreman is your chimney-sweep."

"Yes; and that made him feel the cold the more. But you should see him on a Sunday, Russel. He is so respectable, and his nails so white. I will not listen to a word against him; and he valued my custom, on his oath he did. 'What verdict does Missus desire?' he asked. And he made all the rest go accordingly. Nobody knows what they might have sworn, without a clever man to guide them."

"Of course. What can you expect? But still, you have something new to tell me?"

"Well, Russel, new or old, here it is. And you must bear in mind how I felt, and what everybody was saying. In the first place, then, you must remember that there was a great deal said about a pair of my silk stockings. Now, I shrank particularly from having an intimate matter of that sort made the subject of public gossip. It was neither becoming, nor ladylike, to drag little questions of my wardrobe into the eye of the nation so. Already it was too much to know that a pair of such articles had been found bearing my initials. Most decidedly I refused, and I am sure any lady would do the same, to go into a hard cold witness-box, and under the eyes of some scores of males proclaim my complicity with such things. If I had seen it my duty, I would have endeavoured to conquer my feelings; but of course I took it all for granted that everything was too clear already. And my dear brother! I thought of him; and thought of every one, except myself. Could I do more, Russel Overshute?"

"Indeed, my dear madam, I do not see how. You would have come forward, if necessary. But you did not see any necessity."

"Much more than that. There was much more than that. There was my duty to my brother, stronger than even to my niece. He is getting elderly; and for me to be printed as proving anything against his daughter, would surely have been too much for him. He looked to me so for consolation, and some one to say kind words to him, that to find me in evidence against him might have been his death-blow. No consideration for myself or my own feelings had the weight of a rose-leaf with me. In the breach I would have stood, if I had followed my own wishes. But my duty was to curb myself. You are following me, Russel, carefully?"

"Word for word, as you say it, madam; so far as my poor wits allow."

"Very well, then. I have made it quite clear. That is the beauty of having to explain to clever people."

"I thank you for the compliment," replied Overshute, with a puzzled look; "but I have not earned it; for I cannot see that you have told me anything that I did not know some weeks ago. It may be my stupidity, of course; but I thought that something had occurred quite lately."

"Oh yes, to be sure! It was only to-day! I meant to have told you that first of all. I was grossly insulted. But I am so forgiving that I had forgotten it—quite forgotten it, until you happened to speak of it. A peculiarly insolent proceeding on the part of poor Mrs. Sharp, it appears—or, perhaps, some one for her; for everybody says that she really now has no mind of her own. She did not write me one single line, although I had written politely to her; and she sent me a message—I am sure of it—too bad to be repeated. No one would tell me what it was; which aggravates it to the last degree. I assure you I have not been so upset for years; or, at any rate, not since poor Grace was lost. And about that, unless I am much mistaken, that very low, selfish, and plotting person, knows a great deal more than we have ever dreamed. It would not surprise me in the least, especially after what happened today, to find Mrs. Sharp at the bottom of all of it. At any rate, she has aroused my suspicion by her contemptible insolence. And I am not a person to drop a thing."

"Why, what has she done?" asked Overshute once more; while in spite of impatience he could scarcely help smiling at poor Mrs. Fermitage's petty wrath and frequent self-contradiction.

"What she did was this. She sent me back, not even packed in nice white paper, not even sprinkled with eau de Cologne, not even washed—what do you think of that?—but rolled up anyhow in brown paper, the same as a drayman would use for his taps—oh, Russel, would you ever believe it!"

"Certainly it seems very unpolite. But what was it she sent back to you?"

"Not even the article I expected! Not even that ingredient of costume which I had lent poor Gracie, very nice and pretty ones—but an old grey pair of silken-hose, disgraceful even to look at! It is true that they bear my initials; but I had discarded them long ago."

"What a strange thing!" cried Overshute, flushed with quick excitement. "How reckless we were at the inquest! We had made up our minds without evidence, on the mere faith of coincidence. And you—you have never taken the trouble to look into this point until now—and now perhaps quite by accident! We were told that you had recognised the stockings; and it turns out that you never even saw them. It is strange and almost wicked negligence."

"I have told you my motives. I can say no more," exclaimed Mrs. Fermitage, with her fine fresh colour heightened by shame or anger. "Of course, I felt sure—who could fail to do so?—that the stockings found with my name on them must be the pair I had lent my niece. It seemed most absurd that I should have to see them. It was more than my nerves could bear; and the Coroner was not so unmanly as to force me. Pray, did you go and see everything, sir?"

"Mrs. Fermitage, I am the very last person who has any right to reproach you. I failed in my duty, far more than you

in yours. In a man, of course, it was a thousand times worse. There is no excuse for me. I yielded to a poor unmanly weakness. I wished to keep my memory of the poor dear, as I had seen her last. I should have considered that the poor frail body is not our true identity——"

"Quite so, of course. And therefore, what was the use of your going to see it? No, no, you behaved very well, Russel Overshute; and so did I, if it comes to that. Nobody can be quite blameless, of course; and we are told in the Bible not to hope for it. If we all do our duty according to our inner lights, and so on, the Apostle can say no great harm of us, in his rudest moment to the ladies."

"Let us settle that we both have done our best," said Russel very sadly; knowing how far from the truth it was, but seeing the folly of arguing.

"And now will you tell me, what made you send for those silk ingredients of costume so suddenly; and then show them to me?"

"With pleasure, dear Russel. You understand me, when no one else has any sympathy. I sent for them, or at least for what I fully expected to be the ones, because an impertinent young woman, foolishly trusted with very good keys, gave me notice to go, last evening. Of course she will fly before I have a chance of finding how much she has stolen—they all take very good care to do that; and knowing what the spirit of the age is—dress, dress, fal-lals, ribbons, heels in the air, and so on—I made up my mind to have a turn out to-day, and see how much they had left me. No man can imagine, and scarcely any woman, all the vexations I had to go through. Five pair and a half of silk-hose were missing, as well as a thousand more important things; and they all backed up one another. They stood me out to my face that I never had more than eight pair of the Christchurch-Tom stockings—excuse me for being so coarse, my dear; whereas I had got the receipt for twelve pair from the man that sold them with the big Tom bells on immediately above the instep. I happened to remember that I had lent my darling Gracie pair No. 12, numbered, as all of them were, downright. And so to confound those false-tongued hussies, I came over here in search of them. Finding that they were not here—for the lawyers, of course, steal everything—I was not going to be beaten so. I sent as polite a letter as, after her shameful rudeness, any lady could write, to Mrs. Luke Sharp—a poor woman who expected every halfpenny of my dear husband's savings. How far she deserves them, you have seen to-day. And sooner would I burn myself, like a sooty widow, with all my goods evaporating, than ever leave sixpence for her to clutch, after such behaviour. Russel, you will remember this. You are my executor."

"My dear Mrs. Fermitage, I pray you in no way to be excited. We have not heard all of the story, and we know that servants who are of a faithful kind exaggerate slights to their masters. It was one of the Squire's old servants who went. Your own would, perhaps, have known better. But now, may I see the things Mrs. Sharp sent you?"

"You may. And you may take them, if you like. Or rather, I should say that I beg you to take them. They ought to be in your custody. Will you oblige me by taking them, Russel, and carefully inspecting them? For that, of course, you must have daylight. Take them in the paper, just as they came, and keep them until I ask for them. They can be of no importance, because they are not what I lent to Gracie. Except for my name on them, I am sure that I never could have remembered them. They were darned in the days when I was poor. How often I wish that I still were poor! Then nobody wanted to plot against me, and even to steal my stockings! Oh, Russel, do you think they have murdered my darling because she was to have my money?"

"No, I think nothing of the kind! I believe that our darling Grace is alive; and I believe it tenfold since I saw these things! I am not very old in the ways of the world; and my judgment has always been wrong throughout. But my faith is the same as the grand old Squire's, though forty years of life behind him. I firmly believe that, blindly as we ourselves have managed everything, all will be guided aright for us; and happiness, even in this world, come. Because, though we have done no great good, we have done harm to no one; and the Lord in heaven knows it! Also, He knows that we trust in Him, so far as the trouble allows us. Very well; I will take these stockings home. You shall hear from me on Monday. I believe that our Grace is alive; and God will enable me to deliver her! Please Him, I will never leave off till then!"

The young man looked so grand and strong in his faith, and truth, and righteousness, that the elderly lady said no word, but let her eyes flow, and kissed him. He placed the stockings in an inner pocket, carelessly wrapped in their paper; and he rode home apace to please his mother; and having a cold on him from all his wettings, he perspired freely; and at every stretch of his galloping horse he was absorbing typhus fever.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SUO SIBI BACULO.

In April, when the sunny buds were showing forth their little frills; and birds, that love to hop sideways and try the toleration of the sprays that they are picking at, were almost too busy to chirp, and hung as happily as possible upside down, shaking the flutter of young green lace; while at the same time (for it is a season of great coincidence) pigs reared aloft little corkscrew tails, and scorning their nose-rings, employed them as thimbles for making a punch in the broidery of turf; also when—if the above is not enough—ducks and geese, and cocks and hens, and even the dogs (who regard green grass as an emetic mainly) were all, without knowing it, beginning to wag themselves as they walked or waddled, and to shine in the sun, and to look very large in their own eyes and those of their consorts; neither was there any man who could ride a horse, without knowing how—unless he first had starved him;—at this young jump of the year and of life, Grace Oglander wanted to go for a walk.

She had not by any means been buried in the haunted quarry; neither had she as yet required burial in any place. On the contrary, here she walked more blooming and lovely than even her custom was; and the spring sun glistening upon the gold letters of her tombstone at Beckley, ordered by her good Aunt Fermitage—the same sun (without any strain of his eyes at all likely to turn him to a Strabo) was pleasantly making and taking light in the fluctuations of her growing hair.

Her bright hair (which had been so cruelly cropped) instead of being the worse for the process, was waving and glowing again in vast multiplicity of vigour; like a specimen golden geranium shorn to double the number of its facets; and the blue in the spring of her eyes was enough to dissatisfy the sun with his own sky. However, he showed no discontent, but filled the young wood with cheerful rays, and the open glades with merriment, and even the sombre heart of labouring man with streaks of liveliness. For here were comforts that come in, without the eye considering them; and pleasures, which when thought of fly; and delicate delights, that have no idea of being delightful.

Hereupon the proper thing is for something very harsh to break in, and discomfit all the wandering vision of earthly happiness. But the proper thing, in the present instance, showed its propriety by absence. Nothing broke the flow of sunshine and the eddy of soft shade! unless it were a little ruffle of the south wind seeking leaves before they were quite ready; or the rustle of a rabbit, anxious about his family; or the flutter of a bird, uncertain where to stand and sing his best.

Grace (without a thought of what her own thoughts were or whether she had any mind for thinking) rambled on, as a school-girl does when the hours of school are over. Every single fall or rise of nature's work was kind to her, and led her into various veins of inductive unphilosophy. The packing and storing of last year's leaves, as if exceeding precious, gathered together by the wind and land in some rich rustling corner; the fitting of these into one another (for fear of losing one of them) wonderfully compact, as if with the hammer of a gold-beater, or the unknown implement wherewith a hen packs up her hatched egg-shells; the stiff upstanding of fine young stuff, hazel, ash, and so on, tapering straight as a fishing-rod, and knobbing out on either side with scarcely controllable bulges; over, and above, and throughout all, and sensible of their largeness, the spreading quietude of great trees, just breathing their buds on the air again, but not in a hurry (as in young days) to rush into perils of leafiness—pleased with all these proofs of soft revival and tender movement, the fair maid almost forgot her own depression and perplexities.

When howling winter was put to the rout and banished underground; and the weather, perhaps, might be hoped to behave as decently as an English spring, most skittish of seasons, should order it; and the blue ray of growth (which predominates then, according to the spectroscopists) was pouring encouragement on things green; how was a girl in her own spring yet, to strive against all such influence?

At any rate Grace made no attempt to do anything of the kind; but wandered at her own sweet will, within the limits of her own parole. She knew that she was in seclusion here, by her father's command, for her own good; and much as she yearned, from time to time, to be at home, with all the many things she was so fond of, she was such a dutiful child, and so loving, that she put her own wishes by, and smiled and sighed, instead of pouting. It could not be very long now, she was sure, until her father should come home, and call for her, as he had promised, and take her once more to beloved Beckley, after this mournful exile.

Full as she was of all these thoughts, and heeding her own ways but little, so long as she kept within the outer ring of fence allowed to her, she fell into a little stupid fright, as she called it afterwards; for which there was no one but herself to blame. Only yesterday that good Miss Patch (her governess and sweet guardian) had particularly begged her to be careful; because the times were now so bad that lawless people went everywhere. Miss Patch herself had heard several noises she could not at all account for; and while she considered it quite a duty to trace up everything to its proper source, and absolutely confide in Providence, whose instrumentality is to be traced by all the poor instruments seeking it, still there are times when it cannot be done; and then the right thing is to keep within sight or call of a highly respectable man.

This was exactly what Grace might have done, and would have done, but for the tempting day; for a truly respectable man had been near her, when first she began her little walk; a man whom she had beheld more than once, but always at a little distance; a tall stout man, according to her distant ideas of him, always busy in a quiet way, and almost grudging the time to touch his broad-flapped hat without lifting his head, when he saw her in the woodland.

Grace had never asked him who he was, nor been within talking distance of him; at which she was almost surprised, when she thought how glad, as a rule, are all Oxfordshire workmen to have a good excuse for leaving off. However, she was far beyond him now, when she met another man who frightened her.

This was a fellow of dark complexion, dressed in a dirty fustian suit, and bearing on his shoulder a thick hedge-stake, from which hung a number of rabbit-skins. His character might be excellent; but his appearance did not recommend him to the confidence of the public. Grace shrank aside, but his quick eyes had spied her; and, indeed, she almost feared from his manner, that he had been on the watch for her. So she put the best face on it, and tried to pass him, without showing any misgivings.

But the rabbit-man was not to be thus defrauded of his right to good society. With a quick sharp turn he cast off the skins from his staff, and stretched that slimy implement across the way with one hand; while he held forth the other caressingly, and performed a pretty little caper.

"Allow me to pass, if you please," said Grace, attempting to look very resolute; "these are our grounds. You are trespassing."

"Now, my purty young lady," said the rabbit-man, coming so close that she could not fly, "you wouldn't be too hard, would you now? I sees a great many young maids about—but Lor' there, what be they to compare with you!"

"I am sure that you do not mean any harm," replied Grace, though with much inward doubt: "nobody ever does any harm to me; but every one is so kind to me. My father is so good to all who get into any trouble. I am not worth robbing, Mr. Rabbit-man; honest as you are, no doubt. But I think that I can find a shilling, for you to take home to your family."

"Now, Missy, sweet Missy, when once I seen you, how could I think of a shilling—or two? You was coming out herefor to kiss me, I know; the same as I dreamed about last night. Lor' bless them bootiful eyes and lips, the most massionary man as ever was a'most, would sooner have a kiss, than a crown, of 'em!"

"You insolent fellow! how dare you speak to me in this manner? Do you know who I am? Do you know who my father is?"

"No, Missy; but I dessay a thunderin' beak, as have sent me to prison; and now I have got you in prison too. No comin' out, wi'out paying of your fine, my dear." The dirty scamp, with an appreciative grin, laid hold of poor Grace's trembling hand, and drew her towards him; while she tried vainly to shriek, for her voice had forsaken her—when bodily down went the rabbit-man, felled by a most inconsiderate blow. He dropped so suddenly, that he fetched poor Grace to her knees, by his violent grasp of her; and when he let go, she could not get up for a moment, because her head went round. Then two strong hands were put into hers; and she rose, and faced a young gentleman.

In her confusion, and sense of vile indignity, she did the natural thing. She staggered away to a tree, and spread both hands before her eyes, and burst forth sobbing, as if her heart would break. Instead of approaching to comfort her, the young man applied himself first to revenge. He espied on the path the stick of the prostrate rabbit-man, and laid hold of it. Then, striving to keep his conscience clear, and by no means hit a man on the ground, he seized the poor dealer in fur by the neck, and propped him well up in a sapling fork. Having him thus well situated for penal operations, without any question of jurisdiction, or even of the merits of the case, he proceeded to exhaust the utility of the stick, by breaking it over its owner's back. The calm wood echoed with the sound of wooden thumps, and the young buds trembled at the activity of a stick.

"Lor' a' mussy, a' mussy!" cried the rabbit-man. "You be gooin' outside of the bargain, sir!"

"Oh, don't!—oh, please don't!" Grace exclaimed, running forth from her retirement. "I dare say he did not know any better. He may have had a little too much beer. Poor fellow, he has had quite enough! Oh, stop, do stop, for my sake!"

"For nothing else—in the world—would I stop," said the youth, who was breathless with hitting so hard, and still looking yearningly at the stick, now splintered by so much exercise; "but if you beg him off, he gets off, of course—though he has not had half enough of it. You vile black rascal, will you ever look at a young lady in your life again?"

"Oh, no, so—oh, no, sir—so help me—" cried the rabbit-man, rubbing himself all over. "Do 'ee let me whisper a word to you."

"If I see your filthy sneaking face two seconds more, I'll take a new stick to you, and a much tougher one. Out of my sight with your carrion!"

Black George, with amazement and fury, gazed at the stern and threatening countenance. Then seeing the elbow beginning to lift, he hobbled, as fast as his bruises allowed, to his bundle of skins in the brushwood. Then with a whimper and snivel he passed the broken staff, now thrown at him, through his savoury burden, and with exaggerated limps departed.

"See if I don't show this to your governor," he muttered, as he turned back and scowled, when out of sight and hearing; "I never were took in so over a job, in all my life afore, were I! One bull for a hiding like that!" he grumbled, as he pulled out a sovereign, and looked at it. "Five bull would hardly cover it. Why, the young cove can't a' been told nort about it. A scurvy joke—a very scurvy joke. I ain't got a bone in me as don't ache!"

Leaving him thus to pursue his departure, young Christopher Sharp, with great self-content at the good luck of this exploit, turned towards Grace, who was trembling and blushing; and he trembled and blushed in his turn at her.

"I am so sorry I have frightened you," he said in the most submissive way; "I have done you more harm than good, I fear. I should have known better. But for the moment, I really could not command myself. I hope you will not despise me for it."

"Despise you! Can I ever thank you? But I am not fit to do anything now. I think I had better go home if you please. I am not likely to be annoyed again. And there is a good man in a field half-way."

"To be sure, you know best," the young man answered, cooling into disappointment. "Still, I may follow at a distance, mayn't I? The weather looks quite as if it would be dark. And at this time of year, scarcely anybody knows. There seem to be tramps almost everywhere. But I am sure I do not wish to press myself. I can go on with the business that brought me here. I am searching for the true old wind-flower."

"Oh, are you?" said Grace; "how exceedingly lucky! I can show you exactly where to find it; if only you could manage to come to-morrow."

"To-morrow? Let me see—to-morrow! Yes, I believe I have no engagements. But will you not be afraid—I mean—after that blackguard's behaviour to-day? Not, of course, that he should be thought of twice—but still—oh, I never can express myself."

"I understand every word you would say," the young lady answered decisively; "and I never mean to wander so far again. Still, when I know that you are botanising; or rather, I mean when a gentleman is near—but I also can never express myself. You never must come—oh, I mean—good-bye! But I feel that you ought to be careful, because that bad man may lie in wait for you."

CHAPTER XXV.

MISS PATCH.

That evening Grace made one more trial to procure a little comfort in her own affairs. In the dark low parlour of the cottage, where she had lived for the last three months, with only Miss Patch and a deaf old woman for company and comfort, she sat by the fire and stitched hard, to abide her opportunity. At the corner of the table sat the good Miss Patch, with her spectacles on, and occasionally nodding over her favourite author, Ezekiel.

It was impossible for anybody to look at Miss Patch, and believe in anything against her high integrity. That lofty nose, and hard-set mouth, and the fine abstracted yet benevolent gaze of those hollow grey eyes, were enough to show that here was a lady of strict moral principle and high sense of duty. Incorruptible and grandly honest, but prickly as a hedgehog with prejudice, she could not be driven into any evil course, and required no leading into what she thought the right one. And the right course to her was always the simplest of all things to discover. Because it was that which led most directly to the glory of God at the expense of man. Anything that would smite down pride, and overthrow earthly schemes, and abase the creature before the Creator—that to her mind was the thing commanded; and if it combined therewith a cut at "papal arrogance," and priestly influence, then the command was as delightful as it was imperative.

This tall and very clear-minded lady was, by an in and out sort of way, related to Squire Oglander. She called him her "brother;" and the Squire once (to comfort her in a vile toothache) had gone so far as to call her his "sister." Still that, to his mind, was a piece of flattery, not to be remembered when the tooth was stopped;—from no pride on his part; but because of his ever-abiding execration of her father—the well-known Captain Patch.

Captain Patch was the man who married the last Squire Oglander's second wife, that is to say, our good Squire's stepmother, after the lady had despatched her first husband, by uneasy stages, to a better world. Captain Patch took her for her life-interest under the Oglander settlement; and sterling friends of his declared him much too cheap at the money. But the Oglanders took quite the contrary view, and hated his name while he drew their cash. Yet the Captain proceeded to have a large family, of whom this Hannah Patch was the eldest.

A godly father (as a general rule) has godless children; and happily the converse of that rule holds true. The children of a godless father (scared by the misery they have seen), being acquitted of the fifth commandment, frequently go back to the first. And so it befell with almost all of that impious fellow's family. Nevertheless the Squire, believing in the "commandment with promise," as well as the denunciation at the end of the second, kept himself clear of the Patches, so far as good manners and kindness permitted him, Miss Patch, knowing how good she was, had keenly resented this prejudice after vainly endeavouring to beat it down. Also she felt—not ill-will—but still a melancholy forgiveness, and uneasiness about the present position of Grace's poor mother, who had died in her sins, without any apology to Miss Patch.

However, put all these things as one may (according to constitution), this lady was very good in her way, and desired to make all others good. There was not one faulty point about her, so far as she could discover it; and her rule of conduct was to judge her own doings by a higher standard than was to be hoped for of any other person. Therefore of course, for other persons she could judge what was right and godly infinitely better than they could.

"Oh, Aunty," said Grace, by way of coaxing, having found this of good service ere now; "Aunty, don't you wish it was tea-time now?"

"All meals come in their proper season. We should be grateful for them; but not greedy."

"Oh, but, Aunty, you would not call it greedy to be hungry, I should hope. And you would be so hungry, if you only knew. Ah, but you won't get me to tell you though. I have always been celebrated for making them. And this time I have quite surpassed myself. Now, how much will you offer me to tell you what it is?"

"Grace, you are frivolous!" Miss Patch answered, yet with a slight inclination of her nose towards the brown kitchen where the wood-fire burned. "If our food is wholesome, and vouchsafed in proportion to our daily wants, we should lift up our hearts and be thankful. To let our minds dwell upon that which is a bodily question only, tends to degrade them, and leads us to confound the true end—the glory of our Maker—with the means to that end, which are vulgarly called victuals."

"Very well, Aunty, we will do with bread and butter. I only made my Sally Lunns for you; and if they degrade your mind, I will give them to Margery Daw, or the cottage with ten children, down at the bottom of the wood. What a treat they will have, to be sure, with them!"

"Not so, my dear! If you made them for me, I should fail in my duty if I refused them. We are ordered to be kind and courteous and long-suffering towards one another. And I know that you make them particularly well. They are quite unfit for people in that lower sphere of life. It would be quite sinful to tempt them so! They would puff them up with vanity, and worldliness, and pride. But if you insist upon my tasting them, my dear, in justice to your work I think that you should see to the toasting. Poor Mrs. Daw smokes everything."

"Of course she does. But I never meant to let her do them, Aunty. Only I wanted to be quite sure first that you would oblige me by tasting them."

"My dear, I will do so, as soon as you please." The good lady shut up Ezekiel, and waited. In a few minutes back came Grace, with all things done to a nicety, each against each contending hotly whether the first human duty were to drink choice tea or to eat Sally Lunns. Miss Patch always saw her course marked out by special guidance, and devoutly thus was enabled to act simultaneously.

Grace took a little bit now and again to criticise her own handiwork, while with her bright eyes she watched the relaxing of the rigid countenance. "My dear," said Miss Patch, "they are excellent! and they do the greatest credit to your gifts! To let any talent lie idle is sinful. You might make a few every day, my dear."

"To be sure I will, Aunty, with the greatest pleasure. I do love to do anything that reminds me of my dear father! Oh, Aunty, will you tell me something?"

"Yes, Grace, anything you ask aright. Young girls, of course, must submit to those whose duty it is to guide them. Undue curiosity must be checked, as leading to perverse naughtiness. The principle, or want of principle, inculcated now by bad education, can lead to nothing else but ruin and disgrace. How different all was when I was young! My gallant and spirited father, well known as a brave defender of his country, would never have dreamed of allowing us to be inquisitive as to his whereabouts. But all things are subverted now; filial duty is a thing unknown."

"Oh, but, Aunty, of course we never pretend to be half as good as you were. Still I don't think that you can conclude that I do not love my dear father, because I am not one bit afraid of him."

"Don't cry, child. It is foolish and weak, and rebellious against Divine wisdom. All things are ordered for our good."

"Then crying must be ordered for our good, or we should be able to help it, ma'am. But you can't call it 'crying,' when I do just what I do. It is such a long and lonely time; and I never have been away more than a week at a time from my darling father, until now; and now it is fifteen weeks and five days since I saw him! Oh, it is dreadful to think of!"

"Very well, my dear, it may be fifty weeks, or fifty years, if the Lord so wills. Self-command is one of the very first lessons that all human beings must learn."

"Yes, I know all that. And I do command myself to the very utmost. You know that you praised me—quite praised me—yesterday; which is a rare thing for you to do. What did you say then? Please not to retract, and spoil the whole beauty of your good word."

"No, my dear child, you need not be afraid. Whenever you deserve praise, you shall have it. You saw an old sack with the name of 'Beckley' on it, and although you were silly enough to set to and kiss it, as if it were your father, you positively did not shed one tear!"

"For which I deserve a gold medal at least. I should like to have it for my counterpane; but you sent it away most ruthlessly. Now, I want to know, Aunty, how it came to be here—miles, leagues, longitudes, away from darling Beckley?"

Miss Patch looked a little stern again at this. She perceived that her duty was to tell some stories, in a case of this kind, wherein the end justified the means so paramountly. Still every new story which she had to tell seemed to make her more cross than the one before; whether from accumulated adverse score, or from the increased chances of detection.

"Sacks arrive and sacks depart," she answered, as if laying down a dogma, "according to the decrees of Providence. Ever since the time of Joseph, sacks have had their special mission. Our limited intelligence cannot follow the mundane pilgrimage of sacks."

"No, Aunty, of course, they get stolen so! But this particular sack I saw had on it the name of a good honest man, one of the very best men in Beckley, Zacchary Cripps, the Carrier. His name did bring things to my mind so—all the parcels and good nice things that he carries as if they were made of glass; and the way my father looks over the hedge to watch for his cart at the turn of the lane; and his pretty sister Etty sitting up as if she didn't want to be looked at; and old Dobbin splashing along, plod, plod; and our Mary setting her cap at him vainly; and the way he goes rubbing his boots, as if he would have every one of the nails out; and then dearest father calling out, 'Have you brought us Her Majesty's new crown, Cripps?' and Cripps, putting up his hand like that, and grinning as if it was a grand idea, and then slyly peeping round where the beer-jug hangs—oh, Aunty, shall I ever see it all again?"

"Well, Grace, you will lose very little if you don't. It is one of my brother's worst failings that he gives away fermented liquor to the lower orders inconsiderately. It encourages them in the bad habits to which they are only too prone, even when discouraged."

"Oh no, Aunty! Cripps is the soberest of men. And he does take his beer with such a relish, it is quite a treat to see him. Oh, if I could only see his old cart now, jogging along, like a man with one prong!"

"Grace! Miss Oglander! Your metaphor is of an excessively vulgar description!"

"Is it, Aunty? Then I am very sorry. I am sure I didn't mean any harm at all. Only I was thinking of the way a certain one-legged fiddler walks—but, Aunty, all this is so frivolous! With all the solemn duties around us, Aunty——"

"Yes, my dear, I do wish you would think a little more of them. Every day I do my best. Your nature is not more corrupt than must be, with all who have the sad *phronema sarkos*; but unhappily you always exhibit, both in word and action, something so—I will not use at all a harsh word for it—something so sadly unsolemn."

"What can I do, Aunt? It really is not my fault. I try for five minutes together to be solemn. And then there comes something or other—how can I tell how?—that proves too much for me. My father used to love to see me laugh. He

said it was quite the proper thing to do. And he was so funny (when he had no trouble) that without putting anything into anybody's head, he set them all off laughing. Aunty, you would have been amused to hear him. Quite in the quiet time, almost in the evening, I have known my father make such beautiful jokes, without thinking of them, that I often longed for the old horn lanthorn, to see all the people laughing. Even you would laugh, dear Aunty, if you only heard him."

"The laughter of fools is the crackling of thorns. Grace, you are nothing but a very green goose. Even a stray lamb would afford me better hopes. But knock at the wall with the poker, my dear, that Margery Daw may come in to prayers."

CHAPTER XXVI.

RUTS.

There are few things more interesting than ruts; regarded at the proper time, and in the proper manner. The artists, who show us so many things unheeded by our duller selves, have dwelled on this subject minutely, and shown their appreciation of a few good ruts. But they are a little inclined sometimes to mark them too distinctly, scarcely making due allowance for the vast diversity of wheels, as well as their many caprices of wagging, according to the state of their washers, the tug of the horse, and their own wearing, and a host of other things. Each rut moreover has a voice of its own; not only in its first formation, but at every period of depression in the muggy weather, or rough rebellion in a fine black frost, and above all other times in the loose insurrection of a thaw. There always is a bit of something hard and something soft in it; jags that contradict all things with a jerk; and deep subsidence, soft as flattery.

There scarcely could be a finer sample of ruts than was afforded by a narrow lane, or timber-track, at the extreme north-western outskirt of Stow Forest. Everything here was favourable to the very finest growth of ruts. The road had once been made, which is a necessary foundation for any masterpiece of rut-work; it then had been left to maintain itself, which encourages wholesome development. Another great advantage was that the hard uniformity of straight lines had no chance here of prevailing. For though the course was not so crooked, as in some lanes it may have been, neither was there hedge, or rail, or other mean constriction; yet some fine old trees insisted now and then, from either side, upon their own grand right of way, and stretched great arms that would sweep any driver, or horseman, backward from his seat, unless he steered so as to double them.

Now therefore to one of these corners came, from out the thicket of underwood, a stout man with a crafty slouch, and a wary and suspicious glance. He had thrown a sack over his long white smock, whether to save it from brambles, or to cover its glare in the shady wood; for his general aspect was that of a man who likes to see all things, but not to be seen. And now as he stooped to examine the ruts at a point where they clearly defined themselves, either from habit, or for special reason, he kept as far back by the briary ditch as he could without loss of near insight.

This man, being a member of the great Cripps race—whether worthy, or not, of that staunch lineal excellence—had an hereditary perception of the right way to examine a rut. It would have been easy enough, perhaps, in a lane of little traffic, to judge whether anything lately had passed, with the weather and ground as usual. But to-day—the day after what has been told of—both weather and ground had just taken a turn, as abrupt as if both were feminine. The smile of soft spring was changed into a frown, and the glad young buoyancy of the earth into a stiff sort of feeling, not frozen or crisp, but as happens to a man when a shiver of ague vibrates through a genial perspiration. To put it more clearly, the wind had chopped round to the east, and was blowing keenly—a masterful, strongly pronounced, and busily energetic east wind, as superior to hypocrisy as it was to all claims of mercy. At the sound and the feel of its vehement sweep, surprise and alarm ran through the wood; and the nestling-places of the sun ruffled up like a hen that calls her chicks to her. The foremost of the buds of the tall trees shook; not as they shake to a west wind, but with a sense of standing naked; the twigs that carried them flattened upwards, having lost all pleasure; the branches, instead of bowing kindly (as they do to any other wind), also went upward, with a stiff cold back, and a hatred at being treated so. Many and many a little leaf, still snug in its own overcoat, shrunk back, and preferred to defer all the joys of the sky, if this were a sample of them. And many and many a big leaf (thrust, without any voice of its own, on the world) had no chance of sighing yet, but whistled on the wind, and felt it piping through its fluted heart; and knowing what a liver-coloured selvage must come round its green, bewailed the hour that coaxed it forth from the notched, and tattered, and cast-off frizzle, dancing by this time the wind knows where.

Because the east wind does what no other wind of the welkin ever does. It does not come from the good sky downward, bringing higher breath to us; nor even on the level of the ancient things, spreading average movement. This alone of all winds strikes from the face of the good earth upward, sweeping the blush from the skin of the land, and wrinkling all who live thereon. That is the time when the very best man finds little to rejoice in; unless it be a fire of seasoned logs, or his own contrariety; the fur of all animals (being their temper) moves away and crawls on them; and even bland dogs and sweet horses feel each several hair at issue with their well-brushed conscience.

All of that may be true; and yet there may be so many exceptions. At any rate, Master Leviticus Cripps looked none the worse for the whole of it. His cheeks were of richly varied fibre, like a new-shelled kidney-bean; his mouth (of a very considerable size) looked comfortable and not hungry; and all around him there was an influence tending to intimate that he had dined.

For that he did not care as he should. He was not a man who allowed his dinner to modify his character. The best streaky bacon and three new-laid eggs had nurtured and manured his outer man, but failed to improve him inwardly. Even the expression of his face was very slightly mollified by a first-rate meal; though some of the corners looked lubricated.

"Hath a been by again, or hath a not?" whispered Tickuss to himself, as he stared at a tangled web of ruts, and blessed the east wind for confounding of them, so that a wheel could not swear to its own. The east wind answered with a scolding dash, that cast his sack over his head, and shook out his white smock, scattering over the view, like a jack-towel on the washing-line. Acknowledging this salutation with a curse, Leviticus gathered his sack more tightly, and bending one long leg before him, stealthily peered awry at the wheel-tracks. This was the way to discover whatever had happened last among them, instead of looking across or along them, where the nicer shades would fail.

At first he could make but little of it. The east wind, whirling last year's leaves from the couches where the west had piled them, and parching the flakes of the mud (as if exposed upon a scraper), had made it a hard thing to settle the date of the transit even of a timber dray. One of these had passed not long ago, with a great trunk swinging and swagging on the road, and slurring the scollops of the horse-track.

Therefore Tickuss, for some time, looked less wise than usual, and scratched his head. The brain replied, as it generally does, to this soft local stimulant, so briskly in fact that the master soon was able to clap both his hands into their natural home—the pockets of his breeches—and thus to survey the scene, and grin.

"Did 'ee think to do me, then, old brother Zak? Now did 'ee, did 'ee, did 'ee? Ah, I were aborn afore you, Zak; or if I were not, it were mother's mistake. Go along wi 'ee, Zak, go along wi' 'ee! Go home to thy cat, and thy little kitten, Etty."

He knew, by the track, that his brother had passed a good while ago, or he would not have dared to speak in this rebellious vein. And what he said next was even more disloyal.

"Danged if I ain't a gude mind to hornstring that old hosebird of a Dobbin; ay, and I wull too, if Zak cometh prowling round my place, like this. If a didn't mane no trachery, why dothn't a come in, and call for a horn of ale and a bite of cold bakkon. Ho, ho, we've a pretty well stopped him of that, though. No Master Zak now; go thine own ways. Keep thyzell to thyzell's the law of the land, to my thinking."

Now a year, or even six months ago, Leviticus Cripps would sooner have lost a score of pigs than make such a speech, inhospitable, unnatural, unbrotherly, and violently un-Crippsian. Nothing but his own bad conscience (as he fell more and more away from honour and due esteem for Beckley) could have suggested to him such a low and crooked view of Zacchary. The Carrier was not, in any measure, spying or prowling, or even watching. Such courses were out of his track altogether. Rather would he have come with a fist, if the family honour demanded it; and therewith have converted his brother's olfactory organ into something loftier, as the medium of a sense of honesty.

In bare point of fact the family honour demanded this vindication. But the need had not as yet been conveyed to the knowledge of the executive power. Zacchary had no suspicion at present of his brother's fearful lapse. And the only thing that brought him down that lane, was another stroke of business in the washing line. Squire Corser had married a new sort of wife with a tendency towards the nobility; wherefore a monthly wash was out of keeping with her loftier views, though she had a fine kitchen-garden; and she cried, till the Squire put the whole of it out, and sent it every week to Beckley. Hence a new duty for Dobbin arose, which he faced with his usual patience, simply reserving his right to travel at the pace he considered expedient, and to have a stronger and deeper bottom stitched to his old nose-bag.

The first time the Carrier traversed that road, fraternal duty impelled him to make all proper inquiries concerning the health of his brother, and the character of his tap. But though the reply upon both these points was favourable and pleasing, Zacchary met with so queer a reception, that dignity and self-respect compelled him to vow that for many a journey he would pass with a dry mouth, rather than turn in. Of all the nephews and nieces, who loved to make him their own carrier, by sitting astride perhaps two on each leg, and one on each oölitic vamp, and shouting "Gee, gee," till he panted worse than Dobbin obese with young saintfoin—likewise who always jumped up in his cart, and laid hold of the reins and the whip even, and wore out the patience of any other horse except the horse before them—of all these delightful young pests, not one was now permitted to come near him. And not only that, which alone was very strange, but even Susannah, the wife of Leviticus, and sister-in-law of Zacchary, evidently had upon her tongue laid a dumb weight of responsibility. Quite as if Zak were an interloper, or an inquisitive stranger, thrusting a keen but unjustified nose into things that were better without it. Susannah was always a very good woman, and used to look up to Zacchary, because her father was a basket-maker; and even now she said no harm; but still there was something about her, when she muttered that she must go and wash the potatoes, timid, and cold, and unhearty-like.

The Carrier made up his mind that they all were in trouble about their mortgage again; just as they were about six months back, when the land was likely to be lost to them. And finding it not a desirable thing to be called upon to contribute, he jogged well away from all such tactics, with his pockets buttoned. Not that he would have grudged any good turn to any one of his family; but that his strong common sense allowed him no faith in a liar. And for many years he had known that Tickuss was the liar of the family.

Leviticus took quite a different view of the whole of this proceeding. He was under no terror about his mortgage, for reasons as yet quite private; and his thick shallow cunning, like an underground gutter, was full of its own rats only. He was certain that Zak had suspected him, in spite of the care he had taken to keep his wife and children away from him; and believing this, he was certain also that Zak was playing the spy on him.

While he was meditating thus in his slow and turbid mind, and turning away from the corner of the road towards his beloved pig-lairs, the rattle of the sharp east wind was laden with a softer and heavier sound—the hoofs of a horse upon sod and mud. Tickuss, with two or three long strides, got behind a crooked tree, so as to hide or exhibit himself, according to what should come to pass.

What came to pass was a horse in the first place, of good family and good feed; and on his back a man who shared in at least the latter excellence. These two were not coming by the forest lane, but along a quiet narrow track, which cut off many of its corners. To judge of the two which looked the more honest, would have required another horse in council with another man. At sight of this arrival Tickuss came forth, and scraped humbly.

"Don't stand there, like a monkey at a fair!" cried Mr. Sharp—for he it was, and no mistake about him. "Am I to come through the brambles to you? Can't you come up, like a man with his wits, where this beastly wind doesn't blow so

hard? Who can hear chaw-bacon talk off there?"

Leviticus Cripps made a vast lot of gestures, commending the value of caution, and pointing to the lane half a hundred yards off, as if it contained a whole band of brigands. Mr. Sharp was not a patient man, and he knew that there was no danger. Therefore he swore pretty freely, until the abject lord of swine restored him to a pleasant humour by a pitiful tale of Black George's trouble on the previous afternoon.

"Catching it? Ay, and no mistake!" Tickuss Cripps repeated; "the dust from his jacket—oh Lor', oh Lor! I had followed on softly to see the fun, without Missy knowing I were near, of course; and may I never—if I didn't think a would a'most have killed un! Ho, ho! it'll be a good round week, I reckon, afore Jarge stitcheth up a ferret's mouth again. He took me in terrible, that very morning; he were worse took in hiszell afore the arternoon was out. Praise the Lard for all his goodness, sir."

"Well, well. It shall be made up to him. But of course you did not let him, or any one else, get any idea who the lady is."

"Governor, no man hath any sense of that," Leviticus answered, with one finger on his nose; "save and excep' the old lady to the cottage, and you and I, and you knows whether there be any other."

"Leviticus Cripps, no lies to me! Of course your own wife has got the whole thing out of you."

"Her!" replied Tickuss, with a high contempt, for which he should have had his ears boxed. "No, no, master, a would have been all over Hoxford months ago, if her had knowed ort of it. Her knoweth of course there be zumbody up to cottage with old lady; but her hath zucked in the American story, the same as everybody else have. Who would ever drame of our old Squire's daughter, when the whole world hath killed and buried her? But none the less for that I kep her, and the children, out of the way of our Zak, I did. Um might go talking on the volk up to cottage; and Zak would be for goin' up with one of his cards parraventur. Lor', how old Zak's eyes would come out of his head! The old bat-fowl!—a would crack my zides to see un!"

"You had better keep your fat sides sound and quiet," Mr. Sharp answered sternly; for the slow wits of Tickuss, being tickled by that rare thing, an imagination, the result was of course a guffaw whose breadth was exceeded only by its length.

"Oh Lor', oh Lor'—to see the old bat-fowl with the eyes comin' out of the head of un! I'll be danged if I shouldn't choke!—oh Lor'!"

Mr. Sharp saw that Tickuss, being once set off, might be trusted to go on for at least half an hour, with minute-guns of cackling, loutish, self-glorifying cachinnation, as amenable to reason as a hiccough is. The lawyer's time was too precious to waste thus, so having learned all that he cared to learn, and hearing wheels in the forest lane, he turned back along the narrow covert-ride; and he thought within himself, for he never mused aloud—"My bold stroke bids fair to be a great success. Nobody dreams that the girl is here. She herself believes every word that she is told. Kit is over head and ears; and she will be the same with him, after that fine rescue. Our only marplot has been laid by the heels at the very nick of time. We have only to manage Kit himself—who is a most confounded sort. The luck is with me, the luck is with me; and none shall be the wiser, Only give me one month more."

CHAPTER XXVII.

RATS.

Meanwhile at Shotover Grange, as well as at poor old Beckley Barton, trouble was prevailing and the usual style of things upset. Russel Overshute, though not beloved by everybody (because of his strong will and words), was at any rate thought much of, and would be sadly missed by all. All the women of the household made an idol of him. He spoke so kindly, and said "thank you," when many men would have grunted; and he did not seem to be aware of any padlocked bar of humanity betwixt him and his "inferiors." At the same time he took no liberty any more than he invited it; and his fine appearance and strength of readiness made him look the master.

The men, on the other hand, were not sure of their sorrow to see less of him. He had always kept a keen eye upon them, as the master of a large house ought to do; and he always bore in mind the great truth that men on the whole are much lazier than women. Still even the worst man about the place, while he freely took advantage of the present sweet immunity, would have been sorry to hear of a thing which might drive him to seek for another place.

But what were all these, even all put together, in the weight of their feelings, to compare with the mother of young Overshute? Many might cry, but none would mourn; nobody could have any right to mourn, except herself, his mother. This was her son, and her only hope. If it pleased the Lord to rob her of him, He might as well take her soon afterwards, without any more to do.

This middle-aged lady was not pious, and made no pretence to be so. Her opinion was that the Lord awarded things according to what people do, and left them at liberty to carry on, without any great interference. She knew that she always had been superfluously able to manage her own affairs; and to hear weak ladies going on and on about the will of the Lord, and so forth, sometimes was a trial to her manners and hospitality. In this terrible illness of her son, she had plenty of self-command, but very little resignation. With stern activity and self-devotion, she watched him by day and by night so jealously, that the nurses took offence and, fearing contagion, kept their distance, though they drew their wages.

This was the time to show what stuff both men and women were made of. Fair-weather visitors, and delightful gossips, and the most devoted friends, stood far aloof from the tainted gale, and fumigated their letters. The best of them sent their grooms to the lodge, with orders to be very careful, and to be sure to use tobacco during the moment of colloquy. Others had so much faith that everything would be ordered for the best, that they went to the seaside at once, to be delivered from presumption. Many saw a visitation for some secret sin, that otherwise might have festered inwardly and destroyed the immortal part. Of course they would not even hint that he could have murdered Grace Oglander; nothing was further from their thoughts; the idea was much too terrible. Still there were many things that long had called for explanation—and none had been afforded.

Leaving these to go their way, a few kind souls came fluttering to the house of pestilence and death. Two housemaids, and the boy who cleaned the servant's shoes, had been struck down, and never rose again, except with very cautious liftings into their last narrow cells. The disease had spread from their master; and their constitutions were not like his. Also the senior footman and the under-cook, were in their beds; but the people who had their work to do believed them to be only shamming.

The master, however, still fought on, without any knowledge of the conflict. His mind was beyond all the guidance of will, and afar from its wonted subjects. It roved among clouds that had long blown away; nebules of logic, dialectic fogs, and thunderstorms of enthymeme, the pelting of soritic hail, and all the other perturbed condition of undergraduate weather. In these things, unlike his friend Hardenow, he had never taken delight, and now they rose up to avenge themselves. At other times the poor fellow lay in depths of deepest lethargy, voiceless, motionless, and almost breathless. None but his mother would believe sometimes that he was not downright dead and gone.

Of course Mrs. Overshute had called in the best advice to be had from the whole of the great profession of medicine. The roughness of the Abernethy school was still in vogue with country doctors; as even now some of it may be found in a craft which ought to be gentle in proportion to its helplessness. With timid people this roughness goes a long way towards creating faith, and makes them try to get better for fear of being insulted about it. In London however this Centauric school of medicine had not thriven, when the rude Nessus could not heal himself. A soft and soothing and genial race of Æsculapians arose; the "vis medicatrix naturæ" was exalted and fed with calves' feet; and the hand of velvet and the tongue of silver commended and sweetened the pill of bread.

At the head of this pleasing and amiable band (who seldom either killed or cured) was the famous Sir Anthony Thistledown. This was the great physician who had been invoked from London—to the strong disgust of Splinters, then the foremost light at Oxford—when Squire Oglander was seized with his very serious illness. And now Sir Anthony did his best, with the aid of the reconciled Splinters, to soothe away death from the weary couch of the last of the race of Overshute.

"A pretty story I've aheerd in Oxford to-day; make me shamed, it doth," said Zacchary Cripps to his sister Etty, while he smoked his contemplative pipe by the fire of Stow logs, one cold and windy April evening. "What do you think they've abeen and doed?"

"Who, and where, Zak? How can I tell?" Esther was busy, trimming three rashers, before she put them into the frying-pan. "I really do believe you expect me to know everybody that comes to your thoughts, quite as if it was my

own mind."

"Well, so you ought," said the Carrier. "The women nowadays are so sharp, no man can have his own mind to his self. But anyhow you ought to know that I mean up to poor Worship Overshute's. Ah, a fine young gentleman as ever lived. Seemeth to be no more than last night as he sat in that there chair and said the queerest thing as ever were said by a Justice of the county bench."

"What do you mean, Zak? I never heard him say anything but was kind and proper, and a credit to him."

"Might be proper, or might not. But anyhow 'twere impossible. Did a tell me, or did a not, he would try to go a-poaching? When folk begins to talk like that, 'tis a sign of the ill come over them. Ah's me, 'tis little he'll ever do of poaching, or shutting, or riding to hounds, or tasting again of my best bottle! Bad enough job it be about old Squire, but he be an old man in a way of speaking. Well, the Lord He knoweth best, and us be all in the hollow of His hand. But he were a fine young fellow, as fine a young fellow as ever I see; and not a bit of pride about un!"

Sadly reflecting, the Carrier stopped his pipe with a twig from the fireplace, and gazed at the soot, because his eyes were bright.

"But what were you going to tell me?" asked Etty, bringing her brother back to his subject, as she often was obliged to do.

"Railly, I be almost ashamed to tell 'ee. For such a thing to come to pass in our own county, and a'most the same parish, and only two turnpike gates atween. What do 'ee think of every soul in that there house running right away, wi'out no notice, nor so much as 'good-bye!' One and all on 'em, one and all; so I were told by a truthful man. And the poor old leddy with her dying son, and not a single blessed woman for to make the pap!"

"I never can believe that they would be such cowards," Esther answered as she left her work and came to look at Zacchary. "Men might, but women never, I should hope. And such a kind good house it is! Oh, Zak, it must be a wicked story!"

"It is true enough, Etty, and too true. As I was a-coming home I seed five on 'em standing all together under the elms by Magdalen College. Their friends would not take them in, I was told, and nobody wouldn't go nigh 'em. Perhaps they were sorry they had doed it then."

"The wretches! They ought to sleep out in the rain, without even a pigsty for shelter! Now, Zak, I never do anything without you; but to Shotover Grange I go to-night, unless you bar the door on me; and if you do I will get out of window!"

"Esther, I never heerd tell of such a thing. If you was under a duty, well and good; but to fly into the face of the Lord like that, without no call upon you——"

"There is a call upon me!" she answered, flushing with calm resolution; "it is the Lord that calls me, Zak, and He will send me back again. Now you shall have your supper, while you think it over quietly. I will not go without your leave, brother; but I am sure you will give it when you come to think."

The Carrier, while he munched his bacon, and drank his quart of home-brewed ale, was, in his quiet mind, more troubled than he had ever been before, or, at any rate, since he used to pass the tent of young Cinnaminta. That was the one great romance of his life, and since he had quelled it with his sturdy strength, and looked round the world as usual, scarcely any trouble worse than pence and halfpence had been on him. From week to week, and year to year, he had worked a cheerful road of life, breathing the fine air, looking at the sights, feeling as little as need be felt the influence of nature, making new friends all along his beat, even quicker than the old ones went their way, carrying on a very decent trade, highly respecting the powers that be, and highly respected by them. But now he found suddenly brought before him a matter for consideration, which, in his ordinary state of mind, would have circulated for a fortnight. Precipitance of mind to him was worse than driving down a quarry; his practice had always been, and now it was become his habit, to turn every question inside out and upside down, and across and across, and finger every seam of it (as if he were buying a secondhand sack) ere ever he began to trust his weight to any side of it. To do all this required some hours with a mind so unelectric, and even after that he liked to have a good night's sleep, and find the core of his resolve set hard in the morning.

For this due process there was now no time. He dared not even to begin it, knowing that it could not be wrought out; therefore he betook himself to a plan which once before had served him well. After groping in the bottom of a sacred pocket (where sample-beans and scarlet runners got into the loops of keys, and bits of whipcord were wound tightly round old turnpike tickets, and a little shoemaker's awl in a cork kept company with a shoe-pick), Master Cripps with his blunt-headed fingers got hold of a crooked sixpence. The bend alone would have only conferred a simple charm upon it, but when to the bend there was added a hole, that sixpence became Delphic. Cripps had consulted it once before when a quick-tempered farmer hurried him concerning the purchase of a rick of hay. The Carrier had no superstition, but he greatly abounded with gratitude; and, having made a great hit about that rick, the least he could do to the sixpence was to consult it again under similar hurry.

He said to himself, "Now the Lord send me right. If you comes out heads, little Etty shall go; if you comes out tails, I shall take it for a sign that we ought to turn tails in this here job."

He said no more, but with great extrication worked his oracular sixpence up through a rattle of obstructions. Like the lots cast in a steep-headed man's helmet, up came the sixpence reluctantly.

"I have a got 'ee. Now, what dost thou say?" cried Cripps, with the triumph of an obstinate man. "Never a lie hast thou told me yet. Spake up, little fellow." Being thus adjured, the crooked sixpence, in gratitude for much friction,

gleamed softly in the firelight; but even the Carrier, keen as his eyes were, could not make out head or tail. "Vetch me a can'le and the looking-glass," he called out to Esther; the looking-glass being a large old lens, which had been left behind by Hardenow. Esther brought both in about half a minute; and Cripps, with the little coin sternly sitting as flatly in his palm as its form allowed, began to examine it carefully. With one eye shut, as if firing a gun, he tried the lens at every distance from a foot to half an inch, shifting the candle about until some of his frizzly hair took fire, and with this assistance he exclaimed at last, "Heads, child!—heads it is! Thou shalt go; the will of the Lord ordaineth it! Plaize the Lord to send thee back safe and sound as now thou goest! None on us, to my knowledge, has done aught to deserve to be punished for."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BOOTS ON.

When a very active man is suddenly "laid by the heels;" sad as the dispensation is, there are sure to be some who rejoice in it. Even if it be only a zealous clerk, sausage-maker, or grave-digger, thus upset in his activities; there are one or two compeers who rejoice in the heart, while they deeply lament with the lip. Not that they have the very smallest atom of ill-will about them. They are thoroughly good-hearted fellows, as are nine men out of every ten; and within, as well as without, they would grieve to hear that their valued friend was dead.

Still, for the moment, and while we believe, as everybody does about everybody else, that he is sure as a top to come round again, it is a relief to have this busy fellow just out of the way a bit; and there is an inward hugging of the lazier spirit at the thought that the restless one will have received a lesson, and be pulled back to a milder state. Be this view of the matter either true or false, in a general way, at least in this particular instance (the illness of Russel Overshute), some of it seemed to apply right well.

There was no one who wished him positive death, not even of those whom he had most justly visited with the treadmill; but there were several who were not sorry to hear of this check to his energies; and foremost among them might be counted Mr. Luke Sharp and the great John Smith.

Mr. John Smith had surprised his friends, and disappointed the entire public, by finding out nothing at all about anything after his one great discovery, made with the help of the British army. For some cause or other, best known to himself, he had dropped his indefatigability and taken to very grave shakes of his head instead of nimble footings. He feigned to be very busy still with this leading case of the neighbourhood; but though his superiors might believe it, his underlings were not to be misled. All of these knew whether Mr. John was launching thunderbolts or throwing dust, and were well aware that he had quite taken up with the latter process in the Beckley case.

Why, or even exactly when, this change had occurred, they did not know, only they were sure that the reason lay deep in the pocket of Mr. Smith; which conclusion, as we shall see, did no more honour to their heads than to their hearts.

But still, whatever his feelings were, or his desires in the matter, the resolute face and active step of this intelligent officer were often to be seen and heard at Beckley; and to several persons in the village they were becoming welcome. Numbers Cripps, the butcher, was moved with gentle goodwill towards him, having heard what a fine knife and fork he played, and finding it true in the Squire's bill. Also Phil Hiss of the Dusty Anvil found the fame of this gentleman telling on his average receipts; and several old women, who had some time back made up their accounts for a better world, and were taking the interest in scandal, hailed with delight this unexpected bonus and true premium. To mention young spinsters would be immoral, for none of them had any certainty whether there was, or was not, any Mrs. John Smith. Rustic modesty forbade that the Carrier should be asked to settle this great point directly. Still there were methods of letting him know how desirable any information was.

At all these symptoms of renown, when brought to his knowledge, Mr. Smith only smiled and shook his head. He had several good reasons of his own for haunting the village as he did; one of them being that he thus obeyed the general orders he had received. Also he really liked the Squire, his victuals, and his domestics. Among these latter he had quite outlived any little prejudice created by his early manner; and even Mary Hookham was now inclined to use him as an irritant, or stimulant, for the lukewarm Cripps. But being a sharp and quick young woman, Mary took care not to go too far.

"How is the fine old gentleman now? Mary, my love, how is he?" Mr. Smith asked, as he pulled off his cloak in the lobby, just after church-time, and just before early dinner-time, on the morrow of that Saturday night when Esther set off for Shotover. Although it was spring, she had not gone alone, but had taken a son of the butcher with her; the effect of that quarry-scene on her nerves would last as long as she did.

Mary was bound not to answer Mr. Smith whenever he spoke in that festive way. That much had been settled betwixt her and her mother, remembering what a place Beckley was. But she did all her duty, as a good maid should, in the way of receiving a visitor. She took his cloak from him, and she hung it on a hook—most men wore a cloak just then for walking, whether it were wet or dry, and part of the coming "Tractarian movement" was to cast away that cloak—and then Mary saw on the feathery collar a leaf-bud that threatened to become a moth, according to her entomology. This she picked out, with a "shoo" and a "shish" as she trod it underfoot; and Mr. John Smith, having terror of insects, and being a very clean man, recoiled, just when he was thinking of stealing a kiss. This little piece of business placed them on their proper terms again.

"How is your master, Miss Hookham? I hope you find him getting better. Everything now is looking up again!"

"No, Mr. Smith; he is very sadly. Thanking you, sir, for inquiring of him. He do seem a little better one day, and we all begins to hope and hope, and then there come something all over him again, the same as might be this here cloak, sir, thrown on the head of that there stick. But come in and see him, Mr. Smith, if you please. I thought it was the rector when you rang. But master will be glad to see you every bit the same as if you was, no doubt."

John Smith, who was never to be put down by any small comparisons, followed quick Mary with a stedfast march over the quiet matting. Potters, with their broken shards, had not yet made it a trial to walk, and a still greater trial to look downward, on the road to dinner. In the long, old-fashioned dining-room sat the Squire at the head of his

table. For many years it had been his wont to have an early dinner on Sunday, with a knife and fork always ready for the clergyman, who was a bachelor of middle age. The clergyman came, or did not come, according to his own convenience, without ceremony or apology.

"I beg you to excuse," said the Squire rising, as Smith was shown into the room, "my absence from church this morning, Mr. Warbelow. I had quite made up my mind to go, and everything was quite ready, when I did not feel quite so well as usual, and was ordered to stay at home."

Squire Oglander made his fine old-fashioned bow when he had spoken, and held out his hand for the parson to take it, as the parson always did, with eyes that gave a look of grief and then fell, and kind lips that murmured that all things were ordered for the best. But instead of the parson's gentle clasp, the Squire, whose sight was beginning to fail together with his other faculties, was saluted with a strong rough grasp, and a gaze from entirely unclerical eyes.

"How is your Worship? Well, nicely, I hope. Charming you look, sir, as ever I see."

"Sir, I thank you. I am in good health. But I have not the honour of remembering your name."

"Smith, your Worship—John Smith, at your service; as he was the day before yesterday. 'Out of sight out of mind,' the old saying is. I suppose you find it so, sir!"

With this home-thrust, delivered quite unwittingly, Mr. Smith sat down; his opinion was that Her Majesty's service levelled all distinctions. Mr. Oglander gave him one glance, like the keen look of his better days, and then turned away and gazed round the room for something out of sight, but never likely to be out of mind. The old man was weak, and knew his weakness. In the presence of a gentleman he might have broken down and wept, and been much better for it; but before a man of this sort, not a sign would he let out of the sorrow that was killing him.

It had been settled by all doctors, when the Squire was in his first illness, that nothing should be said by Smith, or any one else (without great cause), about the trouble which was ever in the heart of all the house. Nothing, at least to the Squire himself, for fear of exciting him fatally. Little rumours might be filtered through the servants towards him; especially through Mother Hookham, who put hopeful grains of Paradise into the heavy beer of fact. Such things did the old man good. His faith in the Lord, when beginning to flag, was renewed by fibs of this good old woman; and each confirmed the other.

In former days he would have resented and nipped in the bud—kind-hearted as he was—John Smith's familiarity. But now he had no heart to care about any of such trifles. He begged Mr. Smith to take a chair, quite as if he were waiting to be invited; then, weak as he was, he tottered to the bell-pull, rather than ask his guest to ring. John Smith jumped up to help, but felt uncertain what good manners were.

"Mary," said the Squire, when Mary came; "you always look out of the window, I think, to see the people come out of church."

"Never, sir, never! Except whenever I feels wicked not to a' been there myself. Such time it seemeth to do me good; like smelling of the good words over there."

"Yes, that is very right. All I want to know is whether Mr. Warbelow is coming up here."

"No, sir; not this time, I believe. He seemed to have got a young lady with un, as wore a blue cloak with three slashes to the sleeve, and a bonnet with yellow French roses in it, and a striped skirt, made of the very same stuff as I seed in to Cavell's—no, not Cavell's—t'other shop over the way, round the corner; likewise her had——"

"Then, Mary, bring in the dinner, if you please. This gentleman will dine with me, instead of Mr. Warbelow."

"Well now, if I ever did!" Miss Hookham exclaimed to herself in the passage. "Why, a must be a sort of a gentleman! Master wouldn't dine along of Master Cripps; but to my mind Zak be the gentleman afore he!"

The Squire's oblique little sarcasm—if sarcasm at all it were—failed to hit Mr. Smith altogether; he cordially accepted plate and spoon, and fell to at the soup, which was excellent. The soup was followed by a fine sirloin; whereupon Mr. Oglander, through some association of ideas, could not suppress a little sigh.

"Never sigh at your meat, sir," cried Mr. Smith; "give me the carving-knife, sir, if you are unequal to the situation. To sigh at such a sirloin—oh fie, oh fie!"

"I was thinking of some one who always used to like the brown," the old man said, in the simplest manner, as if an apology were needed.

"Well, sir, I like the brown very much! I will put it by for myself, sir, and help you to an inner slice. Here, Mary, a plate for your master! Quick! Everything will be cold, my goodness! And who sliced this horse-radish, pray? for slicing it is, not scraping."

Mary was obliged to bite her tongue to keep it in any way mannersome; when the door was thrown open, and in came her mother, with her face quite white, and both hands stretched on high.

"Oh my! oh my! a sin I call it—a wicked, cruel, sinful sin!" Widow Hookham exclaimed as soon as she could speak. "All over the village, all over the parish, in two days' time at the latest it will be. Oh, how could your Worship allow of it?"

"Give your mamma a glass of wine, my dear," said Mr. John Smith, as the widow fell back, with violent menace of fainting, or worse; while the poor Squire, expecting some new blow, folded his tremulous hands to receive it. "Take a

good drink, ma'am, and then relieve your system."

"That Cripps! oh, that Cripps!" exclaimed Mrs. Hookham, as soon as the wine, which first "went the wrong way," had taken the right direction; "if ever a darter of mine hath Cripps, in spite of two stockings of money, they say——"

"What is it about Cripps?" asked the Squire, in a voice that required an immediate answer. The first news of his trouble had come through Cripps; and now, in his helpless condition, he always connected the name of the Carrier with the solution, if one there should be.

"He hath done a thing he ought to be ashamed on!" screamed Mrs. Hookham, with such excitement, that they were forced to give her another glass of wine; "he hath brought into this parish, and the buzzum of his family, pestilence and death, he hath! And who be he to do such a thing, a road-faring, twopenny carrier?"

"Cripps charges a good deal more than twopence," said Mr. Oglander quietly; for his hopes and fears were once more postponed.

"He hath brought the worst load ever were brought!" cried the widow, growing eloquent. "Black death, and the plague, and the murrain of Egypt hath come in through Cripps the Carrier! How much will he charge Beckley, your Worship? How much shall Beckley pay him, when she mourneth for her children? when she spreadeth forth her hands and seeketh north and south, and cannot find them, because they are not?"

"What is it, good woman?" cried Smith, impatiently, "what is all this uproar? do tell us, and have done with it?"

"Good man," replied Widow Hookham tartly, "my words are addressed to your betters, sir. Your Worship knoweth well that Master Kale hath leave and license for his Sunday dinner; ever since his poor wife died, he sitteth with a knife and fork to the right side of our cook-maid. He were that genteel, I do assure you, although his appearance bespeaketh it not, and city gents may look down on him; he had such a sense of propriety, not a word did he say all the time of dinner to raise an objection to the weakest stomach. But as soon as he see that all were done, and the parlour dinner forward, he layeth his finger on his lips, and looketh to me as the prime authority; and when I ask him to speak out, no secrets being among good friends, what he said were a deal too much for me, or any other Christian person."

"Well, well, ma'am, if your own dinner was respected, you might have showed some respect for ours," Mr. Smith exclaimed very sadly, beholding the gravy in the channelled dish margined with grease, and the noble sirloin weeping with lost opportunity. But Mr. Oglander took no notice. To such things he was indifferent now.

"To keep the mind dwelling upon earthly victuals," the widow replied severely, "on the Lord's Day, and with the Day of the Lord a-hanging special over us—such things is beyond me to deal with, and calls for Mr. Warbelow. Carrier Cripps hath sent his sister over to nurse Squire Overshute!"

John Smith pretended to be busy with his beef, but Mary, who made a point of watching whatever he did (without well knowing why), startled as she was by her mother's words, this girl had her quick eyes upon his face, and was sure that it lost colour, as the carved sirloin of beef had done from the trickling of the gravy.

"Overshute! nurse Mr. Overshute?" cried the Squire with great astonishment. "Why, what ails Mr. Overshute? It is a long time since I have seen him, and I thought that he had perhaps forgotten me. He used to come very often, when —but who am I to tempt him? When my darling was here, in the time of my darling, everybody came to visit me; now nobody comes, and of course it is right. There is nobody for them to look at now, and no one to make them laugh a little. Ah, she used to make them laugh, till I was quite jealous, I do believe; not of myself, bless your heart! but of her, because I never liked her to have too much to say to anybody, unless it was one who could understand her. And nobody ever turned up that was able, in any way, to understand her, except her poor old father, sir."

The Squire, at the end of this long speech (which had been a great deal too much for him) stood up, and flourished his fork, which should have been better employed in feeding him, and looked from face to face, in fear that he had made himself ridiculous. Nobody laughed at him, or even smiled; and he was pleased with this, and resolved never to give such occasion again; because it would have shamed him so. And after all it was his own business. None of these people could have any idea, and he hoped they never might have. By this time his mind was dropping softly into some confusion, and feeling it so, he sat down again, and drank the glass of wine which Mary Hookham kindly held for him.

For a few minutes Mr. John Smith had his flourish (to let both the women be sure who he was) all about the Queen, and the law of the land, and the jurisdiction of the Bench, and he threatened the absent Cripps with three months' imprisonment, and perhaps the treadmill. He knew that he was talking unswept rubbish, but his audience was female. They listened to him without leaving off their work; and their courage increased as his did.

But presently Mr. Oglander, who had seemed to be taking a nap, arose, and said, as clearly as ever he had said anything in his clearest days—

"Mary, go and tell Charles to put the saddle on the mare at once."

"Oh Lor', sir! whatever are you thinking of? Lor' a massy, sir, I couldn't do it, I couldn't! You ain't abeen a-horseback for nigh four months, and your orders is to keep quiet in your chair, and not even look out o' winder, sir. Do 'ee plaize to go into your slippers, sir?"

"I will not go into my slippers, Mary. I will go into my boots. I hear that Mr. Overshute is ill, and I gather from what you have all been saying that his illness is of such a kind that nobody will go near him. I have wronged the young gentleman bitterly, and I will do my best to right myself. If I never do another thing, I will ride to Shotover this day.

Order the mare, as I tell you, and the air will do me good, please God!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SPIDER'S DINNER-PARTY.

Now was the happy time when Oxford, ever old, yet ever fresh with the gay triennial crown of youth, was preparing itself for that sweet leisure for which it is seldom ill prepared. Being the paramount castle and strongest feudal hold of stout "idlesse," this fair city has not much to do to get itself into prime condition for the noblest efforts and most arduous feats of invincible laziness. The first and most essential step is to summon all her students, and send them to chapel to pay their vows. After this there need be no misgiving or fear of industry. With one accord they issue forth, all pledged to do nothing for the day, week, or month; each intellectual brow is stamped with the strongest resolve not to open a book; and

> "Games are the spur which the clear spirit doth raise,
> To scorn the Dons, and live luxurious days."

This being so, whether winter shatters the Isid wave against Folly bridge, or spring's arrival rustles in the wavering leaves of Magdalen, or autumn strews the chastened fragrance of many brewers on ripe air—how much more when beauteous summer fosters the coy down on the lip of the junior sophist like thistle-seed, and casts the freshman's shadow hotly on the flags of High Street—now or never is the proper period not to overwork one's self, and the hour for taking it easy.

But against each sacred rite and hallowed custom of the place, against each good old-fashioned smoothness, and fine-fed sequacity, a rapid stir was now arising, and a strong desire to give a shove. There were some few people who really thought that the little world in which they lay was one they ought to move in; that perfect life was not to be had without some attempt at breathing; and that a fire (though beautifully laid) gives little warmth till kindled.

However, these were young fellows mostly, clever in their way, but not quite sound; and the heads of houses, generally speaking, abode on the house-top, and did not come down. Still they kept their sagacious eyes on the movement gathering down below, and made up their minds to crush it as soon as they could be quite certain of being too late. But these things ride not upon the cart of Cripps—though Cripps is a theologian, when you beat his charges down.

After the Easter vacation was over, with too few fattening festivals, the most popular tutor in Brasenose (being the only one who ever tried to teach) came back to his rooms and his college work with a very fine appetite for doing good;—according, at least, to his own ideas of good, and duty, and usefulness; all of which were fundamentally wrong in the opinion of the other tutors. But Hardenow, while he avoided carefully all disputes with his colleagues, strictly kept to his own course, and doing more work than the other five (all put together) attempted, was permitted to have his own way, because of the trouble there might be in stopping him.

The college met for the idle term, on Saturday morning, as usual. On Saturday afternoon Hardenow led off his old "squad" with two new recruits, for their fifteen miles of hard walking. Athletics and training were as yet unknown (except with the "eight" for Henley), and this Tractarian movement may have earned its name, ere the birth of No. 90, from the tract of road traversed, in a toe-and-heel track, by the fine young fellows who were up to it. At any rate that was what the country people said, and these are more often right than wrong, and the same opinion still abides with them.

Hardenow only took this long tramp for the sake of collecting his forces. Saturday was not their proper day for this very admirable coat-tail chase. Neither did they swallow hill and plain in this manner on a Sunday. Lectures were needful to fetch them up to the proper pitch for striding so. Wherefore on the morrow Mr. Hardenow was free for a cruise on his own account, after morning sermon at St. Mary's; and not having heard of his old friend Russel for several weeks, he resolved to go and hunt him up in his own home.

It was not a possible thing for this very active and spare-bodied man to lounge upon his road. Whatever it was that he undertook, he carried on the action with such a swing and emphasis, that he seemed to be doing nothing else. He wore a short spencer, and a long-tailed coat, "typical"—to use the pet word of that age—both of his curt brevity and his ankle-reaching gravity. His jacket stuck into him, and his coat struck away with the power of an adverse wind, while the boys turned back and stared at him; but he was so accustomed to that sort of thing that he never thought of looking round. He might have been tail-piped for seven leagues without troubling his head about it.

This was a man of great power of mind, and led up to a lofty standard; pure, unselfish, good, and grand (so far as any grandeur can be in the human compound), watchful over himself at almost every corner of his ways, kind of heart, and fond of children; loving all simplicity, quick to catch and glance the meaning of minds very different from his own; subtle also, and deep to reason, but never much inclined to argue. He had a shy and very peculiar manner of turning his eyes away from even an undergraduate, when his words did not command assent; as sometimes happened with freshmen full of conceit from some great public school.

The manner of his mind was never to assert itself, or enter into controversy. He felt that no arguments would stir himself when he had solidly cast his thoughts; and he had of all courtesies the rarest (at any rate with Englishmen), the courtesy of hoping that another could reason as well as himself.

In this honest and strenuous nature there was one deficiency. The Rev. Thomas Hardenow, copious of mind and

active, clear of memory, and keen at every knot of scholarship, patient and candid too, and not at all intolerant, yet never could reach the highest rank, through want of native humour. His view of things was nearly always anxious and earnest. His standing-point was so fixed and stable, that every subject might be said to revolve on its own axis during its revolution round him; and the side that never presented itself was the ludicrous or lightsome one.

As he strode up the hill, with the back of his leg-line concave at the calf, instead of convex (whenever his fluttering skirt allowed a glimpse of what he never thought about), it was brought home suddenly to his ranging mind that he might be within view of Beckley. At a bend of the rising road he turned, and endwise down a plait of hills, and between soft pillowy folds of trees, the simple old church of Beckley stood, for his thoughts to make the most of it. And, to guide them, the chime of the gentle bells, foretelling of the service at three o'clock, came on the tremulous conveyance of the wind, murmuring the burden he knew so well—"old men and ancient dames, married folk and children, bachelors and maidens, all come to church!"

Hardenow thought of the months he had spent, some few years back, in that quiet place; of the long, laborious, lonesome days, the solid hours divided well, the space allotted for each hard drill; then (when the pages grew dim and dark, and the bat flitted over the lattice, or the white owl sailed to the rickyard), the glory of sallying into the air, inhaling grander volumes than ever from mortal breath proceeded, and plunging into leaves that speak of one great Author only. And well he remembered in all that toil the pure delight of the Sunday; the precious balm of kicking out both legs, and turning on the pillow until eight o'clock; the leisurely breakfast with the Saturday papers, instead of Aristotle; the instructive and amusing walk to church, where everybody admired him, and he set the fashion for at least ten years; the dread of the parson that a man who was known as the best of his year at Oxford should pick out the fallacies of his old logic; and then the culminating triumph of Sabbatic jubilee—the dinner, the dinner, wherewith the whole week had been privily gestating; up to that crowning moment when Cripps, in a coat of no mean broadcloth, entered with a dish of Crippsic size, with the "trimmings" coming after him in a tray, and lifting the cover with a pant and flourish, said, "Well, sir, now, what do 'ee plaize to think of that?"

Nor in this pleasant retrospect of kindness and simplicity was the element of rustic grace and beauty wholly absent—the slight young figure that flitted in and out, with quick desire to please him; the soft pretty smile with which his improvements of Beckley dialect were received; and the sweet gray eyes that filled with tears so, the day before his college met. Hardenow had feared, humble-minded as he was, that the young girl might be falling into liking him too well; and he knew that there might be on his own part too much reciprocity. Therefore (much as he loved Cripps, and fully as he allowed for all that was to be said upon every side), he had felt himself bound to take no more than a distant view of Beckley.

Even now, after three years and a half, there was some resolve in him to that effect, or the residue of a resolution. He turned from the gentle invitation of the distant bells, and went on with his face set towards the house of his old friend, Overshute. When he came to the lodge (which was like a great beehive stuck at the end of a row of trees), it caused him a little surprise to find the gate wide open, and nobody there. But he thought that, as it was Sunday, perhaps the lodge-people were gone for a holiday; and so he trudged onward, and met no one to throw any light upon anything.

In this way he came to the door at last, with the fine old porch of Purbeck stone heavily overhanging it, and the long wings of the house stretched out, with empty windows either way. Hardenow rang and knocked, and then set to and knocked and rang again; and then sat down on a stone balustrade; and then jumped up with just vigour renewed, and pushed and pulled, and in every way worked to the utmost degree of capacity everything that had ever been gifted with any power of conducting sound.

Nobody answered. The sound of his energy went into places far away, and echoed there, and then from stony corners came back to him. He traced the whole range of the windows and caught no sign of any life inside them. At last, he pushed the great door, and lo! there was nothing to resist his thrust, except its sullen weight.

When Hardenow stood in the old-fashioned hall, which was not at all "baronial," he found himself getting into such a fright that he had a great mind to go away again. If there had only been anybody with him—however inferior in "mental power"—he might have been able to refresh himself by demonstrating something, and then have marched on to the practical proof. But now he was all by himself, in strange and unaccountable loneliness. The sense of his condition perhaps induced him to set to and shout. The silence was so oppressive, that the sound of his own voice almost alarmed him by its audacity. So, after shouting "Russel!" thrice, he stopped, and listened, and heard nothing except that cold and shuddering ring, as of hardware in frosty weather, which stone and plaster and timber give when deserted by their lords—mankind.

Knowing pretty well all the chief rooms of the house, Hardenow resolved to go and see if they were locked; and grasping his black holly-stick for self-defence, he made for the dining-room. The door was wide open; the cloth on the table, with knives and forks and glasses placed, as if for a small dinner-party; but the only guest visible was a long-legged spider, with a sound and healthy appetite, who had come down to dine from the oak beams overhead, and was sitting in his web between a claret bottle and a cruet-stand, ready to receive with a cordial clasp any eligible visitor.

Hardenow tasted the water in a jug, and found it quite stale and nasty; then he opened a napkin, and the bread inside it was dry and hard as biscuit. Then he saw with still further surprise that the windows were open to their utmost extent, and the basket of plate was on the sideboard.

"My old friend Russel, my dear old fellow!" he cried with his hand on his heart where lurked disease as yet unsuspected, "what strange misfortune has befallen you? No wonder my letter was left unanswered. Perhaps the dear fellow is now being buried, and every one gone to his funeral. But no; if it were so, these things would not be

thus. The funeral feast is a grand institution. Everything would be fresh and lively, and five leaves put into the dinner-table." With this true reflection, he left the room to seek the solution elsewhere.

He failed, however, to find it in any of the downstair sitting-rooms. Then he went even into the kitchen, thinking the liberty allowable under such conditions. The grate was cold and the table bare; on the one lay a drift of soot, on the other a level deposit of dust, with a few grimy implements to distribute it.

Hardenow made up his mind for the worst. He was not addicted to fiction (as haply was indicated by his good degree), but he could not help recalling certain eastern and even classic tales; and if he had come upon all the household sitting in native marble, or from the waistband downward turned into fish, or logs, or dragons, he might have been partly surprised, but must have been wholly thankful for the explanation. Failing however to discover this, and being resolved to go through with the matter, the tutor of Brasenose mounted the black oak staircase of this enchanted house. At the head of the stairs was a wide, low passage, leading right and left from a balustraded gallery. The young man chose first the passage to the right, and tightening his grip of the stick, strode on.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FIRE-BELL.

The doors of the rooms on either side were not only open but fastened back; the sashes of the windows were all thrown up; and the rain, which had followed when the east wind fell, had entered and made puddles on the sills inside. Such a draught of air rushed down the passage that Hardenow's lengthy skirts flickered out, in the orthodox fashion, behind him.

At the end of this passage he came to a small alcove, fenced off with a loose white curtain, shaking and jerking itself in the wind. He put this aside with his stick; and two doorways, leading into separate rooms, but with no doors in them, faced him. Something told him that both these rooms held human life, or human death.

First he looked in at the one on the left. He expected to see lonely death; perhaps corruption; or he knew not what. His nerves were strung or unstrung (whichever is the medical way of putting it) to such a degree that he wholly forgot, or entirely put by, everything, except his own absorbing sense of his duty, as a man in holy orders. This duty had never been practised yet in any serious way, because he had never been able to afford it. It costs so much more money than it brings in. However, in the midst of more lucrative work, he had felt that he was sacred to it—rich or poor—and he often had a special hankering after it. This leaning towards the cure of souls had a good chance now of being gratified.

In the room on the left hand he saw a little bed, laid at the foot of a fat four-poster, which with carved mouths grinned at it; and on this little bed of white (without curtain, or trimming, or tester), lay a lady, or a lady's body, cast down recklessly, in sleep or death, with the face entirely covered by a silvery cloud of hair. From the manner in which one arm was bent, Hardenow thought that the lady lived. There was nothing else to show it. Being a young man, a gentleman also, he hung back and trembled back from entering that room.

Without any power to "revolve things well," as he always directed his pupils to do, Hardenow stepped to the other doorway, and silently settled his gaze inside. His eyes were so worried that he could not trust them, until he had time to consider what they told.

They told him a tale even stranger than that which had grown upon him for an hour now, and passed from a void alarm into a terror; they showed him the loveliest girl—according to their rendering—that ever they had rested on till now; a maiden sitting in a low chair reading, silently sometimes, and sometimes in a whisper, according to some signal, perhaps, of which he saw no sign. There was no other person in the room, so far as he could see; and he strained his eyes with extreme anxiety to make out that.

The Rev. Thomas Hardenow knew (as clearly as his keen perception ever had brought any knowledge home) that he was not discharging the functions now—unless they were too catholic—of the sacerdotal office, in watching a young woman through a doorway, without either leave or notice. But though he must have been aware of this, it scarcely seemed now to occur to him; or whether it did, or did not, he went on in the same manner gazing.

The girl could not see him; it was not fair play. The width of great windows, for instance, kept up such a rattling of blinds, and such flapping of cords, and even the floor was so strewn with herbs (for the sake of their aroma), that anybody might quite come close to anybody who had cast away fear (in the vast despair of prostration), without any sense of approach until perhaps hand was laid upon shoulder. Hardenow took no more advantage of these things than about half a minute. In that half-minute, however, his outward faculties (being all alive with fear) rendered to his inward and endiathetic organs a picture, a schema, or a plasm—the proper word may be left to him—such as would remain inside, at least while the mind abode there.

The sound of low, laborious breath pervaded the sick room now and then, between the creaking noises and the sighing of the wind. In spite of all draughts, the air was heavy with the scent of herbs strewn broadcast, to prevent infection—tansy, wormwood, rue, and sage, burnt lavender and rosemary. The use of acids in malignant fevers was at that time much in vogue, and saucers of vinegar and verjuice, steeped lemon-peel, and such like, as well as dozens of medicine bottles, stood upon little tables. Still Hardenow could not see the patient; only by following the glance of the reader could he discover the direction. It was the girl herself, however, on whom his wondering eyes were bent. At first he seemed to know her face, and then he was sure that he must have been wrong. The sense of doing good, and the wonderful influence of pity, had changed the face of a pretty girl into that of a beautiful woman. Hardenow banished his first idea, and wondered what strange young lady this could be.

Although she was reading aloud, and doing it not so very badly, it was plain enough that she expected no one to listen to her. The sound of her voice, perhaps, was soothing to some one who understood no words; as people (in some of the many unknown conditions of brain) have been soothed and recovered by a thread of waterfall broken with a walking-stick. At any rate, she read on, and her reading fell like decent poetry.

Hardenow scarcely knew what he ought to do. He did not like to go forward; and it was a mean thing to go backward, rendering no help, when help seemed wanted so extremely. He peeped back into the other room; and there was the lady with the fine white hair, sleeping as soundly as a weary top driven into dreaming by extreme activity of blows.

Nothing less than a fine idea could have delivered Hardenow from this bad situation. It was suddenly borne in upon his mind that the house had a rare old fire-bell, a relic of nobler ages, hanging from a bar in a little open cot,

scarcely big enough for a hen-roost; and Russel had shown him one day, with a laugh, the corner in which the rope hung. There certainly could be but very little chance of doing harm by ringing it; what could be worse than the present state of things? Some good Samaritan might come. No Levite was left to be driven away.

For Hardenow understood the situation now. The meaning of a very short paragraph in the Oxford paper of Saturday, which he had glanced at and cast by, came distinctly home to him. The careful editor had omitted name of person and of place, but had made his report quite clear to those who held a key to the reference. "How very dull-witted now I must be!" cried the poor young fellow in his lonely trouble. "I ought to have known it. But we never know the clearest things until too late." It was not only for the sake of acquitting himself of an awkward matter, but also in the hope of doing good to the few left desolate, that Hardenow moved forth his legs, from the windy white curtain away again.

He went down the passage at a very great pace, as nearly akin to a run as the practice of long steady walks permitted; and then at the head of the staircase he turned, and remembered a quiet little corner. Here, in an out-of-the-way recess, the rope of the alarm-bell hung; and he saw it, even in that niche, moving to and fro with the universal draught. Hardenow seized it, and rang such a peal as the old bell had never given tongue to before. The bell was a large one, sound and clear; and the call must have startled the neighbourhood for a mile, if it could be startled.

"Really, I do believe I have roused somebody at last!" exclaimed the ringer, as he looked through a window commanding the road to the house, and saw a man on horse-back coming. "But, surely, unless he sprang out of the ground, he must have been coming before I began."

In this strange loneliness, almost any visitor would be welcome; and Hardenow ran towards the top of the stairs to see who it was, and to meet him. But here, as he turned the corner of the balustraded gallery, a scared and hurrying young woman, almost ran into his arms.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried, drawing back, and blushing to a deeper colour than well-extracted blood can show; "there is no funeral yet! He is not dead! Who is ringing the bell so? It has startled even him, and will either kill or save him! Kill him, it will kill him, I am almost sure!"

"Esther—Miss Cripps—what a fool I am! I never thought of that—I did not know—how could I tell? I am all in the dark! Is it Russel Overshute?"

"Yes, Mr. Hardenow. Everybody knows it. Every one has taken good care to run away. Even the doctors will come no more! They say it is hopeless; and they might only infect their other patients. I fear that his mother must die too! She has taken the fever in a milder form; but walk she will, while walk she can. And at her time of life it is such a chance. But I cannot stop one moment!"

"And at your time of life is it nothing, Esther? You seem to think of everybody but yourself. Is this fair to your own hearth and home?"

While he was speaking he looked at her eyes; and her eyes were filling with deep tears—a dangerous process to contemplate.

"Oh, no, there is no fear of that," she answered misunderstanding him; "I shall take good care not to go home until I am quite sure that there is no risk."

"That is not what I mean. I mean supposing you yourself should catch it."

"If I do, they will let me stay here, I am sure. But I have no fear of it. The hand that led me here will lead me back again. But you ought not to be here. I am quite forgetting you."

Hardenow looked at her with admiration warmer than he could put into words. She had been thinking of him throughout. She thought of every one except herself. Even in the moment of first surprise she had drawn away so that she stood to leeward; and while they were speaking she took good care that the current of wind passed from him to her. Also in one hand she carried a little chafing-dish producing lively fumigation.

"Now, if you please, I must go back to him. Nothing would move him; he lay for hours, as a log lies on a stone. I could not have knowledge whether he was living, only for his breathing sometimes like a moan. The sound of the bell seemed to call him to life, for he thought it was his own funeral. His mother is with him; worn out as she is, the lady awoke at his rambling. She sent me to find out the meaning. Now, sir, please to go back round the corner; the shivering wind comes down the passage."

Hardenow was not such a coward as to obey her orders. He even wanted to shake hands with her, as in her girlhood he used to do, when he had frightened this little pupil with too much emendation. But Esther curtsied at a distance, and started away—until her retreat was cut off very suddenly.

"Why, ho girl! Ho girl; and young man in the corner! What is the meaning of all this? I have come to see things righted; my name is Worth Oglander. I find this here old house silent as a grave, and you two looking like a brace of robbers! Young woman!—young woman!—why, bless me now, if it isn't our own Etty Cripps! I did believe, and I would believe, but for knowing of your family, Etty, and your brother Cripps the Carrier, that here you are for the purpose of setting this old mansion afire!"

Esther, having been hard set to sustain what had happened already (as well as unblest with a wink of sleep since Friday night), was now unable to assert her dignity. She simply leaned against the wall, and gently blew into the embers of her disinfecting stuff. She knew that the Squire might kill himself, after all his weeks of confinement, by

coming over here, in this rash manner, and working himself up so. But it was not her place to say a word; even if she could say it.

"Mr. Oglander," said Hardenow, coming forward and offering his hand, while Esther looked at them from beneath a cloud of smoke, "I know your name better than you know mine. You happened to be on the continent when I was staying in your village. My name is Thomas Hardenow. I am a priest of the Anglican Church, and have no intention of setting anything on fire."

"Lor' bless me! Lord bless me! Are you the young fellow that turned half the heads of Beckley, and made the Oxford examiners all tumble back, like dead herrings with their jaws down? Cripps was in the schools, and he told me all about it. And you were a friend of poor Overshute. I am proud to make your acquaintance, sir."

"Master Cripps has inverted the story, I fear," Hardenow answered, with a glance at Esther; while he could not, without rudeness, get his hand out of the ancient Squire's (which clung to another, in this weak time, as heartily as it used to do); "the examiners made a dry herring of me. But I am very glad to see you, sir; I have heard of—at least, I mean, I feared—that you were in weak health almost."

"Not a bit of it! I was fool enough—or rather I should say, my sister—to have a lot of doctors down; fellows worth their weight in gold, or at any rate in brass, every day of their own blessed lives; and yet with that temptation even, they cannot lengthen their own days. Of that I will tell you some other time. They kept me indoors, and they drenched me with physic—this, that, and the other. God bless you, sir, this hour of the air, with my own old good mare under me, has done me more good—but my head goes round; just a little; not anything to notice. Etty, my dear, don't you be afraid."

With these words the Squire sank down on the floor, not through any kind of fit, or even loss of consciousness; but merely because his fine old legs (being quite out of practice for so many weeks) had found it a little more than they could do to keep themselves firm in the stirrups, and then carry their master up slippery stairs, and after that have to support a good deal of excitement among the trunk parts.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THROW PHYSIC TO THE DOGS.

"In all my life I never knew such a very extraordinary thing," said Squire Oglander on the following Tuesday, to his old friend Dr. Splinters. "Why, look you here, he was wholly given up by the very first man in London—that the poor young fellow was—can you deny that, Splinters?"

"Well, between you and me and the door-post, Squire," answered his learned visitor, "I am not quite so sure that Sir Anthony is quite the rose and crown of the profession. He may be a great Court card and all that, and the rage with all the nobility; but for all that, Squire, there are good men in comparatively obscure positions; men who have devoted their lives to science from the purest motives; modest men, sir, who are thankful to pocket their poor guinea; men who would scorn any handle to their name or any shabby interloping; sir, I say there are d——d good men——"

"But even you, Splinters, come now—even you gave him up—unless we are wholly misinformed."

"Not at all. That was quite a mistake. The fact was simply this. When Sir Anthony pronounced his opinion at our last consultation, it was not my place to contradict him—we never do that with a London man—but I ventured in my own mind to differ even from our brilliant light, sir. For I said to myself, 'first see the effect of the remedial agent which I myself, in the absence of this Londoner, have exhibited.' I was suddenly called away to retrieve a case of shocking blundering by a quack at Iffley. That was why you did not see me, Squire."

"Oh, yes, to be sure! I quite see now," answered Mr. Oglander, with a quiet internal wink. "And when you came you found the most wonderful effect from your remedial agent."

"That I did. Something I could scarcely have believed. Soft sweet sleep, a genial perspiration, an equable pulse, nice gentle breathing—the very conditions of hygiene which Sir Anthony's efforts could never produce. Why, my good sir, in all the records of the therapeutic art, there is no example of such rapid efficacy. I think it will henceforth be acknowledged that Dr. Splinters knows what he is about. My dear friend, you know that there is nothing I dislike so much as the appearance of vaunting. If I had only condescended to that, nobody could have stopped me, sir. But no, Squire, no; I have always been the same; and I have not an enemy, except myself."

"You may say more than that, sir—a great deal more than that. You may say that you have many friends, doctor, who admire your great abilities. But as to Russel Overshute, if the poor fellow does come round the general belief will be that he must thank the fire-bell."

"The fire-bell! My dear sir, in this age of advanced therapeutics—Oglander, you must know better than to listen to that low story!"

"Splinters, I know that foolish tales are told about almost everything. But being there myself, I thought there might be something in it."

"Nothing whatever! I never heard such nonsense! I was quite angry with Esther Cripps. What can chits of girls know? They must have their chatter."

"I suppose they must," said the Squire sadly, thinking of his own dear Grace; "still they may be right sometimes. At any rate, doctor, the fire-bell did as much good as your medicine did. Take another glass of wine. I would not hurt your feelings for the world, my dear old friend."

"Oglander," answered Dr. Splinters, putting up his great gold spectacles, so that beneath them he might see—for he never could see through them—how to pour out his fine glass of port, "Oglander, you have something or other that you are keeping in the background. Squire, whatever it is, out with it. Between you and me, sir, there should be nothing but downright yes or no, Mr. Oglander. Downright yes or no, sir."

"Of course, of course," said the Squire, relapsing into some quiet mood again; "that was how I always liked it. Splinters, you must know I did. And I never meant anything against it, by bringing this here little bottle back. It may have saved the poor boy's life; and of course it did, if you say so. But the seal is still on the cork, and the stuff all there; so it may do good again. I dare say the good came through the glass; you doctors have such devices!" Mr. Oglander took a small square bottle from his inner peculiar pocket, and gave it to the doctor, so as not to disturb his wine-glass.

"How the deuce did you get hold of this?" cried Splinters, being an angry man when taken without notice; "this is some of that girl's insolent tricks!—I call her an insolent and wicked girl!"

"I call her a good and a brave girl!—the very best girl in Beckley, since—but, my dear Splinters, you must not be vexed. She told me that you had the greatest faith in this last idea of yours; and it struck me at once that you might wish to try it in some other case; and so I brought it. You see it has not been opened."

"It doesn't matter whether it was used or not," cried Dr. Splinters vehemently; "there is the stuff, sir; and here is the result! Am I to understand, sir, that you deny the existence of Providence?"

"Far be such a thing from me!" the Squire replied, with a little indignation at such an idea; and then, remembering

that Splinters was his guest, he changed the subject. "How could I help having faith in the Lord, when I see His care made manifest? Why, look at me, Splinters; I am twice the man I was last Sunday morning! Why is it so? Why, because it pleased a gracious Providence to make it my duty, as a man, to ride!—to ride, sir, a very considerable distance, on a mare who had been eating her head off. Every one vowed that I never could do it; and my good housekeeper locked me in; and when I unscrewed the lock, she sent two men after me, to pick me up. Very good, sir; here I am, enjoying my glass of port, with the full intention of having another. Yesterday I sent to our road-contractor for a three-headed and double-handed hammer; and Kale smashed up, in about two minutes, three hundred and twenty medicine bottles! They will come in for the top of the orchard wall."

"Squire," answered Splinters, with a twinkling eye, "it is not at all improbable that you may be right. There are some constitutions so perverse that to exhibit the best remedial agent is just the same thing as to reason with a pig. But it is high time for me to be jogging on my road. If Beckley and Shotover discard my extremely humble services, there are other places in the world, sir, besides Beckley and Shotover."

"There is no other place in the world for you, except Beckley, for some hours, my friend. We have known one another long enough, to allow for one another now. I would have arranged a rubber for you—but, but—well, you know what I mean—sadly selfish; but I cannot help it."

The doctor, though vain and irritable, was easily touched with softness. He thought of all his many children, and of the long pain he had felt at losing one out of a dozen; then without process of thought he felt for the loss of one; where one was all.

"Oglander, you need not say another word," he answered, putting forth his hand, to squeeze any trifle away between them. "A rubber in winter is all very well; and so it is in summer, at the proper time, but on a magnificent spring evening, to watch the sunset between one's cards is not—I mean that it is very nice indeed, but still it ought scarcely to be done, when you can help it. Now, I will just take the leastest little drop of your grand Curaçoa before I smoke; and then if you have one of those old Manillas, I am your man for a stroll in the garden."

To go into a garden in good weather soothes the temper. The freedom of getting out of doors is a gracious joy to begin with; and when the first blush of that is past, without any trouble there come forward so many things to be looked at. Even since yesterday—if we had the good hap to see them yesterday—many thousand of little things have spent the time in changing. Even with the weather scarcely different from yesterday's—though differ it must in some small points, when in its most consistent mood—even with no man to come and dig, and fork, and roll, and by all human devices harass; and even without any children dancing, plucking, pulling, trampling, and enjoying their blessed little hearts, as freely as any flower does; yet in the absence of all those local contributions towards variety, variety there will be for all who have the time to look for it.

The most observant and delightful poets of the present age, instead of being masters of nature, prefer to be nature's masters. Having obtained this power they use it with such diligence and spirit, that they make the peach and the apple bloom together, and the plum keep the kalendar of the lilac. Once in a way, such a thing does almost happen (without the poet's aid)—that is to say, when a long cold winter is broken by a genial outburst waking every dormant life; and after that, a repressive chill returns, and lasts to the May month. At such a time, when hope deferred springs anew as hope assured, and fear breaks into fluttering joy, and faith moves steadily into growth, then a truly poetic confusion arises in the works of earth.

In such a state of things the squire and the doctor walked to and fro in the garden; the Squire still looking very pale and feeble, but with the help of his favourite spud, managing to get along, and to enjoy the evening. The blush of the peach wall was not over, and yet the trellised apple-tree was softly unsheathing puckered buds, all in little clusters pointed like rosettes of coral. The petals of the plum-bloom still were hovering with their edges brown, although in a corner near a chimney, positively a lilac-bush was thrusting forth those livid jags which lift and curve themselves so swiftly into plumes of beauty. The two good gentlemen were surprised; each wanted particularly to hear what the other thought of it; but neither would deign to ask; and either feared to speak his thoughts, for fear of giving the other an advantage. Because they were rival gardeners; and so they avoided the subject.

"This is the very first cigar," said the Squire, as they turned at the end of the peach wall, over against a young Grosse Mignonne, beautifully trained on the Seymour system, and bright with the central glow of pistil, although the petals were dropping—"my very first cigar, since that—you know what I mean, of course—since I have cared whether I were in my garden, or in my grave. But the Lord supports me. Providence is good; or how could I be smoking this cigar?"

"You must not learn to look at things in that way," Dr. Splinters answered; "Oglander, you must learn to know better. You are in an uncomfortable frame of mind, or you would not have flouted me with that bottle, after all our friendship. Why, bless me! Only look around you. Badly pruned as your trees are, what a picture there is of largeness!"

"Yes, Splinters, more than you could find in yours; which you amputate into a doctor's bamboo. But now, perhaps, you may doubt it, Splinters, because your trees are so very poor—but I have not felt any pride at all, any pride at all, in one of them. What is the good of lovely trees, with only one's self to enjoy them?"

"Now, Oglander, there you are again! How often must I tell you? Your poor little Gracie is gone, of course; and a nice little thing she was, to be sure. But here you are again as well as ever, or at any rate as positive. I judge a man's state of health very much by his powers of contradiction. And yours are first-rate. Go to, go to! You are equal to another wife. Take a young one, and have more Gracies."

"Splinters, do you know what I should do," Mr. Oglander answered, with his spud uplifted, "if my powers were such

as you suppose—because I smashed your bottles?"

"Yes, I dare say you would knock me down, and never beg my pardon till the wedding breakfast."

"You are right in the first part; but wrong in the second. Oh, doctor, is there no one able to share the simplest thoughts we have?"

"To minister to a mind diseased? First, he must have his own mind diseased; as all the blessed poets have. But look! The green fly—who would ever believe it, after our Siberian winter? The aphis is hatched in your young peach-shoots before they have made even half a joint. That comes of your Seymour system."

"Ridiculous!" answered the Squire; "but never mind! What matter now? Then you really do think, Splinters—now, as an old friend, try to tell me—in pure sincerity, do you think that I have altogether lost my Gracie?"

"Oglander, no! I can truly say no. We are all good Christians, I should hope. She is not lost, but gone before."

"But, my dear fellow, will you never understand that she ought to have gone, long after? It is all very well for you, who have got some baker's dozen of little ones, and lost only one in the measles—forgive me, I know it was hard upon you—I say things that I should not say—but if you could only bring your mind—however, I daresay you have tried to do it; and what right have I to ask you? Splinters, I know I am puzzle-headed; and many people think me worse than that. But you have the sense to understand me, because for many years you have been acquainted with my constitution. Now, Splinters, tell me, in three words—shall I live to see my Gracie?"

"That you will, Squire; and to see her married; and to dance on your lap her children!" So said Dr. Splinters, fearing what might happen, if he did not say it.

"Only to see her. That is all I want. And to have her in my arms once more. And to hear her tell me, with her own true tongue, that she never ran away from me. After that I shall be ready for my coffin, and know that the Lord has ordered it. Here comes more of your dust into my eyes! Splinters, will you never learn how to knock your ash off?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

CRIPPS ON CELIBACY.

Whatever might or may be said by any number of most able and homicidal physicians, Russel Overshute will believe, as long as he draws breath of life, that by the grace of the Lord he owes that privilege to the fire-bell. In this belief he has always been most strongly supported by Esther Cripps, who perhaps was the first to suggest the idea; for he at that time must have failed to know a fire-bell from a water-bucket. The doctors had left him, through no fear for their own lives, but in despair of his. There was far less risk of infection now than in the earlier stages. No sooner, however, did the household find out that the medical men had abandoned the case, than panic seized their gallant hearts, and with one accord they ran away. From Saturday morning till Saturday night, when Esther came from Beckley, there was nobody left to watch and soothe the poor despairing misery, except the helpless and worn-out mother.

One thing is certain (and even the doctors, with their usual sharpness, found it wise to acknowledge this)—both Mr. Overshute and his mother must have been dead bodies with little hope of Christian burial, if that brave girl had not set forth (without any one even asking her) on the Saturday night to help them. Mrs. Overshute had quite thrown up all hope of everything—save the mercy of God in a better world, and His justice upon her enemies—when quite in the dark this young girl came, while she was lying down on her back, and curtsied, and asked her pleasure.

If Esther had not curtsied, perhaps Mrs. Overshute in that state of mind would have taken her for an angel; though Etty's bonnet, made by herself, was not at all angelical. But she knew her for one of the lower orders (who bend knee instead of neck), and belonging herself to a fine old race, she rallied her last energies with a power of condescension.

However, these are medical, physical, social, economical, and perhaps even psychological questions—wherein what remains except perpetual inquiry? Enough is to say that Russell Overshute, having long had a ringing in his ears, was rung out of that, and rung back to life, by the lively peal of the fire-bell. And ever since that, whenever he is ill—though it be only a little touch of gout—he immediately sends a good corpulent man to lay hold of the rope and swing to it. These things are of later date. For the present, this young man (although he certainly had turned the corner) lay still in a very precarious state, with a feeble mother to pray for him. Mrs. Overshute held that same vile fever, but in a very different form, as at her time of life was natural. With her it was intermittent, low, stealthy, and undermining. It never affected her brain, or drove her into furious calenture, but rooted slowly inward, preying on her life quite leisurely. Their cases differed, as a knock-down blow differs from a quiet grasp.

But though the house lay still in sadness, loneliness, and dull suspense, and though the doctors, having abandoned the case, had the manners not to come again, still from day to day there was some little growth of liveliness. Hardenow came almost daily, having put his class of striders under a deputy six-leaguer; the Squire also might be expected, whenever Mother Hookham let him out; and even Zacchary Cripps renewed an old washing in that direction. He came, with the hoops of his cart taken out, because of the beautiful weather, and four good baskets of clothes for to wash (whose wearers were happy enough to have no idea where their "things" were), and quite at the centre of his gravity—as felt by himself, and endorsed by Dobbin—anybody getting up with a curious eye might well have beheld a phenomenon. For here stood a very large pickling tub, with the cover taken off for the sake of air; around the sides was salted pork—hands and springs, and belly pieces—and in the middle was a good-sized barrel of the then existent native.

"Veed 'un," cried Cripps, with his coat-tails up, while tugging at his heavy tub; "veed 'un, Etty, whatsomever 'ee do. Salt is the main thing for 'un now. I have heerd tell that they burns away every bit of the salt inside 'em, in these here bouts of fever. If 'ee can replace 'un, laife comes round; or else they goes off, like the snuff of a candle. Bless me, I must be getting fevery myzell, or never should have a job to lift this here. Now the quality of this pickle you know well, for the most part fell on your shoulders. Home-bred, home-born, home-fed, home-slaughtered, and home-salted—that's what I calls pork!"

"Yes, to be sure, Zak," Etty answered, laying her hand to the tub upon the shaft-stock, while Dobbin wagged his tail at her; "but what have you got in this very small cask, sitting in the middle of all the brine?"

"Why, you know, Etty, you must have seed me bring 'em for all the great folk about Christmas-tide. Oysters, as lives in the sea, and must be salt inside of their barryels. So I clapped them in here for a fresh smack of it, and uncommonly strengthening things they be if you take them with enow of treble X. Likely his worship will be too weak to keep them down with the covers on yet, as is the proper way, they tell me; so you best way take out the hearts and give him."

"Oh, brother," cried Esther, remembering suddenly, "I ought not to be talking to you like this. Whatever could I be thinking of? What would the people at Beckley say? They would fear to come nigh you for a month, Zak, and your business would be ruined. Now, do jog on, you and dear old Dobbin. How well I knew the sound of his old feet. I can't give you the fever, Dobbin, can I?"

With this perhaps incorrect or, at any rate, unestablished hypothesis, she gave the old horse a lingering kiss just below his blinkers, in return for which he jerked off some froth on the sleeve of her dress, and shook himself; while the Carrier, having discharged his cargo, smote himself with both arms, from habit rather than necessity, and approached his young sister for his usual hearty smack.

"No, Zak, no," she cried, running up the steps, "I have no fear of taking it myself whatever; but if I should happen to give it to you, I never should get over it."

"Well, well, little un, the Lord knows best," Master Cripps answered, without repining too bitterly at this arrangement; "but ating of my victuals lonesome is worse than having no salt to them; you better come home pretty soon, my dear, or somehow or other there might happen to be some one over in the corner, 'longside of our best frying-pan."

Etty had heard this threat so often, that now she only laughed at it. But instead of laughing, she blushed most sadly at her brother's parting words:

"God bless you, Etty, for a brave good girl; and speed you home to Beckley. You want more sleep of nights, my dear; your cheeks are getting like a pillow-case. But excoose my mentioning of one thing, Etty; I be like a father to 'ee; don't 'ee have more than you can help to say to the great scholard, Master Hardenow."

Cripps was a gentleman, in an inner kind of way, and he took good care to be getting up his shaft (with his stiff knee stiffer than ever, from the long frost of last winter) while he discharged his duty, as he thought it, at, as well as to, his sister. Then he deposited the polished part of his breeches on the driving-board, and brought his "game-leg" into the right stick-out, and with his usual deliberation started—nay, that is too strong a word—persuaded into progress his congenial and deliberate horse. Neither of them hurried on a washing-day, any more than they hurried upon any other day.

Zacchary knew that his sister was—as Master Phil Hiss had said of her—"a most terrible hand at blushing;" and she could not bear to be looked at in this electric aurora of maidenhood; and therefore he managed to be a long way off, ere even he turned both head and hand, to deliver last issue of "God bless you!"

Full of confusion about herself, and clearness of duty for other people, Esther Cripps ran in, to see to the many things now depending upon her. There were now three servants in the house, gathered from good stuff around, but wholly void of any wit, to make up for want of experience. Esther had no experience either, but she possessed good store of sense, and quickness, and kind energy. Whatever she thought of her brother's warning, she would think of afterwards. For the present she must do her best concerning other people; and Mrs. Overshute needed now more nursing than her son did.

Zacchary Cripps, at the very first distance at which he was sure of not being seen, began to shake his head, and shook it, in a resolutely reflective way, for nearly three quarters of a mile. The trees above him were alive with beauty, alike of sight, and sound, and scent; and the Carrier made up his mind for a pipe, to enable him to consider things. His custom was not to smoke, except when good occasion offered; and he tried to have no contempt for carriers (of inferior family) who could not deliver a side of bacon without smoking it over again almost. Zacchary Cripps, like all good men, stood up for the dignity of his work. Strictly meditating thus, he saw a slight figure approaching with a rapid swing, and presently met Mr. Hardenow.

The fellow and tutor of Brazenose, at the sight of Cripps and the well-known cart, stopped short to ask how things were going on at the house on the hill above them. The Carrier answered that it would be many a long day, he was afraid, ere his worship could get about again, and that he ought to be kept very quiet, and those would be his best friends now who had the least to say to him. Also he was told that the poor old lady would find it as much as her life was worth, if she was interrupted or terrified now.

"But, my good Cripps," answered Hardenow, "I am not going either to interrupt or terrify them. All I desire is to have a little talk with your good and intelligent sister."

Poor Zacchary felt that his own tactics thus were turned against him; and, after a little stammering and heightened glow of countenance, he betook himself to his more usual course—that of plain out-speaking. But first he got down from his driving-board that he might not fail in due respect to a gentleman and clergyman. Master Cripps had no liking at all for the duty which he felt bound to take in hand. He would rather have a row with three turnpike-men than presume to speak to a gentleman; therefore his bow-leg seemed to twitch him at the knee, as he led Hardenow aside into a quiet gateway; but his eyes were firm and his manner grave and steadfast as he began to speak.

"Mr. Hardenow, now I must ask your pardon, for a few words as I want to say. You are a gentleman, of course, and a very learned scholar; and I be nothing but a common carrier—a 'carrier for hire,' they calls me in the law, when they comes upon me for damages. Howsoever, I has to do my part off the road as well as on it, sir; and my dooty to them of my own household comes next to my dooty to God and myzell. You are a good man, I know, and a kind one, and would not, beknown to yourself, harm any one. It would go to your heart, I believe, Mr. Hardenow, from what I seed of you, when you was quite a lad, if anyhow you was to be art or part in bringing unhappiness of mind to any that had trusted you."

"I should hope so, Cripps. I have some idea of what you mean, but can hardly think—at any rate, speak more plainly."

"Well then, sir, I means all about your goings on with our little Etty, or, at any rate, her goings on with you, which cometh to the same thing in the end, so far as I be acquaint of it. You might think, if you was not told distinkly to the contrairy, that having no business to lift up her eyes, she never would do so according. But I do assure you, sir, when it cometh to such like manner of taking on, the last thing as ever gets called into the account is sensible reason. They feels this, and they feels that; and then they falls to a-dreaming; and the world goes into their tub, same as butter, and they scoops it out, and pats, and stamps it to their own size and liking, and then the whole melteth, and a sour fool is left."

"Master Cripps, what you say is wise; and the like has often happened. But your sister is a most noble girl. You do

her gross injustice by talking as if she were nothing but a common village maid. She is brave, she is pure, she is grandly unselfish. Her mind is well above feminine average; anything more so goes always amiss. You should not have such a low opinion as you seem to have of your sister, Cripps."

"Sir, my opinion is high enough. Now, to bring your own fine words to the test, would you ever dream of marrying the maid, if I and she both was agreeable?"

"It would be an honour to me to do so. For the prejudices of the world I care not one fig. But surely you know that we contend for the celibacy of the clergy."

"Maning as a parson maun't marry a wife?" asked Cripps, by the light of nature.

"Yes, my friend, that is what we now maintain in the Anglican communion, as the tradition of the Church."

"Well, may I be danged!" cried Cripps, who was an ardent theologian. "Then, if I may make so bold to ask, sir, how could there a' been a tribe of Levi? They must all a' died out in the first generation; if 'em ever come to any generation at all."

"Your objection is ingenious, Cripps; but the analogy fails entirely. We are guided in such matters by unbroken and unquestionable tradition of the early Church."

"Then, sir, if you goes outside of the Bible, you stand on your own legs, and leave us no kind of leg to stand upon. However, I believe that you mean well, sir, and I am sure that you never do no great harm. And, as to our Etty, if you feel like that in an honest, helpless sort of way, I beg the honour of shaking hands, sir, for the spirit that is inside of you."

"Certainly, certainly, Cripps, with great pleasure!"

"And then of asking you to tramp another road, for your own sake, as well as hers, sir. And may the Lord teach you to know your own mind."

"Cripps, I will follow your advice for the present; though you have said some things that you scarcely ought to say."

"Then I humbly beg your pardon, sir. Every one of us doeth that same sometimes. The bridle of the tongue falleth into the teeth, when the lash is laid on us."

"Your metaphors are quite classical. However, I respect you greatly, Cripps, for your straightforward conduct. I am not a weak man, any more than you are; although you seem to think me one. I like and admire your sister Esther, for courage combined with gentleness. I always liked her, when she was a child; and I understood her nature. But as to her—liking me more than she ought; Cripps, you are imaginative."

"Never heerd before," cried Cripps, "any accoosation of that there kind."

"My friend, it is the rarest compliment. However, your horse is quite ready to walk off; and so am I, towards Cowley. I will not go to Shotover Grange to-day; and I will avoid your sister; though I rarely do like talking to her."

"You are a man sir," cried Zacchary Cripps, as Hardenow set off across the fields. "God bless your reverence, though you never get a waife! A true man he is, and a maight a' been a faine one, if he hadn't taken to them stiff coat tails."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

KIT.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Luke Sharp was growing very anxious about her son, and only child and idol, Christopher. Not that there was anything at all amiss with his bodily health, so far at least as she could see; but that he seemed so unsettled in his mind, so absent and preoccupied, and careless even of his out-door sports, which at one time were his only care. Of course, at this time of year, there was very little employment for the gun, but there was plenty of fishing to be got, such as it was, round Oxford, and it must be a very bad time of year when there are no rats for little terriers, and badgers for the larger tribe. Yet none of these things now possessed the proper charm for Christopher. Wherever he was, he always seemed to be wanting to be somewhere else; and, like a hydrophobic dog, he hated to be looked at; while (after the manner of a cat assisted lately by Lucina) he ran up into his own loft, when he thought there was nobody watching.

Well arranged as all this might be, and keen, and self-satisfactory, there was something keener, and not very easy to satisfy, looking after it. The love of a mother may fairly be trusted to outwit any such calf-love as was making a fool of this unfledged fellow, fresh from the feather-bed of a private school.

Considering whence he came, and how he had been brought up and pampered, Kit Sharp was a very fine young fellow, and—thanks to his liking for gun and rod—he could scarcely be called a milksop. Still he was only a boy in mind, and in manner quite unformed and shy; his father (for reasons of his own) having always refused to enter him at any of the colleges. He might perhaps have shaped his raw material by the noblest models, if he had been admitted into the society of undergraduates. But the members of the University entertained in those days, and probably still entertain, a just and inevitable contempt for all the non-togati. Kit Sharp had made some fluttering overtures of the flag of friendship towards one or two random undergraduates who had a nice taste for ratting; he had even dined and wined, once or twice, in a not ignoble college; and had been acknowledged to know a meerschaum as well as if he owned a statute-book. But the boy always fancied, perhaps through foolish and shy pride on his part, that these most hospitable and kind young men had their jokes to themselves about him. Perhaps it was so; but in pure goodwill. Take him for all in all, and allow for the needs of his situation—which towards the third year grow imperative—and the Oxford undergraduate is as good as any other young gentleman.

But Kit Sharp being exceedingly proud, and most secretive of his pride, would not long receive, without return, good hospitality. And this alone, without other suspicions, would have set bounds to his dealing with a race profusely hospitable. His dear and good mother would gladly have invited a Cross Duck Houseful of undergraduates, and left them to get on as they might, if only thereby her pet son might have sense of salt for salt with them; but Mr. Luke Sharp took a different view. To his mind, the junior members of the glorious University were a most disagreeable and unprofitable lot to deal with. He never, of course, condescended to the Vice-Chancellor's court, and he despised all little actions, in that large word's legal sense. He liked a fine old Don, or Head of a House, who had saved a sack of money, or well earned it by vitality. But for any such young fellows, with no expectations, or paulo-post-futura such, Mr. Sharp was now too long established to put a leaf into his dinner-table. This being so, and Christopher also of restricted pocket-money (so that no dinners at the Star or Mitre could be contemplated), Master Kit Sharp, in a "town and gown row," must have lent the weight of his quiet, but very considerable, fist to the oppidan faction.

"Kit, now, my darling Kit, do tell me," said Mrs. Sharp for about the fiftieth time, as she sat with her son in the sweet spring twilight, at the large western window of Cross Duck House; "what is it that makes you sigh so? You almost break your poor mother's heart. I never did know you sigh, my own one. Now, is it for want of a rat, my darling? If rats are a sovereign apiece, you shall have one."

"Rats, mother! Why, I can catch my own, without any appeal to 'the Filthy!' Rats are never far away from legal premises, like these."

"You should not speak so of your father's house, Kit. And I am sure that no rats ever come upstairs, or out of the window I must jump. But now you are only avoiding the subject. What is it that disturbs your mind, Kit?"

"Once more, mother, I have the greatest objection to being called 'Kit.' It sounds so small, and—and so horribly prosaic. All the dictionaries say that it means, either the outfit of a common soldier, or else a diminutive kind of fiddle."

"Christopher, I really beg your pardon. I know how much loftier you are, of course; but I cannot get over the habit, Kit. Well, well, then—My darling, I hope you are not at all above being 'my darling,' Kit."

"Mother, you may call me what you like. It can make no difference in my destinies."

"Christopher, you make my blood run cold. My darling, I implore you not to sigh so. Your dear father pays my allowance on Monday. I know what has long been the aspiration of your heart. Kit, you shall have a live badger of your own."

"I hate the very name of rats and badgers. Everything is so low and nasty. How can you look at that noble sunset, and be full of badgers? Mother, it grieves me to leave you alone; but how can I help it, when you go on so? I shall go for a walk on the Botley Road."

"Take your pipe, Kit, take your pipe; whatever you do, Kit, take your pipe," screamed poor Mrs. Sharp, as he stuck

his hat on, as if it were never to come off again. "Oh, Kit, there are such deep black holes; I will fill your pipe for you, if you will only smoke."

"Mother, you never know how to do it. And once more, my name is 'Christopher.'"

The young man threw a light cloak on his shoulder, and set his eyebrows sternly; and his countenance looked very picturesque in the glow of his death's-head meerschaum. It occurred to his mother that she had never seen anything more noble. As soon as she had heard him bang the door, Mrs. Sharp ran back to the window, whence she could watch all Cross Duck Lane, and she saw him striding along towards the quickest outlet to the country.

"How wonderful it is!" she said to herself, with tears all ready; "only the other day he was quite a little boy, and whipped a top, and cried if a pin ran into him. And now he is, far beyond all dispute, the finest young man in Oxford; he has the highest contempt for all vulgar sports, and he bolts the door of his bedroom. His father calls him thick and soft! Ah, he cannot understand his qualities! There is the deepest and purest well-spring of unintelligible poetry in Kit. His great mind is perturbed, and has hurried him into commune with the evening star. Thank goodness that he has got his pipe!"

Before Mrs. Sharp had turned one page of her truly voluminous thoughts about her son, a sharp click awoke the front-door lock, and a steady and well-jointed step made creaks on the old oak staircase. Mrs. Sharp drew back from her meditative vigil, and trimmed her little curls aright.

"Miranda, I have some work to do to-night," said Mr. Sharp, in his quiet even voice; "and I thought it better to come up and tell you, so that you need not expect me again. Just have the fire in the office lighted. I can work better there than I can upstairs; and I find the evenings damp, although the long cold winter is gone at last. If I should ring about ten o'clock it will be for a cup of coffee. If I do not ring then, send everybody to bed. And do not expect me until you see me."

"Certainly, Luke, I quite understand," answered Mrs. Sharp, having been for years accustomed to such arrangements; "but, my dear, before you begin, can you spare me five minutes, for a little conversation?"

"Of course I can, Miranda! I am always at your service."

Mrs. Sharp thought to herself that this was a slight exaggeration. Still on the whole she had little to complain of. Mr. Sharp always remembered the time when he cast sad distant eyes at her, Miranda Piper,—more enchanting than a will-case, more highly cherished than the deed-box of an Earl. Nothing but impudence had enabled him to marry her; thereby his impudence was exhausted in that one direction, and he ever remained polite to her.

"Then, Luke, will you just take your favourite chair, and answer me only one question?" As she said these words, Mrs. Sharp took care to set the chair so that she could get the last gleam of sunset on her dear lord's face. Her husband thoroughly understood all this, and accepted the situation.

"Now, do tell me, Luke—you notice everything, though you do not always speak of it—have you observed how very strangely Kit has been going on for some time now? And have you any idea of the reason? And do you think that we ought to allow it, my dear?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sharp, I have observed it. You need not be at all uneasy about it. I am observing him very closely. When I disapprove, I shall stop it at once."

"But surely, my dear, surely I, his mother, am not to be kept in the dark about it? I know that you always take your own course, and your course is quite sure to be the right one; but surely, my dear, when something important is evidently going on about my own child, you would never have the heart to keep it from me. I could not endure it; indeed, I could not. I should fret myself away to skin and bone."

"It would take a long time to do that, my dear," replied Mr. Sharp, as he looked with satisfaction at her fine plump figure. It pleased him to hear, as he often did, that there was not in Oxford a finer couple of middle-aged people than Mr. and Mrs. Sharp. "However, I should be exceedingly grieved ever to initiate such a process. But first, before I tell you anything at all, I will ask you to promise two things most clearly."

"My dear, I would promise fifty things rather than put up with this cruel anxiety."

"Yes, I dare say. But I do not want rash promises, Miranda. You must pledge yourself to two things, and keep your pledges."

"I will do so in a moment, with the greatest pleasure. You would never ask anything wrong, I am sure. Only do not keep me waiting so."

"In the first place, then, you must promise me, whether my plan turns out well or ill, on no account to blame me for it, but to give me the credit of having acted for the best throughout."

"Nothing can be easier than to promise that. My dear, you always do act for the best; and what is more, the best always comes of it."

"Very well, you promise that; also, you must pledge yourself to conceal from every one, and most of all from Christopher, everything I am about to tell you, and to act under my directions."

"To be sure, my dear; to be sure, I will. Nothing is more reasonable than that I should keep your secrets."

"I know that you will try, Miranda; and I know that you have much self-command. Also, you will see the importance

of acting as I direct you. All I fear is that when you see poor Kit moping, or sighing, and groaning, it may be almost beyond your power to refrain your motherly heart."

"Have no fear, Luke; have no fear whatever. When I know that it is for his true interest, as of course it will be, I shall be exceedingly sorry for him; but still he may go on as much as he pleases; and of course, he has not behaved well at all, in being so mysterious to his own mother."

Luke Sharp looked at his wife, to ask whether any offshoot of this reproach was intended at all to come home to him. If he had discovered any sign of that, the wife of his bosom would have waited long without getting another word from him. For seldom as Mr. Sharp showed temper, he held back, with the chain-curb of expedience, as quick a temper as ever threatened to bolt with any man's fair repute. But now he received no irritation. His wife looked back at him kindly and sweetly, with moist expressive eyes; and he saw that she still was in her duty.

"Miranda," he said, being touched by this, for he had a great deal of conscience, "my darling, I will tell you something such as you never heard before. I have made a bold stroke, a very bold one; but I think it must succeed. And justice is with me, as you will own, after all the attempts to rob us. Perhaps you never heard a stranger story; but still I am sure you will agree with me, that in every step I have taken I am most completely and perfectly justified."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WOOLHOPIAN.

It is only fair towards Mr. Sharp to acquit him of all intention to trust his wife with a very important secret, as long as he could help it. He was well aware of the risk he ran in taking such a desperate step; but the risk was forced upon him now by several circumstances. Also, he wanted her aid just now, in a matter in which he could not possibly have it without trusting her. Hence he resolved to make a virtue of necessity, as the saying is, and at the same time get the great relief which even a strong mind, in long scheming, obtains, by having its burden shared.

This resolve of his was no sudden one. For several days he had made up his mind, that when he should be questioned upon the subject—which he foresaw must happen—he would earn the credit of candour, and the grace of womanly gratitude, by making a clean breast of it. There could be no better season than this. The house was quiet; his son was away; the shadows of the coming evening softly fell before her step; Cross Duck Lane looked very touching in the calm of twilight; and Mrs. Sharp was in the melting mood. Therefore the learned and conscientious lawyer perceived that the client's affairs, about which he was going to busy himself, might safely wait for another day, while he was sweeping his own hearth clean. So he locked the door, and looked out of the window, where sparrows were swarming to their ivy roost; and then he drew in the old lattice, and turned the iron tongue that fastened it. Mrs. Sharp looked on, while some little suggestion of fear came to qualify eagerness.

"Luke, I declare you quite make me nervous. I shall be afraid to go to bed to-night. Really, a stranger, or a timid person, would think you were going to confess a murder!"

"My dear, if you feel at all inclined to give way," Mr. Sharp answered, as if glad to escape, "we will have out our talk to-morrow—or, no—to-morrow I have an appointment at Woodstock. The day after that we will recur to it. I see that it will be better so."

"Luke, is your mind astray? I quite fear so. Can you imagine that I could wait for two days, after what you have told me?"

"My dear, I was only considering yourself. If you wish it, I will begin at once. Only for your own sake, I must insist on your sitting calmly down. There, my dear! Now, do not agitate yourself. There is nothing to frighten anybody. It is the most simple thing; and you will laugh, when you have heard it."

"Then I wish I had heard it, Luke. For I feel more inclined to cry than laugh."

"Miranda, you must not be foolish. Such a thing is not at all like you. Very well, now you are quite sedate. Now please not to interrupt me once; but ask your questions afterwards. If you ask me a question I shall stop, and go to the office with my papers." Mr. Sharp looked at his wife; and she bowed her head in obedience. "To begin at the very beginning," he said, with a smile to re-assure her, "you will do me the justice to remember that I have worked very hard for my living. And I have prospered well, Miranda, having you as both the foundation and the crown of my prosperity. I was perfectly satisfied, as you know, living quite up to my wishes, and putting a little cash by every year of our lives, and paying on a heavy life-insurance, in case of my own life dropping—for the sake of you and Christopher. You know all that?"

"Darling Luke, I do. But you make me cry, when you talk like that."

"Very well. That is as it should be. We were as happy as need be expected, until the great wrong befell us—the fierce injustice of losing every farthing to which we were clearly entitled. You were the proper successor to all the property of old Fermitage. That old curmudgeon, and wholesale poisoner of the University, made a fool of himself, towards his latter end, by marrying Miss Oglander. Old Black-Strap, as of course we know, had no other motive for doing such a thing, except his low ambition to be connected with a good old family. Ever since he began life as a bottleboy, in the cellars of old Jerry Pigaud——"

"He never did that, Luke. How can you speak so of my father's own first cousin? He was an extremely respectable young man; my father always said so."

"While he was making his money, Miranda, of course he was respectable. And everybody respected him, as soon as he had made it. However, I have not the smallest intention of reproaching the poor old villain. He acted according to his lights, and they led him very badly. A foolish ambition induced him to marry that pompous old maid, Joan Oglander, who had been jilted by Commodore Patch, the son of the famous captain. We all know what followed; the old man was but a doll in the hands of his lady-wife. He left all the scrapings and screwings of his life, for her to do what she pleased with—at least, everybody supposes so."

"What do you mean, Luke?" asked Mrs. Sharp, having inkling of legal surprises. "Do you mean that there is a later will? Has he done justice to me, after all?"

"No, my dear. He never saved his soul by attending to his own kindred. But he just had the sense to make a little change at last, when his wife would not come near him. You know what he died of. It was coming on for weeks; though at last it struck him suddenly. The port-wine fungus of his old vaults grew into his lungs, and stopped them. It had shown for some time in his face and throat; and his wife was afraid of catching it. She took it to be some infectious fever, of which she is always so terribly afraid. The old man knew that his time was short; but take to his

bed he would not. Of all born men the most stubborn he was; as any man must be, to get on well. 'If I am to die of the fungus,' he said, 'I will have a little more of it.' And he went, and with his own hands hunted up a magnum of port, which had been laid by, from the vintage of 1745, in the first days of Jerry Pigaud. But before that, he had sent for me; and I was there when he opened it."

"Luke, you take my breath away. Such wonderful things I have never heard. At least, not in our own family."

"Of course, my dear. We all accept wonders with quietude, till they come home to us. Well, when he fetched out this old bottle, it was fungus inside from heel to neck. He held it up against the light, and the glass being whiter than now they make, and the wine gone almost white with age, there you could see this extraordinary growth, like cords in the bottle, and valves across it, and a long yellow sheath like a crocus-flower. I had never seen anything like it before; but he knew all about it. 'Ah, I know a genleman,' he grunted in his throat—he never could say 'gentleman,' as you remember—'a genleman as would give a hundred guineas for this here bottle! Quibbles, he shouldn't have it for a thousand! My boy, you and I will drink it. Say no, and I'll cut off your wife with a half-penny!' Miranda, what could I do but try to humour him to the utmost? If I had had the smallest inkling of the iniquitous will he had made, of course, I never would have sat on the head of the cask, down in his dingy and reeking vaults, by the hour together, to please him. But never mind that—in a moment he took a long-handled knife, or chopper, and holding the bottle upright, struck off the neck and a part of the shoulder, as straight as a line, at the level of the wine. 'Not many men could do that,' he said; 'none of your clumsy cork-screwers for me! Now, Quibbles, here's a real treat for you! Talk of beeswing, my boy, here's a beehive!' And really it was more like eating than drinking wine; for all the body was gone into the fungus. Nastier stuff I never tasted; but, luckily, he took the lion's share. 'Now, Quibbles, I'll tell you a secret,' he said, after swallowing at least a quart; 'a very pretty girl came and kissed me t'other day, in among these very bottles. Such a little duck—not a bit ashamed or afeared of my fungus, as my missus is. And her breath was as sweet as the violets of '20! "Well now, my little dear," thinks I, as I stood back and looked at her, "that was kind of you to kiss an old man a-dying of port wine fungus! And if he only lives another day, you shall have the right to kiss the Royal family, if you cares to do it." Quibbles, I wouldn't call in you, nor any other thief of a lawyer. Lawyers are very well over a glass; but keep 'em outside of the cellar, say I. Very good company, in their way; but the only company I put trust in is the one I have dealt with all my life,—and many a thousand pounds I have paid them—The Royal Wine Company of Oporto. So now, if anything happens to me—though I am not in such a hurry to be binned away, and walled up for the resurrection—Quibbles, wait six months; and then you go to the Royal Oporto Company, and ask for a genleman of the name of Jolly Fellows.'"

"Now, Luke, I am all anxiety to hear," exclaimed Mrs. Sharp, with a sudden interruption, "what was the end of this very strange affair. I perceive now that I have foreseen the whole of it. But it is not right that you should speak so long, without one morsel of refreshment. It is many hours since you dined, my dear, and a very poor dinner you had of it. You shall have a glass of white wine, and a slice of tongue, between a little cold roll and butter. It will not in any way interrupt you. I can get it all for you, without ringing the bell. Only let me ask you one thing first—why have you never told me this till now?"

"Because, Miranda, it would disturb your mind. And I know that you cannot endure suspense. Moreover, I scarcely knew what to think of it. Poor old Fermitage (what with the fungus already in his tubes, and what he was taking down) might be talking sheer nonsense for all that I knew. And indeed, for a long time I treated it so; and I had no stomach for a voyage to Oporto, upon mere speculation, and for the benefit only of some pretty girl. Then I found out, by the purest chance, that no voyage to Oporto was needful, that old 'Port-wine' (who departed on his cask to a better world, the day after his magnum) meant nothing more than the London stores and agency of the Oporto Company. And even after that I made one expedition to the Minories, all for nothing. Two or three very polite young dons stared at me, and thought I was come to chaff them, or perhaps had turned up from their vaults top-heavy, when I asked for 'Senhor Jolly Fellows.' And so I came away, and lost some months, and might never have thought it worth while to go again, except for another mere accident."

"My dear, what a chapter of accidents!" cried Mrs. Sharp, while feeding him. "I thought that you were a great deal too clever to allow any room for accidents."

"Women think so. Men know better," the lawyer replied sententiously; his ability was too well-known to need his vindication. "And, Miranda, you forget that I had as yet no personal interest in the question. But when I happened to have a Portuguese gentleman as a client—a man who had spent many years in England—and happened to be talking of our language to him, I told him one part of the story, and asked if he could throw any light on it. He told me at once that the name which had so puzzled me must be Gelofilos—a Portuguese surname, by no means common. And the next time I was in town, I had occasion to call in St. John's Street, and found myself, almost by accident again, not far from the Company's offices."

"Mr. Sharp, you left such a thing to chance, when you knew that it might pull down that dreadful woman's insolence!"

"My dear, it is not the duty of my life to mitigate feminine arrogance. And to undertake such a crusade, gratis! I am equal to a bold stroke, as you will see, if your patience lasts—but never to such a vast undertaking. When it comes before me, in the way of business, naturally I take it up. But this was no business of my own; and the will was proved, and assets called in; for the old rogue did not owe one penny. Well, I went again, and this time I got hold of the right man—— Miranda, I hear the bell!"

The new office-bell, the successor to the one that succumbed to Russel Overshute, rang as hard as ring it could. A special messenger was come from London, and in half an hour Mr. Luke Sharp was sitting on the box of the night up mail.

CHAPTER XXXV.

NIGHTINGALES.

This sudden departure of Mr. Luke Sharp, in the very marrow of his story, left his good wife in a trying and altogether discontented state of mind. She knew that she could have no more particulars until he came back again; for Sharp had even less faith in the post than the post of that period deserved. She might have to wait for days and days, with a double anxiety urging her.

In the first place, although she felt nothing but pity for poor old Mrs. Fermitage, and would have been really sorry to hear of anything likely to vex her, she could not help being desirous to know if there were any danger of a thing so sad. But her second anxiety was a great deal keener, being sharpened by the ever moving grit of love; in the dreadful state of mind her son was in, how would all this act upon him? His father had been forced, by some urgency of things, to put on his box-coat, and make off, without even time for a hurried whisper as to the residue of his tale. Mrs. Sharp felt that there might be something which her husband feared to spread before her, without plenty of time to lead up to it; and having for many years been visited (whenever she was not quite herself) with poignant doubts whether Mr. Sharp was anchored upon Scriptural principles, she almost persuaded herself for the moment that he meant to put up with the loss of the money.

However, a little reflection sufficed to clear away this sadly awful cloud of scepticism, and to assure her that Mr. Sharp, however he might swerve in theory, would be orthodox enough in practice to follow the straight path towards the money. And then she began to think of nothing except her own beloved Kit.

The last hurried words of her husband had been—"Not one word to Kit, or you ruin all; let him groan as he likes; only watch him closely. I shall be back by Saturday night. God bless you, my dear! Keep up your spirits. I have the whip-hand of the lot of them."

Herein lay her faith and hope. She never had known her husband fail, when he really made up his mind to succeed; and therefore in the bottom of her heart she doubted the genuine loss of Grace Oglander. Sharp had discovered, and traced to their end, clues of the finest gossamer, when his interest led him to do so. That he should be baffled, and own himself to be so, was beyond her experience. Therefore, although as yet she had no more than a guess at her husband's schemes, she could not help fancying, after his words, that they might have to do with Grace Oglander.

Before she had time to think out her thoughts, Christopher, their main subject, returned from Wytham Wood, after holding long rivalry of woe with nightingales. He still carried on, and well-carried off, the style of the love-lorn Romeo. He swung his cloak quite as well as could be expected of an Englishman—who is born to hate fly-away apparel, all of which is womanish; but the necessities of his position had driven him now to a very short pipe. His favourite meerschaum had fallen into sorrow as terrible as his own. In a highly poetical moment he had sucked it so hard that the oil arose, and took him with a hot spot upon a white tongue, impregnated then with a sonnet. All sonnets are of the tongue and ear; but Kit misliked having his split up, just when it was coming to the final kick. Therefore he gave his pipe a thump, beyond such a pipe's endurance; and being as sensitive as himself, and of equally fine material, it simply refused to draw any more, as long as he breathed poetry. Still breathing poetry, he marched home, with the stump of a farthing clay, newly baked in the Summertown Road, to console him.

Now, if this young man had failed of one of the triple human combination—weed, and clay, and fire—where and how might he have ended not only that one evening, but all the rest of the evenings of his young life? His appearance and manner had at first imported to any one whom he came across—and he truly did come across them in his wide and loose march out of Oxford city—that he might be sought for in a few hours' time, and only the inferior portion found. His mother worried him, so did his father, so did all humanity, save one—who worried him more than any, or all of it put together. The trees and the road, and the singing of the birds, and the gladness of the green world worried him. Luckily for himself he had bought a good box of German tinder, and from ash to ash his spirit glowed slowly into a more philosophic state. Gradually the beauty of the trees and hedges and the sloping fields began to steal around him; the warbled pleasure of the little birds made overture to his sympathy, and the lustrous calm of shadowed waters spread its picture through his mind.

His body also responded to the influences of the time of day, and the love of nature freshened into the natural love of cupboard. Hunger awoke in his system somewhere, and spread sweet pictures in a tasteful part. For a "moment of supreme agony" he wrestled with the coarse material instinct, then turned on his heel, as our novelists say, and made off for his father's kitchen.

His poor mother caught him the moment he came in, and pulled off his hat and his opera-cloak, and frizzled up his curls for him. She seemed to think that he must have been for a journey of at least a hundred leagues; that the fault of his going was hers, and the virtue of his ever coming back was all his own. Then she looked at him slyly, and with some sadness, and yet a considerable touch of pride, by the light of a three-wicked cocoa-candle; and feeling quite sure that she had him to herself, trembled at the boldness of the shot she made:

"Oh, Kit, why have you never told me? I have found it all out. You have fallen in love!"

Christopher Fermitage Sharp, Esquire—as he always entitled himself, upon the collar of spaniel or terrier—had nothing to say for a moment, but softly withdrew, to have his blush in shadow. Of all the world, best he loved his mother—before, or after, somebody else—and his simple, unpractised, and uncored heart, was shy of the job it was

carrying on. Therefore he turned from his mother's face, and her eager eyes, and expectant arms.

"Come and tell me, my darling," she whispered, trying to get a good look at his reluctant eyes, and wholly oblivious of her promise to his father. "I will not be angry at all, Kit, although you never should have left me to find it out in this way."

"There is nothing to find out," he answered, making a turn towards the kitchen stairs. "I just want my supper, if there is anything to eat."

"To eat, Kit! And I thought so much better of you. After all, I must have been quite wrong. What a shame to invent such stories!"

"You must have invented them, yourself, dear mother," said Kit with recovered bravery. "Let me hear it all out when I have had my supper."

"I will go down this moment, and see what there is," replied his good mother eagerly. "Is there anything, now, that can coax your appetite?"

"Yes, mother, oysters will be over to-morrow. I should like two dozen fried with butter, and a pound and a quarter of rump-steak, cut thick, and not overdone."

"You shall have them, my darling, in twenty minutes. Now, be sure that you put your fur slippers on; I saw quite a fog coming over Port Meadow, as much as half an hour ago. This is the worst time of year to take cold. 'A May cold is a thirty-day cold.' What a stupe I must be," she continued to herself, "to imagine that the boy could be in love! I will take care to say not another word, or I might break my promise to his father. What a pity! He has a noble moustache coming, and only his mother to admire it!"

In spite of all disappointment, this good mother paid the warmest heed to the ordering, ay, and the cooking, of the supper of her only child. A juicier steak never sat on a gridiron; fatter oysters never frizzled with the pure bubble of goodness. Kit sat up, and made short work of all that came before him.

"Now, mother, what is it you want to say?" His tone was not defiant, but nicely self-possessed, and softly rich with triumph of digestion. And a silver tankard of Morel's ale helped him to express himself.

"My dear boy, I have nothing to say, except that you have lifted a great weight off my mind, a very great weight beyond description, by leaving behind you not even a trace of the existence of that fine rump-steak."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MAY MORN.

It was the morn when the tall and shapely tower of Magdalen is crowned with a fillet of shining white, awaiting the first step of sunrise. Once a year, for generations, this has been the sign of it—eager eyes, and gaping mouths, little knuckles blue with cold, and clumsy little feet inclined to slide upon the slippery lead. All are bound to keep together for the radiant moment; all are a little elated at their height above all other boys; all have a strong idea that the sun, when he comes, will be full of them; and every one of them longs to be back beneath his mother's blankets.

It is a tradition with this choir (handed, or chanted, down from very ancient choral ancestry) that the sun never rises on May-day without iced dew to glance upon. Scientific record here comes in to prop tradition. The icy saints may be going by, but they leave their breath behind them. And the poets, who have sent forth their maids to "gather the dews of May," knew, and meant, that dew must freeze to stand that operation.

But though the sky was bright, and the dew lay sparkling for the maidens, the frost on this particular morning was not so keen as usual. The trees that took the early light (more chaste without the yellow ray) glistened rather with soft moisture than with stiff encrustment; and sprays, that kept their sally into fickle air half latent, showing only little scolloped crinkles with a knob in them, held in every downy quillet liquid, rather than solid, gem.

Christopher Sharp, looking none the worse for his excellent supper of last night, laid his fattish elbow on the parapet of the bridge, and mused. Poetical feeling had fetched him out, thus early in the morning, to hear the choir salute the sun, and to be moved with sympathy. The moon is the proper deity of all true lovers, and has them under good command when she pleases. But for half the weeks of a month, she declines to sit in the court of lunacy; at least, as regards this earth, having her own men and women to attend to. This young man knew that she could not be found, with a view to meditation, now; and his mind relapsed to the sun—a coarse power, poetical only when he sets and rises.

With strength and command of the work of men, and leaving their dreams to his sister, the sun leaped up, with a shake of his brow and a scattering of the dew-clouds. The gates of the east swung right and left; so that tall trees on a hill seemed less than reeds in the rush of glory; and lines (like the spread of a crystal fan) trembled along the lowland. Inlets now, and lanes of vision (scarcely opened yesterday, and closed perhaps to-morrow) guided shafts of light along the level widening ways they love. Tree and tower, hill and wall, and water and broad meadow, stood, or lay, or leaned (according to the stamp set on them), one and all receiving, sharing, and rejoicing in the day.

Between the battlements, and above them, burst and rose the choral hymn; and as the laws of sound compelled it to go upward mainly, the part that came down was pleasing. Christopher, seeing but little of the boys, and not hearing very much, was almost enabled to regard the whole as a vocal effort of the angels: and thus in solemn thought he wandered as far as the high-tolled turnpike gate.

"I will hie me to Cowley," said he to himself, instead of turning back again; "there will I probe the hidden import of impending destiny. This long and dark suspense is more than can be brooked by human power. I know a jolly gipsy-woman; and if I went home I should have to wait three hours for my breakfast."

With these words he felt in the pockets of his coat, to be sure that oracular cash was there, and found a silk purse with more money than usual, stored for the purchase of a dog called "Pablo," a hero among badgers.

"What is Pablo to me, or I to Pablo?" he muttered with a smothered sigh. "She told me she thought it a cruel and cowardly thing to kill fifty rats in five minutes. Never more—alas, never more!" With a resolute step, but a clouded brow, he buttoned his coat, and strode onward.

Now, if he had been in a fit state of mind for looking about him, he might have found a thousand things worth looking at. But none of them, in his present hurry, won from him either glimpse or thought. He trudged along the broad London road at a good brisk rate, while the sun glanced over the highlands, and the dewy ridges, away on the left towards Shotover. The noble city behind him, stretched its rising sweep of tower, and spire, and dome, and serried battlement, stately among ancient trees, and rich with more than mere external glory to an Englishman. And away to the right hand sloped broad meadows, green with spring, and fluttered with the pearly hyaline of dew, lifting pillars of dark willow in the distance, where the Isis ran.

But what are these things to a lover, unless they hit the moment's mood? The fair, unfenced, free-landscaped road for him might just as well have been wattled, like a skittle-alley, and roofed with Croggon's patent felt. At certain—or rather uncertain—moments, he might have rejoiced in the wide glad heart of nature spread to welcome him; and must have felt, as lovers feel, the ravishment of beauty. It happened, however, that his eyes were open to nothing above, or around, or before him, unless it should present itself in the image of a gipsy's tent.

He turned to the left, before the road entered the new enclosures towards Iffley, and trod his own track towards Cowley Marsh. The crisp dew, brushed by his hasty feet, ran into large globes behind him; and jerks of dust, brought up by pressure, fell and curdled on them. In the haze of the morning, he looked much larger than he had any right to seem, and the shadow of his arms and hat stretched into hollow places. There was no other moving figure to be seen, except from time to time, of a creature, the colonist of commons, whose mental frame was not so unlike his own just now, as bodily form and style of walking might in misty grandeur seem. Though Kit was not such a stupid fellow, when free from his present bewitchment.

Scant of patience he came to a place where the elbow of a hedge jutted forth upon the common. A mighty hedge of beetling brows, and over-hanging shagginess, and shelfy curves, and brambly depths, and true Devonian amplitude. High farming would have swept it down, and out of its long course ploughed an acre. Young Sharp had not traced its windings far, before he came upon a tidy-looking tent, pitched, with the judgment of experience, in a snug and sheltered spot. The rest of the camp might be seen in the distance, glistening in the sunrise. This tent seemed to have crept away, for the sake of peace and privacy.

Christopher quickened his steps, expecting to be met by a host of children, rushing forth with outstretched hands, and shaggy hair, and wild black eyes. But there was not so much as a child to be seen, nor the curling smoke of a hedge-trough fire, nor even the scattered ash betokening cookery of the night before. The canvas of the tent was down; no head peeped forth, no naked leg or grimy foot protruded, to show that the inner world was sleeping; even the dog, so rarely absent, seemed to be really absent now.

The young man knew that the tent was not very likely to be unoccupied; but naturally he did not like to peep into it uninvited; and he turned away to visit the chief community of rovers, when the sound of a low soft moan recalled him. Still for a moment he hesitated, until he heard the like sound again, low, and clear, and musical from the deepest chords of sorrow. Kit felt sure that it must be a woman, in storms of trouble helpless; and full as he was of his own affairs he was impelled to interfere. So he lifted back the canvas drawn across the opening, and looked in.

There lay a woman on the sandy ground, with her back turned towards the light, her neck and shoulders a little raised by the short support of one elbow, and her head, and all that therein was, fixed in a rigour of gazing. Although her face was not to be seen, and the hopeless moan of her wail had ceased, Kit Sharp knew that he was in the presence of a grand and long-abiding woe.

He drew back, and he tried to make out what it was, and he sighed for concert—even as a young dog whimpers to a mother who has lost her pups—and, little as he knew of women, from his own mother, or whether or no, he judged that this woman had lost a child. That it was her only one, was more than he could tell or guess. The woman, disturbed by the change of light, turned round and steadily gazed at him, or rather at the opening which he filled; for her eyes had no perception of him. Kit was so scared that he jerked his head back, and nearly knocked his hat off. He never had seen such a thing before; and, if he had his choice he never would see such a thing again. The great dark, hollow eyes had lost similitude of human eyes: hope and fear and thought were gone; nothing remained but desolation and bare, reckless misery.

Christopher's gaze fell under hers. It would be a sheer impertinence to lay his small troubles before such woe.

"What is it? Oh! what is it?" asked the woman, at last having some idea that somebody was near her.

"I am very sorry; I assure you, ma'am, that I never felt more sorry in all my life," said Kit, who was a very kind-hearted fellow, and had now espied a small boy lying dead. "I give you my word of honour, ma'am, that if I could have guessed it, I would never have looked in."

Without any answer, the gipsy-woman turned again to her dead child, and took two little hands in hers, and rubbed them, and sat up, imagining that she felt some sign of life. She drew the little body to her breast, and laid the face to hers, and breathed into pale open lips (scarcely fallen into death), and lifted little eyelids with her tongue, and would not be convinced that no light came from under them; and then she rubbed again at every place where any warmth or polish of the skin yet lingered. She fancied that she felt the little fellow coming back to her, and she kept the whole of her own body moving to encourage him.

There was nothing to encourage. He had breathed his latest breath. His mother might go on with kisses, friction, and caresses, with every power she possessed of muscle, and lungs, and brain, and heart. There he lay, as dead as a stone—one stone more on the earth; and the whole earth could not bring him back again.

Cinnaminta bowed her head. She laid the little bit of all she ever loved upon her lap, and fetched the small arms so that she could hold them both together, and spread the careless face upon the breast where once it had felt its way; and then she looked up in search of Kit, or any one to say something to.

"It is a just thing. I have earned it. I have robbed an old man of his only child; and I am robbed of mine."

These words she spoke not in her own language, but in plain good English; and then she lay down in her quiet scoop of sand, and folded her little boy in with her. Christopher saw that there was nothing to be done. He cared to go no further in search of fortune-tellers; and, being too young to dare to offer worthless consolation, he wisely resolved to go home and have fried bacon; wherein he succeeded.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MAY-DAY.

Ere yet it was noon of that same day, to the great delight of Mrs. Sharp, a strong desire to fish arose in the candid bosom of Christopher.

"Mother," he said, "I shall have a bit of early grub, and take my rod, and try whether I can't manage to bring you a few perch home for supper. Or, if the perch are not taking yet, I may have a chance of a trout or two."

"Oh, that will be delightful, Kit! We can dine whenever we please, you know, as your dear father is from home. We will have the cold lamb at one o'clock. I can easily make my dinner then; and then, Kit, if you are very good, what do you think I will try to do? Such a treat as you hardly ever had!"

"What, mother?—what? I must be off to get my tackle ready."

"My dear, I will send to Mr. Squeaker Smith, and order a nice light vehicle, with a very steady pony. And, Kit, I will put on my very worst cloak, and a bonnet not worth six-pence, and stout india-rubber overshoes. And so you shall drive me wherever you please; and I will see you catch all the fish. And you will enjoy every fish twice as much, because your dear mother is looking at you. I will bring some sandwiches, my pet, and your father's flask of sherry; and we can stay out till it is quite dark. Why, Kit, you don't look pleased about it!"

"Mother, how can I be pleased to hear you speak of such things, at this time of year? The spring is scarcely beginning yet, and the edges of the water are all swampy. You would be up to your knees, in no time, in the most horrible yellow slime. I should be most delighted to have your company, my dearest mother; but it will not do."

"Very well, Kit; you know best. But, at least, I can have the ride with you, and wait somewhere while you go fishing?"

"If I were going anywhere else, perhaps we might have contrived it so. But while the wind stays in its present quarter, it is worse than useless to think of fishing, except in the most outlandish places. There would not be even a public-house, if you could stop at such a place, within miles of the water I am going to. And the roads are beyond conception. No wheels can get along them, except in the very height of summer, or a dry black-frost. My dear mother, I am truly grieved to lose your company; but I must ride the old cob Sam, and tie him to a tree or gate; and over and over again you have told me how long you have been waiting for the chance of a good long afternoon to do a little shopping. And the London fashions, for the summer season, arrived by the coach only yesterday."

"Did they, indeed? Are you sure of that? Well, Kit, I would rather have come with you than seen the whole world of fashions, although you can judge, and a lady cannot. But I do not care about that, my dear, if only you enjoy yourself. Ring the bell, my darling, and I will see about your dinner."

Kit's heart burned within him sadly, and his cheeks kept it well in countenance, as the shocking fraud thus practised by him upon his good, unselfish mother. However, there was no help for it; and, after all, mothers must be made to be cheated; or why do they love it so?

Thus well-balanced with his conscience, Kit put all his smartest clothes on, as soon as the early dinner was done, and he felt quite sure in his own mind that his mother was safely embarked upon her grand expedition of shopping. He saw her as clean as possible off the premises and round the utmost corner of the lane; and then he waited for a minute and a half, to be sure that she had not forgotten her purse, or something else most essential. At last, he became sure as sure could be, that his admirable mother must now be sitting on a high chair in a fashionable shop; and with that he ran up to his own room, and kicked off his every-day breeches, and with great caution and vast study drew a brand-new pair of noble pantaloons, with a military stripe, up his well-nourished and established legs. He gazed at the result, and found that on the whole it was not bad; and then he put on his best velvet waistcoat, of a chaste sprig-pattern, not too gaudy. A waterfall tie with a turquoise pin, and a cutaway coat of a soft bottle-green, completed him for the eyes of the public, and—for which he cared far more—certain especially private eyes.

Christopher, feeling himself thus attired, and receiving the silent approval of his glass, stole downstairs in a very clever way, and took from his own private cupboard a whip of white pellucid whalebone, silver-mounted, and set with a large and radiant Cairngorm pebble. His mother had given him this on his very last birth-day, and he had never used it, wisely fearing to be laughed at. But now he tucked it under his arm, and swaggering as he had seen hussars do, turned into a passage leading to his private outlet.

Hugging himself upon all his skill, and feeling assured of grand success, Kit allowed his heels to clank, and carried his head with an arrogant twist. And so, near a window, where good light came in large quantity from the garden, he marched into his mother's arms.

"Kit!" cried his mother; and he said, "Yes," being unable to deny that truth. His mother looked at him, and his jaunty whip, and particularly lively suit of clothes; and she knew that he had been telling lies to her by the hundred or the bushel; and she would have been very glad to scorn him, if she could have helped being proud of him. Kit was unable to carry on any more in the way of falsehood. He tried to look fierce, but his mother laughed; and he saw that he must knock under.

"My dear boy," she said, for the moment daring to follow up her triumph, "is this the costume in which you go forth to fish in the most outlandish places, with the yellow ooze above your knees? And is that your fishing-rod? Oh, Kit!—

come, Kit, now you are caught at last!"

"My dear mother, I have told you stories; but I will leave off at last. Now there is not one instant to explain. I have not so much as a moment to spare. If you only could guess how important it is, you would draw in your cloak in a moment. You never shall know another single word, unless you have the manners, mother, to pull in your cloak and let me go by."

"Kit, you may go. When you look at me like that, you may as well do anything. You have gone by your mother for ever so long; or at any rate gone away from her."

With these words, Mrs. Sharp made way for her son to pass her; and Kit, in a reckless manner, was going to take advantage of it; then he turned back his face, to say goodbye, and his mother's eyes were away from him. She could not look at him, because she knew that her look would pain him; but she held out her hand; and he took it and kissed it; and then he made off as hard as he could go.

Mrs. Sharp turned back, and showed some hankering to run after him; and then she remembered what a laugh would arise in Cross Duck Lane to see such sport; and so she sighed a heavy sigh—knowing how long she must have to wait—and retired to her own thoughtful corner, with no heart left for shopping.

But Kit saw that now it was "neck or nothing;" with best foot foremost he made his way through back lanes leading towards the conscientious obscurity of Worcester College—for Beaumont Street still abode in the future—and skirting the coasts of Jericho, dangerously hospitable, he emerged at last in broad St. Giles', without a stone to prate of his whereabouts. Here he went into livery stables, where he was well known, and found the cob Sam at his service; for no university man would ride him (even upon Hobson's choice) because of his ignominious aspect. But Kit knew his value, and his lasting powers, and sagacious gratitude; and whenever he wanted a horse trustworthy in patience, obedience, and wit, he always took brown Sam. To Sam it was a treat to carry Kit, because of the victuals ordered at almost every lenient stage; and the grand largesse of oats and beans was more than he could get for a week in stable. And so he set forth, with a spirited neigh, on the Kidlington road, to cross the Cherwell, and make his way towards Weston. The heart of Christopher burned within him whenever he thought of his mother; but a man is a man for all that, and cannot be tied to apron-strings. So Kit shook his whip, and the Cairngorm flashed in the sun, and the spirit of youth did the same. He was certain to see the sweet maid to-day, knowing her manners and customs, and when she was ordered forth for her mossy walk upon the margin of the wood.

The soft sun hung in the light of the wood, as if he were guided by the breeze and air; and gentle warmth flowed through the alleys, where the nesting pheasant ran. Little fluttering, timid things, that meant to be leaves, please God, some day, but had been baffled and beaten about so, that their faith was shrunk to hope; little rifts of cover also keeping beauty coiled inside, and ready to open, like a bivalve shell, to the pulse of the summer-tide, and then to be sweet blossom; and the ground below them pressing upward with ambition of young green; and the sky above them spread with liquid blue behind white pillows.

But these things are not well to be seen without just entering into the wood; and in doing so there can be no harm, with the light so inviting, and the way so clear. Grace had a little idea that perhaps she had better stop outside the wood, but still that walk was within her bounds, and her orders were to take exercise; and she saw some very pretty flowers there; and if they would not come to her, she had nothing to do but to go to them. Still she ought to have known that now things had changed from what they were as little as a week ago; that a dotted veil of innumerable buds would hang between her and the good Miss Patch, while many forward trees were casting quite a shade of mystery. Nevertheless, she had no fear. If anybody did come near her, it would only be somebody thoroughly afraid of her. For now she knew, and was proud to know, that Kit was the prey of her bow and spear.

Whether she cared for him, or not, was a wholly different question. But in her dismal dullness and long, wearisome seclusion, the finest possible chance was offered for any young gentleman to meet her, and make acquaintance of nature's doing. At first she had kept this to herself, in dread of conceit and vanity; but when it outgrew accident, she told "Aunt Patch" the whole affair, and asked what she was to do about it. Thereupon she was told to avoid the snares of childish vanity, to look at the back of her looking-glass, and never dare to dream again that any one could be drawn by her.

Her young mind had been eased by this, although with a good deal of pain about it; and it made her more venturesome to discover whether the whole of that superior estimate of herself was true. Whether she was so entirely vain or stupid, whenever she looked at herself; and whether it was so utterly and bitterly impossible that anybody should come—as he said—miles and miles for the simple pleasure of looking, for one or two minutes, at herself.

Grace was quite certain that she had no desire to meet anybody, when she went into the wood. She hoped to be spared any trial of that sort. She had been told on the highest authority, that nobody could come looking after her—the assertion was less flattering perhaps than reassuring; and, to test its truth, she went a little further than she meant to go.

Suddenly at a corner, where the whole of the ground fell downward, and grass was overhanging grass so early in the season, and sapling shoots from the self-same stool stood a yard above each other, and down in the hollow a little brook sang of its stony troubles to the whispering reeds—here Grace Oglander happened to meet a very fine young man indeed. The astonishment of these two might be seen, at a moment's glance, to be mutual. The maiden, by gift of nature, was the first to express it, with dress, and hand, and eye. She showed a warm eagerness to retire; yet waited half a moment for the sake of proper dignity.

Kit looked at her with a clear intuition that now was his chance of chances to make certain-sure of her. If he could

only now be strong, and take her consent for granted, and so induce her to set seal to it, she never would withdraw; and the two might settle the rest at their leisure.

He loved the young lady with all his heart; and beyond that he knew nothing of her, except that she was worthy. But she had not given her heart as yet; and, with natural female common sense, she would like to know a great deal more about him before she said too much to him. Also in her mind—if not in her heart—there was a clearer likeness of a very different man—a man who was a man in earnest, and walked with a stronger and firmer step, and lurked behind no corners.

"This path is so extremely narrow," Miss Oglander said, with a very pretty blush, "and the ground is so steep, that I fear I must put you to some little inconvenience. But if I hold carefully by this branch, perhaps there will be room for you to pass."

"You are most kind and considerate," he answered, as if he were in peril of a precipice; "but I would not for the world give you such trouble. And I don't want to go any further now. It cannot matter in the least, I do assure you."

"But surely you must have been going somewhere. You are most polite. But I cannot think for one moment of turning you back like this."

"Then, may I sit down? I feel a little tired; and the weather has suddenly become so warm. Don't you think it is very trying?"

"To people who are not very strong perhaps it is. But surely it ought not to be so to you."

"Well, I must not put all the blame upon the weather. There are so many other things much worse. If I could only tell you."

"Oh, I am so very sorry, Mr. Sharp. I had no idea you had such troubles. It must be so sad for you, while you are so young."

"Yes, I suppose many people call me young. And perhaps to the outward eye I am so. But no one except myself can dream of the anxieties that prey upon me."

Christopher, by this time, was growing very crafty, as the above speech of his will show. The paternal gift was awaking within him, but softened by maternal goodness; so that it was not likely to be used with much severity. And now, at the end of his speech, he sighed, and without any thought laid his right hand on the rich heart of his velvet waistcoat, where beautiful forget-me-nots were blooming out of willow leaves. Then Grace could not help thinking how that trouble-worn right hand had been uplifted in her cause, and had descended on the rabbit-man. And although she was most anxious to discourage the present vein of thought, she could not suppress one little sigh—sweeter music to the ear of Kit than ever had been played or dreamed.

"Now, would you really like to know?—you are so wonderfully good," he continued, with his eyes cast down, and every possible appearance of excessive misery; "would you, I mean, do your best, not only not to be offended, but to pity and forgive me, if, or rather supposing that, I were to endeavour to explain, what—what it is, who—who she is—no, no, I do not quite mean that. I scarcely know how to express myself. Things are too many for me."

"Oh, but you must not allow them to be so, Mr. Sharp; indeed, you mustn't. I am sure that you must have a very good mother, from what you told me the other day; and if you have done any harm, though I scarcely can think such a thing of you, the best and most straightforward course is to go and tell your mother everything; and then it is so nice afterwards."

"Yes, to be sure. How wise you are! You seem to know almost everything. I never saw any one like you at all. But the fact is that I am a little too old; I am obliged now to steer my own course in life. My mother is as good as gold, and much better; but she never could understand my feelings."

"Then come in, and tell my dear old Aunt Patch. She is so virtuous, and she always never doubts about anything; she sees the right thing to be done in a moment, and she never listens to arguments. If you will only come in and see her, it might be such a relief to you."

"You seem to mistake me altogether," cried the young man, with his patience gone. "What good could any old aunts do to me? Surely you know who it is that I want!"

"How can I imagine that?"

"Why, you, only you, only you, sweet Grace! I should like to see the whole earth swallowed up, if only you and I were left together!"

Grace Oglander blushed at the power of his words, and the pressure of his hand on hers. Then, having plenty of her father's spirit, she fixed her bright sensible eyes on his face, so that he saw that he had better stop. "I am afraid that it is no good," he said.

"I am very much obliged to you," answered Grace, with her fair cheeks full of colour, and her hands drawn carefully back to her sides; "but will you be kind enough to stand up, and let me speak for a moment. I believe that you are very good, and I may say very harmless, and you have helped me in the very kindest way, and I never shall forget your goodness. Ever since you came, I am sure, I have been glad to think of you; and your dogs, and your gun, and your fishing-rod reminded me of my father; and I am very, very sorry, that what you have just said will prevent me from thinking any more about you, or coming anywhere, into any kind of places, where there are trees like this, again. I ought to have done it—at least, I mean, I never ought to have done it at all; but I did think that you were so

nice; and now you have undeceived me. I know who your father is very well, although I have seldom seen him; and though I dislike the law, I declare that would not have mattered very much to me. But you do not even know my name, as several times you have proved to me; and how you can ride thirty miles from Oxford, in all sorts of weather, without being tired, and your dogs so fresh, has always been a puzzle to me."

"Thirty miles from Oxford!" Christopher Sharp cried, in great amazement; for in the very lowest condition of the heart figures will maintain themselves.

"Yes; thirty miles, or thirty leagues. Sometimes I hear one thing, and sometimes the other."

"Where you are standing now is about seven miles and three-quarters from Summer-town gate!"

"Surely, Mr. Sharp, you are laughing at me! How far am I from Beckley, then, according to your calculation?"

"How did you ever hear of Beckley? It is quite a little village. A miserable little place!"

"Indeed, then, it is not. It is the very finest place in all the world; or at any rate the nicest, and the dearest, and the prettiest!"

"But how can you, just come from America, have such an opinion of such a little hole?"

"A little hole! Why, it stands on a hill! You never can have been near it, if you think of calling it a 'hole!' And as for my coming from America, you seem to have no geography. I have never been further away from darling Beckley, to my knowledge, than I am now."

Kit Sharp looked at her with greater amazement than that with which she looked at him. And then with one accord they spied a fat man coming along the hollow, and trying not to glance at them. With keen young instinct they knew that this villain was purely intent upon watching them.

"Come again, if you please, to-morrow," said Grace, while pretending to gaze at the clouds; "you have told me such things that I never shall sleep. Come earlier, and wait for me. Not that you must think anything; only that now you are bound, as a gentleman, to go on with what you were telling me."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DIGNITY OF THE FAMILY.

If Grace had only stayed five minutes longer in the place where she was when the fat man came in sight, her eyes and heart would have been delighted by the appearance of a true old friend. But she felt so much terror of that stout person, who always seemed to be watching her afar, that in spite of the extraordinary interest aroused by some of her companion's words, as well as by his manner, she could not help running away abruptly, and taking shelter in the little bowered cottage.

Meanwhile, the stout man in the white frock coat slouched along the furzy valley, with a clownish step. He carried a long pig-whip, and now and then indulged in a crack or flick at some imaginary pig, while a crafty grin, or a wink of one little eye, enlivened his heavy countenance. He was clearly aware of all that had been happening in the wood above him, for the buds as yet rather served to guide the lines of sight than to baffle them; but he showed no desire to interfere, for instead of taking the cross-path, which would have brought him face to face with Kit, he kept down the glade towards the timber-track, which led in another direction. By the side of the little brook he turned the corner of a thick holly-bush, and suddenly met his brother, Master Zacchary Cripps, the Carrier.

The Carrier was in no pleasant mood; his eyes were stern and steadfast, and the colour of his healthy cheeks was deepened into crimson. He bore with a bent arm and set muscle the sceptral whip of the family, bound with spiral brass, and newly fitted with a heavy lash. Moreover, he had come with his Sunday hat on, and his air and walk were menacing. Leviticus started and turned pale, and his cunning eyes glanced for a chance of escape.

"Thou goest not hence, Brother Tickuss," said Cripps, "until thou hast answered what I shall ax, and answered with thine eyes on mine."

"Ax away," said the pigman, sprawling out his fat legs, as if he did not care; "ax away, so long as it be of thy own consarns."

"It is of my own consarns to keep my father's sons from being rogues and liars, and getting into Oxford jail, and into the hands of the hangman."

Leviticus trembled, with fear more than anger. "Thou always was foul-mouthed," he muttered.

"It is a lie!" shouted Zacchary; "as big a lie as ever thou spak'st! I always were that clean of tongue—no odds for that now. Wilt answer me, or will not? Thou liedst to me in Oxford streets the last time as I spake to thee."

"Well, well, maybe a small piece I did; but nothing to lay hold on much. Brother Zak, thou must not be so hard. What man can be always arkerate?"

"A man can spake the truth if he goeth to try, or else a must be a fule. And, Tickuss, thou wast always more rogue than fule. And now here am I, to ax thee spashal what roguery thou beest up to now? Whom hast thou got at the cottage in the wood?"

"Thou'd best way go up there, and see for thyzell. A old lady from Amerikay as wanteth to retaire frout the world. Won't her zend thee a-running down the hill? Ah, and I'd like to see thee, Zak. Her'd lay thy own whip about thee; and her tongue be worse nor a dozen whips!"

Really, while Tickuss was telling this lie, he managed to look at his brother so firmly, in the rally of impudence brought to bay, that Zak for the moment (in spite of all experience) believed him. And the Carrier dreaded—as the lord of swine knew well—nothing so much as a fierce woman's tongue.

"What be the reason, then," he went on, still keeping his eyes on the face of Tickuss, "that thou hast been keeping thyself and thy pigs out o' market, and even thy waife and children to home, same as if 'em had gotten the plague? And what be the reason, Leviticus Cripps, that thou fearest to go to a wholesome public-house, and have thy pint of ale, and see thy neighbours, as behooveth a God-fearing man? To my mind, either thou art gone daft, and the woman should take the lead o' thee, or else thou art screwed out of honest ways."

The Carrier now looked at his brother, with more of pity than suspicion. Tickuss had always been regarded as the weak member of the family, because he laid on more fat than muscle, even in the time of most active growth. And to keep him regularly straight was more than all the set efforts of the brotherhood could, even when he was young, effect. Therefore Zak stood back some little, and the butt of his whip fell down to earth. Leviticus saw his chance, and seized it.

"Consarning of goin' to public-house, I would never be too particular. A man may do it, or a man may not, according to manner of his things at home, or his own little brew, or the temper of his wife. I would not blame him, nor yet praise him, for things as he knoweth best about. To make light of a man for not going to public, is the same as to blame him for stopping from church. A man as careth for good opinion goeth to both, but a cannot always do it. And I ain't a been in church now for more nor a week of Sundays."

The force of this reasoning came home to Cripps. If a man was unable to go to church, there was good room for arguing that his duty towards the public-house must not be too rigidly exacted. Zacchary therefore fetched a sigh. None of the race had broken up at so early an age as that of Tickuss. But still, from his own sad experience, the

Carrier knew what pigs were; and he thought that his brother, though younger than himself, might be called away before him.

"Tickuss," he said, "I may a' been too hard. Nobody knows but them that has to do it what the worrit of the roads is. I may a' said a word here and there too much, and a bit outside the Gospel. According to they a man must believe a liar, and forgive un, and forgive un over and over again, the same as I tries to forgive you, Tickuss."

Zacchary offered his hand to his brother, but Leviticus was ashamed to take it. With the load now weighing upon his mind, and the sense in his heart of what Zacchary was, Tickuss—whatever his roguery was—could not make believe to have none of it. So he turned away, with his feelings hurt too much for the clasp fraternal.

"When a man hath no more respect for hiszell," he muttered over his puckered shoulder, "and no more respect for his father and mother avore un, than to call his very next brother but one a rogue and a liar, and a schemer against publics, to my mind he have gone too far, and not shown the manners relied upon."

"Very well," replied Cripps; "just as you like, Tickuss; though I never did hear as I were short of manners; and there's twelve mailes of road as knows better than that. Now, since you go on like that, and there seemeth no chance of supper 'long of 'ee, I shall just walk up to cottage, and ax any orders for the Carrier. Good evening, brother Tickuss."

With these words Zak set off, and Tickuss repented sadly of the evil temper which had forbidden him to shake hands. But now to oppose the Carrier's purpose would be a little too suspicious. He must go his way and take his chance; he was worse than a pig when his mind was made up.

"Go thy way, and be danged to thee!" thought Leviticus, looking after him. "Little thou wilt take, however, but to knock thy thick head again' a wall. Old lady looketh out too sharp for any of they danged old Beckley carcases. Come thee down to our ouze," he shouted in irony after his brother, "and tell us the noos thou hast picked up, and what 'em be doing in Amerikay! A vine time o' life for thee to turn spy!"

It was lucky for him that he made off briskly among thick brushwood and tangled swamps, for Zacchary Cripps at the last word turned round, with his face of a fine plum-colour, and a stamp of rage which made his stiff knees tingle worse than a dozen turnpikes.

"Spy, didst thou say?" he shouted, staring, with his honest, wrathful eyes, through every glimpse of thicket near the spot where his brother had disappeared—"Spy! if thou beest a man come out, and say it again to the face of me! I'll show thee how to spell 'spy' pretty quick. Leviticus Cripps, thou art a coward, to the back of a thief and a sneaking skulk, unless thou comest out of they thick places, to stand to the word thou hast spoken."

Zacchary stood in a wide bay of copse, and he knew that his voice went through the wood; for he spoke with the whole power of his lungs; and the tender leaves above him quivered like a little breath of fringe, and the birds flew out of their ivy castles, and a piece of bare-faced rock in the distance answered him—but nothing else.

"Thou art a bigger man than I be," shouted the Carrier, being carried beyond himself by the state of things; "come out if thou art a man, and hast any blood of Cripps in thee!" But this appeal received no answer, except from the quiet rock again, and a peaceful thrush sitting over his nest, and well accustomed to the woodman's call.

Zacchary had always felt scorn of Tickuss, but now he almost disdained himself for springing of one wedlock with him. He stood in the place where he must be seen if Tickuss wished to see him, until he was quite sure that no such longing existed on his brother's part. Then the family seemed to be lowered so by this behaviour of a leading member, that when the Carrier moved his legs, he had not the spirit to crack his whip.

"What shall us do? Whatever shall us do?" he said to himself more reasonably, with the anger dying out of his kind blue eyes. "A hath insulted of me, but a hath a big family of little uns to kape up. I harn't had no knowledge how that zort o' thing may drive a man out of his proper ways. Like enough it maketh them careful to tell lies, and shun the thrashing."

Taking this view of the case, Master Cripps turned away from the path towards his brother's house, to which, in the flush of first anger, he meant to go, and there to wait for him; and being rather slow of resolution, he naturally set forth again on the track of the one last interrupted. He would go to this cottage in the wood of which he had heard through one of his washerwomen—though none of them had any washing thence—and then he would satisfy his own mind concerning an ugly rumour, which had unsettled that mind since Tuesday. For in his own hearing it had been said—by a woman, it is true, but still a woman who came of a truthful family, and was married now into the like—that Master Leviticus Cripps was harbouring pirates and conspirators, believed to have come from America, in a little place out of the way of all honest people, where the deaf old woman was. Nobody ever had leave to the house; never a butcher, nor baker, nor tea-grocer, nor a milkman, nor even a respectable washerwoman—there was nothing except a great dog to rush out and bite without even barking.

Zacchary had no easy task to find the little cottage of which he had heard, for it lay well back from all thoroughfares, and so embedded among ivied trees, that he passed and re-passed several times before he descried it; and even then he would not have done so if it had not chanced that Miss Patch, who loved good things when she could get them, was about to dine on a juicy roaster, supplied by the wary Leviticus. Grace herself had prepared the currant sauce, before she went forth for her daily walk, and deaf old Margery Daw was stooping over the fierce wood fire on the ground, and basting with a short iron spoon. The double result was a wreath of blue smoke rising from the crooked chimney, and a very rich odour streaming forth from door and window on the vernal air. The eyes and the nose of the Carrier at once presented him with clear impressions.

"Amerikayans understands good living." Giving utterance to this profound and incontrovertible reflection, Cripps

came to a halt and sagely considered the situation. The first thing he asked, as usual, was—"How would the law of the land lie?" Here was a lonely, unprotected cottage, inhabited by an elderly foreign lady, who especially sought retirement. Had he any legal right to insist on knowing who she was, and all about her? Would he not rather be a trespasser, and liable to a fine, and perhaps the jail, if he forced himself in, without invitation and wilfully, against the inhabitants' wish? And even if that came to nothing—as it might—could he say that it was a manly and straightforward action on his part? He had no enemy that he knew of, unless it was Black George, the poacher; but there were always plenty of people ready to say ill-natured things about a prosperous neighbour; and like enough they would set it afoot that he had gone spying on a helpless lady, because she had never employed him. And then his brother's reproach, which had so fiercely aroused him, came back to his mind.

Neither was it wholly absent from his thoughts, that a great dog was said to reside on these premises, whose manner was the peculiarly unattractive one of rushing out to bite without a bark. The Carrier had suffered in his time from dogs, as was natural to his calling; and although his flesh was so wholesome that the result had never been serious, he was conscious of a definite desire to defer all increase of experience in that line.

"Spy!" he exclaimed, as he sat down rather to rest his stiff knee than to watch the hut. "That never hath been said of me, and never shall without a lie. But one on 'em might come out, mayhap, and give me some zatisfaction."

Before his words were cool, Miss Patch herself appeared in the doorway. She saw not Cripps, who had happened to put himself in a knowing corner; and being in a quietly savage mood (from desire of pig, and dread that stupid old Margery was murdering pig, by revolving him too near the fire), she cast such a glance at the young leaves around her, as seemed enough to nip them in the bud. Then she threw away something with a scornful sweep, and Cripps believed almost every word his brother had been saying.

"I'll be blessed if I don't scuttle off," he said to himself and the moss he was sitting on. "In my time I have a seen all zorts of womans, but none to come nigh this sample as be come over from Amerikay! Sarveth me right for cooriosity. Amend me if ever I come anigh of any Amerikayans again!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A TOMBSTONE.

Are there any who do not quicken to the impulse of young life, lifted free of long repression and the dread of dull relapse? Can we find a man or woman (holding almost any age) able to come out and meet the challenge of the sun, conveyed in cartel of white clouds of May, and yet to stick to private sense of sulky wrongs and brooding hate?

If we could find such a man or woman (by great waste of labour, in a search ungracious), and if it should seem worth while to attempt to cure the case, scarcely anything could be thought of, leading more directly towards the end in view, than to fetch that person, and plant him or her, without a word of explanation, among the flower-beds on the little lawn of Beckley Barton.

The flowers themselves, and their open eyes, and the sparkling smile of the grass, and the untold commerce of the freighted bees, and rich voluntaries of thrush and blackbird (ruffled to the throat with song); and over the whole the soft flow of sunshine, like a vast pervasive river of gold, with silver wave of clouds—who could dwell on petty aches and pains among such grandeur?

The old Squire sat in his bower-chair with a warm cloak over his shoulders. His age was threescore and ten this day; and he looked back through the length of years, and marvelled at their fleeting. The stirring times of his youth, and the daily perils of his prime of life, the long hard battle, and the slow promotion—because he had given offence by some projection of honest opinion—the heavy disappointment, and the forced retirement from the army when the wars were over, with only the rank of Major, which he preferred to sink in Squire—because he ought to have been, according to his own view of the matter, a good Lieutenant-general—and then a very short golden age of five years and a quarter, from his wedding-day to the death of his wife, a single and sweet-hearted wife—and after that (as sorrow sank into the soothing breast of time) the soft, and gentle, and undreamed-of step of comfort, coming almost faster than was welcome, while his little daughter grew.

After that the old man tried to think no more, but be content. To let the little scenes of dancing, and of asking, and of listening, and of looking puzzled, and of waiting to know truly whether all was earnest—because already childhood had suspicion that there might be things intended to delude it—and of raising from the level of papa's well-buttoned pocket, clear bright eyes that did not know a guinea from a halfpenny; and then, with the very extraordinary spring from the elasticity of red calves (which happily departs right early), the jumping into opened arms, and the laying on of little lips, and the murmurs of delighted love—to let his recollections of all these die out, and to do without them, was this old man's business now.

For he had been convinced at last—strange as it may seem, until we call to mind how the strongest convictions are produced by the weakest logic—at last he could no longer hope to see his Grace again; because he had beheld her tombstone. Having made up his mind to go to church that very Sunday morning, in spite of all Widow Hookham could do to stop him, he had spied a new stone in the graveyard corner sacred to the family of Oglander. The old man went up to see what it was, and nobody liked to follow him. And nobody was surprised that he did not show his white head at the chancel-door; though the parson waited five minutes for him, being exceeding loth to waste ten lines, which he had interlarded into a sermon of thirty years back, for the present sad occasion.

For the old Squire sat on his grandfather's tombstone (a tabular piece of memorial, suited to an hospitable man; where all his descendants might sit around, and have their dinners served to them), and he leaned his shaven chin on the head of his stout oak staff, and he took off his hat, and let his white hair fall about. He fixed his still bright eyes on the tombstone of his daughter, and tried to fasten his mind there also, and to make out how old she was. He was angry with himself for not being able to tell to a day without thinking; but days, and years, and thoughts, and doings of quiet love quite slipping by, and spreading without ruffle, had left him little to lay hold of as a knotted record. Therefore he sat with his chin on his stick, and had no sense of church-time, until the choir (which comprised seven Crippses) bellowed out an anthem, which must have shaken their grandfathers in their graves; unless in their time they had done the same.

In this great uproar and applause, which always travelled for half a mile, the Squire had made his escape from the graveyard; and then he had gone home without a word and eaten his dinner, because he must when the due time came for it. And now, being filled with substantial faith that his household was nicely enjoying itself, he was come to his bower to think and wonder, and perhaps by-and-by to fall fast asleep, but never awake to bright hope again.

To this relief and mild incline of gentle age, his head was bowing and his white hair settling down, according as the sun, or wind, or clouds, or time of day desired, when some one darkened half his light, and there stood Mary Hookham.

Mary had the newest of all new spring fashions on her head, and breast, and waist, and everywhere. A truly spirited girl was she, as well as a very handy one; and she never thought twice of a sixpence or shilling, if a soiled paper-pattern could be had for it. And now she was busy with half a guinea, kindly beginning to form its impress on her moist hard-working palm.

"He have had a time of it!" she exclaimed, as her master began to gaze around. "Oh my, what a time of it he have had!"

"Mary, I suppose you are talking of me. Yes, I have had a bad time on the whole. But many people have had far

worse."

"Yes, sir. And will you see one who hath? As fine a young gentleman as ever lived; so ready to speak up for everybody, and walking like a statute. It give me such a turn! I do believe you never would know him, sir; without his name come in with him. Squire Overshute, sir, if you please, requesteth the honour of seeing of you."

"Mary, I am hardly fit for it. I was doing my best to sit quite quiet, and to try to think of things. I am not as I was yesterday, or even as I was this morning. But if I ought to see him—why, I will. And perhaps I ought, no doubt, when I come to think of things. The poor young man has been very ill. To be sure, I remember all about it. Show him where I am at once. What a sad thing for his mother! His mother is a wonderful clever woman, of the soundest views in politics."

"His mother be dead, sir; I had better tell you for fear of begetting any trifles with him; although we was told to keep such things from you. Howsomever, I do think he be coming to himself, or he would not have fallen out of patience as a hath done; and now here he be, sir!"

Russel Overshute, narrowed and flattened into half of his proper size, and heightened thereby to unnatural stature—for stoop he would not, although so weak—here he was walking along the damp walk, when a bed, or a sofa, or a drawn-out chair at Shotover Grange, was his proper place. He walked with the help of a crutch-handled stick, and his deep mourning dress made him look almost ghastly. His eyes, however, were bright and steady, and he made an attempt at a cheerful smile, as he congratulated the Squire on the great improvement of his health.

"For that I have to thank you, my dear friend," answered Mr. Oglander; "for weeks I had been helpless, till I helped myself; I mean, of course, by the great blessing of the Lord. But of your sad troubles, whatever shall I say——"

"My dear sir, say nothing, if you please—I cannot bear as yet to speak of them. I ought to be thankful that life is spared to me—doubtless for some good purpose. And I think I know what that purpose is; though now I am confident of nothing."

"Neither am I, Russel, neither am I," said the old man, observing how low his voice was, and speaking in a low sad voice himself. "I used to have confidence in the good will and watchful care of the Almighty over all who trust in Him. But now there is something over there"—he pointed towards the churchyard—"which shows that we may carry such ideas to a foolish point. But I cannot speak of it; say no more."

"I will own," replied Overshute, studying the Squire's downcast face, to see how far he might venture, "at one time I thought that you yourself carried such notions to a foolish length. That was before my illness. Now, I most fully believe that you were quite right."

"Yes, I suppose that I was—so far as duty goes, and the parson's advice. But as for the result—where is it?"

"As yet we see none. But we very soon shall. Can you bear to hear something I want to say, and to listen to it attentively?"

"I believe that I can, Russel. There is nothing now that can disturb me very much."

"This will disturb you, my dear sir, but in a very pleasant way, I hope. As sure as I stand and look at you here, and as sure as the Almighty looks down at us both, that grave in Beckley churchyard holds a gipsy-woman, and no child of yours! Ah! I put it too abruptly, as I always do. But give me your arm, sir, and walk a few steps. I am not very strong, any more than you are. But, please God, we will both get stronger, as soon as our troubles begin to lift."

Each of them took the right course to get stronger, by putting forth his little strength, to help and guide the other's steps.

"Russel, what did you say just now?" Mr. Oglander asked, when the pair had managed to get as far as another little bower, Grace's own, and there sat down. "I must have taken your meaning wrong. I am not so clear as I was, and often there is a noise inside my head."

"I told you, sir, that I had proved for certain that your dear daughter has not been buried here—nor anywhere else, to my firm belief. Also I have found out and established (to my own most bitter cost) who it was that lies buried here, and of what terrible disease she died. As regards my own illness, I would go through it again—come what might come of it—for the sake of your darling Grace; but, alas! I have lost my own dear mother through this utterly fiendish plot—for such it is, I do believe! This poor girl buried here was the younger sister of Cinnaminta!"

"Cinnaminta!" said the Squire, trying to arouse old memory. "Surely I have heard that name. But tell me all, Russel; for God's sake, tell me all, and how you came to find it out, and what it has to do with my lost pet."

"My dear sir, if you tremble so I shall fear to tell you another word. Remember, it is all good, so far as it goes; instead of trembling you should smile and rejoice."

"So I will—so I will; or at least I will try. There, now, look—I have taken a pinch of snuff, you need have no fear for me after that."

"All I know beyond what I have told you is that your Gracie—and my Grace too—was driven off in a chaise and pair, through the narrow lanes towards Wheatley. I have not been able to follow the track in my present helpless condition; and, indeed, what I know I only learned this morning; and I thought it my duty to come and tell you at once. I had it from poor Cinnaminta's own lips, who for a week or more had been lurking near the house to see me. This morning I could not resist a little walk—lonely and miserable as it was—and the poor thing told me all she knew. She was in the deepest affliction herself at the loss of her only surviving child, and she fancied that I had saved his

life before, and she had deep pangs of ingratitude, and of Nemesis, etc.; and hence she was driven to confess all her share; which was but a little one. She was tempted by the chance of getting money enough to place her child in the care of a first-rate doctor."

"But Grace—my poor Grace!—how was she tempted—or was she forced away from me?"

"That I cannot say as yet; Cinnaminta had no idea. She did not even see the carriage; for she herself was borne off by her tribe, who were quite in a panic at the fever. But she heard that no violence was used, and there was a lady in the chaise; and poor Grace went quite readily, though she certainly did seem to sob a little. It was no elopement, Mr. Oglander, nor anything at all of that kind. The poor girl believed that she was acting under your orders in all she did; just as she had believed that same when she left her aunt's house to meet you on the homeward road, through that forged letter, which, most unluckily, she put into her pocket. There, I believe I have told you all I can think of for the moment. Of course, you will keep the whole to yourself, for we have to deal with subtle brutes. Is there anything you would like to ask?"

"Russel Overshute," said the Squire, "I am not fit to go into things now; I mean all the little ins and outs. And you look so very ill, my dear fellow, I am quite ashamed of allowing you to talk. Come into the house and have some nourishment. If any man ever wanted it, you do now. How did you come over?"

"Well, I broke a very ancient vow. If there is anything I detest it is to see a young man sitting alone inside of a close carriage. But we never know what we may come to. I tried to get upon my horse, but could not. By the bye, do you know Hardenow?"

"Not much," said the Squire; "I have seen him once or twice, and I know that he is a great friend of yours. He is one of the new lights, is not he?"

"I am sure I don't know, or care. He is a wonderfully clever fellow, and as true as steel, and a gentleman. He has heard of course of your sad trouble, but only the popular account of it. He does not even know of my feelings—but I will not speak now of them——"

"You may, my dear fellow, with all my heart. You have behaved like a true son to me; and if ever a gracious Providence——"

Overshute took Mr. Oglander's hand, and held it in silence for a moment; he could not bear the idea of even the faintest appearance of a bargain now. The Squire understood, and liked him all the better, and waved his left hand towards the dining-room.

"One thing more, while we are alone," resumed the young man, much as he longed for, and absolutely needed, good warm victuals; "Hardenow is a tremendous walker; six miles an hour are nothing to him; the 'Flying Dutchman' he is called, although he hasn't got a bit of calf. Of course, I would not introduce him into this matter without your leave. But may I tell him all, and send him scouting, while you and I are so laid upon the shelf? He can go where you and I could not, and nobody will suspect him. And, of course, as regards intelligence alone, he is worth a dozen of that ass John Smith; at any rate, he would find no mare's nests. May I try it? If so, I will take on the carriage to Oxford, as soon as I have had a bit to eat."

"With all my heart," cried the Squire, whose eyes were full again of life and hope. "Hardenow owes a debt to Beckley. It was Cripps who got him his honours and fellowship—or at least the Carrier says so; and we all believe our Carrier. And after all, whatever there is to do, nobody does it like a gentleman, and especially a good scholar. I remember a striking passage in the syntax of the Eton Latin grammar. I make no pretension to learning when I quote it, for it hath been quoted in the House of Lords. Perhaps you remember it, my dear Russel."

"My Latin has turned quite rusty, Squire," answered Overshute, knowing, as well as Proteus, what was coming.

"The passage is this,"—Mr. Oglander always smote his frilled shirt, in this erudition, and delivered, *ore rotundo*—

> "Scilicet ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes,
> Emollit mores, nec sinit esse feros."

CHAPTER XL.

LET ME OUT.

At about the same hour of that Sunday afternoon, Miss Patch sat alone in her little cottage, stubbornly reasoning with herself. She was growing rather weary of her task, which had been a long and heavy one; a great deal longer, and a great deal heavier, than she ever could have dreamed at the outset. It was for the sake of the kingdom of heaven that she had laid her hand to this plough; and now it seemed likely to be a "plough," in the sense in which that word is lightly used by undergraduates.

For public opinion Miss Patch cared nothing. Her view of the world was purely and precisely "Scriptural," according to her own interpretation. Any line of action was especially recommended to her by the certainty that "the world" would condemn it. She had led a life of misery with her father, the gambling captain, the man of fashion, who made slaves of his children; and being already of a narrow gauge of mind, she laid herself out for theology; not true religion, but enough to please her, and make her sure that she was always right.

Grace, being truly of a docile nature, and most unsuspicious (as her father was before her), had implicit faith in the truth and honour of her good Aunt Patch. She looked upon her as so devoutly pious and grandly upright, that any idea of fraud on her part seemed almost profanity. She believed the good lady to be acting wholly under the guidance of her own father, and as his representative; in which there seemed nothing either strained or strange, especially as the Squire had once placed his daughter in the charge of Miss Patch, for a course of Scriptural and historical reading. And the first misgiving in the poor girl's mind arose from what Christopher Sharp had told her. Of pining and lonely weariness, weeks and weeks she had endured, under the firm belief that her father was compelled to have it so, and in the hope of the glorious time when he should come to take her home. For all that she could see good reason—according to what she had been told—but she could see no reason whatever why Miss Patch should have told her falsehoods as to the place in which they lived. Having been challenged upon this subject by her indignant niece, the elderly lady now sat thinking. She was as firmly convinced as ever, that in all she had done, she had acted strictly and purely for the glory of the Lord. Grace, a great heiress, and a silly girl, was at the point of being snapped up by the papists, and made one of them; whereupon both an immortal soul and £150,000 would be devoted to perdition. Of this Miss Patch had been thoroughly assured before she would give her help at all. It was well known that Russel Overshute loved and would win Grace Oglander, and that Russel's dearest friend was Hardenow of Brasenose, and that Hardenow was the deepest Jesuit ever admitted to holy orders in the Church of England; therefore, at heart, Russel Overshute must be a papist of the deepest dye; and anybody with half an eye could see through that conspiracy. To defeat such a scheme, Miss Patch would have promised to spend six months in a hollow tree; but promise and performance are a "very different pair of shoes;" and the lady (though fed, like a woodpecker, on the choicest of all sylvan food) even now, in four months' time, was tiring of her martyrdom.

Her cottage in a wood had long been growing loathsome to her. The deeds of the Lord she admired greatly, when they were homicidal; but of His large and kindly works she had no congenial liking. The fluttering spread of leaves, that hang like tips of empty gloves one day, and after one kind night lift forth (like the hand of a baby with his mind made up), and the change of colour all under the trees, whether the ground be grassed or naked; also the delicate sliding of the light in and out the peeling wands of brush-wood, and flat upon the lichened stones, and even in the coarsest hour of the day—which generally is from 1 to 2 p.m., when all mankind are dining—the quiet spread and receptive width of growth that has to catch its light—for none of these pretty little scenes did Miss Patch care so much as half a patch. And she was sure that they gave her the rheumatism.

She was longing to be in London now, to sit beneath the noble eloquence of preachers and orators most divine, who spend the prime of the year in reviling their friends and extolling the negro. Whereas for weeks and weeks, in this ungodly forest, she had no chance of receiving any spiritual ministration; save once, when Tickuss, on a Sunday morning, had driven her in his pig-cart to a little Wesleyan chapel some three miles off at the end of a hamlet. Here people stared at her so, and asked such questions, that she durst not go again; and, indeed, the pleasure was not worth the risk, for the shoemaker who preached was a thoroughly quiet, ungifted man, without an evil word for anybody.

Not only these large regrets and yearnings were thronging upon this lady now, but also a small although feminine feeling of desire for support and guidance. Strong-minded as she was, and conscious of her lofty mission, from time to time she grew faint-hearted in that dreary solitude, without the encouragement of the cool male will. This for some days she had not received, and she knew not why it had failed her.

Though the afternoon was so bright with temptation, the wood so rich with wonders, Miss Patch preferred to nurse her knee by the little fire in her parlour. She had always hated to be out of doors, and to see too much of things which did not bear out her opinions, and to lose that clear knowledge of the will of the Lord which is lost by those who study Him. She loved to discern in everything that happened to her liking "the grand and infinite potentiality of an all-wise Providence;" and, if a little thing went amiss, she laid all the blame to the badly principled interference of the devil.

While she was deeply pondering thus, and warming her little teapot, in ran the beautiful and lively girl, who had long been growing too much for her. It was not only the brighter spring of young life in this Gracie, and her pretty ways, and nice surprises, and pleasure in pleasing others, and graceful turns of cookery, but also her pure fount of loving-kindness which (having no other way out) was obliged to steal around Miss Patch herself. Although she had been ill-

content with the only explanation she could get about her dwelling-place—to wit, that in these roadless parts distance was very much a matter of conjecture—Grace had no suspicion yet of any plot or conspiracy. All things had been planned so deeply, and carried out so cleverly, that any such suspicion would have been contrary to her nature. She had lost, by some unaccountable carelessness, both the note from her father, which she had received at her Aunt Joan's, and also his more important letter delivered to her, when she met the chaise, by her kind and pious "Aunty Patch." In the first note (delivered by a little boy) she had simply been called forth to meet her father in the lane, and to walk home with him, as he wished to speak with her by herself. She was not to wait to pack any of her clothes, as they would be sent for afterwards; and he hoped her Aunt Joan would excuse his deferring their little dinner for the present.

But when, instead of meeting him, she found the chaise with Miss Patch inside it, and was invited to step in, a real letter was handed to her, the whole of which in the waning light—the day being very brown and gloomy—she could not easily make out. But she learned enough to see that she was to place herself under the care of Miss Patch, and not expect to see her dear father for at least some weeks to come. Her hair, for the reason therein given, was to be cut off at once, and not even kept in the carriage; and the poor girl submitted, with a few low sobs, to the loss of her beautiful bright tresses. But what were they? How small and selfish of her to think twice of them in the presence of the heavy trouble threatening her dear father, and the anguish of losing him for so long, without even so much as a kiss of farewell! For, after his first brief scrawl, he had found that, by starting at once, he could catch at Falmouth the packet for Demerara, and thus save a fortnight in getting to his estates, which were threatened with ruin. If these should be lost to him, Gracie knew (as he had no secrets from her) that half his income would go at one sweep—which, for his own sake, would matter little; but, for the sake of his darling, must, if possible, be prevented.

He had no time now for another word, except that he had left his house at Beckley, just as it stood, to be let by his agent, to cover the expenses of this long voyage, and to get him out of two difficulties. He could not have left his dear child there alone; and, if he could, he would not have done so, for a most virulent fever had long been hanging about, and had now broken out hard by; and Dr. Splinters had strictly ordered, the moment he heard of it, that the dear child's hair should be cropped to her head, and burned or cast away, for nothing harboured infection as hair did. With a few words of blessing, and comfort, and love, and a promise to write from Demerara, and a fatherly hope that for his sake she would submit to Miss Patch in all things, and make the most of this opportunity for completing her course of Scriptural and historical reading, the dear old father had signed himself her "loving papa, W. O."

Grace would have been a very different girl from her own frank self, if she had even dreamed of suspecting the genuineness of this letter. It was in her father's crabbed, and upright, and queerly-jointed hand, from the first line to the last. For a moment, indeed, she had been surprised that he called himself her "papa," because he did not like the word, and thought it a piece of the foreign stuff which had better continue to be foreign. But there stood the word; and in his hurry how could he stop to such trifles? This letter had been lost; poor Grace could not imagine how, because she had taken such great care of it, and had slept with it under her pillow always. Nevertheless, it had disappeared, leaving tears of self-reproach in her downcast eyes, as she searched the wood for it. And this made her careful tenfold of the two letters she had received from George-town.

But now, as she came with her Sunday hat on, and her pretty Woodstock gloves, and her neat brown skirt looped up (for challenge of briers, and furze, and dog-rose), and, best of all, with the bloom on her cheeks, and the sparkle in her clear soft eyes, and the May sun making glory in her rolling clouds of new-grown hair—and, better than best, that smile of the heart filling the whole young face with light—she really looked as if it would be impossible to say "no" to her.

"Aunty," she began, "it is quite an age since you have let me have a walk at all. One would think that I wanted to run away with that very smart young gentleman, who possesses and exhibits that extremely lustrous riding-whip. If he has only got a horse to match it—what is the name, dear Aunty, of that inestimable historical jewel that somebody stole out of somebody's eye?"

"Grace, will you never remember anything? It is now called the Orloff, or Schaffras gem, and is set in the Russian sceptre."

"Then that must be the name of this gentleman's horse, to enable it to go with such a whip. Dear Aunty now, even that whip will not tempt me or move me to run away from you. Only do please to allow me forth. This horrid little garden is so shaded and sour, that even a daisy cannot live. But in the wood I find all things lovely. May I have a run for only half an hour?"

"Upon one condition," replied Miss Patch; "that if you see any one, you shall come back at once, and let me know."

"What, even the fat man with the flapped hat and the smock on? I never go out without seeing him, though he never seems to see me at all. He must be very short-sighted."

"Oh no, my dear; never mind that poor man; he looks after the cattle or something. What I mean is, any young gentleman, who ought to be at home on the Sabbath day. And wrestle with your natural frivolity, my dear, that no worldly thoughts may assault and hurt the soul upon this holy day."

"I will do my best, Aunty. But how can I help thinking of the things I see?"

Miss Patch having less than any faith in unregenerate human nature, feared that she might have been wrong in allowing even this limited freedom to Grace. The truth of it was that, without fresh guidance from a mind far deeper than her own, she could not see the right thing to do in the new complication arising. The interviews between Kit Sharp and Grace were the very thing desired, and surely must have led to something good, which ought to be carefully followed up. And yet, if she met him again, she would be quite sure to go on with her questions; and Kit,

being purely outside of the plot, would reply with the most inconvenient truth. Miss Patch had written, as promptly as could be, to ask what she ought to do in this crisis. But no answer had come through the trusty Tickuss, nor any well-provided visit. The Christian-minded lady could not tell at all what to make of it. Then, calling to mind the sacredness of the day, she dismissed the subject; and sternly rebuked deaf Margery Daw for not keeping the kettle boiling.

CHAPTER XLI.

REASON AND UNREASON.

When things were in this very ticklish condition almost everywhere, and even Cripps himself could scarcely sleep because of rumours, and Dobbin in his own clean stable found the flies too many for him, an exceedingly active man set out to scour the whole of the neighbourhood. To the large and vigorous mind of the Rev. Thomas Hardenow, the worst of all sins (because the most tempting and universal) was indolence.

Hardenow never condemned a poor man for having his pint or his quart of ale (with his better half to help him), when he had earned it by a hard day's work, and had fed his children likewise. Hardenow thought it not easy to find any hypocrisy more bald or any morality more cheap than that or those which strut about, reviling the poor man for taking, in the cheaper liquid form, the nourishment which "his betters" can afford to have in the shape of meat; and then are not content with it, unless it is curdled with some duly sour vintage. And passing such crucial points of debate, Hardenow always could make allowance for any sins rather than those which spring from a treacherous, sneaking, and lying essence.

Now, a council was held at the Grange of Shotover on the Monday. A sad and melancholy house it was, with its fine old mistress lately buried, and its poor young master only half recovered. The young tutor had been especially invited, and having heard everything from the Squire (who was proud of having ridden so far, yet broke down ridiculously among his boasts), and from Russel Overshute (who had thrown himself back for at least three days by excitement and exertion yesterday), and also from Mrs. Fermitage (who had lately been feeling herself overlooked), Hardenow thought for some little time before he would give his opinion. Not that he was, by any manner of means, possessed with the greatness of his own ideas; but that Mrs. Fermitage, from a low velvet chair, looked up at him with such emphatic inquiry and implicit faith, that he was quite in a difficulty how to speak, or what to say.

And so he said a very few short words of sympathy and of kindness, and gladly offered to do his best, and obey the orders given him; so far, at least, as his duty to his college and pupils permitted. He confessed that he had thought of this matter many times before he was invited to do so, and without the knowledge which he now possessed, or the special interest in the subject which he now must feel for the sake of Russel. But Mrs. Fermitage, filled with respect for the wisdom of a fellow and tutor of a college, would not let Hardenow thus escape; and being compelled to give his opinion, he did so with his usual clearness.

"I am not at all a man of the world," he said; "and of the law I know nothing. My friend Russel is a man of the world, and knows a good deal of the law as well. A word from him is worth many of mine. But if Mrs. Fermitage insists upon having my crude ideas, they are these. First of the first, and by far the most important—I believe that Miss Oglander is alive, and that her father will receive her safe and sound, though not perhaps still Miss Oglander."

"God bless you, my dear sir!" the Squire broke in, getting up to lay hold of the young man's hand. "I don't care a straw what her name may be—Snooks, or Snobbs, or Higginbotham—if I only get sight of my darling child again!"

Russel Overshute looked rather queer at this, and so did Mrs. Fermitage; but the Squire continued in the same sort of way—"What odds about her name, if it only is my Grace?"

"Exactly so," replied Hardenow; "that natural feeling of yours perhaps has been foreseen and counted on; and that may be why such trouble was taken to terrify you with the idea of her death. Also, of course, that would paralyze your search, while the villains are at leisure to complete their work."

"I declare, I never thought of that," cried Russel. "How extremely thick-headed of me! That theory accounts for a number of things that cannot be otherwise explained. What a head you have got, my dear Tom, to be sure!"

"I wish I could believe it!" Mr. Oglander exclaimed, whilst his sister clasped her fair fat hands, and looked with amazement at every one. "But I see no motive, no motive whatever. My Grace was a dear good girl, as everybody knows, and a fortune in herself; but of worldly goods she had very little, any more than I have; and her prospects were naturally contingent—contingent upon many things, which may not come to pass, I hope, for many years—if they ever do." Here he looked at his sister, and she said, "I hope so." "Therefore," continued Mr. Oglander, "while there are so many fine girls in the county, very much better worth carrying off—so far as mere worthless pelf is concerned—why should anybody steal my Grace unless they stole her for her own sake?"

Here the Squire sat down, and took to drumming with his stick. His feelings were hurt at the idea—though it was so entirely of his own origination—that his daughter had been carried off for the sake of her money, not of her own dear self. Hardenow looked at him and made no answer. He felt that it did not behove a mere stranger to ask about the young lady's expectations; while Overshute was more imperatively silenced by his relations towards the family. But Mrs. Fermitage came to the rescue. Great was her faith in the value of money, and she liked to have it known that she had plenty.

"Tut, tut," she cried, shaking out her new brocaded silk—a mourning dress certainly, but softly trimmed with purple—"why should we make any mystery of things, when the truth is most important? And the truth is, Mr. Hardenow, that my dear niece had very good expectations. My deeply lamented husband, respected, and I may say reverenced, for upwards of half a century, in every college of Oxford, and even more so by the corporation, for the pure integrity of his character, the loftiness of his principles, and—and the substance of his—what they make the wine of—he was not the man, Mr. Hardenow, to leave a devoted wife behind him, who had stepped perhaps out of her rank a little,

not being of commercial birth, you know, but never found cause to regret it, without some provision for the earthly time which she, being many years his junior——"

"Come, come, Joan, not so very many," exclaimed the truthful Squire; "about five, or say six, at the utmost. You were born on the 25th of June, A.D.——"

"Worth, I was not asking you for statistics. Mr. Hardenow, you will excuse my brother. He has always had a rude style of interruption; he learned it, I believe, in the army, and we always make allowance for it. But to go back to what I was saying—my good and ever to be lamented husband, being, let us say, ten years my senior—Worth, will that content you?—left every farthing of his property to me; and a good husband always does the same thing, I am told, and I believe they are ordered in the Bible; and, of course, I have no one to leave it to but Grace; and being so extraordinarily advanced in years, as my dear brother has impressed upon you, they could not have any very long time to wait; and my desire is to do my duty; and perhaps that lies at the bottom of it all."

After relieving her mind in this succinct yet copious manner, the good lady went into her chair again, carefully directing, in whatever state of mind, the gathering and the falling of her dress aright. And though it might be fancied that her colour had been high, anybody now could see that her dignity had conquered it.

"Now, the whole of this goes for next to nothing," said the Squire, while the young men looked at one another, and longed to be out of the way of it. "As we have got into the subject, let us go right down to the bottom of it. What are filthy pence and halfpence, or a cellar, like Balak's, of silver and gold, when compared with the life of one pure dear soul? I may not express myself theologically, but you can see what I mean exactly. I mean that I would kick old Port-wine's dross to the bottom of the Red Sea, where Pharaoh lies, if it turns out that that has killed my child, or made her this long time dead to me."

Having justified his feelings thus, the old man stood up, and went to the window, to look for his horse. The very last thing he desired always was to let out what he felt too much. But to hear that old thief of a "Port-wine Fermitage" praised, and his lucre put forward, quite as if it were an equivalent for Grace, and to think that he owed to that filthy cause the loss of the liveliest, loveliest darling, without whom he had neither life nor love—such things were enough to break the balance of his patience; and the rest might think them out amongst them.

Now, this might have made a very serious to-do between Mr. Oglander and his sister Joan, both of them being of the stiff-necked order, if he had been allowed to ride away like this. Mrs. Fermitage had her great carriage in the yard, and two black horses with wide valleys down their backs, rattling rings of the brightest brass, while they stood in the stable with a bail between them, and gently deigned to blow the chaff off from the oats of Shotover. This goodly pair made a great rush now into the mind of their mistress—the only sort of rush they ever made—and seeing her brother in that state of mind to get away from her, she became inspired with an equal desire to get away from him.

"Will you kindly ring the bell," she said, "and order my horses to be put to? I think I have quite said every word I had to say. And being the only lady present, of course I labour under some—well, some little disadvantages. Not, of course, that I mean for a moment——"

"To be sure not, Joan! You never do know what you mean. You would be a very nasty woman if you did. Now, do let us turn our minds the pleasant way to everything. If any word has come from me to lead to strong kind of argument, I beg pardon of everybody; and then there ought to be an end of it."

Mrs. Fermitage scarcely knew what to say, but in a relenting way looked round for some one to take it up for her. And she was not long without somebody.

"Mr. Oglander," said Russel Overshute, "you really ought to give us time to think. You are growing so hasty, sir, since you came back to your seat in the saddle, and your cross-country ways, that you want to ride over every one of us—ladies and gentlemen, all alike."

The old Squire laughed, he could not help it, at the thought of his own effrontery. He felt that there might be some truth about it, ever since it had come into his mind that he might not after all be childless. He would not have any one know, for a thousands pounds, why he was laughing; or that half another word might turn it into weeping. He had seen it proved in learned books that no man knew the way to weep at his time of life; and if his own case went against it, he had the manners to be ashamed of it. So he waited till he felt that his face was right, and then he went up to his sister Joan, who was growing uneasy about her own words; and he took her two plump hands in his, and gave a glance, for all there present to be welcome witnesses. And then, having knowledge for the last ten years how much too fat she was to lift, he managed to kiss her in the two right places, disarranging nothing.

His sister looked up at him, as soon as he had done it, with a sense of his propriety and study of her harmonies; and she whispered to him quietly, "I beg you pardon, brother." And he spoke up for all to hear him, "Joan, my dear, I beg your pardon."

"Now, the first thing to be done," said Hardenow, "is to find Cinnaminta and her husband Smith. But allow me to make one important request, that even your adviser, Mr. Luke Sharp, shall not be informed of what has passed to-day, or what Overshute found out yesterday."

With some little surprise they agreed to this.

CHAPTER .

MEETING THE COACH.

There happened, however, to be some one else, whose opinion differed very widely from that of Mr. Hardenow, as to the necessity for any prompt appearance of either Mr. or Mrs. Joseph Smith.

The old red house in Cross Duck Lane was ready to jump out of its windows—if such a feat be possible—with eagerness and anxiety at the long absence of its master. Mr. Luke Sharp had not crossed his own threshold for ten whole days, including two Sundays, when even an attorney may give leg-bail to the Power under whose "Ca. ad sa." he lives. The business of the noble firm of Piper, Pepper, Sharp, & Co. was falling sadly into arrears, at the very busiest time of year; for Mr. Sharp had always kept his very best clerks in leading strings; and Kit thus far, with his mother's aid, had battled against all articles. Christopher Fermitage Sharp, Esq., was resolved to be a country gentleman and a sportsman, and no quill-driver; he felt that his arms, and legs as well, were a great deal too good for going on and under desk.

With fine resignation Kit accepted the absence of his father. With his father away, he was a very great man; with his father at home, he was quite a small boy. He liked to play master of a house, and frighten his mother and the maids; and vow to dine at the Mitre all the rest of the week—if that was their style of cookery!

But poor Mrs. Sharp could not treat the matter thus. Truly delighted as she was to see her dear boy take his father's place, and conduct himself with dignity as the head of the household, and find fault with things of which he knew nothing, and order this, that, and the other away—still she could not help remembering that all this was not as it ought to be. Christopher ought to have been in tortures of intense anxiety; and, so far as that went, so ought she; and she really tried very hard not to sleep, and to sit up listening for the night-bell. But a man who thinks everything of his own will, and nothing of any other person's wish, may be pretty sure that none will miss his presence so much as himself does.

In spite of all that, Mrs. Sharp was anxious, and so were the rest of the household—though rather perhaps with care than love—at the long, unaccountable absence of the head and the brain of everything. Even the boys in Cross Duck Lane, who had a strong idea that Lawyer Sharp would defend them against the magistrates, were beginning to feel that they must look out before throwing stones at any other boys.

"You are not at all the thing, my darling boy," said Mrs. Sharp to Christopher, on the evening of that same Monday on which the Council had been held at Shotover; "your want of appetite makes me wretched. Now, put on your cloak, my pet, and go as far as Carfax, or Magdalen Bridge. The two evening coaches will soon be in—the 'Defiance' and the 'Regulator.' I have a strong idea that your father will come by one or other of them."

"I may just as well go there as anywhere else," the young man answered gloomily. For some days now he had striven in vain for an interview with his charmer; and, most unkindest cut of all, he had spied her once, and she had run away. "It does not matter where I go."

"When you talk like that, dear child, you have no idea what you do. You simply break the heart of your poor mother—and much you care for that! Now, if you should see any very fresh calves' sweet-breads, or even a pig's fry, or anything you fancy, order it in, dear, at once; and be sure that you are at home by nine o'clock; and bring your dear papa with you, if you can."

Kit, with a sigh and a roll of his eyes, flung his cloak around him; and with long, slow, melancholy strides clomb the arduous steep of Carfax. Here at that time—if any faith there be to bruit of veterans—eighty well-equipped quadrigæ daily passed with prance of steeds and sound of classic trump, and often youthful charioteer, more apt to handle than win ribbons. Forty chariots came from smoke, and wealth, and din of blessed Rome; and other forty sped them back, with the glory and mud of the country divine.

The moody Kit ensconced himself, away from the tramp of the vulgar crowd, in the beetling doorway of a tailor who had put his shutters up; and thrice being challenged by proctors velvet-sleeved, and velvet-selvaged Pro—"Sir, are you a member of this university?"—thrice had the pleasure of answering "No!" Once and again he wiped his hectic cheek and fevered brow with a yellow bandana, from which the winner of last year's Derby was washing out; and he saw the "Defiance" and the "Regulator" pass, newly horsed from rival inns, exalting their horns against one another, with splinter-bars swinging behind cocked tails, all eager for their race upon the Cheltenham road. But he saw not the author of his existence; yet no tear bedewed his unfilial eye, though these were the likeliest coaches.

"All right," he said, putting his pipe in its case; "governor won't come home to-night. I'm in no hurry, if he isn't. I think I'll have sheep's trotters. It's a beastly time of the year for anything." Twitching his cloak, which had two long tassels, he strode, from his post of observation and morbid meditation, towards a tidy and clean little tripe-shop. He knew the old woman who kept it, in George Street; and she always put him into good condition by generous admiration.

Alas! he had stridden but a very few strides, when he met the up-coach from Woodstock, wearily with spent horses making rally for the Star. The driver (a man of fine family at Christchurch, now in his seventh term, and fighting off his "smalls"), with a turn of his strong arm, pulled the team together, while with the other hand he launched a scouring flourish of the shrill scourge over every blessed horse's ears.

"Well done, my lord!" said the gentleman on the box, as the four horses pulled up foot for foot, and stood with their ears and their noses one for one; "you have brought them up in noble style, my lord. I never saw it done more perfectly."

My lord touched his white hat, and said nothing. He had crowned his day, as he always loved to crown it; and now, if he could get into a back room of the Star, pull off his top-boots and cape, and don cap and gown, and fetch back to college clear of £5 fine—as happy as any lord would he be, till nature sent him forth to drive again tomorrow.

But Kit, having very keen ears, had recognised, even from the other side of the street, the sound of his dear father's voice. Mr. Luke Sharp never missed a chance of commending a nobleman's exploits; but he would not have spoken in so loud a tone, perhaps, if he had known that his son was near at hand. For he hated with a consistent hatred—whether he were doing well or ill—all observation of his movements by any member of his household. Christopher, being well aware of this, pursued his own course in the shadow, but resolved, with filial piety, to keep his good father in sight for fear of his falling into any mischief.

First of all, Mr. Sharp—as observed at a respectful distance by his son—went into the coach office, and there left his hand-bag and his travelling coat; then, carrying something rolled under his arm, he betook himself to a little quiet tap-room, and called for something that loomed and steamed afar, very much after the manner of hot brown grog.

"Ho, ho!" muttered Kit; "then he isn't going home. My duty to the household commands me to learn why."

With a smack of his lips, Mr. Sharp the elder came out into Corn-Market Street again, and turning his back on his home, set forth at a rapid pace for the broad desert of St. Giles. Here he passed into an unlit alley, in the lonely parts beyond St. John's; and Kit, full of wonder, was about to follow, but hung back as the receding figure suddenly stopped and began to shift about. In a nice dark place, the learned gentleman unrolled the travelling rug he had been carrying, undoubled it, after that, from some selvage—and, lo, there was a city watchman's large loose overall! Then he pressed down the crown of his black spring-hat, till it lay on his head like a pancake, pulled the pouch of his long cloak over that, and emerged from his alley with a vigilant slouch, whistling "Moll Maloney." Considerable surprise found its way into the candid mind of Christopher.

"Well now!" thought the ungrateful youth, as he shrank behind a tree to peep; "I always knew that the governor was a notch or two too deep for us; but what he is up to now surpasses all experience of him. What shall I do? It seems so nasty to go spying after him. And yet things are taking such a very strange turn, that, for the sake of my mother, who is worth a thousand of him, I do believe I am bound to see what this strange go may lead to."

Young curiosity sprang forth, and strongly backed up his sense of duty; insomuch that Kit, after hesitating and listening for any other step, stealthily followed the "author of his existence" across the dark and dusty road. "He is going to Squeaker Smith's," thought the lad; "he will get a horse, and ride away, no end; and of course I can never go after him. I am sure it has something to do with me. Such troubles are enough to drive one mad."

But Mr. Sharp did not turn in at the lamp-lit entrance to those mews. He shunned the beaming oil, which threw barred shadows upon sawdust of a fine device, and, keeping all his merits in the dark, strode on, like a watchman newly ordered to his post. Then suddenly he turned down a narrow unmade lane, hillocked with clay, and leading (as Christopher knew quite well) to the wildest part of "Jericho."

"I will follow him no further," said Kit Sharp, with a pang of astonishment and doubt; "he is my father; what right have I to pry into his secrets? How I wish that I had not followed him at all! It serves me right for meanness. I will go home now; what care I for anything—trotters, cow-heel, or sweet-bread?"

As he turned, to carry out this good resolve, with a heart that would have ailed him more for leaving fears unfinished, the sound of a clouting, loutish footstep came along the broken mud-banks of the narrow lane. The place was lonely, dark, and villainous: foot-pads still abounded. Kit knew that his father often carried large sums of money, and always the great gold watch; he might have been decoyed here for robbery and murder, upon pretence of secret business; clearly it was the young man's duty not to be too far away. Therefore he drew back, and stood in the jaws of the dark entrance.

But while he was ready to leap forth if wanted, the sound of quiet voices told him that there was no danger. Kit could not hear the first few words; but his father came back towards the mouth of the lane, as if he would much rather not go into the dark too deeply. Christopher therefore was obliged either to draw back into the hedge, and there lie hid without moving, or else to come forward and declare himself. He knew that the latter was his proper course, or he might have known it, if he had taken time to think; but the dread of his father and the hurry of the moment drove him, without thought, into the lurking-place. It was quite dark now, and there was not a lamp within a furlong of them.

"You quite understand me, then;" Mr. Sharp was speaking in a low clear voice; "you are not to say a word to Cripps about it. He is true enough to me, because he dare not be otherwise; but he is an arrant coward. I want a man who has the spirit to defy the law, when he knows that he is well backed up."

"Governor, I am your man for that. I have defied the law, since I were that high, with only my mother, in the wukuss, to back me."

"What I mean is, to defy the wrong fashions of the law; the petty rules that go against all common sense and equity."

"All the fashions of the law be wrong. I might a' got on in the world like a house afire, if it hadn't been for the devil's own law. To tell me a thing is agin the law is as good as an eyster to my teeth. Go on, governor, no fear of that, I say."

"And you know where to find, at any moment, a man as resolute as yourself—Joe Smith. Well, you know what you have to do, in case of any sudden stir arising. At present all goes well; but all, at any moment, may go wrong. Squire Overshute is about again at last——"

"Ah, if I could only come across of he of a dark night, such as this be——"

"And that fool Cinnaminta has told him all she knows—which, luckily, is not very much. I took good care to keep women out of it. And the Carrier too has been smelling about—but he hasn't the sense of his own horse. Night and day, George, night and day, keep a look-out, and have the horses ready. You know what I have done for you, my man."

"Governor, if it hadn't been for you, I might a' seed the clouds through a halter loop."

"You speak the truth, and express it well. And you may still enjoy that fair opportunity, unless you attend to every word I say."

"No fear, governor; I know you too well. A good friend and a bad enemy you be. Thick and thin, sir—thick and thin. Agin all the world, sir, I sticks by you."

"Enough for to-night, my man. Get ready and be off. I shall know where to find you, as before. I shall ride over to-morrow, if I find it needful."

With these words, Mr. Luke Sharp set off at a good round pace for Oxford, while the other man shambled and whistled his way homewards up the black-mouthed lane. Perceiving these things, Christopher Sharp, with young bones, leaped from his hiding-place. Astonishment might have been read upon his ingenuous and fat countenance, if the lighting committee of the corporation had carried out their duty. But (having no house of their own out here) they had, far back, put colophon upon the nascent gas-pipe. The ambition of the city, at that time, was to fill all the houses of the citizens, and extend in no direction. But though his countenance, for want of light, only wasted its amazement, Kit—like Hector with his windpipe damaged, but not by any means perforated—gave issue to his sentiments. Unlike Hector—so far as we know—Kit had been forming a habit of using language too strong for ladies.

"Blow me!" was his unheroic exclamation—"blow me, if ever yet I knew so queer a start as this! Sure as eggs is eggs, that is the very blackguard I drubbed for his insolence! His voice is enough, and his snuffle; and I believe he was rubbing his nose in the dark. I am sure he's the man; I could swear it's the man, though I could not see his filthy face at all. My father to be in a conspiracy with him! And poor Cinnaminta, and Mr. Overshute! What the dickens is the meaning of it all? The governor has a thousand times my brains, as everybody says, and I am the last to grudge it to him; and he thinks he can do what he likes with me. I am not quite sure of that, if he puts my pecker up too heavily."

To throw his favourite light on his own reflections, Kit Sharp lit his pipe, and followed slowly in his father's wake. Wiser, and wider, and brighter men might be found betwixt every two lamp-posts, but few more simple, soft, and gentle than this honest lawyer's son.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE MOTIVE.

Perfectly free from all suspicions, and as happy as he deserved to be, Mr. Sharp leaned back in his easy chair, after making an excellent supper, and gazed with complacency at his good wife. He was really glad to be at home again, and to find his admiring household safe, and to rest for a while with a quiet brain, as the lord and master of everything. Christopher had been sent to bed, as if he were only ten years old; for instead of exhibiting the proper joy, he had behaved in a very strange and absent manner; and his father, who delighted much in snubbing him sometimes, had requested him to seek his pillow. Kit had accepted this proposal very gladly, longing as he did to think over by himself that strange adventure of the evening.

"Now, darling Luke," began Mrs. Sharp, as soon as she had made her husband quite snug, and provided him with a glass of negus, "you really must be amazed at my unparalleled patience and self-control. You ran away suddenly at the very crisis of a most interesting and momentous tale. And from that day to this I have not had one word; and how to behave to Kit has been a riddle beyond riddles. How I have seen to the dinner—I am sure—and of sleep I have scarcely had fifty winks, between my anxiety about you, and misery at not knowing how the story ended."

"Very well, Miranda, I will tell you all the rest; together with the postscript added since I went to London. Only you must stay up very late, I fear, to get to the proper end of it."

"I will stay till the cocks crow. At least, I mean, dear, if, after your long journey, you are really fit for it. If not, I will wait till to-morrow, dear."

Mr. Sharp was touched by his wife's consideration for him. He loved her more than he loved any one else in the world, except himself; and though (like many other clear-headed men) he had small faith in brains feminine, he was not quite certain that he might not get some useful idea out of them when the matter at issue was feminine.

"I am ready, if you are, my dear," he said, for he hated to beat about the bush. "Only I must know where I left off. With all I have done since, I quite forget."

"You left off just when you had discovered the real man who was called 'Jolly Fellows;' the man Cousin Fermitage left his will with."

"To be sure! Or at least, it was a codicil. Very well, I found him in the wine-vaults of the company, where they have been for generations. He was going round with some large and good customer, such as old Fermitage himself had been. Senhor Gelofilos had a link in one hand, and in the other a deep dock-glass, while a man in his shadow bore a flashing gimlet and a long-armed siphon-tap. From cell to cell, and pipe to pipe, they were going in regular order, showing brands, *ex* this, and *ex* that, and making little taps and trying them.

"I was admitted, without a word, as one of this solemn procession, being taken for a member of the sacred trade; and the number of sips of wine I got, and the importance attached to my opinion, would have made you laugh, Miranda. At length I got a chance of speaking alone to Senhor Gelofilos, a tall, dark, gentlemanly man, of grave and dignified manner. He at once remembered that he had received a paper from Mr. Fermitage; of its nature however he knew nothing, not being acquainted with our legal forms. He had kept it ever since in a box at his house, and if I could call upon him after office hours, he would show it to me with pleasure. Accordingly, I took a hackney-coach to his house near Hampstead in the evening, and found that old 'Port-wine' had not deceived me during our last interview.

"I held in my hand a most important codicil to the old man's will, duly executed and attested, so far at least as could be decided without inquiry. By this codicil he revoked his will thus far, that, instead of leaving the residue, after payment of legacies, to his widow absolutely, he left her a life-interest in that residue, after bequeathing the sum of £20,000, duty free, to his niece, Grace Oglander."

"Out of my money, Luke!" cried Mrs. Sharp indignantly. "Twenty thousand pounds out of my money! And what niece of his was she, I should like to know? Was there nothing whatever for his own flesh and blood?"

"Nothing whatever," answered Mr. Sharp calmly. "But wait a bit, Miranda, wait. Well, all the residue of his estate, after the decease of his said wife, Joan, was by this codicil absolutely given to his said niece Grace. He said that they both would know why he had made the change. And then the rest of his will was confirmed, as usual."

"I never heard such a thing! I never heard such robbery!" exclaimed Mrs. Sharp, with a panting breast. "I hope you will contest it all, my dear. If there is law in the land, you cannot fail to upset such a vile, vile will! You can show that the fungus got into his brain."

"My dear, it is my object to establish that will, or the codicil rather, which I thus discovered. I am obliged to proceed very carefully, of course; a rash step would ruin everything. Unluckily the executors remain as before, though he would not trust them with the codicil. Well, one of them, as you know, bought such a lot of port, half-price, at his testator's sale, that in three months he required an executor for himself. The other took warning by his fate, and is going in for claret and the sour Rhenish wines. This has made him as surly as a bear, and he is a most difficult man to manage. But if any one can handle him, I can; and he has a deadly quarrel with that haughty Joan. I had first ascertained, without any stir, that the attestation is quite correct—two stupid bottle-men, who gave no thought to what they were doing, but can swear to the signing; and the codicil itself, though 'Port-wine' drew it without any

lawyer, is quite clear and good. At the proper moment I produce the codicil, account for my possession of it, go to Mr. Wigginton, and make him prove it; and then, I think, we turn the tables on the proud old widow."

"Oh, Luke, what a blessed day that would be for me! The things I have endured from that odious woman! Of course, it will mortify her not to have disposal, and to have to give up £20,000—the miser, the screw, the Expositor hypocrite! The filthy silk stockings I should be ashamed to own! But, darling Luke, I do not see how we ourselves are a bit the better off for it. Poor Grace being dead, of course her father takes the money."

"Suppose, for a moment that, instead of being dead, Grace Oglander is the wedded wife, by that time, of a certain Christopher Fermitage Sharp, and without any settlement!"

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Sharp, jumping with astonishment. "Is it possible? Is it possible?"

"It is more than possible, it is probable; and without some very bad luck, it is certain!"

"Oh, you darling love!" she very nearly shouted, giving him a hug with her plump white arms. "Oh, Luke, Luke, it is the noblest thing I ever heard! And she is such a nice girl, too, so sweet, and clever, and superior! The very daughter I would have chosen out of fifty thousand! And with all that money at her back! Why, we can retire, and set up a green barouche! I shall have it lined with the new agate colour, trimmed with deep puce, like the Marchioness of Marston's—that is, if you approve, of course, my dear. And a pair of iron-greys always go the best with that. But, Luke, you will laugh at me for being in a hurry. There is plenty of time, dear, is there not?—though they do say that carriage-builders are so slow. But they think so much of their old family, my dear. I know how very wonderfully managing you are, and as clever as can be consistent with the highest principle. But do tell me, how you have contrived all this so well, and never even let me guess a single whisper of it."

"It has required some tact and skill," Mr. Sharp replied, with a twinkle in his eyes, and taking a good pull at his port-wine negus; "and even more than that, Miranda, without a bold stroke it could never have been done. I staked almost everything upon the die; not quite everything, for I made all arrangements if we should have to fly."

"Fly, my dear!" cried Mrs. Sharp, looking up with a very different face. "What do you mean, Luke? To have to run away!"

"Quite so. There is no great stroke without great miss. And if I had missed, we must all have bolted suddenly."

"The Lord forbid! Run away in disgrace from my father's own house, and the whole world that knows us! I never could have tried to go through such a trial."

"Yes, my dear Miranda, it might have come to that. And you would have gone through the whole of it, without a single murmur."

"Luke, I positively tremble at you!" the good woman answered, as her eyes fell under his. "How stern you can look when you want to scare me!"

"Miranda, I tell you the simple truth. We must all have been in France within twelve hours if, if—well, never mind. Nothing venture nothing win. But happily we have won, I believe; though we must not be too sure as yet. We have justice on our side; but justice does not always prevail against petty facts. And public opinion would set against us with great ferocity, if we failed. If we succeed, all men will praise us as soon as we begin to spend our money, and exert it near home at the outset. Everything depends upon success; of course, it always does in everything."

"My dear, it is not fair of you to talk like that," Mrs. Sharp answered, with tears in her eyes; for, in all her kind and ungirt nature, there was no entry for cynicism; "you must feel that I would hold by you always, whatever all the world might have the impudence to say, dear."

"Beyond a doubt you would. You could do no otherwise. But that might be of very little use. I mean, that it would be the very greatest prop, and comfort, and blessing, and support in every way, and would keep up one's faith, to some extent, in human nature, and divine assistance—but still, if we had to live on three pound ten a week! However, we will not anticipate the worst. You would like to know how the whole thing stands now?"

Mrs. Luke Sharp, although not very clever, and wholly incapable of any plot herself (beyond such little stratagems as ladies do concoct, for fetching down the price of rep, or getting gloves at a quarter of their cost), nevertheless had her share of common sense, and that which generally goes therewith—respect for the opinion of good people. She knew that her husband was a very bold man, as well as a very strong-willed one; he had often done things which she had thought too daring; and yet they had always turned out well. But what he had now in hand was, even according to his own account, the most risky and perilous venture yet; and though (like the partner of a gambler) she warmed up to back his hand, and cheer him, and let her heart go with him, in her wiser mind she had shivers, and shudders, and a chill shadow of the end of it.

Mr. Sharp saw that his wife was timid; which of all things would be fatal now; for her aid was indispensable. Otherwise, perhaps, he would not have been quite so ready to tell her everything. He had put things so that her dislikes and envies, as well as her likings, and loves, and ambitions would compel her to work with him. If she were lukewarm his whole scheme must fail. At the mere idea his temper stirred. "Will you hear the rest? Or is your mind upset?" he asked a little roughly. His wife looked up brightly from some little blink of thought. "Every word of it now, I must hear every word, if you will be so kind, my dear. I will go and see that all the doors are shut."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MANNER.

"You see now, Miranda," continued Mr. Sharp, as his wife came and sat quite close to him, "that it was my duty to make the most of the knowledge thus providentially obtained. We had met with a bitter disappointment through the most gross injustice, brought about, no doubt, by craft, and wheedling, and black falsehood. When old Fermitage stood godfather to our only child, and showed a sense of duty towards him by bottling and walling up a pipe of wine, everybody looked upon Kit as certain to stand in his shoes in the course of time. You know how we always looked forward to it, not covetously or improperly, but simply as a matter of justice. And you remember what he said to me, before he went to church with Joan Oglander: 'Quibbles, my boy, this shall make no difference between you and me, mind!'

"I am sure that he meant it when he said it; but that artful woman so led him astray, and laid down the law about wives and husbands, and 'county families,' and all that, and pouring contempt upon our profession, that all his better feelings left him, and he made the will he did. And but for her low, unwomanly cowardice during his last illness, so it would have stood—as she believes it even now to stand."

"Oh, what a pure delight it will be," cried the lady, unable to help herself, "such a triumph of right over might and falsehood! Do let me be there to see it."

"There is time enough to think of that, Miranda. Well, as soon as ever I felt quite sure of my ground about the codicil (which Senhor Gelofilos placed in my hands after making inquiry about me here, and being satisfied of my relationship and respectability), I began to cast about for the most effectual mode of working it. It was clear in a moment that the right course was to make a match between Grace, now the legal heiress, and Kit, the legitimate heir. But here I was met by difficulties which appeared at first sight insuperable. The pride of the old Squire, and his family nonsense, the suit of Russel Overshute, and the girl's own liking for that young fellow (which I had some reason to suspect), the impossibility of getting at the girl, and last not least the stupid shyness of our Christopher himself; these and other obstacles compelled me to knock them all out of the way, by some decisive action. The girl must be taken out of stupid people's power, and brought to know what was good for her.

"Of course, I might have cut the matter short by walking the girl off, and allowing her no food until she consented to marry Kit; and probably if I could only have foreseen my sad anxieties and heavy outlay, I should have acted in that way. But I have a natural dislike to measures that wear an appearance of harshness; and I could not tell how Kit might take it, or even you, Miranda dear. In this sad puzzle, some good inspiration brought to my mind Hannah Patch, then living by herself in London. In a sort of a manner she is my sister (as I have told you long ago), although she is so many years my elder."

Mrs. Sharp nodded; she knew all about it and admired her husband none the less for being the illegitimate son of the fashionable Captain Patch.

"Very well," this admirable man resumed, "you are aware that Hannah looked very coldly upon me, and spoke of me always as 'that child of sin,' until I was enabled to marry you, my dear, through your disinterested affection, which is my choicest treasure. Having won that, and another more lucrative (but less delightful) partnership, I became to sweet Hannah the child of love, and was immediately allowed the privilege of doing all her legal business gratis. You have often grumbled at that, but I had some knowledge of what I was about, my dear, and I soon obtained that due influence over her which all women ought to have some man to wield. Setting aside her present use, Hannah Patch has £200 a year of her own, which might be much better invested, and shall be, as soon as it comes to us; but it would not do to have her too set up herself."

"Oh Luke, what a large-minded dear you are!" whispered Mrs. Sharp, with much enthusiasm; "I do believe nothing escapes you, and nothing that gets into your hand ever does get out again!"

"Well, I am pretty well for that," he answered, looking at his large, strong palm; "I began with my hands pretty empty, God knows, and only my own brain to fill them. But perseverance, integrity, and readiness to oblige, have brought me on; and above all things, Miranda, the grace that I found in your kind eyes."

The kind and still pretty eyes looked prettier, and almost young, with the gleam of tears; while the owner of all this integrity proved that it had stood him in good stead, by drawing from his pocket, and spreading on his head, a handkerchief which had cost him yesterday fourteen and sixpence, in Holborn, ready hemmed.

"Yes," he continued with a very honest smile; "you see me as I am, my dear; and there are many poor people in the world worse off. Still it would never do for me to stop. One must be either backward or forward, always; and I prefer to be forward. And I hope to make a great step now. But there must be no hesitation. Well, to go on with my story, I saw how useful Miss Patch might be to us. She has strong religious views, which always make it so easy to guide any one aright, by giving the proper turn to things. Pugnacious dread of Popery, and valiant terror of the Jesuits, are the leading-strings of her poor old mind. I got firm hold of both of these, and being trustee of her money also, I found her quite ready to do good deeds.

"I allowed her to perceive that if things went on, without our interference, Grace Oglander would be married, and her enormous fortune sacrificed, to a man whose bosom friend is a Jesuit, a fierce wolf in sheep's clothing—an uncommonly clever fellow by the bye—a very young tutor of Brasenose. She had heard of him; for his name is well

known among the leaders of this new sect, who call themselves Anglo-Catholics, and will end by being Roman Catholics. Of these good men (according to their lights) Hannah Patch has even deeper terror than of downright Jesuits. Naturally such stuff matters not to me; except when I can work it."

"Hannah Patch also had a special grudge against old Squire Oglander, a man very well in his way, and very honest, who thinks a great deal of his own opinions, and is fit to be his own grandfather. He had no love at all for the Patch connection—the patch on the family, as he called it—and the marriage of his stepmother with Captain Patch, and the Captain's patronising air towards him—in a word, Miranda, he hated them all.

"However, when Hannah was in trouble once or twice, and without a roof to shelter her—before she got her present bit of cash—old Oglander had her down, and was very good, and tried to like her. He put his child under her care to learn 'theology,' as she called it, and he paid her well for teaching her the Psalms, and the other denunciations. They went away together to some very lonely place; while the Squire was a week or two away from home. And now it occurred to me that this experience might be repeated, and prolonged if needful. Oglander had been nervous, as I knew, and as his daughter also knew, about some form of black fever or something, which had been killing some gipsy people, and was likely to come into the villages. I made use of this fact, with Hannah Patch to help me, and quietly took my young heiress off to a snug little home in the thick of the woods, where I should be sorry to reside myself. She was under the holy wing of Miss Patch; and there she abides to this present day; and I feed them very well, I assure you. They cost me four pound ten a week; for the evangelical Hannah believes it to be the clearest 'mark of the beast' to eat meat less than twice a day; and Leviticus Cripps, who supplies all the victuals, is making a fortune out of me. No bigger rogue ever lived than that fellow. He is under my thumb so entirely that if I told him to roll in the mud he would roll. And yet with all his awe of me, he cannot forbear from cheating me. He has found out a manner of dipping his pork so that he turns it into beef or mutton, according to the orders from the cottage; and he charges me butcher's price for it, and cartage for six miles and a half, and a penny a pound for trimming off the flanks!"

"My dear!" said Mrs. Sharp, "it is impossible! He never could deceive a woman so, however devoted her mind might be. The grain of the meat is quite different, and the formation of the bones not at all alike; and directly it began to roast——"

"Well, never mind, Miranda, there they are quite reconciled to the situation; except that Hannah Patch is always hankering after 'the means of grace,' and the young girl mooning about her sweet old parent and beloved Beckley. Sometimes there are very fine scenes between them; but upon the whole they get on well together, and appreciate one another's virtues. And I heartily trust that the merits of our Kit have made their impression on a sensitive young heart. They took to one another quite kindly in the romance of the situation, when I brought their sweet innocence into contact by a very simple stratagem. The dear young creatures have believed themselves to be outwitting everybody; the very thing I laboured for them both to do. All's well that ends well—don't you think, Miranda?"

"I am so entirely lost—I mean I am so unable to think it all out, without more time being given me," Mrs. Sharp answered, while she passed her hand across her unwrinkled forehead, and into her generally consulted curl, "that really, Luke, for the moment I can only admire your audacity. But I think, dear, that in a matter of this kind—an especially feminine province, I may say—you might have done me the honour of consulting me."

"Miranda, it was not to be thought of. Your health and well-being are the dearest objects of my life. I will only ask, could you have borne the suspense, and the worry, and anxiety of the last four months; above all, the necessity for silence?"

"Yes, Luke, I could have been very silent; but I cannot abide anxiety. You call me a dear fat soul sometimes, and your judgment is always correct, my dear. At the same time, I have little views of my own, and sensible ways of regarding things. You would like to hear my opinion, Luke, and to answer me one or two questions?"

"Certainly, Miranda; beyond all doubt. For what other purpose do I tell you all? Now, let me have a nap for five minutes, my dear, while you ponder this subject and arrange your questions."

He threw his smart handkerchief over his head, stretched out his feet, and took a nice little doze.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE POSITION.

"Among my relations," said Mrs. Sharp, reclining, for fear of asserting herself, as soon as her lord looked up again. "I have always been thought to possess a certain amount of stupid common sense. Nothing of depth, or grand stratagems, I mean, but a way of being right nearly nine times out of ten. And I think that this feeling is coming over me, just now."

"My dear, if it is so, do relieve yourself. Do not consider my ideas for a moment, but let me know what your own are."

"Luke, how you love to ridicule me! Well, if my opinion is of no account, I can only ask questions, as you tell me. In the first place, how did you get the girl away?"

"Most easily; under her father's orders. Hannah can write the old gentleman's hand to any extent, and his style as well. For the glory of the Lord she did so."

"And how did you bring her to do such shocking things? She must have had a strong idea that they were not honest."

"Far otherwise. She took an enthusiastic view of the matter from the very first. I made it quite clear to her how much there was at stake; and the hardest job for a long time was to prevent her from being too zealous. She scorns to take anything for herself, unless it can be put religiously. And for a long time I was quite afraid that I could not get a metal band on her. But she found out, before it was quite too late, that the mission of the "Brotherly-love-abounders," upon the west coast of Africa, had had all their missionaries eaten up, and required a round sum to replace them. I promised her £5000 for that, when her own mission ends in glory."

"Then you are quite certain to have her tight. I might trust you for every precaution, Luke. But how have you managed to keep them so quiet, while the neighbourhood was alive with it? And in what corner of the world have you got them? And who was the poor girl that really did die?"

"One question at a time, if you please, Miranda, though they all hang pretty much upon one hook. I have kept them so quiet, because they are in a corner of a world where no one goes; in a lonely cottage at the furthest extremity of the old Stow Wood, where their nearest road is a timber-track three-quarters of a mile away. They are waited on by a deaf old woman, who believes them to be Americans, which accounts to her mind for any oddness. Their washing is done at home, and all their food is procured through Cripps the swine-herd, whose forest farm lies well away, so that none of his children go to them. Cripps is indebted to me, and I hold a mortgage of every rod of his land, and a bill of sale of his furniture and stock. He dare not play traitor and claim the reward, or I should throw him into prison for forgery, upon a little transaction of some time back. Moreover, he has no motive; for I have promised him the same sum, and his bill of sale cancelled, when the wedding is happily celebrated. Meanwhile he is making fine pickings out of me, and he caters at a profit of cent. per cent. There is nobody else who knows anything about it, except a pair of gipsy fellows, too wide awake to come near the law for any amount of guineas. One of them is old Kershoe, the celebrated horse-stealer, whom I employed to drive and horse the needful vehicle from London. He knew where to get his horses without any postmaster being the wiser, and his vehicle was a very tidy carriage, bought by the gipsies for a dwelling-place, and furbished up so that the chaises of the age are not to be compared with it. The inquiries made at all livery-stables, and posting-houses, and so on, by order of Overshute and the good Squire, and some of them through my own agency, have afforded me genial pleasure and some little share of profit."

"Really, my dear," said Mrs. Sharp; "you were scarcely right in charging for them. You should have remembered that you knew all about it."

"That was exactly what I did, my dear; and I felt how expensive that knowledge was. As a little set-off against the pig-master's bills, I made heavy entries against the good Squire. The fault is his own. He should not have driven me into costly proceedings by that lowest of all things the arrogance of birth. Well, the other gipsy man is no other than Joe Smith, who jumped the broomstick with the lovely Princess Cinnaminta. You must have heard of her, Miranda. Half the ladies in Oxford were most bitterly jealous of her, some years back."

"I am sure then that I never was, Mr. Sharp!—a poor creature sitting under sacks, and doing juggling!"

"Nothing of the kind. You never saw her. She is a woman of superior mind and most refined appearance. Indeed, her eyes are such as never——"

"Oh, that is where you have been, Luke, is it, while we have been here for a fortnight, trembling——"

"Nonsense, Miranda; don't be so absurd. The poor thing has just lost her only child, and I believe she will go mad with it. It was her pretty sister, young Khebyra, who died of collapse, and was buried the same night. This case was most extraordinary. The fever struck her, without any illness, just as the plague and the cholera have done, with a headlong, concentrated leap; as a thunderstorm gathers itself sometimes into one blue ball of lightning. She was laughing at ten o'clock, and her poor young jaw tied up at noon; and a great panic burst among them."

"Luke!" exclaimed Mrs. Sharp, strongly shuddering; "you never mean to say that you came home to me, from being among such people, without a change of clothes, or anything!"

"How could I come home without anything, my dear? But I was not 'among' them at all that day, nor at any other

period. I never go to work in that coarse sort of way. Familiarity begets contempt. However, I was soon informed of this most sad occurrence; and for a while it quite upset me, coming as it did at such a very busy time. However, when I had time to dwell more calmly on the subject, I began to see a chance of turning this keen blow to my benefit.

"The gipsy camp was broken up with fatalistic terror—the most abject of all terrors; as the courage of the fatalist is the fiercest of all courage. They carried off their Royal stock, the heiress of the gipsy throne—as soon as some fine thief is hanged—quite as the bees are said to carry off their queen, when a hornet comes. Poor Cinnaminta was caught away just when I might have made her useful; and only two men were left to attend to the burial of her sister. Of these, my friend Joseph Smith was one, as he ought to be, being Cinnaminta's spouse.

"It was a very active time for me, I assure you, Miranda dear. The complication was almost too much to be settled in so short a time. And some of my hair, which had been quite strong, was lying quite flat in the morning. Perhaps you remember telling me."

"Yes, that I do, Luke! I could not make it out. Your hair had always stood so well; and a far better colour than the young men have got! And you told me that it was gone like that from taking Cockle's antibilious pills!"

"Miranda, I have never deceived you. I did take a couple, and they helped me on. But, without attributing too much to them, I did make a lucky turn of it. Their manner of sepulture is brief and wise; or, at any rate, that of this tribe is; though they differ, I believe, very widely. These wait till they are sure that the sun has set, and then they begin to excavate. I was able to suggest that, in this great hurry and scattering of the tribes of Israel, the wisest plan would be to adopt and adapt a very quiet corner already hollowed, and indicated by name (which is so much more abiding than substance) as a legendary gipsy Aceldama. The idea was caught at, as it well deserved to be, in the panic, and lack of time, and terror of the poor dead body. The poor thing was buried there with very hasty movements, her sister and the rest being hurried away; and it is quite remarkable how this (the merest episode) has, by the turn of events, assumed a primary importance.

"Foresight, and insight, and second-sight almost, would be attributed to me by any one who did not know the facts. Scarcely anybody would believe, as this thing worked in my favour so much, that I can scarcely claim the invention, any more than I can take any credit for the weather. Indeed, I may say, without the smallest presumption or profanity, that something higher than mere fortune has favoured my plans from the very first. I had provided for at least one whole day's start, before any alarm should be given; but the weather secured me, I may say, six weeks, before anything could be done in earnest, And then the discovery of that body, by a girl who was frightened into fits almost, and its tardy disinterment, and the universal conclusion about it, which I perhaps helped in some measure to shape, also the illness with which it pleased Providence to visit Messrs. Oglander and Overshute—I really feel that I have the deepest cause to be grateful, and I trust that I am so."

"Certainly, my dear, your cause is just," said Mrs. Sharp, as her husband showed some symptoms of dropping off to sleep again; "but in carrying it out you have inflicted pain and sad, sad anxiety on a poor old man. Can he ever forgive you, or make it up?"

"I should hope for his own sake," replied the lawyer, "that he will cast away narrow-mindedness; otherwise we shall not permit him to rush into the embraces of his daughter. But if he proves relentless, it matters little, except for the opinion of the world. He cannot touch 'Portwine's' property at all; and he may do what he likes with his own little wealth. His outside value is some £40,000. However, if I understand him aright, we shall manage to secure his money too, tied up, I dare say—but what matters that? He is a most fond papa, and his joy will soon wash away all evil thoughts."

"How delightful it will be!" cried the lady, with a sigh, "to restore his long-lost child to him. Still it will be a most delicate task. You must leave all that to me, Luke."

"With pleasure, my dear Miranda; your kind heart quite adapts you for such a melting scene. And, indeed, I would rather be out of the way. But I want your help for more than that."

"You shall have it, Luke, with all my heart and soul! It is too late now to draw back; though, if you had asked my advice, I would have tried to stop you. But just one question more—how did you get rid of John Smith and his inquiries? They say that he is such a very shrewd man."

"Do you not know, will nobody ever know, the difference between small, uneducated cunning and the clear intelligence of a practised mind? To suppose that John Smith would ever give me any trouble! He has been most useful. I directed his inquiries; and exhausted the inquisitive spirit through him."

"But you did not let him know——"

"Miranda, now, I shall go to bed, if I am so very fast asleep. Can no woman ever dream of large utility? I have had no better friend, throughout this long anxiety, than John Smith. And without the expenditure of one farthing, I have guided him into the course that he should take. When he hears of anything, the first thing he asks is—'Now, what would Lawyer Sharp be inclined to think of this?' Perhaps I have taken more trouble than was needful. But, at any rate, it would be disgraceful indeed if John Smith could cause me uneasiness. The only man I have ever had the smallest fear of has been Russel Overshute. Not that the young fellow is at all acute; but that he cannot be by any means imbued with the proper respect for my character."

"How very shocking of him, my dear Luke, when your character has been so many years established!"

"Miranda, it is indeed shocking!—but what can be expected of a Radical? Ever since that villainous Reform Bill passed, the spirit of true reverence is destroyed. But he must have some respect for me, as soon as he knows all.

Although, to confess the pure truth, my dear, things have worked in my favour so, that I scarcely deserve any credit at all, except for the original conception. That, however, was a brave one."

"It was, indeed; and I am scarcely brave enough to be comfortable. There is never any knowing how the world may take things. It is true that old Fermitage was not your client, and you had been very badly treated, and had a right to make the most of any knowledge obtained by accident. But old Mr. Oglander is your client, and has trusted you even in the present matter. I do not think that my father would have considered it quite professional to behave so."

Mrs. Luke Sharp was alarmed at her own boldness in making such a speech as this. She dropped her eyes under her husband's gaze; but he took her remarks quite calmly.

"My dear, we will talk of that another time. The fact that I do a thing—after all my experience—should prove it to be not unprofessional. At the present moment, I want to go to bed; and if you are anxious to begin hair-splitting, bed is my immediate refuge. But if you wish to know about the future of your son, you must listen, and not try to reason."

"I did not mean to vex you, Luke. I might have been certain that you knew best. And you always have so many things behind, that Solomon himself could never judge you. Tell me all about my darling Kit, and I will not even dare to cough or breathe."

"My dear, it would grieve me to hear you cough, and break my heart if you did not breathe. But I fear that your Kit is unworthy of your sighs. He has lost his young heart beyond redemption, without having the manners to tell his mother!"

"They all do it, Luke; of course they do. It is no good to find fault with them. I have been expecting that sort of thing so long. And when he went to Spiers for the melanochaitotrophe, with the yellow stopper to it, I knew as well as possible what he was about. I knew that his precious young heart must be gone; for it cost him seven and sixpence!"

"Yes, my dear; and it went the right way, in the very line I had laid for it. I will tell you another time how I managed that, with Hannah Patch, of course, to help me. The poor boy was conquered at first sight; for the weather was cold, with snow still in the ditches, and I gave him sixpenny-worth of brandy-balls. So Kit went shooting, and got shot, according to my arrangement. Ever since that, the great job has been to temper and guide his rampant energies."

"And of course he knows nothing—oh no, he would be so very unworthy, if he did! Oh, do say that he knows nothing, Luke!"

"My dear, I can give you that pleasing assurance; although it is a puzzling one to me. Christopher Fermitage Sharp knows not Grace Oglander from the young woman in the moon. He believes her to have sailed from a new and better world. Undoubtedly he is my son, Miranda; yet where did he get his thick-headedness?"

"Mr. Sharp!"

"Miranda, make allowance for me. Such things are truly puzzling. However, you perceive the situation. Here is a very fine young fellow—in his mother's opinion and his own—desperately smitten with a girl unknown, and romantically situated in a wood. There is reason to believe that this young lady is not insensible to his merits; he looks very nice in his sporting costume, he has no one to compete with him, he is her only bit of life for the day, he leaves her now and then a romantic rabbit, and he rescues her from a ruffian. But here the true difficulty begins. We cannot well unite them in the holy bonds, without a clear knowledge on the part of either of the true patronymic of the other. The heroine knows that the hero rejoices in the good and useful name of 'Sharp'; but he knows not that his lady-love is one Grace Oglander of Beckley Barton.

"Here, again, you perceive a fine stroke of justice. If Squire Oglander had only extended his hospitalities to us, Christopher must have known Grace quite well, and I could not have brought them together so. At present he believes her to be a Miss Holland, from the United States of America; and as she has promised Miss Patch not to speak of her own affairs to anybody (according to her father's wish, in one of the Demerara letters), that idea of his might still continue; although she has begun to ask him questions, which are not at all convenient. But things must be brought to a point as soon as possible. Having the advantage of directing the inquiries, or at any rate being consulted about them, I see no great element of danger yet; and of course I launched all the first expeditions in every direction but the right one. That setting up of the tombstone by poor old Joan was a very heavy blow to the inquisitive."

"But, my dear, that did not make the poor girl dead a bit more than she was dead before."

"Miranda, you do not understand the world. The evidence of a tombstone is the strongest there can be, and beats that of fifty living witnesses. I won a most difficult case for our firm when I was an ardent youth, and the victory enabled me to aspire to your hand, by taking a mallet and a chisel, and a little nitric acid, and converting a 'Francis,' by moonlight, into a 'Frances.' I kept the matter to myself, of course; for your good father was a squeamish hand. But you have heard me speak of it."

"Yes, but I thought it so wrong, my dear, even though, as you said, truth required it."

"Truth did require it. The old stonemason had not known how to spell the word. I corrected his heterography; and we confounded the tricks of the evil ones. All is fair in love and law, so long as violence is done to neither. And now I wish Kit's unsophisticated mind to be led to the perception of that great truth. It is needful for him to be delicately admitted to a knowledge of my intentions. There is nobody who can do this as you can. He takes rather clumsy and obstinate views of things he is too young to understand. The main point of all, with a mind like his, is to dwell upon the justice of our case and the depth of our affection, which has led to such a sacrifice of the common conventional view of things."

"My dear, but I have had nothing to do with it. Conception, plan, and execution are all your own, and no other person's. Why, I had not even dreamed——"

"Still, you must put it to him, Miranda, as if it was your doing more than mine. He has more faith in your—well, what shall I call it? I would not for a moment wrong him by supposing that he doubts his own father's integrity—in your practical judgment, let us say, and perception of the nicest principles. It is absolutely necessary that you should appear to have acted throughout in close unison with me. In fact, it would be better to let the boy perceive that the whole idea from the very first was yours; as in simple fact it must have been, if circumstances had permitted me to tell you all that I desired. To any idea of yours he takes more kindly perhaps than to those which are mine. This is not quite correct, some would say; but I am above jealousy. I always desire that he should love his mother, and make a pattern of her. His poor father gets knocked about here and there, and cannot halt to keep himself rigidly upright, though it always is his ambition. But women are so different, and so much better. Even Kit perceives that truth. Let him know, my darling, that your peace of mind is entirely staked upon his following out the plan which you mean to propose to him."

"But, my dear Luke, I have not the least notion of any plan of any sort."

"Never mind, Miranda; make him promise. I will tell you all about it afterwards. It is better not to let him know too much. Knowledge should come in small doses always, otherwise it puffs up young people. Alas! now I feel that I am not as I was! Twenty years ago I could have sat up all night talking, and not shown a sign of it next day. I have not had any sleep for the last twelve nights. Do you see any rays in my eyes, dear wife? They are sure indications of heart disease. When I am tired they always come."

"Oh, Luke, Luke, you will break my heart! You shall not say another word. Have some more negus—I insist upon it! It is no good to put your hand over the glass—and then come to bed immediately. You are working too hard for your family, my pet."

CHAPTER XLVI.

IN THE MESHES.

Now being newly inspired by that warm theologian—as Miss Patch really believed him to be—Luke Sharp, the lady felt capable of a bold stroke, which her conscience had seemed to cry out against, till loftier thoughts enlarged it. She delivered to her dear niece a letter, written in pale ink and upon strange paper, which she drew from a thicker one addressed to herself, and received "through their butcher" from a post-office. Wondering who their butcher was, but delighted to get her dear father's letter, Grace ran away to devour it.

It was dated from George-town, English Guayana, and though full of affection, showed touching traces of delicate health and despondency. The poor girl wiped her eyes at her father's tender longing to see her once more, and his earnest prayers for every blessing upon their invaluable friend, Miss Patch. Then he spoke of himself in a manner which made it impossible for her to keep her eyes wiped, so deep was his sadness, and yet so heroically did he attempt to conceal it from her; and then came a few lines, which surprised her greatly. He said that a little bird had told him that during her strict retirement from the world in accordance with his wishes, she had learned to esteem a most worthy young man, for whom he had always felt warm regard, and, he might even say, affection. He doubted whether, at his own time of life, and with this strange languor creeping over him, he could ever bear the voyage to England, unless his little darling would come over to fetch him, or at least to behold him once more alive; and if she would do so, she must indeed be quick. He need not say that to dream of her travelling so far all alone was impossible; but if, for the sake of her father, she could dispense with some old formalities, and speedily carry out their mutual choice, he might with his whole heart appeal to her husband to bring her out by the next packet.

He said little more, except that he had learned by the bitter teaching of adversity who were his true friends, and who were false. No one had shown any truth and reality except Mr. Sharp of Oxford; but he never could have dreamed, till it came to the test, that even the lowest of the low would treat him as young Mr. Overshute had done. That subject was too painful, so he ended with another adjuration to his daughter.

"Aunty, I have had the most extraordinary letter," cried Grace, coming in with her eyes quite dreadful; "it astonishes me beyond everything. May I see the postmark of yours which it came in? I shall think I am dreaming till I see the postmark."

"The stamp of the office, do you mean, my dear? Oh yes, you are welcome to see, Grace. Here it is, 'George-town, Demerara.' The date is not quite clear without my spectacles. Those foreign dies are always cut so badly."

"Never mind the date, aunt. I have the date inside, in my dear father's writing. But I am quite astonished how my father can have heard——"

"Something about you, sly little puss! You need not blush so, for I long have guessed it."

"But indeed it is not true—indeed it is not. I may have been amused, but I never, never—and oh, what he says then of somebody else—such a thing I should have thought impossible! How can one have any faith in any one?"

"My dear child, what you mean is this: How can one have any faith in worldly and ungodly people? With their mouths they speak deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips——"

"Oh no, he never was ungodly; to see him walk would show you that; and if being good to the poor sick people, and dashing into the middle of the whooping-cough——"

"How am I to know of whom you speak? You appear to have acted in a very forward way with some one your father disapproves of."

"I assure you, I never did anything of the kind. It is not at all my manner. I thought you considered it wrong to make unfounded accusations."

"Grace, what a most un-Christian temper you still continue to display at times! Your cheeks are quite red, and your eyes excited, in a way very sad to witness. The trouble I have taken is beyond all knowledge. If you do not value it, your father does."

"Aunty Patch, may I see exactly what my daddy says to you? I will show you mine if you will show me yours."

"My dear, you seem to forget continually. You treat me as if I were of your own age, and had never been through the very first alarm which comes for our salvation. It has not come to you, or you could not be so frivolous and worldly as you are. When first it rang, even for myself——"

"How many times does it ring, Aunt? I mean for every individual sinner, as you always call us."

"My dear, it rings three times, as has been proved by the most inspired of all modern preachers, the Rev. Wm. Romaine, while amplifying the blessed words of the pious Joseph Alleine. He begins his discourse upon it thus——"

"Aunty, you have told me that so many times that I could go up into his desk and do it. It is all so very good and superior; but there are times when it will not come. You, or at any rate I, for certain, may go down on our knees and pray, and nothing ever comes of it. I have been at it every night and morning, really quite letting go whatever I was thinking of—and what is there to come of it, except this letter? And it doesn't sound as if my father ever wrote a word

of it."

"Grace, what do you mean, if you please?"

"I mean what I do not please. I mean that I have been here at least five months, as long as any fifty, and have put up with the miserablest things—now, never mind about my English, if you please, it is quite good enough for such a place as this—and have done my very best to put up with you, who are enough to take fifty people's lives away, with perpetual propriety—and have hoped and hoped, and prayed and prayed, till my knees are not fit to be looked at—and now, after all, what has come of it? That I am to marry a boy with a red cord down his legs, and a crystal in his whip, and a pretty face that seems to come from his mamma's watch-pocket, and a very nice and gentle way of looking at a lady, as if he were quite capable, if he had the opportunity, of saying 'bo' to any goose on the other side of the river!"

"My dear, do you prefer bold ruffians, then, like the vagabond you were rescued from?"

"I don't know at all what I do prefer, Aunt Patch, unless it is just to be left to myself, and have nothing to say to any one."

"Why, Grace, that is the very thing you complained of in your sinful and ungrateful speech, just now! But do not disturb me with any more temper. I must take the opportunity, before the mail goes out, to tell your poor sick father how you have received his letter."

"Oh no, if you please not. You are quite mistaken, if you think that I thought of myself first. My dear father knows that I never would do that; and it would be quite vain to tell him so. Oh, my darling, darling father!—where are you now, and whatever are you doing?"

"Grace, you are becoming outrageous quite. You know quite well where your father is; and as to what he is doing, you know from his own letter that he is lying ill, and longing for you to attend upon him. And this is the way that you qualify yourself!"

"Somehow or other now—I do not mean to be wicked, aunt—but I don't think my father ever wrote that letter—I mean, at any rate, of his own free will. Somebody must have stood over him—I feel as if I really saw them—and made him say this, and that, and things that he never used to think of saying. Why, he never would have dreamed, when he was well, of telling me I was to marry anybody. He was so jealous of me, he could hardly bear any gentleman to dare to smile; and he used to make me promise to begin to let him know, five years before I thought of any one. And now for him to tell me to marry in a week—just as if he was putting down a silver-side to salt—and to marry a boy that he scarcely ever heard of, and never even introduced to me—he must have been, he cannot but have been, either wonderfully affected by the climate, or shackled down in a slave-driver's dungeon, until he had no idea what he was about."

"Have you finished, Grace, now? Is your violence over?"

"No; I have no violence; and it is not half over. But still, if you wish to say anything, I will do all I can to listen to it."

"You are most obliging. One would really think that I were seventeen, and you nearly seventy."

"Aunt Patch, you know that I am as good as nineteen; and instead of being seventy you are scarcely fifty-five."

"Grace, your memory is better about ages than about what you do not wish to hear of. And you do not wish to hear, with the common selfishness of the period, of the duty which is the most sacred of all, and at the same time the noblest privilege—the duty of self-sacrifice. What are your own little inclinations, petty conceits, and miserable jokes—jokes that are ever at deadly enmity with all deep religion—ah, what are they—you selfish and frivolous girl!—when set in the balance with a parent's life—and a parent whose life would have been in no danger but for his perfect devotion to you?"

"Aunt Patch, I never heard you speak of my father at all in that sort of way before. You generally talk of him as if he were careless, and worldly, and heterodox, most frivolous, and quite unregenerate. And now quite suddenly you find out all his value. What do you want me to do so much, Aunt Patch?"

"Don't look at me like that, child; you quite insult me. As if it could matter to me what you do—except for your own eternal welfare. If you think it the right thing to let your father die in a savage land, calling vainly for you, and buried among land-crabs without a drop of water—that is a matter for you hereafter to render your own account of. You have tired me, Grace. I am not so young as you are; and I have more feeling. I must lie down a little; you have so upset me. When you have recovered your proper frame of mind, perhaps you will kindly see that Margery has washed out the little brown teapot."

"To be sure, aunty, I am up to all her tricks. And I will just toast you a water-biscuit, and put a morsel of salt butter on it, scarcely so large as a little French bean. Go to sleep, aunty, for about an hour. I am getting into a very proper frame of mind; I can never stay very long out of it. May I go into the wood, just to think a little of my darling father's letter?"

"Yes, Grace; but not for more than half an hour, on condition that you speak to no one. You have made my head ache sadly. Leave your father's letter here."

"Oh no, if you please, let me take it with me. How can I think without it?"

Miss Patch was so sleepy that she said, "Very well; let me see it again when you have made the tea." Whereupon Grace, having beaten up the cushion of the good lady's only luxury, and laid her down softly, and kissed her forehead

(for fear of having made it ache), stole her own chance for a little quiet thought, in a shelter of the woods more soft than thought. For the summer was coming with a stride of light; and bashful corners, full of lateness, tried to ease it off with moss.

In a nook of this kind, far from any path, and tenderly withdrawn into its own green rest, the lonely and bewildered girl stopped suddenly, and began to think. She drew forth the letter which had grieved her so; and she wondered that it had not grieved her more. It was not yet clear to her young frank mind that suspicion, like a mole, was at work in it. To get her thoughts better, and to feel some goodness, she sat upon a peaceful turret of new spear-grass, and spread her letter open, and began to cry. She knew that this was not at all the proper way to take things; and yet if any one had come, and preached to her, and proved it all, she could have made no other answer than to cry the more for it.

The beautiful light of the glancing day turned corners, and came round to her; the lovable joy of the many, many things which there is no time to notice, spread itself silently upon the air, or told itself only in fragrance; and the glossy young blades of grass stood up, and complacently measured their shadows.

Here lay Grace for a long sad hour, taking no heed of the things around her, however much they heeded her. The white windflower with its drooping bells, and the bluebell, and the harebell, and the pasque-flower—softest of all soft tints—likewise the delicate stitchwort, and the breath of the lingering primrose, and the white violet that outvies its sister (that sweet usurper of the coloured name) in fragrance and in purity; and hiding for its life, without any one to seek, the sensitive wood-sorrel; and, in and out, and behind them all, the cups, and the sceptres, and the balls of moss, and the shells and the combs of lichen—in the middle of the whole, this foolish maid had not one thought to throw to them. She ought to have sighed at their power of coming one after another for ever, whereas her own life was but a morning dew; but she failed to make any such reflection.

What she was thinking of she never could have told; except that she had a long letter on her lap, and could not bring her mind to it. And here in the hollow, when the warmth came round, of the evening fringed with cloudlets, she was fairer than any of the buds or flowers, and ever so much larger. But she could not be allowed to bloom like them.

"Oh, I beg pardon," cried an unseen stranger in a very clear, keen voice; "I fear I am intruding in some private grounds. I was making a short cut, which generally is a long one. If you will just show me how to get out again, I will get out with all speed, and thank you."

Grace looked around with surprise but no fear. She knew that the voice was a gentleman's; but until she got up, and looked up the little hollow, she could not see any one. "Please not to be frightened," said the gentleman again; "I deserve to be punished, perhaps, but not to that extent. I fancied that I knew every copse in the county. I have proved, and must suffer for, my ignorance."

As he spoke he came forward on a little turfy ledge, about thirty feet above her; and she saw that he looked at her with great surprise. She felt that she had been crying very sadly, and this might have made her eyes look strange. Quite as if by accident, she let her hair drop forward, for she could not bear to be so observed; and at that very moment there flowed a gleam of sunshine through it. She was the very painting of the picture in her father's room.

"Saints in heaven!" cried Hardenow, who never went further than this in amazement, "I have found Grace Oglander! Stop, if you please—I beseech you, stop!"

But Grace was so frightened, and so pledge-bound, that no adjuration stopped her. If Hardenow had only been less eager, there and then he might have made his bow, and introduced himself. But Gracie thought of the rabbit-man, and her promise, and her loneliness, and without looking back, she was round the corner, and not a ribbon left to trace her by. And now again if Hardenow had only been less eager, he might have caught the fair fugitive by following in her footsteps. But for such a simple course as that he was much too clever. Instead of running down at once to the spot where she had vanished, and thence giving chase, he must needs try a cross cut to intercept her. There were trees and bushes in the way, it was true, but he would very soon get through them; and to meet her face to face would be more dignified than to run after her.

So he made a beautifully correct cast as to the line she must have taken, and aiming well ahead of her, leaped the crest of the hollow and set off down the hill apace. But here he was suddenly checked by meeting a dense row of hollies, which he had not seen by reason of the brushwood. In a dauntless manner he dashed in among them, scratching his face and hands, and losing a fine large piece of black kerseymere from the skirt of his coat, and suffering many other lesser damages. But what was far worse, he lost Grace also; for out of that holly grove he could not get for a long, long time; and even then he found himself on the wrong side—the one where he had entered.

If good Anglo-Catholics ever did swear, the Rev. Thomas Hardenow must now have sworn, for his plight was of that kind which engenders wrath in the patient, and pleasantry on the part of the spectator. His face suggested recent duello with a cat, his white tie was tattered and hanging down his back, his typical coat was a mere postilion's jacket, and the condition of his gaiters afforded to the sceptic the clearest proof of the sad effects of perpetual self-denial. His hat, with the instinct of self-preservation, had rolled out from the thicket when he first rushed in; and now he picked up this wiser portion of his head, and was thankful to have something left.

Chances were against him; but what is chance? He had an exceedingly strong will of his own, and having had the worst of this matter so far, he was doubly resolved to go through with it. Without a second thought about his present guise or aspect, he ran back to the spot which he had left so unadvisedly. There he did what he ought to have done ten minutes or a quarter of an hour ago, he ran down the slope to the nest in the nook which had been occupied by Grace. Then he took to the track which she had taken; but she had been much too quick for him; she had even snatched up her letter, so that he was none the wiser. He came to a spot where the narrow and thickly woven

trackway broke into two; and whether of the two to choose was more than a moment's doubt to him. Then he seemed to see some glint of footsteps, and sweep of soft sprays by a dress towards the right; and making a dash through a dark hole towards it, was straightway enveloped in a doubled rabbit-net, cast over his surviving hat.

"Hold un tight, Jarge, now thou'st got un!" cried out somebody whom he could not see, "poachin' son of a gun, us'll poach un!"

"Poaching—my good friends," cried Hardenow, trying to lift his arms and turn his head round, all vainly; "you can scarcely know the meaning of that word, or you never would think of applying it to me. Let me see you, that I may explain. I have been trespassing, I am afraid; but by the purest accident—allow me to turn round, and reason quietly; I have the greatest objection to violence; I never use, nor allow it to be used. If you are honest gamekeepers, exceeding your duty through earnest zeal, I would be the last to find fault with you; want of earnestness is the great fault of this age. But you must not allow yourselves to be misled by some little recent mischances to my clothes. Such things befall almost everybody exploring unknown places. You are pulling me! you are exceeding your duty! Is the bucolic mind so dense? Here I am at your mercy—just show yourselves. You may choke me if you like, but the result will be—oh!—that you will also be choked yourselves!"

"A rare fine-plucked one as ever I see," said rabbiting George to Leviticus Cripps, when Hardenow lay between them, senseless from the pressure upon his throat; "ease him off a bit, my lad, he never done no harm to me. They long-coated parsons is good old women, and he be cut up into a young gal now. Lay hold on the poor devil, right end foremost, zoon as I have stopped uns praching. Did ever you see such a guy out of a barrow?"

Heavy-witted Tickuss made no answer, but laid hold of the captive by his shoulders, so that himself might be still unseen, if consciousness should return too soon. Black George tucked the feet under his arm, after winding the tail of the net round the shanks, and expressing surprise at their slimness; and in no better way than this these two ignorant bumpkins swung the body of one of the leading spirits of the rising age to the hog-pound.

Thomas Hardenow was not the man to be long insensible. Every fibre of his frame was a wire of electric life. He was "all there"—to use a slang expression, which, by some wondrous accident, has a little pith in it—in about two minutes; not a bit of him was absent; and he showed it by hanging like a lump upon his bearers as they fetched him to an empty hog-house, dropped him anyhow, and locked him in; then one of them jumped on a little horse and galloped off to Oxford.

CHAPTER XLVII.

COMBINED WISDOM.

"I really cannot go on like this," said Mr. Sharp to Mrs. Sharp, quite early on the following morning. "Thank God, I am not of a nervous nature, and patience is one of my largest virtues. But acting, as I have done, for the best, I cannot be expected to put up with perpetual suspense. This very day I will settle this matter, one way or the other." The lawyer for the first time now was flurried; he had heard of the capture of a spy last night—for so poor Hardenow had been described—and though he had kept that new matter to himself, he was puzzled to see his way through with it.

"Luke, my dear," replied Mrs. Sharp, with some of her tightenings not done up, "surely there need not be such hurry. You make me quite shiver, when you speak like that. I shall come down to breakfast without any power; and the Port-meadow eel will go out for the maids. Should we ever behold it again, Luke?"

"Of course not; how could you expect it? Slippery, slippery—hard it is to lay fast hold of anything; and the worst of all to bind is woman. I do not mean you, my dear; you need not look like that; you are as firm as this tag of your stays—corset, corset—I beg pardon; how can a man tell the fashionable words?"

"But, Luke, you surely would not think of proceeding to extremities?"

"Any extremity; if it only were the last. For the good of my family, I have worked hard; and there never should have been all this worry with it. Miranda, I may have strayed outside the truth, and outside the law—which is so much larger—but one thing I beg you to bear in mind. Not a thing have I done, except for you and Kit. Money to me is the last thing I think of; pure affection is the very first. And no one can meddle with your settlement."

"Oh, my darling," Mrs. Sharp exclaimed, as she fell back from looking at the looking-glass, "you are almost too good for this world, Luke! You think of everybody in the world except yourself. It is not the right way to get on, dear. We must try to be a little harder."

"I have thought so, Miranda; I must try to do it. Petty little sentiments must be dropped. We must rise and face the state of things which it has pleased Providence to bring about. I am responsible for a great deal of it; and with your assistance, I will see it through. We must take Kit in hand at once. My dear wife, can I rely upon you?"

"Luke, you may rely upon me for anything short of perjury; and if it comes to that, I must think first."

"No man ever had a better any more than he could have a truer wife, or one so perpetually young." With these words Mr. Sharp performed some little operations, which, even in the "highest circles," are sometimes allowed to be brought about by masculine hands, when clever enough; and before very long this affectionate pair went down to breakfast and enjoyed fried eel.

Kit, who had caught this fine eel, was not there; perhaps he was gone forth to catch another; so they left him the tail to be warmed up. In the present condition of his active mind, and the mournful absence of his beloved, Christopher found a dark and moody pleasure in laying night-lines. If his snare were successful, he hauled out his victim, and, with a scornful smile, despatched him; if the line held nothing, he cast it in again, with a sigh of habitual frustration. This morning, however, he was not gone forth on his usual round of inspection, but had only walked up to the livery-stables, to make sure of his favourite hack for the day. He had made up his mind that he must see Grace that very same day, come what would of it; he would go much earlier, and watch the door; and if this bad fortune still continued, he would rush up at last and declare himself.

But this bold resolve had a different issue; for no sooner had the young man, with some reluctance and self-reproach, dealt bravely with a solid breakfast, than he was requested by his dear mother to come into his father's little study.

Now, this invitation was not in accordance with the present mood of Christopher. He had made up his mind to be off right soon for the bowers of his beloved, with a roll and some tongue in his little fishing-creel, and a bottle of beer in each holster. In the depth of the wood he might thus get on, and enjoy to the utmost fruition of his heart all the beauty of nature around him. It was a cruel blow to march just then to a lecture from the governor, whose little private study he particularly loathed, and regarded as the den of the evil one. However, he set up his pluck and went.

Mr. Sharp, looking (if possible) more upright and bright than usual, sat in front of the large and strong-legged desk, where he kept his more private records, such as never went into the office. Mrs. Sharp also took a legal chair, and contemplated Kit with a softer gaze. He with a beating heart stood up, like a youth under orders to construe.

"My son," began the father and the master, in a manner large and affable, "prepare yourself for a little surprise on the part of those whose principal object is your truest welfare. For some weeks now you have made your dear mother anxious and unhappy, by certain proceedings which you thought it wise and manly to conceal from her."

"Yes, you know you did, Kit!" Mrs. Sharp interposed, shaking her short curls, and trying to look fierce. The boy, with a deep blush, looked at her, as if everybody now was against him.

"Christopher, we will not blame you," resumed Mr. Sharp, rather hastily, for fear that his wife should jump up and spoil all. "Our object in calling you is not that. You have acted according to our wishes mainly, though you need not have done it so furtively. You have formed an attachment to a certain young lady, who leads for the present a retired

life, in a quiet part of the old Stow Wood. And she returns your affection. Is it so, or is it not?"

"I—I—I," stammered Kit, seeking for his mother's eyes, which had buried themselves in her handkerchief. "I can't say a word about what she thinks. She—she—she has got such a fashion of running away so. But I—I—I—well, then, it's no good telling a lie about it; I am deucedly fond of her!"

"That is exactly what I wished to know; though not expressed very tastefully. Well, and do you know who she is, my son?"

"Yes, I know all that quite well; as much as any fellow wants to know. She is a young lady, and she knows all the flowers, and the birds, and the names of the trees almost. She can put me right about the kings of England; and she knows my dogs as well as I do."

"A highly accomplished young lady, in short?"

"Yes, I should say a great deal more than that. I care very little for accomplishments. But—but if I must come to the point—I do like her, and no mistake!"

"Then you would not like some other man to come, and run away with her, quite against her will?"

"That man must run over my body first," cried Kit, with so much spirit that his father looked proud, and his poor mother trembled.

"Well, well, my boy," continued the good lawyer, "it will be your own fault if the villain gets the chance. I am doing all I can to provide against it; and am even obliged to employ some means of a nature not at all congenial to me, for—for that very reason. You are sure that you love this young lady, Kit?"

"Father, I would not say anything strong; but I would go on my knees, all the way from here to there, for the smallest chance of getting her!"

"Very good. That is as it should be. I would have done the very same for your dear mother. Mamma, you have often reminded me of it, when anything—well, those are reminiscences; but they lie at the bottom of everything. A mercenary marriage is an outrage to all good feeling."

"She has not got a sixpence, father; she told me so. She makes all the bread, and she puts by all the dripping."

"My dear boy, you know then what a good wife is. Mamma, we shall have to clear out the room where the rocking-horse is, and the old magic-lantern, and let this young couple go into it."

"My dear, it would be a long job; and there are a great many cracks in the paper; but still we could have in old Josephine."

"Those are mere details, Momma. But this is a serious question; and the boy must not be hurried. He may not have made up his mind; or he may desire to change it to-morrow. He is too young to have any settled will; and there is no reason why he should not wait——"

"Not a day will I wait—not an hour would I wait; in ten minutes I could pack everything!"

"He might wait for a twelvemonth, my dear Miranda, and sound his own feelings, and the young girl's too, if we could only be certain that the young man of rank, with the four bay horses, was not in earnest when he swore to carry her off to-morrow."

"My dear husband," Mrs. Sharp said, softly; "let us hope that he meant nothing by it. Such things are frequently said, and come to nothing."

"I tell you what it is," Kit almost shouted, with his fist upon the sacred desk; "you cannot in any way enter into my feelings upon such matters! I beg your pardon, that is not what I mean, and I ought never to have said it. But still, comparatively speaking, you can take these things easily, and go on, and think people foolish—but I cannot. I know when my mind is made up, and I do it. And to stop me with all sorts of nonsense—at least, to find fifty reasons why I should do nothing—is the surest of all ways to make me do it. I have many people who will follow me through thick and thin; though you may not believe it, because you cannot understand me, and your views are confined to propriety. Mine are not. And you may find that out in a very short time. At any rate, if I do a thing that brings you, father and mother, into any evil words, all I can say is, you never should have stopped me."

With this very lucid expression of ideas, Christopher strode away, and left his parents petrified—as he thought. Mrs. Sharp was inclined to be a dripping well; but Mr. Sharp was dry enough. "Exactly, exactly," he said, as he always said when a thing had come up to his reckoning; "nothing could have been done much better. Put the money in his best breeches' pocket, my dear, without my knowledge; and at the back-door kiss him. Adjure him to do nothing rash; and lend him your own wedding-ring, and weep. For a runaway match the most lucky of all things is the boy's mother's wedding-ring. And above all things, not a word about his rival, until he asks—and then all mystery; only you know a great deal more than you dare tell."

"Oh, Luke, are you sure that it will all go aright?"

"Miranda, tell me anything we can be sure of, and you will have given me a new idea. And I want ideas; I want them sadly. My power of invention is failing me, or at any rate that of combining my inventions. You did not observe that I was nervous, did you?"

"Nervous! Luke—you nervous! I should think that the end of the world was coming if I saw any nervousness in you!

And in the presence of a boy, indeed——"

"My dear wife, I will give you my word that I felt—well, I will not say 'nervous,' if you dislike it—but a little uncomfortable, and not quite clear, when I saw how Kit was taking things. Real affection is a dreadful thing. I did not want so much of it. I meant to have told him who she is, till the turn of things made me doubt about it. But he is quite up for anything now, I believe, though he must be told before he goes. He is such a calf that he must not imagine that she has a sixpence to bless herself. He would fly off in a moment if he guessed the truth. He must know her name; and that you must tell him; and you know how to explain it all a thousand-fold better than I do."

"Possibly I do," replied Mrs. Sharp; "I may have some very few ideas of my own; although according to you, Mr. Sharp, I am only the mother of a calf!"

"Very well said, my dear. And I have the honour of being his father." They smiled at one another, for they both knew how to give and take.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MASCULINE ERROR.

Christopher Fermitage Sharp, Esquire, strode forth, to have room as well as time for thought. His comely young face was unusually red, and he stroked his almost visible moustache, as a stimulant to manhood. So deep and stern were his meditations, that he never even thought of his pipe until he came to a bridge on the Botley road, whereon he was accustomed to lean, and smoke, and gaze at the little fish quietly. From the force of habit he pulled out his meerschaum, flint and steel, and German tinder, and through blue rings of his own creation, watched and envied the little fish. For though it was not yet the manner of his mind to examine itself very deeply, he had a strong conviction that the fish were happy, and that he was miserable. Upon the former point there could not be two opinions—unless the fish themselves held one—when any man observed how the little fellows jumped at the spicy-flavoured flies (that fluttered on fluid gold to them), or flashed in and out among one another, with a frolicsome spread of silver, or, best of all, in calm contemplation, softly moved pellucid fins, and gently opened fans of gills, with magnifying eyes intent upon the glory of the lustrous world. Kit considered them with an envious gaze. Were they harassed, were they tortured, were they racked with agonised despair, by the proceedings of the female fish?

Compelled to turn his grim thoughts inward, he knew not that he was jealous. He only knew that if he were to meet the young nobleman with the four bay horses, it would be an evil day for one of them. Tush, why should he not go and forestall that bloated, unprincipled aristocrat—whose intentions might even be dishonourable—by having four horses himself, and persuading that queen of beauty to elope with him? He had given his parents due notice; and if he had done what they wished by thus falling in love, it could not be very much against their wishes if he made a hasty match of it. But could this lovely young American be persuaded to come with him. He had far too much respect for her to dream of using violence. But surely if he could convince her of the peril she was in, and could promise her safe refuge with a grave old lady, a valued relative of his own, while she should have time to consider his suit, his devotion, his eternal constancy, his everlasting absorption into her higher and purer identity—

He pulled out his purse; it contained four and sixpence—a shilling and three halfpence for each horse, and nothing for the postilions. "We must do it less grandly," he said to himself; "and after all it will be better so. How could four horses ever get through that wood? I must have been a fool to think of it. A very light chaise and pair will do ten times better, at a quarter of the money. I can get tick for that from old Squeaker himself; and the governor will have to pay; it need not cost me more than half a crown, and about three bob for turnpikes. Fifteen miles to old Aunt Peggy's on the Wycombe road. Once there, I defy them to do what they like. I am always the master of that house, and I know where they keep the blunderbuss. I have the greatest mind not to go home at all, but complete my arrangements immediately. Squeaker would lend me a guinea with pleasure; he is a large-minded man, I am sure. What a fool I was to give poor Cinnaminta such a quantity of tin that day!—and yet how could I help it? I might have gone on like a lord but for that."

Kit turned round and shook his head in several directions, trying to bring to his mind the places where money might be hoped for. Than this there is no mental effort more difficult and absorbing. No wonder therefore that, in this contemplation, he did not hear the up-mail full-gallop, springing the arch from the Cheltenham side, to make a fine run into Oxford. "Hoi there, stoopid!" the coachman shouted, for the bridge was narrow, and the coach danced across it, with the vigour of the well-corded team. "Oh, Kit, is it? Climb for your hat, Kit."

Kit's best friend—so far as he had any friends in the University—by a stroke of fine art, sent the lash of his whip round the hat of the hero, and deposited it, ere one might cry, "Where art thou gone?" on the oil-cloth, which sat on the top of the luggage, which sat on the top of the coach which he drove, like the heir of all the race of Nimshi. The hireling Jehu sat beside him, and having been at it since nine o'clock last night, snored with a flourish not inferior to that which the mail-guard began upon his horn.

Kit was familiar with a coach at speed, as every young Englishman at that time was. In a twinkle he dashed at the hind-boot, laid hold of the handle, and was up at once; the guard, with an eye to an honest half-crown, moving sideways, but offering no help, because it would have been an insult. Then over the hump of the luggage crawled Kit, and clapped his own hat on his head, and between the shoulders of two fat passengers, threw forth his strong arm, and "bonneted" the spanking son of Nimshi. The leaders ran askew, till they were caught up; and the smart young driver would have thrown down the reins, and committed a personal assault on Kit, who was perfectly ready to reply to it—being skilled in the art of self-defence—if the two fat passengers, having seen the whole, had not joined hands, and stopped it.

"Tit for tat; tit for tat!" they cried; "Squire, you began it, and you have your due." And so, with a hearty laugh, on they galloped.

"If you should have anything to say to me," cried Kit, as he swung himself off the early mail, at the corner of his native Cross Duck Lane, "you will know where to find me. But you must wait a day or two, for I have a particular engagement."

"All rubbish, Kit! Come and wine with me at seven. I shall have tooled home the 'Nonpareil' by then."

Christopher, though stern, was placable. He kissed his hand to his reconciled friend, while he shook his head, to decline the invitation, and strode off vigorously to consult his mother. To consult his dear mother meant to get money out of her, which was a very easy thing to do; and having a good deal of conscience, Kit seldom abused that

opportunity, unless he was really driven to it. Metallic necessity was on him now; his courage had been rising for the last half-hour. "Faint heart never won fair lady," rang to the tune of many horses' feet. His dash through the air had set his spirits flying; his exploit, and the applause thereof, had taught him his own value. From this day forth he was a man of the world; and a man of the world was entitled to a wife.

It is the last infirmity of noble and too active minds, to feel that nothing is done well unless their presence guides it; to doubt the possibility of sage prevision and nice conduct, through the ins and outs of things, if ever the master-spirit trusts the master-body to be away, and the countless eyes of the brain to give twinkle, instead of the two solid lights of the head. Hence it was that Mr. Sharp, at sight of Kit, came forth to meet him, although he had arranged to send the mother. And this—as Mrs. Sharp declared to her dying day—was the greatest mistake ever made by a man of most wonderful mind; while she was putting away the linen.

"Come in here, my boy," he said to his son, who was strictly vexed to see him, and yearning to be round the corner; "there are one or two things that have never been made quite clear to your understanding. We do not expect you to be too clear-sighted at your time of life, and so on. Come in that I may have a word with you."

Christopher, with a little thrill of fear, once more entered the sacred den, and there stood as usual; while his father sat and regarded him with a lightsome smile. One of the many causes which had long been at work to impair the young man's filial affection was, that his father behaved as if it were not worth while to be in earnest with him; as if Kit Sharp had a mind no riper than just to afford amusement to mature and busy intellects. Christopher knew his own depth, and was trying to be strong too, whenever he could think of it. And if he did spend most of his time in sport and congenial pastime, of one thing he was certain—that he never did harm to any one. Could his father say that much for himself?

"Aha, my boy, aha," said the elder Sharp in that very same vein which always so annoyed and vexed his son; "what will you give me for a little secret, a sweet little secret about a young lady in whom you take the deepest interest?"

The ingenuous youth, in spite of all efforts, could not help blushing deeply; for he had a purely candid skin, reproduced from Piper ancestry. And the sense of hot cheeks made him glow to the vital centres of the nobler stuff. Therefore he scraped with his toes—which was a trick of his—and kept silence.

"Pocket money gone again?" continued his father pleasantly; "nothing to offer his kind papa for most valuable information? Courting is an expensive business—I ought to have remembered that. And the younger the parties the more it costs; hot-house flowers, and a smelling-bottle, a trifle of a ring, just to learn the size; that being accepted, the bolder brooch, charmed bracelet, and locket for the virgin heart—no wonder you are short of cash, my Kit."

"You don't know one atom about it," cried Christopher, boiling with meritorious wrath. "I never gave her nothing—and she wouldn't have it!"

"The double negative, to be sure. How forcible and how natural it is! Well, well, my boy, let us try to believe you. Scatter all doubts by exhibiting your wealth. You had five pounds and ten shillings lately; and you pay nothing for anything that can be placed to your father's credit. Let me see your cash-box, Kit."

"This is all that I have at present," said Christopher, pulling out his three-and-sixpence—for he had given the guard a shilling; "but you must not suppose that this is all to which I am entitled. I have I.O.U's from junior members of the University for really more than I can reckon up; and every one of them will get the money from his sisters, in the long vacation."

"Oh, Kit, Kit! The firm ends with me. I must sell the good-will for the very worst old song, if it once leaks out what a fool you are. By what strange cross of reckless blood can such a boy be the future head of Piper, Pepper, Sharp, & Co.?" Mr. Sharp covered up his long clear head, and hid—for this once—true emotion. Kit looked at the kerchief with a very queer glance. He was not at all affected by this lamentation, however just, because he had heard it so often before; and he never could make out exactly how much of him his father could manage to descry through that veil Palladian.

"Well, sir," he said, "you have always told me, as long as I can remember, that I was to be a gentleman; and gentlemen trust one another."

"Very well said!" Mr. Sharp replied, with a deeply irritating smile; "and now I will trust you, young sir, in a matter of importance. Remember that I trust you as a gentleman—for I need not tell you one word, unless I choose—and if I depart from my usual practice, it is partly because you are beginning to claim a sort of maturity. Very well, let us see if it can be relied upon. You pledge your word to keep silence, and I tell you what you never could find out."

Kit was divided with his mind in twain; whether he should draw the sharp falchion of his wit, or whether he should rather speak honeysome words; and, as nearly always happens when Minerva is admitted, he betook himself to the gentler process.

"Very well, sir," he said, pulling up his collar, as if he had whiskers to push it down, "whatever I am told in confidence is allowed to go no further. It is scarcely necessary for me to say that I reserve, of course, the final right of reference to my honour."

"To be sure, and to your ripe judgment and almost patriarchal experience, Kit. Then be it known to you, aged youth, that you have not shown hoar sagacity. You do not even know who the lady is whom you have honoured with your wise addresses."

"And I don't care a d—n who she is," cried Kit, "so long as I love her, and she loves me!"

"My son, you are turbulent and hasty. Your wisdom has left you suddenly. Your manners also; or you would not swear in the presence of your father."

"Sir, I was wrong; and I beg your pardon. But I think that I learned the first way of it from you."

"Kit, Kit, recall that speech! You must have gone altogether dreaming lately. My discourse is always moderate, and to the last degree professional. However, in spite of the generous impulse, which scarcely seems natural at your threescore years and ten, it does seem a needful precaution to learn the name, style, and title of the lady whom you will vow to love, honour, and—obey."

"Her name," cried Kit, without any sense of legal phrase and jingle, "is Grace Holland. Her style is a great deal better than anybody else's. And as for title, such rubbish is unknown in the gigantic young nation to which she belongs."

"Her name," said Mr. Sharp, setting his face for the conquest of this boy, and fixing keen hard eyes upon him, "is Grace Oglander, the daughter of the old Squire of Beckley. Her style—in your sense of the word—is that of a rustic young lady; and her title, by courtesy, is Miss—a barbarous modern abbreviation."

The youth was at first too much amazed to say a word; for he was not quick-witted, as his father was. He gave a little gasp, and his fine brown eyes, which he could not remove from his father's, changed their expression from defiance to doubt, and from doubt to fear, and from fear to sorrow, with a little dawning of contempt. "Why, my man, is this beyond your experience of life?" asked Luke Sharp, trying to look his son down, but failing, and beginning to grow uneasy. Kit's face was aflame with excitement, and his lips were trembling; but his eyes grew stern.

"Father, I hope you do not mean what you have said—that you are only joking with me—at any rate, that you have not known it—that you have not done it—that you have not even left poor old Mr. Oglander one hour——"

"Wait, boy, wait! You know nothing about it. Who are you to judge of such matters, indeed? Remember to whom you are speaking, if you please. I have done what was right; and for your sake I have done it."

"For my sake! Why, I never had seen the young lady before I was told that she was dead and buried—murdered, as everybody said—and the tracing of the criminals was mainly left to you! I longed to help, but I knew that you despised me; and now do you mean to say that you did it?"

Luke Sharp was a quick-tempered man. He had borne a great deal more than usual. And now he spoke with vast disdain.

"To be sure, Kit, I murdered her; as is proved to such a mind as yours by the fact of her being now alive! What can I have done to have a fool for my son?"

"And what have I done to have a rogue for a father? You may knock me down, sir, if you please!"—for Mr. Sharp arose, as if that would be his next proceeding;—"you have always used your authority very much in that manner with me. I don't want to be knocked down; but if it will do you any good, pray proceed to it; and down I go."

"I declare, after all, you have got some little wit," cried the lawyer, with a smile withdrawing, and recovering self-command. "I cannot be angry with a boy like you, because you know no better. Oh, here comes your mother! Your excitement has aroused her. Mamma, you have not the least idea what a lion you have to answer for. I leave him to you, my dear. Soothe him, feed him, and try to find his humming-top."

CHAPTER XLIX.

PROMETHEUS VINCTUS.

"I will not die like this! It is unseemly to die like this!" the Rev. Thomas Hardenow was exclaiming at this very time, but a few miles off. "I hope I am not a coward altogether; but the ignominy is unbearable. In this den of Eumæus, this sty of Sycorax, entangled in the meshes of a foul hog-net, and with hogs' grunt, grunt, for the chorus of my woes! My Prometheus class is just waiting for me at the present moment, so far as I can reckon here the climbing of the day; and I had rendered into English verses that delicious bit of chorus—'With thy woes of mighty groaning, mortals feel a fellow-moaning, And of Colchic land indwellers, maids who never quail in fight;' and so on—how small-minded of me to forget it now!—down to, 'And springs of holy-watered rivers wail thy pitiable woe.' But instead of nymphs of ocean, here comes that old pig again! If he could only grout up that board—which he must do sooner or later—what part of me will he begin upon? Probably this little finger—it is so white and helpless! If I could only, only move!—to be eaten alive by pigs! Well, well—there is not so very much left for them. Infinitely better men have had a lower end than that. Only I would bend my knees—if bend them I could—to the Giver of all good, that I may be insensible before the pigs begin."

His plight was a very unfortunate one; but still in the blackest veil of woe there is sure to be some little threadbare place—from so many people having worn that veil—and even poor Hardenow had one good "look-out." To wit, although he had been without food for six-and-twenty hours now (having been caught in the treacherous toils soon after he set his toes towards his dinner), he was not by any means in the same state in which a Low-Church clergyman must have been. His system was so attuned to fasting, and all his parts so disciplined, that "cupboard" was only whispered among them in a submissive manner; and even his stomach concluded sorrowfully that it must be Friday.

Beyond this considerable advantage—which could not last much longer—there was really little to console him. His cowardly captors, not content with the rabbit-net twined round him, had swathed him also in the stronger meshes of a corded gig-net. And even after that, Black George, having had the handling of his legs, and discovered the vigour of their boniness, was so impressed that he called out—"I never did heckle such a wiry chap. Fetch a pair of they tough thongs, Tickuss, same as thou makest use of for ringing of the pigs, my lad."

"Whish!—can't 'ee whish, with my name so pat?" Leviticus whispered sulkily; but he brought the unyielding thongs, wherewith the fellow and tutor of Brasenose very soon had his wrists and ankles strapped. And in spite of all struggles through the livelong night, as firmly as a trussed hare was he fixed.

Nevertheless, he could roll a little, though not very fast, because his elbows stopped him; for being of the sharpest they stuck into the ground, which was of a loamy nature. He fought with this difficulty, as with every other; for a braver heart never dwelled in any body, whether fat or lean; and he plucked up his angles from their bed of earth, whenever the limits of cord would yield. He knew all about the manufacture of twine—so far as one not in the trade could know it—because he had got up the subject for the sake of a whipcord of a puzzle in Theocritus; but this only served to make his case the worse; for at that time honest string was made. The dressing, and the facing, and the thousand other rogueries, make it quite impossible to tie a good knot now; and even if a strap has any leather in it, its first operation is a compromise.

But at that stouter period, bind made bound. Mr. Hardenow could roll a little; but that was as much as he could do. And rolling did him very little good, except by way of exercise; because he was pulled up short so suddenly by feather-edged boarding, with a coat of tar. The place in which he was penned was most unworthy of such an occupant. It was not even the principal meal-house, or the best treasury of "wash." It was not the kitchen of the tasteful pigs, or even their back-kitchen, but something combining the qualities of their scullery and dust-bin. But the floor was clean, and a man lying lowly, so far as smell was concerned, had certainly the best of the situation; inasmuch as all odours must ascend to the pure ether of the exalted. Hardenow knew that it was vain to roll, because the door was padlocked, and the lower end, to which he chiefly tended, had a loose board, lifted every now and then by the unringed snout of a very good old sow. Pure curiosity was her motive, and no evil appetite, as her eyes might tell. She had never seen a fellow and a tutor of a college rolling, as she herself loved to do; and yet in a comparatively clumsy way. She grunted deep disapproval of his movements, and was vexed that her instructions were entirely thrown away.

"Ah, Linus, Linus be the cry; and let the good be conqueror!" Mr. Hardenow quoted, as his legs began to ache; "henceforth, if I have any henceforth, how palpably shall I realise the difference between the alindethra and the circular conistra! In this limited place I combine the two; but without the advantages of either. I take it that, whether of horse, or hen, or human being, the essential condition of revolutionary enjoyment is—that the limbs be free. In my case, they are not free. The exhilaration which would ensue, and of which, if I remember rightly, Pliny speaks—or is it Ælian?—my memory seems to be rolling too; but be the authority what it will, in my case that exhilaration is (at least for the moment) not forthcoming. But I ought to condemn myself far rather than writers who treat of a subject with the gravity of authority; that is to say, if they ever tried it. 'Experimentum in corpore vili,' is what all writers have preferred. If their own bodies were not too noble, what powerful impress they might have left!"

After such a cynical delivery as this, it served him particularly right to hit, in the course of revolution, upon a bit of bone even harder than his own; a staunch piece of noble old ossification (whether of herbivorous, carnivorous, or omnivorous dragon), such as would have brought Professor Buckland from Christ Church headlong, or even

Professor Owen, from the British Museum, the Melampus of all good dragons. Hardenow knew nothing about it; except that it ran into him, and jerked him in such a way over the ground, that he got into the highest corner, and gladly would have rubbed himself, if good hemp had yielded room for it.

But this sad blow, which seemed at first the buffet of the third and crowning billow of his woe, proved to be a blessing in disguise; inasmuch as the reaction impelled him to a spot where he descried some encouragement to work. And a little encouragement was enough for him. By virtue of inborn calmness, long classical training and memories, and pure Anglo-Catholic discipline, the young man was still "as fresh as paint," in a trouble which would have exhausted the vigour of a far more powerful and fiery man. Russel Overshute, for instance, even in his best health would have worn his wits out long ago, by futile wrath, and raving hunger.

Mr. Hardenow could not even guess how there came to be quite a thick cluster of pretty little holes, of about the size of a swan's quill, drilled completely through the board against which his mishap had driven him. The board was a stoutish slab of larch, cut "feather-edged;" and the saw having struck upon most of these holes obliquely, their form was elliptic instead of round, and their axes not being at right angles to the board, they attracted no attention by admitting light, since the light of course entered obliquely. In some parts as close as the holes of a colander, in other places scattered more widely, they jotted the plank for nearly a yard of its length, and afforded a fine specimen of the penetrative powers of a colony of *Sirex gigas*, so often mistaken for the hornet.

But though as to their efficient cause he could form no opinion, Hardenow hoped that their final cause might be to save his life; which he quietly believed to be in great peril. For he knew that he lay in the remote obscurity of a sad and savage wood, unvisited by justice, trade, or benefit of clergy. Here, if no good spirit came, or unseen genius, to release him, die he must at his own leisure, which would be a long one. And he could discover no moral to be read from his pre-historic skeleton; unless it were that very low one—"stick to thy own business."

A man of ordinary mind would not have troubled his head about this. "*Post me, diluvium*," is the strengthening sentiment of this age; no fulcrum whatever for any good work; and the death of all immortality. Hardenow would have none of that; he had no idea of leaving ashes fit to nourish nothing. Collecting his energies for a noble protest against having lived altogether in vain, he brought his fettered heels, like a double-headed hammer, as hard as his probolistic swing could whirl, against the very thickest-crowded cells of bygone domicile. The wooden shed rang, and the uprights shook, and the nose of the sow at the lower end was jarred, and her feelings hurt; for, truly speaking, her motives had been misunderstood. And if Hardenow had but kept pigs of his own, he would have gone to work down there, to help her, and so perhaps have got her to release him from his toils. Everybody, however, must be allowed to go to work in his own way: and to find fault with him, when he tries to do his best, is (as all kind critics own) alike ungraceful and ungracious. Mr. Hardenow worked right hard, as he always did at everything, and his heels had their sparables as good as new, and capable of calcitration, though he wore nothing stronger than Oxford shoes with a bow of silk ribbon on the instep. The ribbon held fast, and he kicked or rather swung his feet by a process of revolution, as bravely as if he had Hessian boots on. At the very first stroke he had fetched out a splinter as big as the scoop of a marrow-spoon; and delivering his coupled heels precisely where little tunnels afforded target, in a quarter of an hour he had worked a good hole, and was able to refresh himself with the largeness of the outer world.

Not that he could, however skilled now in rolling, roll himself out of his black jail yet—for the piece punched out was only four inches wide—but that he got a very decent width (in proportion at least to man's average view) for clear consideration of the world outside. And what he saw now was a pretty little sight, or peep at country scenery. For the wood, just here, was not so thick that a man could not see it by reason of the trees—as the Irishman forcibly observed—but a dotted slope of bush and timber widening and opening sunny reaches out of the narrow forest track. There was no house to be seen, nor cottage, nor even barn or stable, nor any moving creature, except a pig or two grouting in the tufted grass, and gray-headed daws at leisure perking and prying, for the good of their home-circle.

But presently the prisoner espied a wicket-gate, nearly at the bottom of the sylvan slope, with a little space roughly stoned before it—almost a sure sign, in a neighbourhood like that, of a human dwelling-place inside. And when Hardenow's eyes, recovering tone, assured him of the existence of some moss-grown steps, for the climbing of a horse upon either side, he felt a sudden (though it may not have been a strictly logical) happiness, from the warm idea that there must be some of the human race not far from him. He placed his lips close to the hole which he had made, and shouted his very loudest, and then stopped a little while, to watch what might come of it, and then sent forth another shout. But nothing came of it, except that the pigs pricked up their ears and looked around and grunted; and the jackdaws gave a little jerk or two, and flapped their wings, but did not fly; and a soft woody echo, of a fibrous texture, answered as weakly as a boy who does not know.

This was pretty much what Hardenow expected. He saw that the wicket-gate was a long way off, three or four hundred yards perhaps; but he did not know that his jailer, Tickuss Cripps, was the man who lived inside of it. Otherwise his sagacious mind would have yielded quiet mercy to his lungs. For Leviticus was such a cruel and cowardly blunderer, that, in mere terror, he probably would have dashed grand brains out. But luckily he was far away now, and so were all other spies and villains; and only a little child—boy or girl, at that distance nobody could say which—toddled out to the wicket-gate, and laid fat arms against it, and laboured, with impatient grunts, to push it open. Having seen no one for a long time now, Hardenow took an extraordinary interest in the efforts of this child. The success or the failure of this little atom could not in any way matter to him; yet he threw his whole power of sight into the strain of the distant conflict. He made up his mind that if the child got out, he should be able to do the like.

Then having most accurate "introspection" (so far as humanity has such gift) he feared that his mind must be a little on the wane, ere ever such weakness entered it. To any other mind the wonder would have been that his should continue to be so tough; but he hated shortcomings, and began to feel them. Laying this nice question by, until there

should be no child left to look at, he gazed with his whole might at this little peg of a body, in the distance, toppling forward, and throwing out behind the weight of its great efforts. He wondered at his own interest—as we all ought to wonder, if we took the trouble. This little peg, now in battle with the gate, was a solid Peg in earnest; a fine little Cripps, about five years old, as firm as if just turned out of a churn. She was backward in speech, as all the Crippses are; and she rather stared forth her ideas than spoke them. But still, let her once get a settlement concerning a thing that must be done to carry out her own ideas; and in her face might be seen, once for all, that stop she never would till her own self had done it. Hardenow could not see any face, but he felt quite a surety of sturdiness, from the solid mould of attitude.

That heavy gate, standing stiffly on its heels, groaned obstreperously, and gibed at the unripe passion of this little maid. It banged her chubby knees, and it bruised her warted hand, and it even bestowed a low cowardly buffet upon her expressive and determined cheek. And while she lamented this wrong, and allowed want of judgment to kick out at it, unjust it may have been, but true it is, that she received a still worse visitation. The forefoot of the gate, which was quite shaky and rattlesome in its joints, came down like a skittle-pin upon her little toes, which were only protected on a Sunday. "Ototoi, Ototoi!" cried Mr. Hardenow, with a thrilling gush of woe, as if his own toes were undergoing it. Bitter, yet truly just, lamentation awoke all the echoes of the woods and hills, and Hardenow thought that it was all up now—that this small atom of the wooded world would accept her sad fate, and run in to tell her mother.

But no; this child was the Carrier's niece; and a man's niece—under some law of the Lord, untraced by acephalous progeny—takes after him oftentimes a great deal closer than his own beloved daughter does. Whether or no, here was this little animal, as obstinate as the very Carrier. Taught by adversity she did thus:—Against the gate-post she settled her most substantial availability, and exerted it, and spared it not. Therewith she raised one solid leg, and spread the naked foot thereof, while her lips were as firm as any toe of all the lot, against the vile thing that had knocked her about, and the power that was contradicting her. Nothing could withstand this fixed resolution of one of the far more resolute moiety of humanity. With a creak of surrender, the gate gave back; and out came little Peggy Cripps, with a broad face glowing with triumph, which suddenly fell into a length of terror, as the vindictive gate closed behind her. To get out had been a great labour, but to get back was an impossibility; and Hardenow, even so far away, could interpret the gesture of despair and horror. "Poor little thing! How I wish that I could help her!" he said to himself, and very soon began to think that mutual aid might with proper skill be compassed.

With this good idea, he renewed his shouts, but offered them in a more insinuating form; and being now assured that the child was female, his capacious mind framed a brief appeal to the very first instinct of all female life. Possibly therefore the fairer half of pig and daw creation appropriated with pleasure his address. At any rate, although the child began to look around, she had no idea whence came the words, "Pretty little dear! little beauty!" etc., with which the learned prisoner was endeavouring to allure her.

But at last, by a very great effort and with pain, Hardenow managed to extract from the nets his white cravat, or rather his cravat which had been white, when it first hung down his back from the taloned clasp of the hollies. By much contrivance and ingenious rollings, he brought out a pretty good wisp of white, and hoisted it bravely betwixt gyved feet, and at the little breach displayed it. And the soft breath of May, which was wandering about, came and uncrinkled, and in little tatters waved the universal symbol of Succession Apostolical, as well as dinner-parties.

Little Peggy happened at this moment to be staring, with a loose uncertain glimpse of thought that somebody somewhere was calling her. By the flutter of the white cravat, her wandering eyes were caught at last, and fixed for a minute of deliberate growth of wonder. Not a step towards that dreadful white ghost would she budge; but a steadfast idea was implanted in her mind, and was likely to come up very slowly.

"It is waste of time; I have lost half an hour. The poor little thing—I have only scared her. Now let me think what I ought to do next."

But even while he addressed himself to that very difficult problem, Hardenow began to feel that he could not grapple with it. His mind was as clear as ever, but his bodily strength was failing. He had often fasted for a longer time, but never with his body invested thus, and all his members straitened. The little girl sank from his weary eyes, though he longed to know what would become of her; and he scarcely had any perception at all of pigs that were going on after their manner, and rabbits quite ready for their early dinner, the moment the sun began to slope, and a fine cock partridge, who in his way was proud because his wife had now laid a baker's dozen of eggs, and but for his dissuasion would begin to sit to-morrow; and after that a round-nosed hare, with a philoprogenitive forehead, but no clear idea yet of leverets; and after that, as the shadows grew long, a cart, drawn by a horse, as carts seem always to demand that they shall be—the horse of a strong and incisive stamp (to use the two pet words of the day), the cart not so very far behind him there, as they gave word to stop at the gate to one another—and in the cart, and above the cart, and driving both it and the horse thereof, as Abraham drove on the plain of Mamre, Zacchary Cripps; and sitting at his side, the far-travelled and accomplished Esther.

CHAPTER L.

FEMININE ERROR.

Meanwhile, at Cross Duck House, ever since that interview of the morning, things were becoming, from hour to hour, more critical and threatening. If Mr. Sharp could only have believed that his son was now a man, or at least should be treated as though he were; and if after that the too active lawyer could only have conceived it possible that some things might go on all the better without him; it is likely enough that his righteous and gallant devices would have sped more easily.

But Luke Sharp had governed his own little world so long that he scarcely could imagine serious rebellion. And he cared not to hide his large contempt for the intellect of Christopher, or the grievance which he had always felt—at being the father of a donkey. And so, without further probation or pledge, he went forth to make his own arrangements, leaving young Kit to his mother's charge, like a dummy, to be stroked down and dressed.

If he had left Kit but an hour before for his mother to tell him everything, and round the corners, and smooth the levels, and wrap it all up in delicious romance, as women do so easily, with their power of believing whatever they wish, the boy might have jumped at the soft sweet bait; for he verily loved his sylvan maid. But now all his virtue and courage, and even temper, were on the outlook; and only one thing more was needed to drive him to a desperate resolve.

And that one thing was supplied, in the purest innocence, by Mrs. Sharp; though the question would never have arisen if her son had been left to her sole handling.

"Then, mother, I suppose," said Kit as simply as if he smelled no rat whatever, thoroughly as he understood that race, "if I should be fortunate enough to marry beautiful Miss Oglander, we shall have to live on bread and cheese, until it shall please the senior people to be reconciled, and help us?"

"No, Kit! What are you talking of, child? The lady has £20,000 of her own! And £150,000 to follow, which nobody can take from her!"

With a very heavy heart he turned away. Nothing more was required to settle him. He saw the whole business of the plotting now; and the young romance was out of it. He went to the bow-window looking on the lane, and felt himself akin to a little ragamuffin, who was cheating all the other boys at marbles. Hard bitterness and keen misery were battling in his mind which should be the first to have its way and speak.

"This comes of being a lawyer's son!" he cried, turning round for one bad glance at his mother. "She said that she disliked the law. I don't dislike, I abhor it."

"So you may, my dear boy, and welcome now. This will lift you altogether beyond it. Your dear father may consider it his duty to continue the office, and so on; but you will be a country gentleman, Kit, with horses, and dogs, and Manton guns, and a pack of hounds, and a long barouche, and hot-house grapes. And I will come and live with you, my darling; or at least make our country house of it, and show you how to manage things. For the whole world will be trying to cheat you, Kit; you are too good-natured, and grand in your ways! You must try to be a little sharper, darling, with that mint of money."

"Must I? But suppose that I won't have it."

"Sometimes I believe that you think it manly to provoke your mother. The money ought to have been ours, Kit; mine by heritage and justice; at least a year and a half ago. A moderate provision should have been made for a woman, who may have her good points—though everybody has failed to discover them—and who married with a view to jointure. Ten thousand pounds would have been very handsome—far handsomer than she ever was, poor thing!—and then by every law, human and divine, all the rest must have come to you and me, my dear. Now, I hope that you see things in their proper light."

"Well, I dare say I do," he answered, with a little turn of sulkiness, such as he often got when people could not understand him. "Mother, you will allow me to have my own opinion; as you have yours."

"Certainly, Kit! Of course, my dear. You know that you always have been allowed extraordinary liberty in that way. No boy in any school could have more; even where all the noblemen's sons are allowed to make apple-pie beds for the masters. Every night, my dear boy, when your father was away, it has rested with you, and you cannot deny it, to settle to a nicety what there must be for supper."

"Such trumpery stuff is not worth a thought. I am now like a fellow divided in two. You might guess what I am about, a little. It is high time for me to come forward. You cannot see things, perhaps, as I do. How often must I tell you? I give you my word as a gentleman—all this is exceedingly trying."

"Of course it is, Kit; of course it is. What else could be expected of it? But still, we must all of us go through trials; and then we come out purified."

"Not if we made them for ourselves, mother; and made them particularly dirty ones. But I cannot talk of it; what do I know? A lot of things come tempting me. Everybody laughs at me for wondering what my mind is. And everybody cheats me, as you said. Let the governor carry on his own devices. I have made up my mind to consider a good deal,

and behave then according to circumstances."

"You will behave, I trust, exactly as your parents wish. They have seen so much more of the world than you have; they are far better judges of right and wrong; and their only desire is your highest interest. You will break your poor mother's heart, dear Kit, if you do anything foolish now."

The latter argument had much more weight with young Sharp than the former; but pledging himself as yet to nothing, he ran away to his own room to think; while his mother, with serious misgivings, went down to see about the soup, and hurry on the dinner. She knew that in vaunting Miss Oglander's wealth she had done the very thing she was ordered not to do, and she was frightened at the way in which her son had taken it.

Mr. Sharp did not come home to their early dinner at half-past one o'clock; indeed, his wife did not expect him much; and his son was delighted not to see him. Kit sat heavily, but took his food as usual. The condition of his mind might be very sad indeed, but his body was not to be driven thereby to neglect the duties of its own department. He helped his dear mother to some loin of mutton; and when she only played with it, and her knife and fork were trembling, he was angered, and his eyes sought hers; and she tried to look at him and smile, but made a wretched job of it. Christopher reserved his opinion about this; but it did not help in any way to impair his resolution.

For dessert they had a little dish of strawberries from pot-plants in the greenhouse; and as they were the first of the season, the young fellow took to them rather greedily. His mother was charmed with this condescension, and urged him so well that in about three minutes the shining red globes ticked with gold were represented by a small, ignoble pile of frilled stalks blurred with pink. At this moment in walked the master of the house.

He had been as fully occupied as a certain unobtrusive, but never inactive, gentleman, proverbially must be in a gale of wind. The day was unusually warm for the May month, and the streets of Oxford dusty. Mr. Sharp had been working a roundabout course, and working it very rapidly; he had managed to snatch at a sandwich or two—for he could not go long without nourishment—but throughout all his haste he had given himself, with the brightest vision of refreshing joy, just time to catch these strawberries. At least he was sure of it. But now, where were they?

"Ah, I see you know how to snap up a good thing!" cried the lawyer, with a glance of contempt and wrath; "show the same promptitude in what has been arranged for your benefit this afternoon, my boy; and then you will be, in earnest, what you put on your dogs' collars."

This was not the way to treat Kit Sharp; but the lawyer never could resist a sneer, even when his temper was at its best, which it certainly was not just now.

Kit looked a little ashamed for a moment, but made no excuse for his greediness; he was sure that his mother would do that best. By this time he had resolved to avoid, for the present, all further dispute with his father. Whatever was arranged for him he would do his best to accept, with one condition—that he should be allowed to see the young lady first, and test her good-will towards him, before her "removal" (as Mr. Sharp mildly called it) was attempted. His sanguine young heart had long been doing its utmost to convince him that this sweet-tempered and simple maid could never bring herself to the terrible cruelty of rejecting him. He felt how unworthy he was; but still so was everybody else—especially the villain with the four bay horses: from that scoundrel he would save her, even if he had to dissemble more than he ever had done before.

Luke Sharp, with his eyes fixed on his son in lofty contemplation, beheld (as through a grand microscope) these despicable little reasonings. To argue with Kit was more foolish than filing a declaration against a man of straw. To suppose that Kit would ever really rebel was more absurd than to imagine that a case would be decided upon its merits. "So be it," he said; "but of course, even you would never be quite such a fool as to tell her what your father and mother have done for her good."

There still was a little to be done, and some nicety of combination to see to; and after a short consultation with his wife, and particular instructions as to management of Kit, Mr. Sharp rode off on his own stout horse, with a heavily loaded whip and a brace of pistols, because there were some rogues about.

CHAPTER LI.

UNFILIAL.

"At seven o'clock all must be ready," said Mr. Sharp, towards the close of a hurried conversation with Miss Patch, Grace Oglander being sent out of the way, according to established signal; "there is no time to lose, and no ladies' tricks of unpunctuality, if you please. We must have day-light for these horrid forest-roads, and time it so as to get into the London road about half-past eight. We must be in London by two in the morning; the horses, and all that will be forthcoming. Kit rides outside, and I follow on horse-back. Hannah, why do you hesitate?"

"Because I cannot—I cannot go away, without having seen that Jesuit priest in the pig-net wallowing. It is such a grand providential work—the arm of the Lord has descended from heaven, and bound him in his own meshes. Luke, I beg you, I implore you—I can pack up everything in an hour—do not rob me of a sight like that."

"Hannah, are you mad? You have never been allowed to go near that place, and you never shall!"

"Well, you know best; but it does seem very cruel, after all the lack of grace I have borne with here, to miss the great Protestant work thus accomplished. But suppose that the child should refuse to come with us—we have no letters now, nor any other ministration."

"We have no time now for such trumpery; we must carry things now with a much higher hand. Everything hangs upon the next few hours; and by this time to-morrow night all shall be safe: Kit and the girl gone for their honeymoon, and you sitting under the most furious dustman that ever thumped a cushion."

"Oh, Luke, how can you speak as if you really had no reverence?"

"Because there is no time for such stuff now. We have the strength, and we must use it. Just go and get ready. I must ride to meet my people. The girl, I suppose, is with Kit by this time. What a pair of nincompoops they will be!"

"I am sure they will be a very pretty pair—so far as poor sinful exterior goes—and, what is of a thousand-fold more importance, their worldly means will be the means of grace to hundreds of our poor fellow-creatures, who, because their skin is of a different tint, and in their own opinion a finer one, are debarred——"

"Now, Hannah, no time for that. Get ready. And mind that there must be no feminine weakness if circumstances should compel us to employ a little compulsion. Call to your mind that the Lord is with us; the sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

Pleased with his knowledge of Holy Writ, he went to the place where his horse was tied, and there he found a man with a message for him, which he just stopped to hearken.

"As loovin' as a pair o' toortle doves; he hath a-got her by the middle; as sweet as my missus were to me, afore us went to church togither!" Black George had been set to watch Kit and Gracie, during their private interview, lest any precaution should be overlooked.

"Right! Here's a guinea for you, my man. Now, you know what to do till I come back—to stay where you are, and keep a sharp look-out. Can the fool in the net do without any water? Very well, after dark, give him some food, bandage his eyes, and walk him to and fro, and let him go in Banbury.

"All right, governor. A rare bait he shall have of it, with a little swim in the canal, to clane un."

"No hardship, no cruelty!" cried Mr. Sharp, with his finger to his forehead, as he rode away; "only a little wise discipline to lead him into closer attention to his own affairs."

Black George looked after his master with a grin of admiration. "He sticketh at nort," said George to himself, as he began to fill a grimy pipe; "he sticketh at nort no more than I would. And with all that house and lands to back un! Most folk with money got no pluck left, for thinking of others as owneth the same. I'll be danged if he dothn't carry on as bold as if he slep' in a rabbit-hole." With these words he sat down to watch the house, according to his orders.

But this man's description of what he had seen in the wood was not a correct one—much as he meant to speak the truth—for many reasons, and most of all this: that he ran away before the end of it. It was a pretty and a moving scene; but the rabbit-man cared a great deal more for the pipe, which he could not smoke in this duty, and the guinea which he hoped to get out of it. And it happened, as near as one can tell, on this wise:

Grace Oglander, came down the winding wooded path, with her heart pit-a-patting at every step, because she was ordered to meet somebody. An idea of that kind did not please her. A prude, or a prim, she would never wish to be; and a little bit of flirting had been a great relief, and a pleasant change in her loneliness. But to bring matters to so stern a point, and have to say what she meant to say, in as few words as possible, and then walk off—these strong measures were not to her liking, because she was a most kind-hearted girl, and had much good-will towards Christopher.

Kit on the other hand, came along fast, with a resolute brow and firm heavy stride. He had made up his mind to be wretched for life, if the heart upon which he had set his own should refuse to throb responsively. But whatever his fate might be, he would tread the highest path of generosity, chivalry, and honour; and this resolution was well set forth in the following nervous and pathetic lines, found in his blotting-paper after his untimely—but stay, let us not

anticipate. These words had been watered with a flood of tears.

"C. F. S. TO MISS G. O.

Say that happier mortal woos thee,
Say that nobler knight pursues thee,
  While this blighted being teareth
  All the festive robes it weareth,
While this dead heart splits to lose thee—
Ah, could I so misuse thee?
  Though this bosom, rent by thunder,
Crash its last hope anchor'd in thee;
  Liefer would I groan thereunder,
Than by falsehood win thee!"

And now they met in a gentle place, roofed with leaves, and floored with moss, and decorated with bluebells. The chill of the earth was gone by and forgotten, and the power of the sky come back again; stately tree, and graceful bush, and brown depths of tangled prickliness—everything having green life in it—was spreading its green, and proud of it. Under this roof, and in these halls of bright young verdure, the youth and the maid came face to face befittingly. Grace, as bright as a rose, and flushing with true tint of wild rose, drew back and bowed, and then, perceiving serious hurt of Christopher, kindly offered a warm white hand—a delicious touch for any one. Kit laid hold of this and kept it, though with constant fear of doing more than was established, and, trying to look firm and overpowering, led the fair young woman to a trunk of fallen oak.

Here they both sat down; and Grace was not so far as she could wish from yielding to a little kind of trembling which arose in her. She glanced at Kit sideways whenever she felt that he could not be looking at her; and she kept her wise eyes mainly downward whenever they seemed to be wanted—not that she could not look up and speak, only that she would rather wait until there was no other help for it; and as for that, she felt no fear, being sure that he was afraid of her. Kit, on the other hand, was full of fear, and did all he could in the craftiest manner to make his love look up at him. He could not tell how she might take his tale; but he knew by instinct that his eyes would help him where his tongue might fail. At last he said—

"Now, will you promise faithfully not to be angry with me?"

"Oh yes, oh yes—to be sure," said Grace; "why should I be angry?"

"Because I can't help it—I give you my honour. I have tried very hard, but I cannot help it."

"Then who could be angry with you, unless it was something very wicked?"

"It is not very wicked, it is very good—too good for me, a great deal, I am afraid."

"There cannot be many things too good for you; you are simple, and brave, and gentle."

"But this is too good for me, ever so much, because it is your own dear self."

Grace was afraid that this was coming; and now she lifted her soft blue eyes and looked at him quite tenderly, and yet so directly and clearly that he knew in a moment what she had for him—pity, and trust, and liking; but of heart's love not one atom.

"I know what you mean," he whispered sadly, with his bright young face cast down. "I cannot think what can have made me such a fool. Only please to tell me one thing. Has there been any chap in front of me?"

"How can I tell what you mean?" asked Grace; but her colour showed that she could guess.

"I must not ask who it is, of course. Only say it's not the swell that drives the four bay horses."

"I do not know any one that drives four bay horses. And now I think that I had better go. Only, as I cannot ever meet you any more, I must try to tell you that I like you very much, and never shall forget what I owe to you; and I hope you will very soon recover from this—this little disappointment; and my dear father, as soon as we return to England—for I must go to fetch him——"

"Grace—oh, let me call you 'Grace' once or twice, it can't matter here in the middle of the wood—Grace, I was so taken up with myself, and full of my miserable folly, which of course I ought to have known better——"

"I must not stop to hear any more. There is my hand—yes, of course you may kiss it, after all that you have done for me."

"I am going to do a great deal more for you," cried Kit, quite carried away with the yielding kindness of lovely fingers. "For your sake I am going to injure and disgrace my own father—though the Lord knows the shame is of his own making. It is my father who has kept you here; and to-night he is going to carry you off. Miss Patch is only a tool of his. Your own father knows not a word about it. He believes you to be dead and buried. Your tombstone is set up at Beckley, and your father goes and cries over it."

"But his letters—his letters from Demerara? Oh! my head swims round! Let me hold by this tree for a moment!"

Kit threw his arm round her delicate waist to save her from falling; and away crept George, who had lurked behind a

young birch-tree too far off to hear their words.

"You must rouse up your courage," said Kit, with a yearning gaze at his sweet burden, yet taking no advantage of her. "Rouse up your courage, and I will do my best to save you from myself. It is very hard—it is cruelly cruel, and nobody will thank me!"

"His letters from Demerara!" cried Grace, having scarcely heard a word he said. "How could he have written them? You must be wrong."

"Of such letters I have never heard. I suppose they must have been forgeries. I give you my word that your father has been the whole of the time at Beckley, and a great deal too ill to go from home."

"Too ill!—my father? Yes, of course—of course! How could he help being ill without me? And he thinks I am dead? Oh! he thinks that I am dead! I wonder that he could dare to be alive. But let me try to think a little."

She tottered back to the old stump of the tree, and sat down there, and burst forth into an extraordinary gush of weeping: more sad and pitiful tears had never watered an innocent face before. "Let me cry!—let me cry!" was her only answer when the young man clumsily tried to comfort.

Kit got up and strode about; his indignation at her deep low sobs, and her brilliant cheeks like a river's bed, and her rich hair dabbled like drifted corn, and above all the violent pain which made her lay both hands to her heart and squeeze—his wrath made him long to knock down people entitled to his love and reverence. He knew that her heart was quite full of her father in all his long desolation, and was making a row of pictures of him in deepening tribulation; but a girl might go on like that for ever; a man must take the lead of her.

"If you please, Miss Oglander," he said, going up and lifting both her hands, and making her look up at him, "you have scarcely five minutes to make up your mind whether you wish to save your father, or to be carried away from him."

Grace in confusion and fear looked up. All about herself she had forgotten; she had even forgotten that Kit was near; she was only pondering slowly now—as the mind at most critical moments does—some straw of a trifle that blew across.

"Do you care to save your father's life?" asked Kit, rather sternly, not seeing in the least the condition of her mind, but wondering at it. "If you do, you must come with me, this moment, down the hill, down the hill, as fast as ever you can. I know a place where they can never find us. We must hide there till dark, and then I will take you to Beckley."

But the young lady's nerves would not act at command. The shock and surprise had been too severe. All she could do was to gaze at Kit, with soft imploring eyes, that tried to beg pardon for her helplessness.

"If we stay here another minute, you are lost!" cried Kit, as he heard the sound of the carriage-wheels near the cottage, on the rise above them. "One question only—will you trust me?"

She moved her pale lips to say "yes," and faintly lifted one hand to him. Kit waited for no other sign, but caught her in his sturdy arms, and bore her down the hill as fast as he could go, without scratching her snow-white face, or tearing the arm which hung on his shoulder.

CHAPTER LII.

UNPATERNAL.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sharp had his forces ready, and was waiting for Grace and Christopher. Cinnaminta's good Uncle Kershoe (who spent half of his useful time in stealing horses, and the other half in disguising and disposing of them), although he might not have desired to show himself so long before the moonlight, yet, true to honour, here he was, blinking beneath a three-cornered hat, like a grandly respectable coachman. The carriage was drawn up in a shady place, quite out of sight from the windows; and the horses, having very rare experience of oats, were embracing a fine opportunity. In picturesque attitudes of tobacconizing—if the depth of the wood covers barbarism—three fine fellows might now be seen; to wit, Black George, Joe Smith, and that substantial householder, Tickuss Cripps. In the chaise sat a lady of comfortable aspect, though fidgeting now with fat, well-gloved hands. Mrs. Sharp had begged not to have to stop at home and wonder what might be doing with her own Kit: and the case being now one of "neck or nothing," her husband had let her come, foreseeing that she might be of use with Grace Oglander. For the moment, however, she looked more likely to need attendance for herself; for she kept glancing round towards the cottage-door, while her plump and still comely cheeks were twitching, and tears of deep thought about the merits of her son held her heart in quick readiness to be up and help them. Once Mr. Sharp, whose main good point, among several others, was affection for his wife, rode up, and in a playful manner tickled her nose with the buckskin loop of his loaded whip, and laughed at her. She felt how kind it was of him, but her smile was only feeble.

"Now mind, dear," said Mr. Sharp, reining his horse (as strong as an oak and as bright as a daisy), "feel no anxiety about me. You have plenty of nourishment in your three bags; keep them all alive with it. Everything is mapped out perfectly. Near Wycombe, without rousing any landlord, you have a fresh pair of horses. In a desert place called the 'New Road,' in London, I meet you and take charge of you."

"May Kit have his pipe on the box? I am sure it will make him go so much sweeter."

"Fifty, if he likes. You put his sealskin pouch in. You think of every one before yourself."

"But can I get on with that dreadful woman? Don't you think she will preach me to death, Luke?"

"Miranda, my dear, you are talking loosely. You forget the great gift that you possess—the noblest endowment of the nobler sex. You can sleep whenever you like, and do it without even a suspicion of a snore. It is the very finest form of listening. Good-bye! You will be a most happy party. When once I see you packed, I shall spur on in front."

Mr. Sharp kissed his hand, and rode back to the cottage. Right well he knew what a time ladies take to put their clothes upon them; and the more grow the years of their practice in the art, the longer grow the hours needful. Still he thought Miss Patch had been quite long enough. But what could he say, when he saw her at her window, with the looking-glass sternly set back upon the drawers, lifting her hands in short prayer to the Lord: as genuine a prayer as was ever tried. She was praying for a blessing on this new adventure, and that all might lead up to the glory of the Kingdom; she besought to be relieved at last from her wearying instrumentality. Mr. Sharp still had some little faith left—for he was a man of much good feeling—and he did not scoff at his sister's prayer, as a man of low nature might have done.

Nevertheless he struck up with his whip at the ivy round her bedroom window, to impress the need of brevity; and the lady, though shocked at the suggestion of curtailment, did curtail immediately. In less than five minutes, she was busy at the doorway, seeing to the exit of everything; and presently, with very pious precision, she gave Mrs. Margery Daw half a crown, and a tract which some friend should read to her, after rubbing her glands with a rind of bacon, and a worn-out pocket-handkerchief, which had belonged to the mighty Rowland Hill, whose voice went three miles and a half.

Then Miss Patch (with her dress tucked up, and her spectacles at their brightest) marched, with a copy of the Scriptures borne prominently forward, and the tags of her cloak doubled up on her arm, towards the carriage, where Grace must be waiting for her. The sloping of the sunset threw her shadow, and the ring-doves in the wood were cooing. The peace and the beauty touched even her heart; and the hushing of the winds of evening in the nestling of the wood appeased the ruffled mind to that simplicity of childhood, where God and good are one.

But just as she was shaking hands benevolently with Mrs. Sharp, before getting into the carriage, back rode Mr. Sharp at full gallop, and without any ceremony shouted, "Where's the girl?"

"Miss Oglander! Why, I thought she was here!" Hannah Patch answered, with a little gasp.

"And I thought she was coming with you," cried Mrs. Sharp; "as well as my dear boy, Christopher."

"I let her go to meet him as you arranged," Miss Patch exclaimed decisively; "I had nothing to do with her after that."

"Is it possible that the boy has rogued me?" As Mr. Sharp said these few words, his face took a colour never seen before, even by his loving wife: The colour was, a livid purple, and it made his sparkling eyes look pale.

"They must be at the cottage," Mrs. Sharp suggested; "let me go to look for the naughty young couple."

The lawyer had his reasons for preventing this, as well as for keeping himself where he was; and therefore at a sign from him, Miss Patch turned back, and set off with all haste for the cottage. No sooner had she turned the corner,

than Joe Smith, the tall gipsy, emerged from the wood with long strides into the road, and beckoned to Mr. Sharp urgently. The lawyer was with him in a moment, and almost struck him in his fury at what he heard.

"How could you allow it? You great tinkering fool! Run to the corner where the two lanes meet. Take George with you. I will ride straight down the road. No, stop, cut the traces of those two horses! You jump on one, and Black George on the other, and off for the Corner full gallop! You ought to be there before the cart. I will ride straight for that rotten old jolter! Zounds, is one man to beat five of us?" Waiting for no answer, he struck spurs into his horse, and, stooping over the withers, dashed into a tangled alley, which seemed to lead towards the timber-track.

No wonder Mr. Sharp was in such a rage, for what had happened was exactly this—only much of it happened with more speed than words:—

Cripps, the Carrier, had been put up by several friends and relations (especially Numbers, the butcher, who missed the pork trade of Leviticus) to bring things directly to a point, instead of letting them go on, in a way which was neither one thing nor the other. Confessing all the claims of duty, poor Zacchary only asked how he could discharge them. He had done his very best, and he had found out nothing. If any one could tell him what more to do, he would wear out his Sunday shoes to thank them.

"Brother Zak," said Mrs. Numbers, with a feeling which in a less loyal family would have been contempt, "have you set a woman to work; now, have you?"

Every Cripps present was struck with this, and most of all the Carrier. Mrs. Numbers herself was quite ready to go, but a feud had arisen betwixt her and Susannah, as to whether three-holed or four-holed buttons cut the cotton faster; and therefore the Carrier resolved to take his own sister Etty, who never quarrelled. It was found out that she required change of air, and, indeed, she had been rather delicate ever since her long sad task at Shotover. Now, Leviticus durst not refuse to receive her, much as he disliked the plan. The girl went without any idea of playing spy; all she knew was that her brother was suspected of falling into low company, and she was to put him on his mettle, if she could.

Hence it was that Hardenow, gazing betwixt the two feather-edged boards, beheld—just before he lost his wits—the honoured vehicle of Cripps, with empty washing baskets standing, on its welcome homeward road, to discharge the fair Etty at her brother's gate. Tickuss was away upon Mr. Sharp's business, and Zacchary, through a grand sense of honour, would not take advantage of the chance by going in. Craft and wickedness might be in full play with them, but a wife should on no account be taken unawares, and tempted to speak outside her duty.

Therefore the Carrier kissed his sister in the soft gleam of the sunset-clouds, and refusing so much as a glass of ale, touched up Dobbin with a tickle of the whip; and that excellent nag (after looking round for oats in a dream, which his common sense premised to be too sanguine) brushed all his latter elegances with his tail, and fetching round his blinkers a most sad adieu to Esther, gave a little grunt at fortune and resignedly set off. Alas, when he grunted at a light day's work, how little did he guess what unparalleled exertions parted him yet from his stable for the night!

For while Master Cripps, with an equable mind, was jogging it gently on the silent way, and (thinking how lonely his cottage would be without Esther) was balancing in his mind the respective charms of his three admirers, Mary Hookham, Mealy Hiss, and Sally Brown of the Golden Cross, and sadly concluding that he must make up his mind to one of the three ere long—suddenly he beheld a thing which frightened him more than a dozen wives.

Cripps was come to a turn of the track—for it scarcely could be called a road—and was sadly singing to Dobbin and himself that exquisite elegiac—

> "Needles and pins, needles and pins,
> When a man marries, his trouble begins!"

Dobbin also, though he never had been married, was trying to keep time to this tune, as he always did to sound sentiments; when the two of them saw a sight that came, like a stroke for profanity, over them.

Directly in front of them, from a thick bush, sprang a beautiful girl into the middle of the lane, and spread out her hand to stop them. If the evening light had been a little paler, or even the moon had been behind her, a ghost she must have been then, and for ever. Cripps stared as if he would have no eyes any more; but Dobbin had received a great many comforts from the little hands spread out to him; and he stopped and sniffed, and lifted up his nose (now growing more decidedly aquiline) that it might be stroked, and even possibly regaled with a bunch of white-blossomed clover.

"Oh, Cripps, good Cripps, you dear old Cripps!" Grace Oglander cried with great tears in her eyes, "you never have forgotten me, Zacchary Cripps? They say that I am dead and buried. It isn't true, not a word of it! Dear Cripps, I am as sound alive as you are. Only I have been shamefully treated! Do let me get up in your cart, good Cripps, and my father will thank you for ever!"

"But, Missy, poor Missy," Cripps stammered out, drawing on his heart for every word, "you was buried on the seventh day of January, in the year of our Lord, 1838; three pickaxes was broken over digging of your grave, by reason of the frosty weather; and all of us come to your funeral! Do 'ee go back, miss, that's a dear! The churchyard to Beckley is a comfortable place, and this here wood no place for a Christian."

"But, Cripps, dear Cripps, do try to let me speak! They might have broken thirty pickaxes, but I had nothing at all to do with it. May I get up? Oh, may I get up? It is the only chance of saving me. I hear a horse tearing through the wood! Oh, dear, clever Cripps, you will repent it for the rest of all your life. Even Dobbin is sharper than you are."

"You blessed old ass!" cried a stern young voice, as Kit Sharp (who had meant not to show) rushed forward, "there is no time for your heavy brain to work. You shall have the young lady, dead or alive! Pardon me, Grace—no help for it. Now, thick-headed bumpkin, put one arm round her, and off at full gallop with your old screw! If you give her up I will hang you by the neck to the tail of your broken rattletrap!"

"Oh, Cripps, dear Cripps, I assure you on my honour," said Grace, as tossed up by her lover, she sat in the seat of Esther, "I have never been dead any more than you have. I can't tell you now; oh, drive on, drive, if you have a spark of manhood in you!"

A horse and horseman came out of the wood, about fifty yards behind them, and Grace would have fallen headlong, but for the half-reluctant arm of Cripps, as Dobbin with a jump (quite unknown in his very first assay of harness) set off full gallop over rut and rock, with a blow on his back, from the fist of Kit, like the tumble of a chimney-pot.

Then Christopher Sharp, after one sad look at Grace Oglander's flying figure, turned round to confront his father.

"What means all this?" cried the lawyer fiercely, being obliged to rein up his horse, unless he would trample Kit underfoot.

"It means this," answered his son, with firm gaze, and strong grasp of his bridle, "that you have made a great mistake, sir—that you must give up your plan altogether—that the poor young lady who has been so deceived——"

"Let go my bridle, will you? Am I to stop here—to be baffled by you? Idiot, let go my bridle!"

"Father, you shall not—for your own sake, you shall not! I may be an idiot, but I will not be a blackguard——"

"If by the time I have counted three, your hand is on my bridle, I will knock you down, and ride over you!"

Their eyes met in furious conflict of will, the elder man's glaring with the blaze of an opal, the younger one's steady with a deep brown glow.

"Strike me dead, if you choose!" said Kit, as his father raised his arm, with the loaded whip swinging, and counted, "One, two, three!"—then the crashing blow fell on the naked temple; and it was not needed twice.

Dashing the rowels into his horse (whose knees struck the boy in the chest as he fell, and hurled him among the bushes), the lawyer, without even looking round, rode madly after Zacchary. Dobbin had won a good start by this time, and was round the corner, doing great wonders for his time of life—tossing the tubs, and the baskets, and Grace, and even the sturdy Carrier, like fritters in a pan, while the cart leaped and plunged, and the spokes of the wheels went round too fast to be counted. Cripps tugged at Dobbin with all his might; but for the first time in his life, the old horse rebelled, and flung on at full speed.

"He knoweth best, miss; he knoweth best," cried Zacchary, while Grace clung to him; "he hath a divination of his own, if he dothn't kick the cart to tatters. But never would I turn tail on a single man—who is yon chap riding after us?"

"Oh, Cripps, it is that dreadful man," whispered Grace, with her teeth jerking into her tongue; "who has kept me in prison, and perhaps killed my father! Oh, Dobbin, sweet Dobbin, try one more gallop, and you shall have clover for ever!"

Poor Dobbin responded with his best endeavour; but, alas! his old feet, and his legs, and his breath were not as in the palmy days; and a long shambling trot, with a canter for a change, were the utmost he could compass. He wagged his grey tail, in brief expostulation, conveying that he could go no faster.

"Now for it," said Cripps, as the foe overhauled them. "I never was afeard of one man yet! and I don't mane to begin at this time of life. Missy, go down into the body of the cart. Her rideth aisily enough by now; and cover thee up with the bucking-baskets. Cripps will take thee to thy father, little un. Never fear, my deary!"

She obeyed him by jumping back into the cart—but as for hiding in a basket, Grace had a little too much of her father's spirit. The weather was so fine that no tilt was on; she sat on the rail there, and faced her bitter foe.

"That child is my ward!" shouted Mr. Sharp, riding up to the side of Cripps; while his eyes passed on from Grace's; "give her up to me this moment, fellow! I can take her by law of the land; and I will!"

"Liar Sharp," answered Master Cripps, desiring to address him professionally, "this here young lady belongeth to her father; and no man else shall have her. Any reasoning thou hast to come down with, us will hearken, as we goes along; if so be that thou keepest to a civil tongue. But high words never bate me down one penny; and never shall do so, while the Lord is with me."

"Hark you, Cripps," replied Mr. Sharp, putting his lips to the Carrier's ear; and whispering so that Grace could only guess at enormous sums of money (which sums began doubling at every breath)—"down on the nail, and no man the wiser!"

"But the devil a great deal the wiser," said the Carrier, grinning gently, as if he saw the power of evil fleeing away in discomfiture. "Now Liar Sharp hath outwitted hisself. What Liar would offer such a sight of money for what were his own by the lai of the land?"

"You cursed fool, will you die?" cried Sharp, drawing and cocking a great horse-pistol; "your blood be on your head—then yield!"

Cripps, with great presence of mind, made believe for a moment to surrender, till Mr. Sharp lowered his weapon,

and came up to stop the cart, and to take out Grace. In a moment, the Carrier, with a wonderful stroke, learned from long whip-wielding, fetched down his new lash on the eyeball of the young and ticklish horse of the lawyer. Mad with pain and rage, the horse stood up as straight as a soldier drilling, and balanced on the turn to fall back, break his spine, and crush his rider. Luke Sharp in his peril slipped off, and the cart-wheel comfortably crunched over his left foot. His pistol-bullet whizzed through a tall old tree. He stood on one foot, and swore horribly.

"Gee wugg, Dobbin," said Cripps, in a cheerful, but not by any means excited, vein; "us needn't gallop any more now, I reckon. The Liar hath put his foot in it. Plaize now, Miss Grace, come and sit to front again."

"We shall have you yet, you d——d old clod!" Mr. Sharp in his rage yelled after him; "oh, I'll pay you out for this devil's own trick! You aren't come to the Corner yet."

"Ho, ho!" shouted Cripps; "Liar Sharp, my duty to you! You don't catch me goin' to the Corner, sir, if some of the firm be awaitin' for me there."

With these words he gaily struck off to the right, through a by-lane, unknown, but just passable, where the sound of his wheels was no longer heard, and the mossy boughs closed over him. Grace clung to his arm; and glory and gladness filled the simple heart of Cripps.

Meanwhile Mr. Sharp, who had stuck to his bridle, limped to his horse, but could not mount. Then he drew forth the other pistol from the near holster, and cocked it and levelled it at Cripps; but thanks to brave Dobbin, now the distance was too great; and he kept the charge for nobler use.

CHAPTER LIII.

"THIS WILL DO."

Mr. Sharp's young horse, being highly fed and victualled for the long ride to London, and having been struck in the eye unjustly, and jarred in the brain by the roar of a pistol and whizz of a bullet between his pricked ears, was now in a state of mind which offered no fair field for pure reasoning process. A better-disposed horse was never foaled; and possibly none—setting Dobbin aside, as the premier and quite unapproachable type—who took a clearer view of his duties to the provider of corn, hay, and straw, and was more ready to face and undergo all proper responsibilities.

Therefore he cannot be fairly blamed, and not a pound should be deducted from his warrantable value, simply because he now did what any other young horse in the world would have felt to be right. He stared all around to ask what was coming next, and he tugged on the bridle, with his fore-feet out, as a leverage against injustice, and his hind-legs spread wide apart, like a merry-thought, ready to hop anywhere. At the same time he stared with great terrified eyes, now at the man who had involved him in these perils, and now at the darkening forest which might hold even worse in the background.

Mr. Sharp was not in the mood for coaxing, or any conciliation. His left foot was crushed so that he could only hop, and to put it to the ground was agony; his own son had turned against him; and a contemptible clod had outwitted him; disgrace, and ruin, and death stared at him; and here was his favourite horse a rebel! He fixed his fierce eyes on the eyes of the horse, and fairly quelled him with fury. The eyes of the horse shrank back, and turned, and trembled, and blinked, and pleaded softly, and then absolutely fawned. Being a very intelligent nag, he was as sure as any sound Christian of the personality of the devil—and, far worse than that, of his presence now before him.

He came round whinnying to his master's side, as gentle as a lamb, and as abject as a hang-dog; he allowed the lame lawyer to pick up his whip, and to lash him on his poor back, without a wince, and to lead him (when weary of that) to a stump, from which he was able to mount again.

"Thank you, you devil," cried Mr. Sharp, giving his good horse another swinging lash; "it is hopeless altogether to ride after the cart. That part of the play is played out and done with. The pious papa and the milk-and-water missy rush into each other's arms. And as for me—well, well, I have learned to make a horse obey me. Now, sir, if you please, we will join the ladies—gently, because of your master's foot."

He rode back quietly along the track over which he had chased the Carrier's cart; and his foot was now in such anguish that the whole of his wonderful self-command was needed to keep him silent. He set his hard lips, and his rigid nose was drawn as pale as parchment, and the fire of his eyes died into the dulness of universal rancour. No hard-hearted man can find his joy in the sweet soft works of nature, any more than the naked flint nurses flowers. The beauty of the young May twilight flowing through the woven wood, and harbouring, like a blue bloom, here and there, in bays of verdure; while upward all the great trees reared their domes once more in summer roofage, and stopped out the heavens; while in among them, finding refuge, birds (before the dark fell on them) filled the world with melody; and all the hushing rustle of the well-earned night was settling down—through all of these rode Mr. Sharp, and hated every one of them.

Presently his horse gave a little turn of head, but was too cowed down to shy again; and a tall woman, darkly clad, was standing by the timber track, with one hand up to catch his eyes.

"You here, Cinnaminta!" cried the lawyer with surprise. "I have no time now. What do you want with me?"

"I want you to see the work of your hand—your only child, dead by your own blow!"

Struck with cold horror, he could not speak. But he reeled in the saddle, with his hand on his heart, and stared at Cinnaminta.

"It is true," she said softly; "come here and see it. Even for you, Luke Sharp, I never could have wished a sight like this. You have ruined my life; you have made my people thieves; the loss of my children lies on you. But to see your only son murdered by yourself is too bad even for such as you."

"I never meant it—I never dreamed it—God is my witness that I never did. I thought his head was a great deal thicker."

Sneerer as he was, he meant no jest now. He simply spoke the earnest truth. In his passion he had struck men before, and knocked them down, with no great harm; he forgot his own fury in this one blow, and the weight of his heavily-loaded whip.

"If you cannot believe," she answered sternly, supposing him to be jeering still, "you had better come here. He was a kind, good lad, good to me, and to my last child. I have made him look very nice. Will you come? Or will you go and tell his mother?"

Luke Sharp looked at her in the same sort of way in which many of his victims had looked at him. Then he touched his horse gently, having had too much of rage, and allowed him to take his own choice of way.

The poor horse, having had a very bad time of it, made the most of this privilege. Setting an example to mankind (whose first thought is not sure to be of home) the poor fellow pointed the white star on his forehead towards his

distant stable. Oxford was many a bad mile away, but his heart was set upon being there. Sleepily therefore he jogged along, having never known such a day of it.

While he thought of his oat-sieve sweetly, and nice little nibbles at his clover hay, and the comfortable soothing of his creased places by a man who would sing a tune to him, his rider was in a very different case, without one hope to turn to.

The rising of the moon to assuage the earth of all the long sun fever, the spread of dewy light, and quivering of the nerves of shadow, and then the soft, unfeatured beauty of the dim tranquillity, coming over Luke Sharp's road, or flitting on his face, what difference could they make to its white despair? He hated light, he loathed the shade, he scorned the meekness of the dapple, and he cursed the darkness.

Out of sight of the road, and yet within a level course of it, there lay, to his knowledge, a deep, and quiet, and seldom-troubled forest-pool. This had long been in his mind, and coming to the footpath now, he drew his bridle towards it.

The moon was here fenced out by trees, and thickets of blackthorn, and ivy hanging like a funeral pall. Except that here at the lip of darkness, one broad beam of light stole in, and shivered on gray boles of willow, and quivered on black lustrous smoothness of contemptuous water.

To the verge of this water Luke Sharp rode, with his horse prepared for anything. He swept with his keen eyes all the length of liquid darkness, ebbing into blackness in the distance. And he spoke his last words—"This will do."

Then he drove his horse into the margin of the pool, till the water was up to the girths, and the broad beams of the moon shone over them. Here he drew both feet from the stirrup-irons, and sat on his saddle sideways, sluicing his crushed and burning foot, and watching the water drip from it. And then he carefully pulled from the holster the pistol that still was loaded, took care that the flint and the priming were right, and turning his horse that he might escape, while the man fell into deep water, steadfastly gazed at the moon, and laid the muzzle to his temple, justly careful that it should be the temple, and the vein which tallied with that upon which he had struck his son.

A blaze lit up the forest-pool, and a roar shook the pall of ivy; a heavy plash added to the treasures of the deep, and a little flotilla of white stuff began to sail about on the black water, in the commotion made by man and horse. When Mr. Sharp was an office-boy, his name had been "Little Big-brains."

CHAPTER LIV.

CRIPPS BRINGS HOME THE CROWN.

Although the solid Cripps might now be supposed by other people to have baffled all his enemies, in his own mind there was no sense of triumph, but much of wonder. The first thing he did when all danger was past, and Dobbin was pedalling his old tune—"three-happence and tuppence; three-happence and tuppence; a good horse knows what his shoes are worth"—was to tie up Gracie in a pair of sacks. He thumped them well on the foot-board first, to shake all the mealiness out of them; and then, with permission, he spread one over the delicate shoulders, and the other in front, across the trembling heart and throat. Then, by some hereditary art, he fastened them together, so that the night air could not creep between.

"Cripps, you are too good," said Grace; "if I could only tell you half the times that I have thought of you; and once when I saw a sack of yours——"

"Lor', miss, the very one as I have missed! Had un got a red cross, thick to one side—the Lord only knows what a fool I be, to carry on with such rum-tums now; however I'll have hold of he—and zummat more, ere I be done with it." Here the Carrier rubbed his mouth on his sleeve, as he always did to stop himself. He was not going to publish the family disgrace till he had avenged it. "But now, miss, not another word you say. Inside of them sacks you go to sleep; the Lord knows you want it dearly; and fall away you can't nohow. Scratched you be to that extreme in getting out of Satan's den, that tallow candles dropped in water is what I must see to. None on 'em knows it, no, not one on 'em. Man or horse, it cometh all the same. It taketh a man to do it, though."

"I should like to see a horse do it," said Grace; and her sleepy smile passed into sleep. Eager as she was to be in her father's arms, the excitement, and the exertion, and the unwonted shaking, and passage through the air, began to tell their usual tale.

This was the very thing the crafty Carrier longed to bring about. It left him time to consider how to meet two difficulties. The first was to get her through Beckley without any uproar of the natives; the second, to place her in her father's arms without dangerous emotion. The former point he compassed well, by taking advantage of the many ins and outs of the leisurely lanes of Beckley, so that he drew up at the back door of the Barton, without a single sapient villager being one bit the wiser.

Now, if he only had his sister with him, the second point might have been better managed; because he would have sent her on in front, to treat with Mrs. Hookham, and employ all the feminine skill supplied by quickness, sympathy, and invention. As it was, he must do the best he could; and his greatest difficulty was with Grace herself.

The young lady by this time was wide awake, and stirred with such violent throbbings of heart, at the view of divine and desirable Beckley sleeping in the moonlight, and at the breath of her own home-door, and haunt of her darling father's steps, that Cripps had to hold her down by her sacks, and wished that he could strap her so. "Do 'ee zit still, miss; do 'ee zit still," he kept on saying, till he was afraid of being rude.

"You are a tyrant, Cripps; a perfect tyrant! Because you have picked me up, and been so good, have you any right to keep me from my father?"

"Them rasonings," said Cripps in a decided tone, "is good; but comes to nothing. Either you do as I begs of you, missy, or I turns Dobbin's head, and back you go. It is for the Squire's sake I spake so harsh to 'ee. Supposin' you was to kill him, missy, what would you say arterwards?"

"Oh, is he so dreadfully ill as that? I will do everything exactly as you tell me."

"Then get down very softly, miss, and run and hide in that old doorway, quite out of the moonshine, and stay there till I come to fetch 'ee."

Still covered with the sacks, the maiden did as she was told; while the Carrier, with ungainly skill, and needless cautions to his horse (who stood like a rock), descended. Then he walked into the Squire's kitchen, with whip in hand, as usual, as if he were come to deliver goods.

The fat cook now was sitting calmly by the fire meditating. To her the time of year made no difference, except for the time that meat must hang, and the recollection of what was in its prime, and the consideration of the draught required, and the shutting of the sun out when he spoiled the fire. In the fire of young days, when herself quite raw, this admirable cook had been "done brown" by a handsome young Methodist preacher. Before she understood what a basting-ladle is, her head was set spinning by his tongue and eyes; he had three wives already, but he put her on the list, took all her money out of her, and went another circuit. The poor girl spent about a year in crying, and then she returned to the Church of England, buried her baby, and became a cook. Without being soured by any evil, she now had long experience, and a ripe style of twirling her thumbs upon her apron.

"Plaize, Mrs. Cook," began Zacchary, entering under official privilege, and trying to look full of business, "do 'ee know where to lay hand on Mother Hookham? A vallyble piece of goods I has to deliver, and must have good recate for un."

"But lor', Master Cripps, now, whatever be about? It ain't one of your Hoxford days; and us never sends out no washing!"

"You've a-knowed me a long time now, ain't you, Mrs. Cook? Did you ever know me for to play trickum-trully?"

"Never have you done that to my knowledge," the good woman answered steadfastly, though pained in her heart by the thought of one who had; "Master Cripps is known to be the breadth of his own word."

"Then, my good soul, will 'ee fetch down Mother Hookham? It bain't for the flourishes, the Lord A'mighty knows. I haven't got the governing of them little scrawls myself nor the seasoning amongst them as appertains to you. Bootifully you could a' done it, Mrs. Cook; but the directions here is so particular! For a job of this sort, you are twenty years too young."

"Oh, Master Cripps," cried the cook, who made a star, like that upon a pie, for her manual sign; "well you know that the ruin of my days has been trust in eddication. Standing outside of it, I was a-took in, and afore there come any pen or pencil, £320 was gone. Not for a moment do I blame the Word of God, only them as blasphemeth it. But the whole of my innard parts is turned against a papper, even on a pie-crust."

"Don't 'ee give way now, dear heart alive! Many a time have you told me, and every time I feels the more for 'ee. Quite a young 'ooman you be still in a way, and a treasure for a young man with a whame in his throat, and half-a-guinea every week you might aim for roasting dinner-parties. But do 'ee now go, and fetch Mother Hookham down."

"The old 'ooman isn't in the house, Master Cripps. She hath so many things to mind that the wonder is how she can ever go through of them. A heavy weight she hath taken off my shoulders, ever since here she come, in virtue of her tongue. But her darter can be had to put a flour to a'most anything if my signs isn't grand enough to go into your hat, Master Cripps."

"Now, my dear good soul," replied the Carrier, standing back and looking at her, "you be taking of everything in a crooked way, you be. I have a little thing to see to—nort to say of kitchen in it, and some sort of style pecooliar. Requaireth pecooliar management, I do assure you, and no harm. Will 'ee plaize to hearken to me now? Such as I have to say—not much."

The brave cook answered this appeal by running to fetch Mary Hookham; in everything that now she did, even with such a man as Cripps, the remembrance of vile deceit made her look out for a witness. Mary came down with a bounce as if she had never been near her looking-glass, but was born with her ribbons and colour to match. And her eyes shone fresh at the sight of Master Cripps.

"How well you be looking, my dear, for sure!" said the Carrier, having (as a soldier has) his admiration of a pretty girl quickened by the sound of firearms. "And I be come to make 'ee look still better."

Mary cast a glance at the cook, as if she thought her one too many. Cripps must be going to declare his mind at last; and Mary had such faith in him, that she required no witness.

"Who do 'ee think I have brought 'ee back?" asked Zacchary, meaning to be very quiet, but speaking so loud in his pride, that Mary, with a pale face, ran and shut the door upon the steps leading to her master's quarters. Then she came back more at leisure, and put her elbows to her sides, and looked at Master Cripps, as if she had never meant to think of him for herself. And this made Cripps, who had been exulting at her first proceedings, put down his whip and wonder.

"Not Miss Grace!" cried Mary; "surely never our Miss Grace!"

"What a intellect that young woman hath!" said Cripps aloud, reflecting; "a'most too much, I be verily afeared."

"Oh no, Master Cripps, not at all too much for any one as entereth into it, with a household feeling. But were I right? Oh, Master Cripps, were I right?"

"Mary Hookham," said Cripps, coming over, and laying his hand on her shoulder (as he used to do when she was a little wench, and made him a curtsy with a glass of ale, even then admiring him), "Mary, you were right, as I never could believe any would have the quickness. Cripps hath a-brought home to this old ancient mansion the very most vallyble case of goods as ever were inside it. Better than the crown as the young Queen hath, for ten months now, preparing."

"Alive?" asked Mary, shrinking back towards the fire, for his metaphor might mean coffins.

"Now, there you go down again—there you go down," answered Cripps, who enjoyed the situation, and desired to make the most of it. "I thought you was all intellect—but better perhaps without too much. Put it to yourself now, Mary, whether I should look like this, if I had only brought the remainses."

"Oh, where is her? Where is her? Wherever can her be?" cried Mary, forgetting all her fine education, in strong vernacular excitement.

"Her be where I knows to find her again," answered Zacchary, with a steadfast face. It was not for any one to run in and strike a light betwixt him and his own work. "Her might be to Abingdon, or to Banbury. Proper time come, I can vetch her forrard."

"Oh, I thought you had got her in the house, Master Cripps. How disappointing you do grow, to be sure! I suppose it is the way of all men."

Mary shed a tear, and Master Cripps (having been tried by sundry women) went closer, to be sure of it. He was pleased at the sign, but he went on with his business.

"You desarve to know everything. Now, can 'ee shut the doors, without a chance of anybody breaking in?"

Mary and the cook, with a glance at one another, fastened all the doors of the large low kitchen, except the one leading to the lane itself.

"You bide just as you be," said Cripps, "and I'll show 'ee something worth looking at."

He ran to the place where Grace was hiding, in the chill and the heat of impatience, and he took the coarse sacks from her shoulders, as if her sackcloth time was done at last. Then he led her to the warmth and light, and she hung behind afraid of them. That strange, but not uncommon shyness of one's own familiar home—when long unseen—came over her; and she felt, for the moment, almost afraid of her own beloved father. But Cripps made her come, and both Mary Hookham and the fat cook cried, "Oh my! My good!" and ran up and kissed her, and held her hands; while she stood pale and mute, with large blue eyes brimful of tears, and lips that wavered between smile and sob.

"Does he—does he know about me?" she managed to say to Cripps, while she glanced at the door leading up to her father's room.

"Not he! Lord bless you, my dear," said Cripps, "it taketh 'em all half an hour apiece to believe as you ever be alive, miss."

"It would never take my father two minutes," answered Grace; "he will be a great deal too glad of it to doubt."

"You promised to bide by my diraxions," the Carrier cried reproachfully; "if 'ee don't, I 'on't answer for nort of it. Now sit you down, miss, by back-kitchen door, to come or go either way, according as is ordered. Now, Mary, plaize to go, and say, that Cripps hath come to see his Worship about a little mistake he hath made."

Mr. Oglander never refused to see any who came to visit him. His simple, straightforward mind compelled him to go through with everything as it turned up, whether it were of his own business, or any other person's. Therefore he said, "Show Cripps in here."

Cripps was in no hurry to be shown in. He felt that he had a ticklish job to carry through, and he might drop the handles if himself were touched amiss. And he thought that he could get on much better with a clever woman there to help him.

"Plaize, your Worship," he began, coming in, with his finger to his forelock, and his stiff knee sticking out. "Don't 'ee run away now, Mary, that's a dear; you knows all the way-bills; and his Worship will allow of you."

"Why, Cripps," Mr. Oglander exclaimed, "you are making a very great fuss to-night; and you look as if you had been run over. Even if it is half-a-crown, Cripps, you are come to prove against me—put it down. I will not dispute it. I know that you would rather wrong yourself than me." The old gentleman was tired, and he did not want to talk.

"In coorse, in coorse," said Zacchary (as if every man preferred to wrong himself), "but the point is a different thing; and, Mary, speak up, and say you know it is."

"Yes, sir, I do assure you now," said Mary, "the point is altogether quite a different sort of thing."

"Then why can't you come to it?" cried the Squire; "is it that you want to marry one another?"

Mary's face blushed to a fine young colour; and Cripps made a nod at her, as if he meant to think of it, but must leave that for another evening.

"I never could abide such stuff," muttered Mary, "as if all the world was a-made of wives and husbands!"

The Squire sat calmly with his head upon his hand, and his white hair glistening in the lamplight, as he gazed from one to the other, with a smile of melancholy amusement. It would be a great discomfort to him to lose Mary Hookham's services; and he thought it a little unkind of her to leave him in this sad loneliness; but he had not lived threescore years and ten without knowing what the way of the world is. Therefore, if Cripps had made up his mind—as the women had long been declaring that he as a man was bound to do—Mr. Oglander would be the last to complain, or say a word to damp them. The Carrier himself had some idea that such was the working of the Squire's mind.

"Now, your Worship," he said, putting Mary away to a place where she could use her handkerchief, "will 'ee plaize to hearken, without your own opinion before hast heard what there be to say? Nayther of us drameth of doing you the wrong to take away Mary, while you be wanting of her. You ought to have knowed us better, Squire. And as for poor Mary, I ain't said a word to back up her hopes of a-having me yet. Now, Miss Mary, have I?"

"No, that you never haven't, Master Cripps! And it may come too late; if it ever do come."

"Well, well," continued Mr. Cripps, without much terror at the way she turned her back; "railly, your Worship, it was you who throwed us out. Reckoning of my times is a hard thing for me; and a hundred and four times a year is too much for the discretion of a horse a'most."

"Very well, Cripps," said the Squire in despair; "every one knows that you must have your time. Not a word will I speak again, until I have your leave."

"I calls it onhandsome of your Worship to say that; being so contrary of my best karaksteristicks. Your Worship maneth all things for the best, I am persuaded; but speaking thus you drives me into such a prespiration, the same as used to be a sweat when I was young and forced to it. Now, doth your Worship know that all things cometh in a round, like a sound cart-wheel, to all such folks as trusts the Lord?"

"I know that you have such a theory, Cripps. You beat the whole village in theology."

"And the learned scholar in Oxford, your Worship; he were quite doubled up about the tribe of Levi. But for all of their stuff, the Lord still goeth on, making His rounds to His own right time; and now His time hath come for you, Squire."

"Do try to speak out, Cripps; and tell me what excites you so."

"Mary, his Worship is beginning to look white. Fetch in the pepper-castor, and the gallon of vinegar as I delivered last Wednesday."

"No, Mary, no. I want nothing of the kind. Tell him—beg him—just to speak out what he means."

"Cripps—Master Cripps, now," cried Mary in a tremble; "you be going too far, and then stopping of a heap like. His Worship ought to be let into the whole of it gradooal—gradooal—gradooal."

"Can 'ee trust in the word of the Lord, your Worship?" asked Cripps, advancing bravely. "Can 'ee do that now, without no disrespect to 'ee?"

"In two minutes more you'll drive me mad, between you!" the old Squire shouted, as he rose and spread his arms. "In the name of God, what is it? Is it of my daughter?"

"Yes, yes, father dearest! who else could it be in the whole of the world?" a clear voice cried, as a timid form grew clear. "They would go on all the night; but I could not wait a moment. Daddy, I am sure that you won't be frightened. You can't have too much of your own Grace, can you? Don't let it go to your heart, my darling. Grace will rub it for you. There, let me put my head just as I used, and then you will be certain, won't you?"

She laid her head upon her father's breast, while Mary caught hold of the Carrier's sleeve, and led him away to the passage. Then the old man's weak and trembling fingers strayed among his daughter's hair, and he could not speak, or smile, or weep.

"There, you will be better directly, darling," she whispered, looking up with streaming eyes, as she felt him tremble exceedingly, and her quick hands eased him of the little brooch (containing her mother's hair and her own), which fastened his quivering shirt-frill; "you wanted me to come back, didn't you? But not in such a hurry, darling—not in such a hurry. Father dear, why ever don't you kiss me?"

"If you did not run away, dear—say you did not run away."

"Daddy, you cannot be so ill-minded; so very wicked to your only child."

The old man took his child's hand in his own, and soothed her down, and drew her down, until they were kneeling at the table side by side; then they put up their hands to thank God for one another, and did it not with lips, but with heart and soul.

CHAPTER LV.

SMITH TO THE RESCUE.

Now, in the whole of Beckley village, scarcely a soul under eighty years of age (unless it were of some child under eight, tucked up in rosy slumber) failed to discuss within half an hour the "miracle" about Grace Oglander. That word was first set afoot in the parish by a man of settled habits, and therefore of sure authority. For Thomas Kale had been put upon a horse, when the Carrier's leg would not go up, and ordered to ride for his life to tell Squire Overshute all that was come to pass.

This Kale was a man of large wondering power, gifted moreover with a faith in ghosts, which often detracted from his comfort. He had seen his young mistress in a half-light only, when the household was called to look at her; and now he was ordered to a house where a lady had died not more than a few weeks back. Between Beckley Barton and Shotover Grange, there are two places known to be haunted. The necessity for priming Thomas, before he started, had occurred unluckily to himself alone. Already, as he rode out of the yard, a gatepost and a tree shone spectrally. He felt the necessity for priming himself; and, prudent man as he was, he saw no mischief in affording it. Squire Overshute could not give him less than a guinea for his tidings. Therefore (though pledged to the utmost not to speak) he took the very turn which the prudent Cripps had shunned; and pulling up at the window of the Dusty Anvil, gave a shout for hot gin-and-water.

The Anvil was ringing with hilarity that night, and its dust, if heavy sprinkling could ally it, was subsiding. For Beckley having played a cricket-match with Islip, and beaten the dalesmen by ten wickets—as needs must be with five Crippses holding willow—an equally invincible resolve arose to out-eat the losers at the supper. Islip, defeated but not disgraced, was well represented both in flesh and cash; and as Mr. Kale called for his modest glass, a generous feeling awoke in the breasts of several young men to pay for it. For the wickets had been pitched in a meadow of the Squire's, where Kale had plied scythe and roller.

Thomas Kale saw that it would be a most uncandid and illiberal act to open his mouth for a negative only. He firmly restricted good feeling, however, to three good bumpers, and a bottomer; pledging himself, on compulsion, to call on his way back and manage the duplicate. But his heart was so good, that before he rode off, with a flout at all ghosts and goblins, he took an old crony by the name upon his smock, and told him where to go for a "miracle."

Now, who should this be but old Daddy Wakeling, that ancient and valued friend of Cripps, and one of the best men in Elsfield parish? Daddy was forced to spend much of his time outside his own parish, for the best of reasons—and a melancholy one—there was no public-house inside of it. Here he was now, with his fine white locks and patriarchal countenance, propounding a test to our finest qualities, a touchstone of one's lofty confidence or low cynicism—whether the subject should now be pronounced more venerable, or more tipsy.

But old Daddy Wakeling would be the very last (when getting near the middle of his third gallon) to conceal from his friends any gratifying news; and ere ever Kale's horse's heels turned the corner, Daddy's wise old lips were wagging into the ear of a crony. In less than two minutes, Phil Hiss had got the news; a council was held in the long-room of the inn; and a march upon the Squire's house, and a serenade by every one who could scrape, blow, twang, or halloa, was the resolution of a moment.

In the thick of the rout, as with good intent they approached the old-fashioned coach-doors (which led to the front where they meant to be musical), a short square fellow slipped out of the crowd, and without observation went his way. His way was to a little hut of a stable, fastened only with a prong outside, but holding a nice young horse, who had finished his supper, but was not sleepy. He neighed as John Smith came in, for he felt quite inclined for a little exercise, and he knew the value of the saying he had heard—"After supper, trot a mile." Numbers Cripps was his owner, in that shameful age of ownership—which soon will be abolished, now that its prime key is gone, the key of holy wedlock—and the butcher had offered Mr. Smith a ride, whenever he should happen to want one.

The night was well up in the sky, and the track of summer daylight star-swept; the dim remembrance of a brighter hour (that hangs round a tree, like a halo) was gone; and only little twinkles shone through bays of leafage against the tidal power of the moon; and the long immeasurable stretch of silence spread faint avenues of fear.

Mr. John Smith was a very brave man. Imagination never stirred the corpulence of his comfort. What he either saw or sifted out by his own process, that he believed; and very little else. And so he rode, through light and shade, and the grain of the air which is neither; while the forest grew deeper with phantasm, and the depth of night made way for him.

Suddenly even he was startled. In a dark narrow place, where he kept the track, and stuck his heels under his horse's belly (for fear of being taken sideways), something dashed by him, with a pant and roar, and fire flying out of it. Mr. Smith blessed his stars that he was not rolled over, as he very well might have been; for that which flew by him, like a streak of meteor, was a strong horse frantic.

Smith turned round in his saddle, and stared; but the runaway sped the faster, as if he were rushing away from the forest, with a pack of wolves behind him. The stirrups of his empty saddle struck fire, clashing under him, and his swift flight scarcely left a sound of breath or hoof to follow him.

"The devil is after him!" said John Smith; "I never saw a horse in such a state of mind. I may as well mark the spot where he came out. He has left, as sure as I sit here, a tale to be told, in the background."

Without dismounting, he broke off a branch of young white poplar, and cast it so that by daylight he could find it; and then, with a very uneasy mind, he rode on, to trace the rest of it. He was not by any means in Luke Sharp's pay (as one or two persons had suspected), neither was he even of his privy council; and yet he was bound hand and foot to him; partly by fealty of a conquered mind, and partly by sense of his brother Joe's complicity and subservience. John Smith, in his own way, was an honourable man; and money was no bribe to him.

With quickened alarm, he rode on at all speed towards the cottage of the swineherd. Never in any way had he dealt with the sylvan schemes of Mr. Sharp, or even from a distance watched them. It was long ere he had any clear suspicions—for his tall brother kept miles away from him—and in seeking the remains of Grace under the snowdrift, he wrought out his duty with blind honesty.

John Smith's nerves were of iron, and even the riderless horse had not scattered them; but though he rode on bravely still, a cloud of gloom fell over him. It would make a sad difference to his life if anything had happened to Mr. Sharp (for Smith had invested a little money under the lawyer's guidance), and knowing Luke Sharp as he did, he feared that evil had befallen him.

Hence, with dark misgiving, and the set resolve to face it, he lashed his horse on at a perilous rate, through the wattled ways of moonlight. The glance and the glimpse of light and shade flew past him, like a cataract, till suddenly even he was scared by the sound of his name in a sad clear voice. He pulled up his horse, and laid his hand on the butt of a pistol beneath his cape, till a woman came forth into the light, and said—

"I was sure you would come; but too late—it is too late!"

"Cinnaminta, show me," he answered very softly, knowing by her gesture that the mischief was at hand. As soon as he was off his horse, and had made him fast by the bridle, she led him round some shadowy corners into a little dingle. This had no great trees to crowd it; and though it lay below the level of the wood around, the moon was high enough now to throw a broad gangway of light along it. The sides were fringed or jagged with darkness, cumbrous tree or mantled ivy jutting forth black elbows; but in the middle lay and spread fair sward of dewy emblements, swept with brightness, and garnished for a Whitsun dance of fairies.

But now, instead of skip and music, sigh and sob and wailing noises of the human heart were heard. A fine young form, of the Oxford build, lay heavily girt with molehills, enfolded vainly in a velvet cloak, and vainly on every side adjured to open its eyes and come back again. Kit was not at all the fellow thus to be addressed in vain—if he only could have heard the living voices challenge him. His love of sport had been love of pluck, as it generally is with Englishmen; and all his dogs, of different sizes, must have taught him something. His mother now was pulling at him, in a storm of fear and hope. She felt that he could not be dead, because it would be so outrageous; and yet her feeble heart was fearful that such things had been before. Happily for herself, she knew not what had happened to him; but took it for an accident of the woods; for the gipsy-woman, who alone had seen it, had been too kind to tell the truth.

"Oh, Kit, Kit! now only look!" the poor fond mother was going on; "only lift one eyelid, darling; only move one little hand"—his hands were of very considerable size—"or do anything, anything you like, dear, just to show that you are coming back, back to your own mother! Kit—oh, my Kit, my own and ever only Kit—or Christopher, if you like it better, darling—here have I been for whole hours and hours, and not one word will you say to me! If ever I laughed at you, Kit, in my life, you must have felt how proud I was. There is not anything in all the world, or anybody to come near you, Kit. Only come—only be near me, instead of breaking all my heart like this!"

Worn out with misery, she fell back; and Cinnaminta, with a short quick sigh, knelt down on the turf, and supported her.

"Four times have I had to bear it, and every time worse than the time before," she said in her soft clear tone to herself; but only to remind herself of the tenderness she was sure to show. "And this was her only one, and grown up!"

Her face (still beautiful and lovely with the sad love in her eyes, the memory of the time when still there was somebody to live for) shone in the gentle light, now poured abundantly on all of them. Of all who had lived, and loved, and suffered, and now made shadows in the moonshine, not one had been down to the holy depths of sorrow as this woman had.

"Catch un up now," cried John Smith, who never knew how his ideas were timed; "catch un up by the heels, one of 'ee, while I take un by the head. This here baistly hole be enow to fetch the ghost of his life out. He hath got life in him. Don't tell me! His ears be like a shell; and no dead man's is. Rap on the nob! Lor' bless my heart, I'd sooner have fifty, than one on the basket. What, all on you afeard to heckle him?"

"Oh no, sir, oh no, sir," cried poor Mrs. Sharp, as Tickuss, and another man, fell away; "I am not very strong, but I can help my child."

"Ma'am, you are a lady!" said John Smith, that being his very highest crown of praise; "but as for you—a d—d set of cowards—go to the devil, all of you! Now, ma'am, I will not trouble you, except to follow after us. Cinny will clear the way in front; it cometh more natural to her. And you, ma'am, shall follow me as you please; and sorry I am not to help you. A little shaking will do him a world of good."

He was taking up Kit, with a well-adjusted balance, while he spoke to her; and he wasted his breath in nothing, except in telling her to follow him. As the hind comes after the poor slain fawn, or the cow runs after the netted cart, where the white face of her calf weeps out, even so Mrs. Sharp of her dress thought nothing—though cut up, like a carrot, in the latest London style, and trimmed with almost every flower nature never saw—anyhow, after Kit she went, and knew not light from darkness.

Mr. Smith sturdily managed to get on; he was thickly built, and had well-set reins; and though poor Kit was no feather-weight, his bearer did not flag with him. Then setting the body of the lad on a mound, where the moon shone clearly upon his face, and the night air fanned him quietly, John Smith very calmly pulled out a bright weapon, and flourished it, and felt the edge.

"Oh no, sir! Oh pray, sir!" cried Mrs. Sharp, falling on her knees, and enclasping her poor boy.

"Cinny, just lead her behind that bush. 'Tis either death, or blood, with him."

"Oh no, I never could bear to be out of sight. If it really must be done, I will not shriek. I will not even sigh. Only let me stay by his side!"

John Smith signed to his sister-in-law, who took the mother's trembling hands, and turned her away for a moment.

"Now fetch cold water. That vein must not be allowed to bleed too long, ma'am. 'Tis a ticklish one to manage for a surgeon even; and at present it is sulky. But it only wants a little air, and just the least little touch again. If you could just manage to go and say your prayers, ma'am, we could get on a long sight better."

"Oh, I never thought of that. How sinful of me! Oh, kind good man, I implore of you—"

"Not of me, ma'am. Pray to God in heaven, unless you wish to see me run away. And if I do, he slips right off the hooks."

She turned away, with her weak hands clasped; but whether she prayed or not, never could she tell. But one thing she bore in mind, as long as soul abode with it, and that was the leap of her heart when Smith shouted in a good loud voice, "All right!"

CHAPTER LVI.

FATAL ACCIDENT TO THE CARRIER.

Now, that little maid who with such strength, alike of mind and body, had opened the paternal gate, and then bewailed her prowess, happened to be the especial favourite of her good Aunt Esther. Therefore no sooner had the Carrier begun his eventful homeward course, as heretofore related, than Etty, who loved a forest walk and felt rather dull without Zacchary, took Peggy's fat red hand, and, after a good tea with Susannah, set forth for an evening stroll, to gather flowers and hear the birds sing.

Almost before they had got well into the wooded places, Peggy shrank away from a black timber shed, partly overhung by trees.

"Peggy not go there, Aunt Etty," she said; "goose in there, a great white goose!"

"A ghost, you little goose?" answered Esther, laughing, for still there was good sunset. "Come and show me; I want to see a ghost."

"No, no, no!" cried the child, pulling backward, and struggling as hard as she had struggled with the gate; "Peggy see a white goose in a black hole there, all day."

"Then, Peggy, stop here while I go and look. You won't be afraid to do that, will you?"

Running bravely up to the hole in the boards, Esther saw, to her great amazement, the form, perhaps the corpse, of a man, stretched at length on the ground inside. It lay too much in the dark for the face to be seen, and the dress was so swaddled with netting, and earthy, that little could be made of it. A torn strip of cambric, that once had been white, lay partly on the body and partly on the board. Esther caught it up; she remembered having ironed something of this shape for somebody once, who was going to be examined. She knew where to look for the mark, and there she saw in small letters—"T. Hardenow."

Surprised as she was, she did not lose her wits or courage, as she used to do. She ran to the door of the shed, tried the padlock, and finding it fastened (as she had feared), made haste to the grain-house, and seized a bunch of keys. Not one of them truly was born with the lock, but one was soon found to serve the turn; then Esther pushed back the creaking door, and timidly gazed round the shadowy shed. She was quite alone now, for her little niece, with short sobs of terror, had set off for home.

In the light admitted by the open door, young Esther descried a poor miserable thing, helpless, still as a log, and senseless, yet to her faithful heart the idol of all adoration. Gently, step by step, she stole to the prostrate form, and knelt down softly, and reverently touched it. She feared to seem to take advantage of a helpless moment; and yet a keen joy, mixed with terror, shone in the eagerness of her eyes. "He is alive, I am sure of that," she said to herself, as she pulled forth a pair of strong scissors which she always carried; "he is alive, but very, very nearly dead. What wretches can have treated him like this?"

In two minutes, Hardenow was free from every cord and throng of bondage; his lax arms fell at his sides; his legs (that had saved his life by kicking) slowly sank back to their native angles, like a lobster's claw untied, and his small and dismally empty stomach quivered almost invisibly.

"Oh, he is starving, or downright starved!" cried Esther, watching his white lips, which trembled with some glad memory of suction, and then stiffened again to some Anglican dream. "After all, I have blamed other folk quite amiss. He hath corded himself away from his victuals to give way to his noble principles. But how could he lock himself in? The Lord must have sent a bad angel to tempt him, and then to turn the key on him."

Before she had finished this reasoning process, the girl was half-way towards the cot of Tickuss, her heart outweighing her mind, according to all true feminine proportions. She ran in swiftly upon Susannah, sitting in the dusky kitchen and pondering over a very slow fire the cookery of the children's supper. These good young children never failed to go to see the pigs fed, and down at the styes they all were at this moment, with no victuals come, and the pigs all squeaking, because the pig-master was not at home.

This was most sad, and the children felt it; nevertheless they bore it, knowing that their own pot was warming. But they too might have squeaked, if they had known that out of their own pot Aunt Etty was stealing half the meat and all the little cobs of jelly. It was as fine a pot of stuff as ever Susannah Cripps had made, for she did not hold at all with fattening the pigs, and starving her own children; and she argued most justly, while Esther all the while was ladling all the virtue out.

Etty had never been known to do anything violent or high-handed; yet now, without entering into even the very shortest train of reasoning, away she went swifter than any train, bearing in her right hand the best dresser-jug (filled with the children's tidbits of nurture), and in her left hand flourishing Susannah's own darling silver wedding-spoon. Mrs. Leviticus longed to rush in chase of her; but ere her slowly startled nerves could send the necessary tingle to her ruminating knees, the girl was out of sight, and for her vestige lingered naught but a very provoking smell of soup.

Now, in so advanced a stage of the world's existence (and of this narrative) is it needful, judicious, or even becoming to describe, spoonful by spoonful, however grateful, delicious, and absorbing, the process of administering and

receiving soup? To "give and take" is said, by people of large experience in life, to be about the latest and most consummate lesson of humanity; coming even after that extreme of wisdom which teaches us to "grin and bear it." But in the present trifling instance, two young people very soon began to be comparatively at home with the subject. The opening of the eyes, in all countries and creatures, is done a good deal later than the opening of the mouth; the latter being the essential, the former quite a fortuitous proceeding.

After six spoonfuls, as counted by Esther, Hardenow opened both his eyes; after two or three more, he knew where he was; and when he had swallowed a dozen and a bonus, scarcely any of his wits were wanting. Still Esther, for fear of a relapse, went on; though her hand trembled dreadfully when he sat up, with his poor bones creaking sadly, and tried to be steady upon her arm, but was overbalanced by his weight of brain. Instead of shrieking, or screaming, she took advantage of this opportunity, and his bony chin dropping afforded the finest opening towards his interior.

To put it briefly, he quite came round, and after twenty spoonfuls vowed—with the conscience rushing for the moment into the arms of common sense—that never would he fast again. And after thirty were absorbed and beginning to assimilate, he gazed at Esther's smiling eyes, and saw the clearest and truest solution of his "postulates on celibacy." Esther dropped her eyes in terror, and made him drink the dregs and bottom, with a convert's zealous gulp. And as it happened, this was wise.

If any malignant persons charge him with having sold, for a mess of pottage, man's noblest birthright, celibacy, let every such person be corded up, at the longest possible date after breakfast, and the shortest before dinner—or rather, alas! before dinner-time—let him stay corded, and rolling about in a hog-house (as long as roll he can, which never would approach Mr. Hardenow's cycle); let him, throughout this whole period, instead of eating, expect to be eaten; then with a wolf in his stomach (if he has one) let him lose his wits (if he has any), and then let a lovely girl come and free him, and feed him, and cry over him, and regard him—with his clothes at their very worst, and cakes of dirt in his eyes and mouth—as the imperial Jove in some Dictæan cavern dormant; and then, as the light and the life flow back, and the power of his heart awakes, let there manifestly accrue thereto a better, gentler, and sweeter heart, timid even of its own pulse, and ashamed of its own veracity—and then if he takes all this unmoved, why, let him be corded up again, and nobody come to deliver him.

Esther only smiled and wept at her patient's ardent words and impassioned gratitude. She knew that between them was a great gulf fixed, and that the leap across it seldom has a happy landing; and when poor Hardenow fell back, in the weak reaction of a heart more fit for pain than passion, she knelt at his side, and nursed and cheered him, less with the air of a courted maiden than of a careful handmaid. In the end, however, this feeling (like most of those which are adverse to our wishes) was prevailed upon to subside, and Esther, although of the least revolutionary and longest-established stock in England—that of the genuine Crippses, whose name, originally no doubt "Chrysippus," indicates the possession of a golden horse—Etty Cripps, finding that the heart of her adored one had, in Splinters' opinion, a perilous fissure, requiring change of climate, consented at last (having no house of her own) to come down from the tilt, and go to Africa.

For Hardenow, as he grew older and able to regard mankind more largely, came out from many of the narrow ways, which (like the lanes of Beckley) satisfy their final cause by leading into one another. With the growth of his learning, his candour grew; and he strove to bind others by his own strap and buckle, as little as he offered to be bound by theirs. Therefore when two of his very best friends made a *bonâ fide* job of it, and being unable to think their thoughts out got it done by deputy, and sank to infallible happiness, Thomas Hardenow pulled up, and set his heels into the ground of common sense, like a horse at the brink of a quarry-pit; and the field of reason, rich and gracious, opened its gates again to him.

Herein he cut no capers, as so many of the wilder spirits did, but made himself ready for some true work and solid advantage to his race. And so, before any University Mission, or plough-and-Bible enterprise, Hardenow set forth to open a track for commerce and civilization, and to fight the devil and slavery in the rich rude heart of Africa. Besides his extraordinary gift of tongues, he had many other qualifications—the wiriness of his legs and stomach, his quiet style of listening (so that even a "nigger" need not be snubbed), his magnificent freedom from humour (an element fatal to stern convictions), and last not least, as he said to Etty, for a clinching argument, his wife's acquaintance with the carrying trade.

Happy exile, how much better than home misery it is! But the House of Cripps sent forth another member into banishment, with little choice or chance of much felicity on his part. As there are woes more strong than tears, so are there crimes beyond the lash. When the doings of Leviticus were brought to light, and shown to be unsuccessful, a council of Crippses was held in his hog-house, and a stern decree passed to expatriate him. Tickuss was offered his fair say, and did his very best to defend himself; but the case from the first was hopeless. If he had wronged any other parish than Beckley, or even any other as well, there might have been some escape for him. Cruelty, cowardice, treason high and low, perjury to his own elder brother, and eternal disgrace to his birthplace—there was not a word in the mouth of any one half bad enough to use to him. The Carrier rose, and said all he could say, for the sake of the many children; but weighty with piety as he was, he could not stem the many-fountained torrent of the Crippsic wrath. The pigs of Leviticus were divided among all the nephews and nieces, and cousins (ere ever a creditor got a hock-rope or a flick-whip ready), and Tickuss himself, unhoused, unstyed, unlarded, and unsmocked, wandered forth with his business gone, like a Gadarene swine-herd void of swine.

For years and years that fine old hog-farm was the haunt of rats and rabbits; never a grunt or squeak of porker (ringing or rung eloquently) shook the fringe of ivied shade, or jarred the acorn in its cup, until a third son arose and grew up to Zacchary Cripps hereafter. All the neighbourhood lay under a cloud of fear and sadness, because of what Luke Sharp had done, not to others, but himself. Luke Sharp, the greatest of all lawyers—so the affrighted woodman says—may and must, alas, be seen (at certain moments of the forest moon) rising on horseback from the black pool where his black life ended, gaining the shore with a silent bound, and galloping, with his arm held forth as straight

as any sign-post, to the nook of dark lane where he smote his son; and then to the ruined hut, wherein he imprisoned the fair lady; and then to the rotting shed, in which he corded and starved the great Oxford scholar.

Whether, for the assertion of the law, Luke Sharp is allowed by some evil power thus to revisit the glimpses of the moon, or whether he lies in silent blackness, ignorant of evil—sure it is that no one cares to stay beyond the fall of dusk in that part of the forest.

But as soon as the lawyer's wife and son, by virtue of the poplar mark, had found and quietly buried his disappointed corpse, they made the very best of a broken business, as cheerfully as could be hoped for. Each of them sighed very heavily at times, especially when they were almost certain of hearing again, round the corner or downstairs, a masterful and very memorable tread. Therefore, with what speed they might, they let their fine old Cross Duck House, and fleeing all low curiosity, unpleasant remark, and significant glance, took refuge under the quiet roof of Kit's aunt Peggy, near High Wycombe, where he had hoped to lodge, and woo his timid forest angel. Here Kit found tardy comfort, and recovered health quite rapidly, by writing his own dirge in many admirable metres, till, being at length made laureate of a strictly local paper—at a salary of nil per annum, and some quarts of ale to stand—he swung his cloak and lit his pipe in the style of better days.

From those whom his father had wronged so deeply he would accept no help whatever, much as they desired to show their sense of his good behaviour. And when the second-best ambition of his life arrived by coach—that notable dog, "Pablo"—if Christopher could have sniffed lightest scent of Beckley, or Shotover, in the black dog-winkles of his nostrils, the odds are ten to one that Oxford never would have sighed (as all through the October term she did) at the loss of her finest badgerer.

In spite of all this obstinacy, three people were resolved to make him come round and be comfortable, settled, and respectable. To this they brought him in the end, and made him give up fugitive pieces, sonnets, stanzas to a left-hand glove, and epitaphs on a cenotaph. The Squire, and Russel, and Grace could not compose their own snug happiness without providing that Kit should be less miserable than his poetry. So they married him to a banker's daughter, and—better still—put him in the bank itself.

The loyalty of Mrs. Fermitage to her distinguished husband's memory was never disturbed by any knowledge of that fatal codicil. Poor Mrs. Sharp, as she slowly recovered from the sad grief wrought by greed, more and more reverently cherished her great husband's high repute. She rejoined him in a better world—or at least she set forth to do so—without any knowledge of the blow he had given to her son's head, and her own heart. Kit, like a man, concealed that outrage, and, like a good son, listened to his departed father's praises. But in her heart the widow felt that some of these might be imperilled, if that codicil turned up. Long time she kept it in reserve, as a thunderbolt for Joan Fermitage; but Pablo's arrival improved her feelings, and so did the banker's daughter; and finally, on Kit's wedding-day, with a sigh and a prayer, she took advantage of a clear fire and a rapid draught—and the codicil flew through the chimney-pot.

As a lawyer's daughter, she revered such things. In the same capacity, she knew that now it could make no great practical difference; for Grace was quite sure of her good aunt's money. And again, as a widow and mother, she felt what a stain must be cast on the name she loved best, if this little document ever came to light—other than good firelight.

But why should Esther have had no house of her own, as darkly hinted above, so as to almost compel her to descend from tilt to tent? The reason is not far to seek, and he who runs may read it, without running out of Beckley.

Cripps, the Carrier, now being past the middle milestone of man's life, and seeing every day, more and more, the grey hairs in his horse's tail, lowered his whip in a shady place, and let his reins go slackly, and pulled his crooked sixpence out, and could not see to read it. And yet the summer sun was bright in the top of the bushes over him!

"I vear a must; I zee no way out of un," Zacchary said to his lonely self. "Etty is as good as gone a'ready; her cannot stan' out agin that there celibacy; and none else understandeth the frying-pan. The Lord knows how I have fought agin the womminses, seeing all as I has seen. And better I might a' done, if I must come to it, many a time in the last ten year. Better at laste for the brown, white, and yellow; though the woman as brought might a' shattered 'em again. After all, Mary might be a deal worse; though I have a-felt some doubt consarning of her tongue; but her hath a proper respect for me, and forty puns to Oxford bank—if her moother spaiketh raight of her; and the Squaire hath given me a new horse, to come on whenso Dobbin beginneth to wear out. Therefore his domestics hath first claim; though I'd soonder draive Dobbin than ten of un. What shall us do now? Whatever shall us do?"

Zacchary Cripps pulled off his hat in a slow perspiration of suspense; for if he once made up his mind, there would be no way out of it. He looked at his horse with a sad misgiving, both on his own account and Dobbin's. The marriage of the master might wrong the horse, and the horse might no more be the master's. Suddenly a bright idea struck him—a bar of sunshine through the shade.

"Thou shalt zettle it, Dobbin," he cried, leaning over and stroking his gingery loins. "It consarneth thee most, or, leastways, quite as much. Never hath any man had a better horse. The will of the Lord takes the strength out of all of us; but He leaveth, and addeth to the wisdom therein. Dobbin, thou seest things as never men can tell of. Now, if thou waggest thy tail to the right—I will; and so be to the left—I wun't. Mind what thou doest now. Call upon thy wisdom, nag, and give thy master honestly the sense of thy discretion."

With a settled mind, and no disturbance, he awaited the delivery of Dobbin's tail. A fly settled on the white foam of the harness on the off side of this ancient horse. Away went his tail with a sprightly flick at it; and Cripps accepted the result. The result was the satisfaction of Mary's long and faithful love for him, and the happy continuance, in woodland roads, of the loyal race and unpretentious course of Cripps, the Carrier.

THE END.

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Minor typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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