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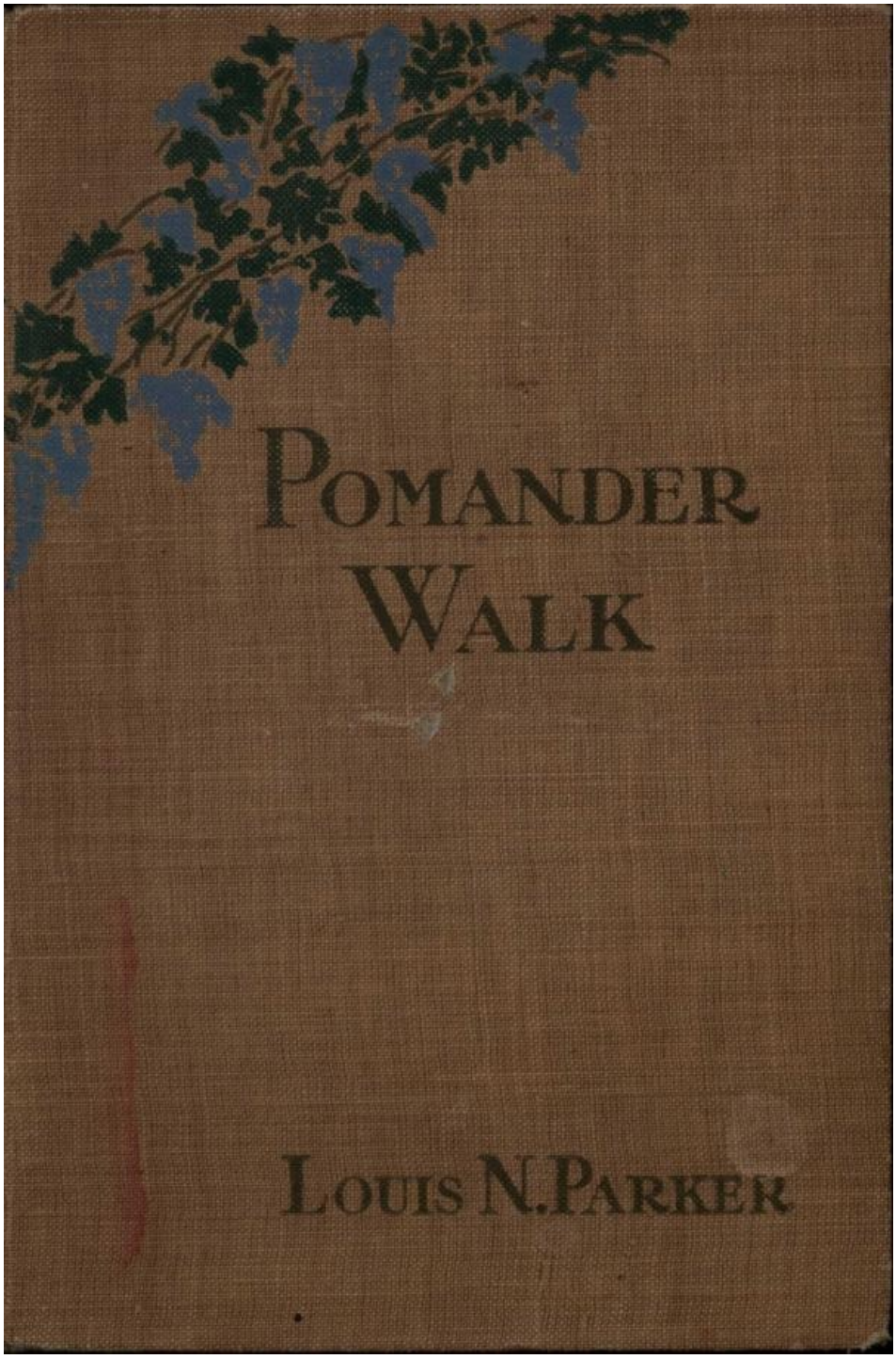

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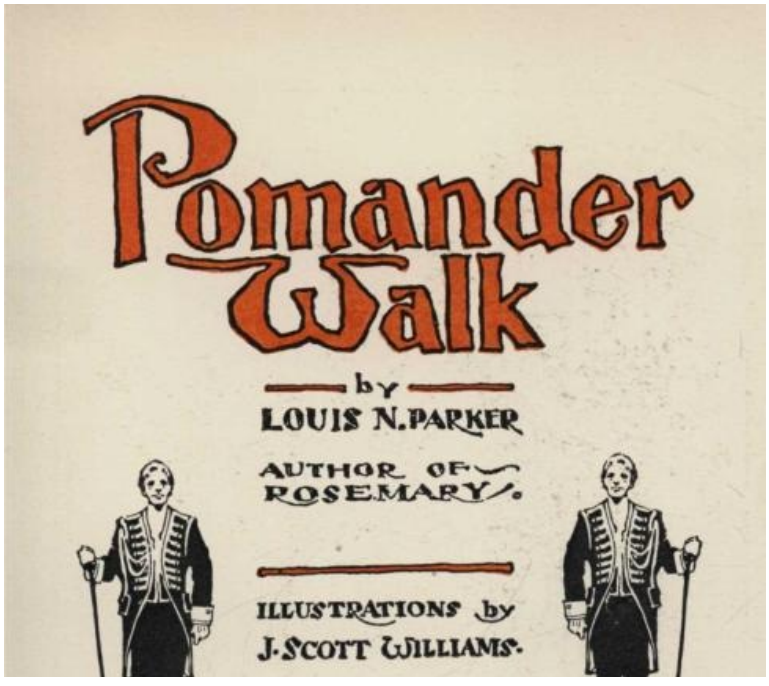

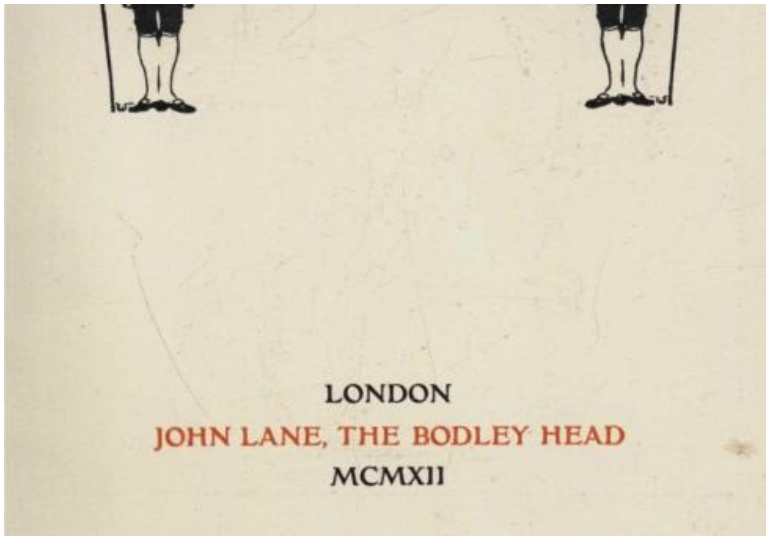

Title page

Pomander Walk

by
LOUIS N. PARKER
AUTHOR OF
ROSEMARY

ILLUSTRATIONS by
J. SCOTT WILLIAMS

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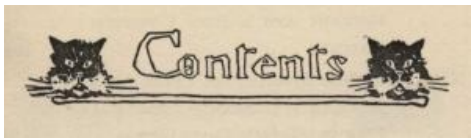

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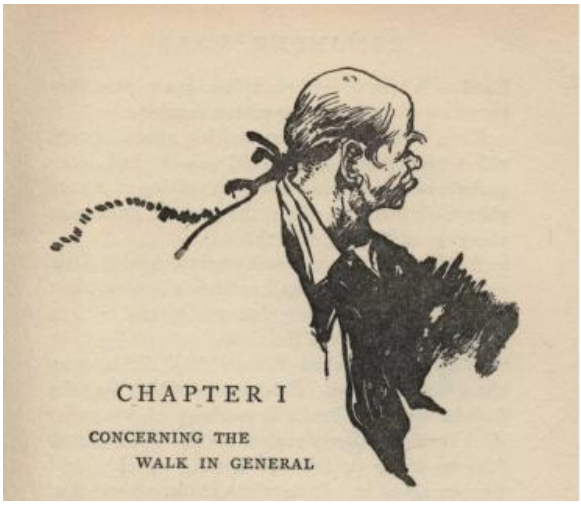
CONCERNING THE WALK IN GENERAL



Chapter I headpiece

It lies out Chiswick way, not far from Horace Walpole's house where later Miss Pinkerton conducted her Academy for Young Ladies. It is still there, although it was actually built in 1710; but London has gradually stretched its tentacles towards it, and they will soon absorb it. Where Marjolaine and Jack made love, there will be a row of blatant shops, and Sir Peter's house will be replaced by a flaring gin-palace. It has fallen from its high estate nowadays; and Mrs. Poskett's prophecy has come true: one of its dainty houses—I think it is the one in which the Misses Pennymint lived—is now indeed occupied by a person who earns a precarious living with a mangle.

Even in the days I am writing about, it was old—ninety-five years old—and had seen many ups and downs; for I am writing of events that took place in 1805: the year of Trafalgar; the year of Nelson's death.

At that time it was a charming, quaint little crescent of six very small red-brick houses, close to the Thames, facing due south, and with a beautiful view across the river.

Why it was called Pomander Walk is more than I can tell you. There is a tradition that the builder had inherited a beautiful gold pomander of Venetian filigree and that the word struck him as being pretty and having an old-world flavour about it. It certainly conferred a sort of quiet dignity on the crescent; almost too much dignity, indeed, at first, for it seemed to make the letting of the houses difficult. Common people fought shy of it, because of the name, yet the houses were so small that wealthy folk—the Quality—wouldn't look at them. Ultimately, however, they were occupied by gentlefolk in reduced circumstances; people who had an eye for the picturesque, people who sought retirement; and the owner was happy.

In 1805 it had grown mellow with age. The red bricks of which it was built had lost the crudeness of their original colour and had acquired a delicious tone restful to the eye. Pomander Walk was, in fact, one of the prettiest nooks near London. It stood—and stands—on a little plot of ground projecting into the river. At the upper end it was cut off from the rest of the parish of Chiswick by Pomander Creek, which ran a long way inland and formed a sort of refuge for lazy barges, one of which was generally lying there with its great brown sail hanging loose to dry. Chiswick Parish Church was only a little way across the creek, but in order to get to it you had to walk very nearly a mile to the first bridge, and I am afraid Sir Peter Antrobus too often made that an excuse for not attending more than two services on a Sunday.

The little houses were built in the sober and staid style introduced during the reign of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Anne (now deceased). The architect had taken a slily humorous delight in making them miniature copies of much more pretentious town mansions. Each little house had its elaborate door with a shell-shaped lintel; each had its miniature front-garden, divided from the road-way by elaborate iron railings; and each had an ornate iron gate with link-extinguisher complete. You might have thought the houses were meant to be inhabited by very small Dukes, so stately were they in their tiny way. The ground-floor sitting-rooms all had bow-windows, and in each bow-window the occupants displayed their dearest treasures, generally under a glass globe. A glance at these would almost have been enough to tell you what manner of people their owners were. In the first, at the top corner of the crescent, stood the model of a man-of-war. The second displayed a silver cup with the arms of the City of London carefully turned outward for the passer-by to admire respectfully; the third showed a stuffed canary; the fourth was empty—I will tell you why later; the fifth presented a pinchbeck snuff-box, and in the sixth there was an untidy pile of old books.

In front of the crescent lay a delightful lawn, always admirably kept. Jim, Sir Peter Antrobus's man, mowed it regularly every Saturday afternoon. This lawn was protected on the river-side by a chain hanging from white posts. You never saw posts so white as those were, for every Saturday evening Jim—a very active old sailor in spite of his stiff leg—gave them a fresh coat of paint; he even went so far as to paint the chain as well.

JIM,—A VERY ACTIVE OLD SAILOR IN SPITE OF HIS STIFF LEG

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In the lower corner of the lawn, and facing the bend of the river, stood what the inhabitants of the Walk called the Gazebo, a little shelter formed by a well-trimmed boxwood hedge, in which was a rustic seat. Sir Peter Antrobus and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn would sit there on warm summer evenings and discuss the news of the day—or, let me rather say—the news of the day before yesterday; for the only journal they saw was a three days old "Globe" which Sir Peter's cousin sent him when he had done with it, and when he thought of it.

The great charm of the Gazebo was that it was sufficiently removed from the houses to ensure strict privacy: the ladies of the Walk, who shared fully in their sex's attribute of curiosity, could neither see nor hear what went on in its seclusion, and Sir Peter, who thought he was a woman-hater, was all the more fond of it on that account. In his own house he really could not talk at his ease, for his voice had, by long struggles against gales, acquired a tremendous carrying power; the party-wall was very thin, and his next-door neighbour, Mrs. Poskett, was—or, at least, so he imagined—always listening.

But the pride of the Walk was a great elm-tree standing in the centre of the lawn, and shading it delightfully. A very ancient tree, much older than the Walk: indeed, the crescent had, in a manner of speaking, been built round it. At its base Jim—there was really no limit to the things Jim could do—had built a comfortable seat which encircled its trunk, and this seat was the special prerogative of the ladies of the Walk when it was not occupied by Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's numerous progeny.

I think I have told you all that is necessary about the external features of the Walk. You must see it with sympathetic eyes, if you are not to laugh at it: a little crescent of six very small old red-brick houses; in front of them, six tiny gardens full at all seasons of the year of bright old-fashioned flowers; then the highly ornamental railings and stately gates; then a red-brick pavement, or side-walk; then a broad path; and then the lawn, the elm-tree, and the Gazebo.

Beyond this, the Thames, bearing great brown barges up to Richmond or down to Chelsea, according to the state of the tide; and the Parish Church of Chiswick, half buried in the foliage of stately trees, as a fitting background.

You could not find a quieter, more peaceful, or more forgotten spot near London in a month's search; for the only way into the Walk was along a very narrow path by the side of Pomander Creek: a path the children of Chiswick had been sternly forbidden to use, and which even their elders only attempted when they were more than usually sober, for fear of falling into the creek. So, although the Walk was nominally open to the public, it was not a thoroughfare, as you had to go out the same way as you went in. Strangers very seldom found their way to its precincts, and to all intents and purposes the lawn and the Gazebo had grown to be the private property of the inhabitants. As their rooms were extremely small, they made the lawn a sort of common drawing-room, where they entertained each other in a modest way with a dish of tea. After Mr. Basil Pringle and Madame Lachesnais and her daughter had come to live in the Walk there would even be music on the lawn. Madame would bring out her harp, Mr. Pringle his violin, and Marjolaine would sing quaint old French ditties.

I pity the unhappy stranger who stumbled into the Walk on such an occasion. The music would stop dead. Teacups would hang suspended half-way to expectant lips, and all eyes would be turned on the intruder with a stare which, if he had any marrow, would infallibly freeze it. Then to see Sir Peter throw his chest out, march up to the stranger and ask him what he wanted in a voice which masked a volcanic rage under courteous tones, was to behold a thing never to be forgotten. All the stranger could do was to stammer an apology and beat a retreat; but for days the memory of the unknown danger he had escaped would haunt him.

Sir Peter Antrobus—Admiral Sir Peter Antrobus—was not a person to be trifled with, I assure you. In the first place, he lived in the corner house as you entered the Walk. This gave him a sort of prescriptive right to sovereignty. You must also consider that he was an Admiral and that his gallantry had earned him a knighthood. He was, indeed, the only specimen of actual nobility the Walk had to show, though Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn could, by much pressure, be induced to admit, that if everyone had his rights and if lawyers were not such scoundrels, he himself—but he always broke off there and left you wondering what degree of the peerage he had claims to. But Sir Peter was undoubtedly a knight, and his title gave him the *pas* in all the Walk's social functions. Not only that, but the Walk looked up to him as its natural leader and adviser. None of the inhabitants would ever dream of making any little improvements to their houses without having first consulted the Admiral. It was he who determined when the lawn needed mowing, the Gazebo trimming, and it was he who fixed the date for painting the wood-work and railings of the houses. Also, he chose the colour: a good, useful green; and anyone who had dared depart from the precise shade chosen by him, would have heard of it. He was to all intents and purposes an autocrat, and the Walk trembled at his nod. His rule was very gentle, however. He kept his one remaining eye steadily fixed on the Walk; but although it wore a threatening frown and could flash in fury, the expression lurking in its depth was one of affection. He loved the Walk with all his heart; he was proud of it with all his soul. His one ambition was to keep it as spick and span as his own quarterdeck had been. I think, indeed, he confused it in his mind to some extent with that quarterdeck, for in his little garden he had erected the model of a mast, on which he hoisted the Union Jack with his own hands regularly at sunrise, and as regularly struck it at sunset. And once, when the Regent had gone by in the Royal barge on his way to Richmond, he had come out in gala uniform, and dipped it in a Royal salute in the finest style. The Admiral was salt from head to foot and right through. He used to call himself a piece of salt junk: for he had been at sea ever since he was a lad of ten. His bravery and high spirits had cleared the road for him at a time when the sea was a path of glory for British mariners, and his culminating recollection was the battle of Copenhagen, in which he had taken part with Nelson. His only cause for complaint was that he had been put on half-pay too early. Was not a man of sixty, hale, hearty, and in the full possession of all his faculties, worth two whipper-snappers of thirty? And did the loss of an eye disqualify him? Could he not spy the enemy as quickly with one eye as with two? As a matter of fact, you could only use one eye with a spy-glass, and so, what was the good of the other? Answer him that! Very well, then.

But these outbursts only came in moments of great depression; generally after his monthly excursion into town to draw his pay. On these occasions it was his habit to visit the coffee-houses where sea-captains of his own standing congregated; in the afternoon he would dine with a few cronies at the Hummums; later, he might take a taste of the newest play at Covent Garden—he maintained that the Drama, like the Navy, was going to the dogs—and after the play there usually

followed a jorum of punch and a church-warden pipe in some hostelry where glees were sung. Then, in the small hours, he would be lifted into an old, ramshackle shay, by the faithful Jim; Jim would be lifted beside him, and together they would steer a devious course towards Chiswick, where the village constable was on the look-out for them, and would pilot them along the perilous Creek, unlock the door for them, and deposit them safely in the passage. What happened after that, which saw the other to bed, or whether either of them ever got beyond the foot of the stairs, it were the height of indiscretion to enquire. An English gentleman's house is his castle, and if an English gentleman is too tired to go upstairs that is nobody's business but his own.

The Walk was always aware of these excursions, and on the mornings following upon them it had become the rule to make as little noise as possible, so as not to disturb the Admiral's repose. When he ultimately woke on such mornings it was small wonder he took a jaundiced view of life, prophesied the immediate stranding of His Majesty's entire Fleet owing to puerile navigation, and was, generally, in his least amiable and least hopeful mood. Small wonder, also, that he railed against a purblind and imbecile government for putting a seasoned officer on the shelf. A headache modifies one's outlook, and, as Mrs. Poskett was fond of saying, one should be especially considerate with a man, more especially a sailor-man, the day after he had drawn his pay—most especially a sailor-man who, at the mature age of sixty, was still a bachelor.

If Sir Peter was a bachelor, that was not Mrs. Poskett's fault. She herself had only narrowly missed belonging to the minor nobility. Alderman Poskett, her deceased husband, had died just as he was ripe for the Shrievalty, and, sure enough, the year he would have been Sheriff the King had dined with the Lord Mayor, and Poskett would infallibly have received a knighthood, had he been alive. Mrs. Poskett felt, in a confused way, that she had been badly used, and that the Walk would only be stretching ordinary courtesy very slightly by addressing her as Lady Poskett. Unfortunately this never occurred to the Walk, and as Mrs. Poskett was determined to achieve the title somehow, she had cast her eyes on Sir Peter. The latter, however, had not been a handsome midshipman, and a still handsomer Captain, without acquiring considerable experience in the wiles of the sex, and, so far, Mrs. Poskett's blandishments had met with only negative success. Mrs. Poskett lived next door to the Admiral, and to her great distress there was a sort of subdued feud between them; a feud she could do nothing to abate. Could she be expected to get rid of Sempronius, for the sake of Sir Peter? In the first place, it is not so easy to get rid of a long-haired, yellow Persian cat. Once, in a fit of desperation at the failure of her siege on the Admiral's affections, she had put Sempronius in a market-basket, and she and Abigail—her little maid, fresh from a Charity School—had carried him quite half a mile and let him loose, after a tragic farewell, in the middle of a cabbage-field. But when they got home disconsolate, there was Sempronius washing his face in front of the fire as if nothing had happened. After that there was never again any question of getting rid of him. If the Admiral really feared for the safety of his thrush, why did n't he get rid of the thrush? Only once had Sempronius been found sitting on the roof of the osier cage, and extending a soft paw downwards through its bars; the thrush was singing blithely all the time, and you could see by the expression on Sempronius's face that his only feeling was one of admiration for the song. But the Admiral had taken on amazingly, had stormed and sworn, and promised to throw Sempronius into the river if he ever caught him at such games again.

Since that day Mrs. Poskett had felt that she had a very uphill task before her; but she had set herself to work to become Lady Antrobus with increased determination. She was heartily encouraged in this by Miss Ruth Pennymint, who lived in the third house from the top corner—lived there with her much younger sister, Miss Barbara.

Miss Ruth, elderly and kind hearted, was an inveterate matchmaker. As she explained to her bosom friend, Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn, "My dear," she said, "I've lived three years with a tragic instance of what comes of blighted affections; and I'll take precious good care nobody else's affections get blighted if I can help it." To which Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn replied, "And well I understand your meaning, Ruth; for if Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had n't asked me to marry him, what I should ha' done I don't know." Whereupon the two ladies, for no obvious reason, wept together and were greatly comforted.

It seems that Miss Barbara had years ago been more or less affianced to a Lieutenant in the Navy. Not a young lieutenant, an elderly lieutenant with several characteristics which were doubtful recommendations. But time had softened the image of the gallant tar in Miss Barbara's recollection, and the more it receded, the more romantic it had become, until now she was, not so much in love with her recollections of him, as with what she could remember of the ideal she had set up in her own mind.

In the flesh, Lieutenant Charles—no one had ever heard his surname—had been a very short, puffy man, with a completely bald head. His language was interlarded with expletives, suitable, perhaps, to intercourse with rough sailors in a gale, but devastating on shore in the company of ladies. Personally, I am not at all certain he had ever actually proposed to Miss Barbara. I don't believe he knew how.

The two ladies were living near the Docks at the time, with their father, who was something in linseed; and I have no doubt Lieutenant Charles found the old man's Port-wine agreeable and liked to bask in Miss Barbara's pretty smiles. For Miss Barbara was very pretty indeed; a bonny, plump little thing, by nature all mirth and laughter. She did not so much walk as hop like a little bird. She was altogether like a bird. Her father had always called her his dicky-bird. She kissed just as a bird pecks, and when she spoke or laughed, it was exactly like the twitter of birds settling down to sleep at sunset.

Whether she had ever really been in love with the lieutenant is another question I must leave unanswered. It is only barely conceivable. To be sure, girls do fall in love with the most improbable men: even short and puffy ones; and perhaps the lieutenant's strange oaths bewitched her in some inexplicable way. The only evidence of practical romance I can bring forward, is that the lieutenant did undoubtedly present Miss Barbara on one of his home-comings from distant parts with a grey parrot with a red tail. To be sure, he may have found the bird an intolerable nuisance; but this is an ill-natured suggestion. Whether this gift was intended as a hint, whether the parrot was meant as a dove and harbinger of a coming proposal, or whether it was an economical return for much liquid refreshment, the world will never know, for the same night the lieutenant's inglorious career came to an equally inglorious end.

This combination of what might, with a little violence, be construed as a lover's gift with the tragic loss of the lover, was the turning-point in Miss Barbara's life. Henceforth she convinced herself that she had been engaged to marry Charles, and she vowed herself to perpetual spinsterhood and the care of the parrot.

The care of the parrot was no such easy matter. The bird had made a long journey in the lieutenant's cabin, and had acquired all the lieutenant's most picturesque expressions. He was not, therefore, a bird you could admit into general society with any feeling of comfort, for although he was generally sulky in the presence of strangers, he would occasionally, and when you least expected them, rap out a string of uncomplimentary references to their personal appearance, and consign them, body and soul, to unmentionable localities, with a clearness of utterance which left no doubt as to his meaning.

When Papa Pennymint died, it was found that linseed had not been a commodity for which the demand had been sufficient to build up anything approaching a fortune. As a matter of fact, the old man had died just in time to avoid bankruptcy, and the two ladies had been obliged to sell their pretty home and to take refuge in Pomander Walk, out of reach of the genteel friends who had known them in the days of their prosperity. Of course the bird had come with them; but he had not left his language behind, and Barbara was forced to keep him shut up in the little back parlour, out of earshot. There she spent at least one hour with him every day, listening, as she told the sympathising Walk, to her dead lover's voice; and it was this constant companionship with the loquacious bird which had fostered and developed in her mind the legend of her unhappy love.

SHE SPENT AT LEAST ONE HOUR WITH HIM EVERY DAY, LISTENING, AS SHE TOLD THE SYMPATHISING WALK, TO HER DEAD LOVER'S VOICE

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As a detail, I may as well add here that Barbara had christened the parrot Doctor Johnson, in honour of the mighty lexicographer, about whom she knew nothing except that an engraved portrait of him used to hang in what her father called his study, and that when she asked him who the original was and what he had done, he said, "Oh, I don't know. Seems he talked a lot." The parrot talked a lot, and so he was called Doctor Johnson. I should very much have liked to hear the observations the Giant of Fleet Street would have made, had he lived long enough to be aware of the compliment.

How the Misses Pennymint made both ends meet was a never-ending subject of discussion between Mrs. Poskett and Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn. They regretfully came to the conclusion that the two ladies positively worked for their living. This was a serious aspersion on the Walk—but there was a worse one.

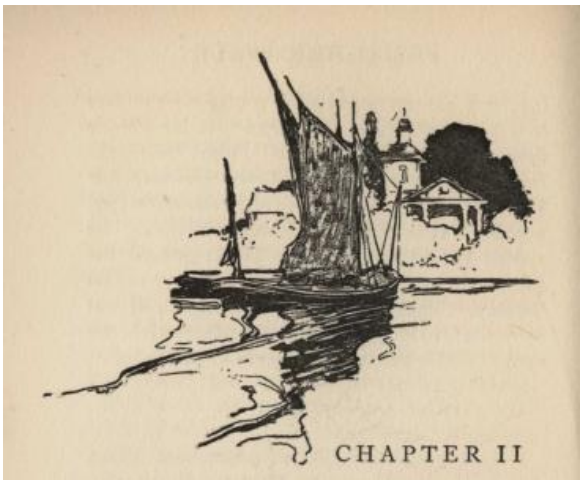
A little while ago a young man—well, a youngish man—with one shoulder a little higher than the other, had come to live with the Pennymints. At first they let it be understood that he was a distant cousin come on a visit; but when weeks passed and then months, he could no longer be described as a visitor, and the Walk had to face the fact that not only did the Misses Pennymint work for their living, but that they also kept a lodger. At first the Walk was consoled with the idea that at any rate he looked like a gentleman, and might possibly be one. But lately it had been discovered that he was a mere common fiddler, and played every evening in the orchestra at Vauxhall Gardens. Yet, in spite of his ungentlemanly profession, the man did, undoubtedly, behave like a gentleman. Moreover, it was very difficult to tax the Misses Pennymint with their ungenteel goings-on; because there was not an inhabitant of the Walk who had not experienced some kindness at their hands.

I hope I have conveyed the impression of a quiet and contented little community. I am sorry to have to add that there was one fly in the amber of their content. In the early spring of 1805 a mysterious figure had suddenly appeared in the Walk. A fisherman. A gaunt creature in an indescribable slouch hat: the sort of hat you do not pick up when you see it lying in the road; his bony form was encased in a long, nondescript linen garment, something like a carter's smock-frock. This had once been white, but was now of every shade of brown. It had enormous pockets, bulging with unthinkable contents. One morning the Walk had awakened to find him sitting at the corner where Pomander Creek empties into the Thames; sitting on an old box, with a dreadful tin vessel full of worms at his side; sitting fishing. The Walk rubbed its eyes and wondered what the

Admiral would say. When the Admiral came out of his house he stopped aghast. Then he gathered himself together for a mighty effort. But it came to nothing: you cannot argue with a man who refuses to argue back. The fisherman met Sir Peter's first onslaught with a curt "Public thoroughfare," and then definitely closed his lips. Sir Peter raked him fore and aft, but never got another syllable out of him. Ultimately he retired baffled and beaten. Henceforward the fisherman came to his pitch every day, except Sunday. The Walk grew accustomed, if not reconciled, to his presence by slow degrees. They spoke of him among themselves as the Eyesore.

CHAPTER II

HOW SIR PETER ANTROBUS AND JEROME BROOKE-HOSKYN, ESQUIRE, SMOKED A PIPE TOGETHER



Chapter II headpiece

On Saturday afternoon, May 25, 1805, Pomander Walk was looking its very best. The sun transfigured the old houses; the elm rustled in the river-breeze; the Admiral's thrush was singing wistfully; Mrs. Poskett's cat, Sempronius, was seated in her little front garden, wistfully listening to the bird's song; the Eyesore was patiently wasting worms on discriminating fish who knew a hook when they saw it; and Sir Peter Antrobus and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, both in their shirt-sleeves, were finishing a game of quoits.

"A ringer!" shouted Sir Peter, whose quoit had fallen fairly over the peg. Then he hurried up to the quoits, and, measuring their respective distances from it with a huge bandana handkerchief, added, "One maiden to you, Brooke! Game all! Peeled, by Jehoshaphat!"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn flicked the dust off his waistcoat with magnificent indifference. The Admiral produced a boatswain's whistle, and in answer to a blast, his man, Jim, appeared at an upstair window. "Ay, ay, Admiral!"

"The usual. Here, under the elm. And look lively."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

Jim disappeared like a Jack-in-the-box. "We must play it off," said Sir Peter.

But Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn protested. "Another time, Sir Peter. It is very warm, and my eye is out."

"So 's mine," cried the Admiral, with a guffaw; "but I see straight, what?"

It was a matter of principle with Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn never to take the slightest notice of the Admiral's jokes. Sir Peter might be the autocrat of the Walk, although Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had his own views even on that point; but he himself was the acknowledged wit and man of fashion, and from that position nothing should shake him. He had spied Miss Ruth Pennymint working in her open bow-window, and Mrs. Poskett busy with her flowers. Assuming his grandest manner, he said warningly: "Should we not resume our habiliments? The fair are observing us."

"Gobblessmysoul!" cried Sir Peter, shocked at being discovered in undress. They hastily helped each other into their coats, which were lying on the bench under the elm. Meanwhile, Jim had brought out a tray with two pewters, two long clay pipes, a jar of tobacco and a lighted candle, and had placed it on the bench. From the open upstair window of the Pennymint's house came the strains of a violin: one passage, played over and over again, with varying degrees of success.

"Wish Mr. Pringle would stop his infernal scraping," growled the Admiral.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn shrugged his shoulders with condescending pity. "Poor fellow! What a way of earning his living!"

Sir Peter turned to the quarter from which the music came, and, making a speaking-trumpet of his hands, roared, "Mr. Pringle! Mr. Pringle, ahoy!"

A hideous wrong note, as if the player had been scared out of his wits, was the answer, and Basil Pringle appeared at the window. "I beg your pardon, Admiral; I was engrossed."

"Join us under the elm, what?"

"With pleasure. I 'll just put away my Strad."

As Basil retired Sir Peter turned to Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "His what?"

"His Stradivarius," answered the latter, and as that obviously conveyed no meaning, "his violin."

"Oh! His fiddle! Why could n't he say so?—Jim!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Another pewter."

"Ay, ay, sir." Jim hobbled off into the Admiral's house and Sir Peter and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn stood, facing each other, each grasping his pewter of foaming ale.

"Well!" cried Sir Peter, "The King!"

But Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was not to be put off with so curt a toast. Planting his feet firmly together, and throwing his chest out, he boomed in a formal and stately manner, "His Most Gracious Majesty, King George the Third, God bless him!"

The Admiral eyed him curiously for a moment, and seemed about to speak, but thought better of it; and for an appreciable time the faces of both gentlemen were hidden. When they came to light again it was with a great sigh of satisfaction, and they both settled down on the bench for quiet enjoyment.

"Now!" cried Sir Peter, "a pipe of tobacco with you, Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn?"

"Delighted!"

"St. Vincent. Prime stuff: and—in your ear—smuggled!"

"No!—reely?"

The two men leant over the candle and lighted their pipes with artistic care.

"Was you at a banquet again last night, Brooke?" asked the Admiral, during this process.

"Yes—yes," replied the other, with splendid indifference. "The Guildhall. All the hote tonn."

"Lucky dog," said Sir Peter, smacking his lips: "turtle, eh?"

With the air of a man jaded by too much enjoyment Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn condescended to enlarge. "As usual. Believe me, personally I should much prefer seclusion and meditation in the company of poets and philosophers, or dallying with Selina; but my friends are good enough to insist. Only last night," with a side glance to watch the effect he was producing, "Fox—my good friend, the Right Honourable Charles James Fox—said, 'Brooke, my boy'—just like that—'Brooke, my boy, what would our banquets be without you?'"

Sir Peter was deeply impressed. He felt himself in touch with the great world. "Gobblessmysoul!" he cried. "What's your average?"

"I am sorry to say, I usually have to wrench myself away from my precious Selina four nights a week."

"Think o' that, now!—By the way, how is she?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn turned his lack-lustre eyes fondly towards his house. "Selina? Cheerful, sir. Selina is faint but pursuing. We have now been in the holy state of matrimony five years, and never a word of complaint has fallen from the dear soul's lips."

"Re-markable! And all that time Pomander Walk has seen scarcely anything of her."

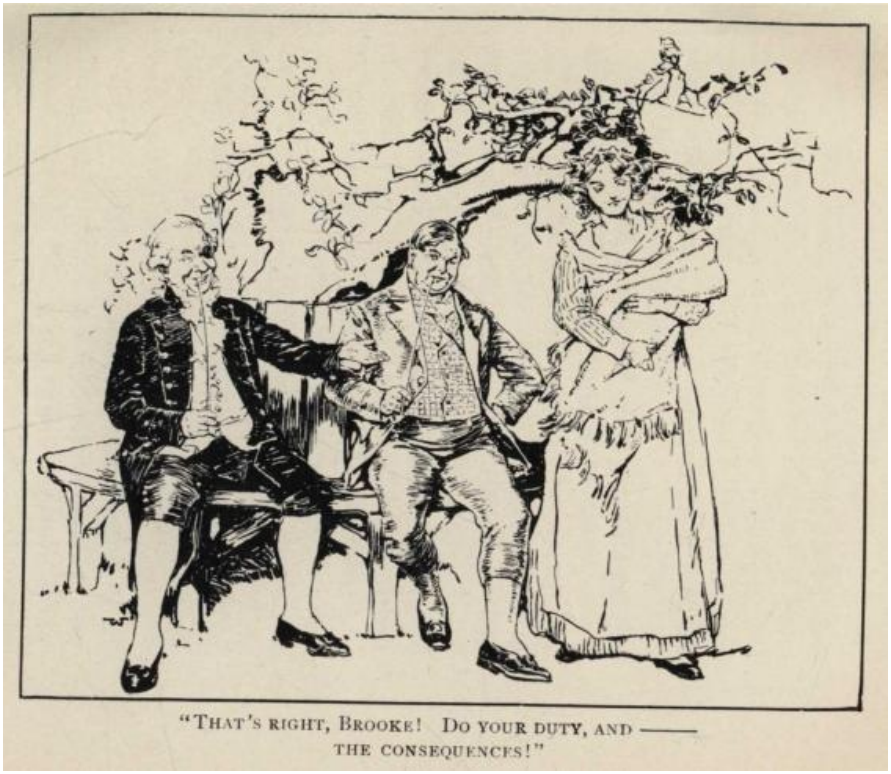
"She has been much occupied—much occupied," put in Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, with a deprecatory flourish of his pipe. And, as if in corroboration of his statement, the door of his house opened and a pretty maidservant came out, carrying a year-old baby in her arms. "Chck! chck!" said Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn.

"Four olive-branches in five years!" cried Sir Peter, instinctively sidling away from the baby.

"Of the female sex," explained Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn: "all of the female sex. This is Number Four. Chck! chck!"

Mrs. Poskett, attracted by the baby, had hastily come out of her door carrying her cat, Sempronius, in her arms, and was beckoning to the maid.

"And another coming!" roared the Admiral. "That's right, Brooke! Do your duty, and damn the consequences!—But let's have a boy next time," he went on, heedless of Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's frantic signals, "let 's have a boy, and make a sailor of him!—Gobblessmysoul!" For Mrs. Poskett, having dropped the cat in the garden, had come up to the tree, and was simpering with pretty modesty.



"THAT'S RIGHT, BROOKE! DO YOUR DUTY, AND —— THE CONSEQUENCES!"

"THAT'S RIGHT, BROOKE! DO YOUR DUTY, AND —— THE CONSEQUENCES!"

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," said she. "Oh—don't put your pipes away, please. I have been well trained. Alderman Poskett smoked even indoors. May I sit down?" She planted herself between the two men. "Now, go on talking, just as though I was n't here."

There was an awkward pause. Fortunately at this moment Jim created a diversion by bringing the third pewter. To his amazement Mrs. Poskett promptly seized it. "For me? How thoughtful of you!" she cried; and while Sir Peter and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn looked on too much astonished to speak, she drained it as to the manner born.

"Jim, another," grunted the Admiral.

But Mrs. Poskett protested. "Oh, no, I could n't! Reely and posivitely I could n't!"

"We was expecting Mr. Pringle, ma'am," said the Admiral, stiffly.

But the hint was entirely lost. "Ah, poor Mr. Pringle! Poor fellow! An unhappy life, I fear; and him with one shoulder higher than the other. Not that you notice it much when you look at him sideways. There. I was rather alarmed when he arrived a month ago. Can't be too careful, and me a lone woman. A musician, you know. One never knows what their morals may be."

"Hoho!" shouted Sir Peter, "he's quiet enough—except when he 's making a noise!"

Mrs. Poskett looked puzzled. She never could see a joke.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn received it with his customary stony stare and at once broke in. "He is some sort of cousin to the Misses Pennymint, I am told?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Poskett, with a sniff, "we are told. But who knows?—I fear—" she sank her voice to a mysterious whisper—"I fear he is—hush!—a lodger!"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was genuinely shocked. "You don't say so!"

The Admiral began to grow uncomfortable. He hated tittle-tattle. "Where's that cat of yours,

ma'am?" he cried, with sudden suspicion.

"Sempronius? The dear thing is so happy. He 's in the front garden, listening to your dear thrush."

"By Jehoshaphat!" cried the Admiral, half rising.

"Oh, don't be alarmed! Sempronius adores him. He would n't touch a hair of his head."

"I warn you, ma'am," growled Sir Peter, reluctantly sinking back into his seat, "if he does, I 'll wing him." From which you might gather the speakers thought that thrushes had hair and cats wings.

Now Basil Pringle, who had carefully laid his famous Strad in its case and covered it with a magnificent silk handkerchief, joined the little group under the elm. He was—apart from a very slight malformation of one shoulder—a good-looking fellow. He had the musician's pensive face, and a pair of very tender brown eyes, and his hands were the true violinist's hands, with long and lissome fingers. Jim hobbled up at the same time with a fresh pewter of ale.

"Ah, Mr. Pringle," said the Admiral, hospitably, "here 's your pewter."

But Basil waved it away. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Poskett—Gentlemen. Thank you, Admiral, but I 'm sure you 'll excuse me. I have a long night's work."

Jim was ready for the occasion. He hobbled back quicker than he had come, and drained the pewter at one draught under the very nose of the Eyesore.

"Fiddling at Vauxhall?" asked the Admiral.

"As usual, Sir Peter. It is a gala night. Fireworks."

Mrs. Poskett gave a little scream of delight.

"Fireworks! Oh, ravishing!"

"And Mrs. Poole is to sing; and Incledon."

Up jumped the Admiral, slapping his thigh. "Incledon! Then, by gum, I must be there! He was a sailor, y' know. I remember him in '85, on the *Raisonable*. Lord Hervey, and Pigot and Hughes—they 'd have him up to sing glees together!—Lord! Did ye ever hear him sing:

'A health to the Captain and officers too,
And all who belong to the jovial crew
On board of the Arethusa'?"

Now, the Admiral's voice was an admirable substitute for a fog-horn, but as a vehicle for a ballad, it left much to be desired. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn writhed in melodramatic agony, and even Mrs. Poskett winced. Basil tried to turn the enthusiast's thoughts into a gentler channel by interpolating that to-night Incledon was to sing "Tom Bowling." At once the Admiral's face took on an expression of the tenderest pathos. "Tom Bowling?—Ah!" and he was off again, in a roar he intended for a mere sentimental whisper

"Here, a sheer hulk, lies poor Tom Bowling—"

This was too much for Jim's feelings, never more receptive to melodious sorrow than when he had just absorbed a pint of ale, and he joined his master in a sympathetic howl.

Mrs. Poskett was overcome. "Oh, don't, Sir Peter," she cried. "Alderman Poskett used to sing just like that. You could hear him a mile off, but you could never tell what the tune was." The tender recollection very nearly moved her to tears.

Sir Peter stopped his song abruptly, with a penitent, "Gobblessmysoul! I beg your pardon!"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn felt he had been out of the conversation long enough. He turned condescendingly to Basil. "Are we not to see the Misses Pennymint to-day?"

"They are very busy," replied the young violinist.

Mrs. Poskett saw her opportunity. "I saw Miss Ruth sewing at a ball-dress," she said; and then added with a meaning look at Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, "I wonder which of them is going to a ball?"

Basil knew from experience what was coming. Mrs. Poskett continued, "I've seen them making wedding-dresses, and even," with pretty confusion, "even christening robes."

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn turned to her with an outraged expression: "I trust you do not insinuate Pomander Walk harbours mantua-makers?"

"It harbours a poor, hunchback fiddler," remarked Basil, very quietly.

Sir Peter was getting red in the face. "The Misses Pennymint are estimable ladies, and we are fortunate to have them among us. Frequently when I have my periodical headaches—"

"Hum," said Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn.

"The result, sir, of voyages in unhealthy regions!—they have sent me their home-made lavender water. When you had your last fit of asthma, Mrs. Poskett, did n't they come and sit with you and give you treacle-posset? And when Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn presented you with your fourth daughter, whose calves-foot jelly comforted her? We have nothing to do with their means of livelihood; we are, I am happy to say, like one family. What, Brooke?"

Thus appealed to, Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn could only assent: but he did so with a bad grace, and with a contemptuous glance at Basil. It was really too bad of Sir Peter to suggest that he, Jerome Brooke-Hoskyn, the Man of Fashion, the friend of the Right Honourable Charles James Fox, had anything in common with this shabby musician.

Mrs. Poskett bridled. "Do you include the French people at Number Four?" she said.

"They are not French, ma'am," retorted the Admiral, "and if they were, they couldn't help it."

Mrs. Poskett pointed with a giggle to the Eyesore, who was at that moment lovingly fixing one more worm on his hook. "Do you include the Eyesore?"

"No, I do not!" roared the Admiral, in a rage. "He doesn't live here. If England were under a proper government, he would be hanged for trespassing. I 've tried to remove him, as you know, but—ha!—it appears he has as much right here as any of us."

"After all," said Basil, soothingly, "he never moves from one spot."

"He never speaks to anybody," added Mrs. Poskett.

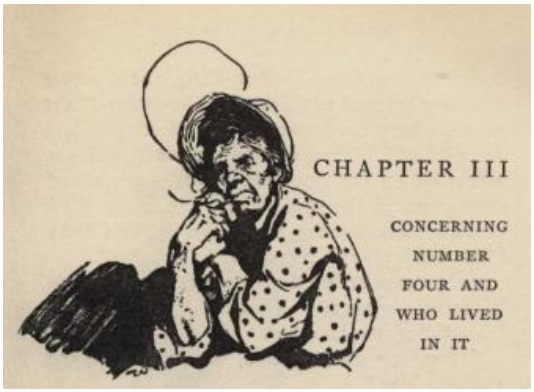
"He'd better not, ma'am!"

And Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn summed up with a laugh, "And I will do him the justice to say, he never catches a fish!"

Basil held up a warning hand, for the door of Number Four had just opened.

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING NUMBER FOUR AND WHO LIVED IN IT



Chapter III headpiece

If I had had to give an account of Number Four even six months before this story opens I should have been forced to admit it was a blot on the Walk. The people who occupied it had left without paying their rent, which was in itself a thing likely to cast discredit on the whole Walk. But they did worse than that. Just before leaving, they managed, on one plausible pretext or another, to wheedle sums of varying amounts out of almost all their neighbours. Out of every one of them, in fact, except the Reverend Jacob Sternroyd, D.D., who lived all alone in the sixth and last house, and about whom I shall have more to say by-and-by. For weeks the Walk remained hopeful of seeing its money back. Then came doubt, and lastly, a period of very bad temper during which everybody told everybody else they had said so all along, and if people had only listened to them —! The owner of the house, a very fat brewer at Brentford, put in a dreadful old Irishwoman as

caretaker, and she would sit on the front door-steps—the actual door-steps, in the open, where the whole Walk could not avoid seeing her—and smoke a filthy short black pipe: a sight terrible to behold.

When remonstrated with, she retorted volubly in incomprehensible Milesian. The Admiral himself had attacked her.

"Now, my good woman, we can't have you smoking here."

The old woman looked up at him with bleary eyes, and puffed in his face.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"What for should I not hear, darlint?"

"You are not to smoke here!"

"Who says so?"

"I say so. If you don't go indoors, I 'll come and take the pipe out of your mouth."

"Will you so? You bring your ugly face inside that gate and see phwat I'll do to ye!"

"Do you know who I am?"

"Sure an' I do. Yer father sowld stinkin' fish on Dublin quay when I was ridin' in me carriage."

"You foul-mouthed old woman—!"

"Don't you 'ould woman' me, neither. You go to hell and watch ould Nick stirrin' up yer grandmother!"

THE REVEREND JACOB STERNROYD, D.D.

THE REVEREND JACOB STERNROYD, D.D.

No gentleman could hope to carry on a conversation on these lines with any success when all the windows of the Walk were open, and all the inhabitants listening behind the curtains. The Admiral went straight to the Brentford brewer, but the latter gave him no redress. He only asked whether the Admiral had taken the old lady's advice.

She was not only in herself an intolerable nuisance, but she prevented desirable tenants from taking the house. Whenever any candidate appeared she had an excruciating toothache; or she

was doubled up with rheumatism; or she shook the whole house with a ghastly churchyard cough. The sympathy of the enquirer forced the information from her that she had been sprightly and well, a picture of a woman, till she came to Pomander Walk. Mind you, she was n't saying anything against the house. It was a good enough house; though, to be sure, the rats were something awful. Still, some people liked rats. In desperate cases she even went so far as to hint that the house was haunted. She was a foolish old woman, of course, but why did locked doors open of themselves? Doors she had locked with her own hands. They did say that the last tenant had hanged himself in the garret. And by that time the enquirer had given her half-a-crown, and had left her in the undisputed possession of her cutty-pipe on the doorstep.

This fertility of imagination led to her undoing, however. For upon hearing of it (from the Admiral, of course) the brewer sent his wife in the guise of an enquiring tenant, and subsequently turned the old woman out without any ceremony whatever.

But the Walk did not recover its self-respect for some time. The house was still undeniably empty. The windows got dirty; dead leaves covered the door-step; the paint peeled off the woodwork and the railings; some wretched boys threw a dead dog into the garden, where it lay hidden for days; and, besides, the old woman's suggestion that the house was haunted, left its poison behind. Presently Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's nurse saw a face gibbering behind the window, and had hysterics; and next Miss Barbara Pennymint distinctly saw a hand beckoning to her from the same window and fled, shrieking, to her sister.

The Admiral pooh-poohed the whole thing and made elaborate arrangements to spend a night in the house with Jim. Jim expressed his delight at the prospect of such an adventure, and went about describing exactly what he would do to the ghost if he saw it; but he had very bad luck when the time came, with a sudden attack of sciatica which glued him to his bed. The curious thing was that however often the Admiral postponed the day for the undertaking, Jim's sciatica inevitably returned when the day came. So time slipped away. The Admiral said he would explore the mystery alone, but it slipped his memory.

So the house remained tenantless, and when the Walk was painted according to the Admiral's instructions, Number Four had to be passed over, and consequently looked more woe-begone than ever.

And the next thing the Walk knew was that it woke one morning to find strange men bringing loads of furniture, amongst which was a harp, a *forte-piano*, and a guitar-case, and that painters —not their own painters, but an entirely unknown lot—were at work scraping off the old paint.

The Admiral rushed out—I am shocked to say, in his slippers and shirt-sleeves—and was told that the house was let; let, without any sort of warning or notice; let, so to speak, over the heads of the Walk; over his own head. And the men could not tell him the name of the new tenant. All they knew was that it was a lady. A lady with a name they could n't pronounce. A foreign name. Foreign? *Foreign*?—Yes; French, by the sound of it.

This was beyond anything the Admiral or the Walk had ever had to cope with. However, the Admiral mastered his indignation and contented himself with giving the painters strict and minute instructions as to the precise shade of green they were to use so as to make the house uniform with the rest.

He had to go to London next day to draw his pay. We know the inevitable consequences of that excursion. The following morning he woke at midday in a very bad humour. The first thing he saw when he threw open his window, was Sempronius digging up his sweet peas; and the next was Number Four painted a creamy white.

I draw a veil.

It was no use appealing to the brewer. He said he had nothing to do with it; and when it was pointed out to him that the chaste uniformity of the Walk was ruined, he impertinently suggested that the entire Walk might get itself painted all over again, and painted sky-blue.

So the Admiral took his time, determined to give this malapert and intrusive foreign woman—she had now become a woman—a severe lesson.

A few days later the house was taken possession of by an elderly female servant—a stout and florid Bretonne, who went about, as Mrs. Poskett said, looking a figure of fun in her national costume.

Then began such a scrubbing and brushing and washing at Number Four as the Walk had never seen. The bolder spirits—not the Admiral: he reserved himself for the enemy-in-chief—Mrs. Poskett, and Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn's nurse, made tentative approaches, but were repulsed with great slaughter: the Bretonne could not speak a word of English. When, however, she proceeded to tie a rope from the elm—the sacred Elm—-to the Gazebo, to hang rugs across it and beat them

to the tune of "*Malbroucq s'en va-t-en guerre*" sung with immense gusto, Sir Peter was forced to attack her himself. He had picked up a smattering of French in the wars, and the Walk lined its window with eager faces to witness his victory.

Alas, the Bretonne now pretended not to understand the Admiral's French, and replied to all his remonstrances, commands, and objurgations, with "Bien, mon vieux!" while she banged more lustily on the rugs and covered the now apoplectic Admiral with layers of dust.

The Admiral promised his subjects—Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, I am sorry to say, indulged in a cynical smile—that the very first hour the Frenchwoman came into residence—the very first hour, mind you—he would teach her her place.

The next day the house was ready for her, and the Walk could but shudder as it looked at it: it had become so un-English. The steps were as white as snow; the garden was trim and neat; the quiet cream paint was offensively cheerful; the brass knocker was a poem; the windows gleamed, positively gleamed, in the sun, and behind them were coquettish lace curtains. The crowning offence was that every window-sill was loaded with growing flowers. Mr. Pringle said the house standing in the midst of its prim neighbours reminded him of a laughing young girl surrounded by her maiden aunts; and Miss Ruth Pennymint told him he ought to know better than to say such things in the presence of ladies.

The Admiral himself as this story proceeds, shall tell you in his own words of the startling effect produced by the arrival of the new tenants. Suffice it to say that it was totally unexpected, and that the Walk was forced to readjust its views in every particular. At the point of time we have now reached, Madame Lachesnais and her daughter, Marjolaine, were the most popular inhabitants of the Walk, and nobody had anything but good to say of them.

Wherefore, when, as recorded in the previous chapter, Mr. Pringle held up a warning hand and said "Madame!" all turned expectantly.

It was quite a little procession that now issued from Number Four. First came Nanette, the servant, spick and span in her Bretonne dress, with a cap of dazzling whiteness. On her arm was a great market-basket. She was followed by Madame herself, a tall and graceful person no longer in the first bloom of youth, but, in spite of the traces of sorrow on her face, still beautiful. She was dressed in some quiet, grey material, for she was still in half-mourning for her late husband; her delicate throat and hands were set off by exquisite old lace. She moved with a sort of floating grace, very charming to watch. There was distinction and well-bred self-possession in every line. Behind her followed her daughter, Marjolaine, a charming girl of nineteen. There is no necessity for more particular description. A charming girl of nineteen is the loveliest thing on earth, and more need not be said.

The Admiral and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn leaped to their feet as Madame appeared. Both threw their chests out and assumed their finest company manner, to such an extent, indeed, that Mrs. Poskett could not repress a contemptuous sniff.

Madame came graciously towards the group. "Ah! Good afternoon," she said, in a pleasant voice, with only the slightest trace of a French accent. "I am going marketing in Chiswick with Nanette. Nanette cannot speak a word of English, you know." Then she turned to her daughter. "Marjolaine, you may take your book under the tree, if our friends will have you." Marjolaine was talking to Mr. Basil Pringle. "It is nearly time for my singing-lesson, Maman."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Basil, I fear you find her very backward."

Basil could only murmur, "O no, Madame, I assure you—"

It was noticeable that everyone who spoke to Madame did so with a sense of subdued reverence.

Madame turned to Marjolaine. "Ask Miss Barbara to chaperone you, as I have to go out."

"Bien, Maman."

"You are to speak English, dear."

"Bien, Maman—O! I mean yes, mother!"

Sir Peter and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn both sidled up to Madame, while Mrs. Poskett stood utterly neglected and looked on with the air of an injured saint.

"May I not offer you my escort?" said both gentlemen in one breath.

"O no!" laughed Madame. "I have Nanette. Nothing can happen to me while I have Nanette."

"As if anything ever could happen in Chiswick!" said Mrs. Poskett, a little spitefully.

Madame signalled to Nanette to lead the way, and followed her past the Eyesore and out of the Walk, convoyed by the gallant Admiral as far as the corner, where he stood looking after her an appreciable time.

Meanwhile Marjolaine had run up to the railings of Number Three where Miss Ruth

Pennymint was sewing in the window.

"Miss Ruth," she cried, "is Barbara busy?"

Miss Ruth looked up from her work with a smile as she saw the eager young face. "She's closeted with Doctor Johnson."

"Will you ask her to come out when she's done?" and Marjolaine came back to the tree. Basil rose from his seat. "Pray don't move," said the young girl, prettily, "Barbara will be here in a moment. She is with Doctor Johnson."

Basil's face was very grave. It looked almost like the face of a man who finds himself in the presence of a great tragedy; or of one who knows he is fighting an insuperable obstacle. "Ah, yes," he sighed, "Doctor Johnson. Surely that is very pathetic." And he turned away and leant disconsolately against the railings, with his eyes fixed on the door of Number Three.

"Come and sit down, Missie, come and sit down," cried the Admiral, heartily.

Marjolaine accepted his invitation. "I used to be so afraid of you, Sir Peter!"

"Gobblessmysoul! Why?"

"You were so angry with us for painting our house white!"

"Hum," coughed the Admiral, looking guiltily at Mrs. Poskett and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "Ah—hum!—the others were green, ye see. But it's an admirable contrast."

Mrs. Poskett sniffed. She had not forgotten the Admiral's ignominious surrender.

Now Miss Ruth and Miss Barbara came out of their house, hand in hand, as usual. Miss Ruth was, as we are aware, considerably older than her sister, and still treated her like a pet child. Barbara disengaged herself as soon as she caught sight of Marjolaine, rushed at her with bird-like hops, and pecked a little kiss off each cheek as a bird pecks at a cherry.

"Oh, Marjolaine, dearest!" she cried with enthusiasm, "Doctor Johnson has been most extraordinarily eloquent!" The two girls walked away together with their arms gracefully entwined around each other's waists. Ruth joined the others under the tree.

"Good afternoon," she said, "Dear Barbara!—She has just had her hour with the parrot. Her memories of Lieutenant Charles are at their liveliest."

Mr. Basil, who had never taken his eyes off Barbara, heaved a soul-rending sigh, and came up to Miss Ruth.

"Very unwholesome, *I* think," said Mrs. Poskett, sharply. Miss Ruth explained to Basil: "Lieutenant Charles was in His Majesty's Navy, you know, and dear Barbara was affianced to him."

"So I have heard," answered Basil, coldly. As a matter of fact, he had heard it on an average twice every day. Ruth went on relentlessly, "Unhappily he was abruptly removed from this earthly sphere."

Bare politeness forced Basil to show some interest. After all, Ruth was Barbara's sister. "I presume he fell in battle?"

"Say rather in single combat."

The Admiral with difficulty suppressed a guffaw. He whispered to Basil with a hoarse chuckle, "As a matter of fact he was knocked on the head outside a gin-shop."

"But," the unconscious Ruth went on, "he had bestowed a token of his affection on dear Barbara, in the shape of the remarkable bird you may have seen."

Basil had seen him often and had heard him constantly. For whenever the bird was left alone, he filled the air incessantly with ear-piercing shrieks.

"Doctor Johnson," continued Ruth, "named after the great Lexicographer in consideration of his astonishing fluency of speech. Doctor Johnson is Barbara's only consolation."

Basil suppressed a groan. The obstacle! The obstacle!

"Yes, dear," said Barbara, who had come up with Marjolaine. She spoke with pretty melancholy, but with a side-glance at Basil. "Yes, dear, he speaks with Charles's voice, and says the very things Charles used to say."

Basil moved away. This was almost more than he could bear.

"How lovely!" cried Marjolaine. "I wish I could hear him!"

"Ah, no!" Barbara's chubby face fell into the nearest approach to solemnity she could manage. "Not even you may share that melancholy joy. The things he says are too sacred."

Sir Peter had sidled up to Basil. "I tell you, sir, that bird's language would silence Billingsgate. The atmosphere of that room must be solid, sir—solid." Basil stared at him with amazed reproof, and the Admiral turned to Marjolaine. "Well, Missie, we all hope you 've grown to like the Walk?"

"I love it! And so does Maman."

The Admiral grew enthusiastic. He turned towards the houses glowing in the late sun. "It is a sheltered haven. Look at it! A haven of content! What says the poet? 'The world forgetting, by the world forgot.'"

All had turned with him. They were just an ordinary, every-day set of people. There was not a poet among them, if we except Basil, and yet the Walk, basking in the evening sun, touched some chord in each heart. The Admiral saw his flag drooping in the still air, and remembered his fighting days; Mrs. Poskett thought of Sempronius, and her tea-kettle simmering on the hob; Ruth was grateful for the shelter her little house had given her in her misfortune; Barbara thought of Doctor Johnson and—must I say it?—of Basil; Basil thought of Barbara; Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn thought of patient, unattractive Selina, and the four baby girls; Marjolaine, in her fresh girlhood, could only think of how pretty the flowers looked in the window.

Barbara exclaimed, "When the sunlight falls on it so, how lovely it is!"

Basil looked into her blue eyes, and murmured, "It reminds me of the music I am at work on."

"What is that?" cried Marjolaine. "It sounds beautiful—through the wall."

The musician's enthusiasm was kindled; he grew eloquent. "It is by a new German composer: a man called Beethoven. My old violin-master, Kreutzer, sent it me.—Ah! These new Germans! They are so complicated; so difficult. I am old-fashioned, you know. I had the honour of playing under Mr. Haydn at the Salomon concerts. Yes! and in the very first performance of his immortal Oratorio, 'The Creation,' at Worcester. So perhaps I am prejudiced. Yet this new music is very wonderful; very heart-searching." He stopped abruptly, realising he was talking to deaf ears. Sir Peter came to his rescue.

"I don't know anything about your new-fangled fiddle-faddles; but, by Jehoshaphat, Pringle, play me a hornpipe, and I 'll dance till your arms drop off!"

He hummed the tune, and with amazing agility sketched a few steps, while Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn put up his quizzing glass and eyed him with a superior smile. "Oh!" laughed Marjolaine, clapping her hands, "you must teach me!"

"That I will, Missie! and the sooner the better."

Mrs. Poskett was furious. "No fool like an old fool," she whispered in Ruth's ear.

Barbara, who had been up to Mrs. Poskett's gate to stroke Sempronius, came running down with a little cry of horror. She pointed to the frouzy figure of the Eyesore. "Look! The Eyesore 's going to smoke!"

And, sure enough, after removing an indescribable handkerchief, a greasy newspaper, obviously containing his lunch, half an apple, a large piece of cheese, a huge pocket-knife, and a lump of coal he had picked up in the road, the Eyesore had dragged out a horrible little clay pipe and a dreadful little paper packet of tobacco. The Walk stood petrified. When the Eyesore smoked, everybody had to go indoors and shut their windows.

"His poisonous tobacco!" cried Ruth. "Can you not speak to him, Admiral?"

"I can, Madam, but he'll answer back."

"And then," said Mrs. Poskett somewhat tartly, "of course you are helpless."

"Not at all, ma'am. I hope I can swear with any man; but—the ladies!"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had been observing the Eyesore. "Thank heaven," he whispered, "his pipe won't draw."

For the Eyesore was trying to blow through the stem, was knocking his pipe on the palm of his hand, was endeavouring to run a straw through it: all without success. Finally, in an access of rage, he tossed it aside and sullenly resumed his fishing. A sigh of relief went up from the whole Walk. They were saved.

Now a quaint figure came slowly round the corner. "Ah!" cried Basil, "here is our good Doctor Sternroyd!"

"With his books, as usual," added Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "What a brain!"

"Old dryasdust!" laughed Sir Peter. But pointing to the Doctor, Basil motioned them all to silence.

And, to be sure, the Doctor was worth looking at. He was dressed in the fashion of fifty years before. Indeed, I should doubt whether in all those fifty years he had had a new suit of clothes. On his head was a venerable hat of indefinite shape; under his left arm a great bundle of old books; under his right a venerable umbrella of generous proportions, which had once been green. Fortunately his coat had originally been snuff-coloured, so that the spilled snuff made no difference to it. His small-clothes were shabby; his lean shanks were encased in grey worsted stockings, and the great silver buckles on his shoes were tarnished.

At the present moment, however, it was not so much his appearance as his actions that

arrested the Walk's attention. He had come in dreamily as usual with his lack-lustre eyes seeing nothing in spite of their great silver-rimmed spectacles. Suddenly his attention was attracted by something lying at his feet. He stopped, picked it up laboriously, and examined it minutely, pushing his spectacles over his forehead for the purpose.

"Bless the man!" cried Mrs. Poskett. "He 's picked up the Eyesore's filthy pipe!"

And now he was exhibiting all the symptoms of frantic joy. Utterly unconscious of the people watching him, he indulged in delighted chuckles, and his withered old legs quite independently of their master's volition executed a sort of grotesque dance. He looked very much like a crane that had caught a fish.

"But why the step-dance?" exclaimed Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, with a laugh.

Sir Peter hailed him. "Doctor Sternroyd, ahoy!"

The Doctor looked from one to the other in genuine amazement. It was evident his mind had been wandering in some remote world.

"Dear me! Tut, tut!" he stammered. "I had not observed you!" Then, with a radiant face, "Ah, my friends, congratulate me!"

All gathered round him, and the Admiral asked, "What about, Doctor?"

"This," said the reverend gentleman, holding up the trophy. "This. A beautiful specimen of an early Elizabethan tobacco-pipe!"

It was with the greatest difficulty the Admiral restrained a great burst of laughter from the onlookers. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn got as far as "That, sir? Why, that's—" when a tremendous dig from the Admiral's elbow deprived him of his wind, and sent him backward clucking like an infuriated turkey-cock.

"I do not wonder at your surprise," continued the antiquary. "Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, they are sometimes found in the alluvial deposit of the Thames; but even my friend, the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose specialty they are, does not possess so perfect a specimen in his entire collection."

Again the Admiral was obliged to exercise all his authority in order to suppress unseemly mirth or explanations. Doctor Sternroyd went on with the tone of regret assumed by a man of learning in the presence of an ignorant and unappreciative audience. "Ah, you don't understand the value of these things. Out of this fragment it is possible to reconstruct an entire epoch. I see Sir Walter Raleigh's fleet bringing home the fragrant weed from the distant plantations; I see him enjoying its vapours in his pleasaunce at Sherborne; I see Drake solacing himself with it on board the Golden Hind. Yes, yes, I shall read a paper on it.—Ah! if only my dear wife, my beloved Araminta, were here now!" With mingled melancholy and triumph he drifted across the lawn and into his house—the last house of the crescent.

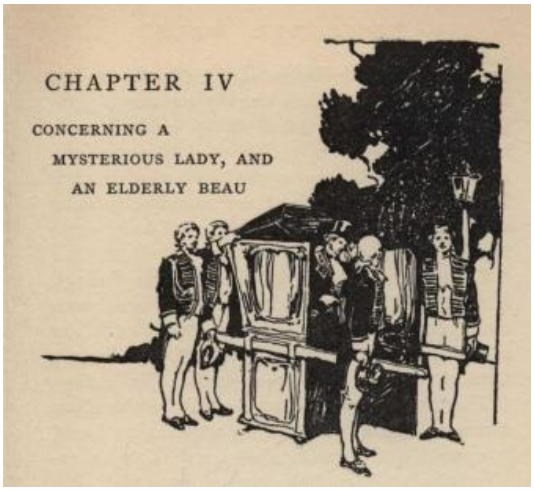
"Amazing!" said Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn; "but why would n't you let me tell him, Sir Peter?"

There was a wistful look on Sir Peter's face as he replied. "Ah, Brooke! We all live on our illusions. The more we believe, the happier we are!"

This was beyond Brooke; but Miss Ruth understood and sighed her assent.

CHAPTER IV

CONCERNING A MYSTERIOUS LADY, AND AN ELDERLY BEAU



Chapter IV headpiece

This was evidently to be a memorable afternoon in the annals of Pomander Walk; for no sooner had it recovered from its mirth over the Doctor's antiquarian discovery than Jim, who had been training the sweet peas at the corner of the Admiral's house, shouted hoarsely:

"Admiral! Pirate in the offing!"

Such a startling announcement was well calculated to silence all laughter; and the imposing figure who now appeared round the corner certainly did nothing to encourage mirth: a very tall, very gaunt, very bony lady, severely but richly dressed; her face hidden in the remote recesses of a more than usually capacious poke bonnet. She was followed by an enormous footman carrying a gold-headed cane in one hand, while a fat pug reposed on his other arm. The Walk was paralysed and could only stare and gasp. Who was she? Where did she come from? Whom did she want?

She stopped and examined the Eyesore through her uplifted *face-à-main*, as if he had been some strange, unpleasant animal. "Fellow," she said, "is this Pomander Lane?" A shudder ran through the Walk. Pomander *Lane*, indeed!—The only answer the lady got from the Eyesore was that at that precise moment he found it agreeable to scratch his back. With an exclamation of disgust she turned from him only to find herself face to face with Jim. Now Jim was not pretty to look at.

"Fellow, is this Pomander Lane?" she repeated.

"You 've a-lost yer bearin's, mum," replied the old tar huskily and not too cordially.

"What savages!" muttered the Lady as she turned to Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "You! Is this Pomander Lane?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had laid himself out to fascinate her with his courtliest manner, but the "You!" with which she addressed him aroused the turkey-cock within him, and it was an icy and raging Brooke-Hoskyn who replied, "This, ma'am, is Pomander *Walk*!"

"Same thing," said the Lady contemptuously.

"Excuse me, ma'am—!" exclaimed Sir Peter hotly.

But she waved him aside and proceeded in a tone intended to be ingratiating, and therefore more offensive than any tone she could have chosen, "My good people"—imagine the Walk's feelings!—"I have undertaken to look after the morals of this part of your parish. I have made it my duty to give advice and distribute alms."

Morals—parish—advice—alms! Had the Walk ever heard such words uttered within its genteel precincts? The Lady turned to Ruth, who happened to be at her side. "Where are your children?"

Ruth stood aghast. She could only breathe indignantly, "I am a spinster."

"Are there no children?" said the Lady reproachfully.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's nurse happened to pass at the moment on her way into the house. The Lady stopped her. "Ah, yes." Mrs. Poskett and the Admiral had sunk in helpless surprise on the bench under the elm. The Lady turned to them. "The father and mother, I suppose?"

Mrs. Poskett and the Admiral started apart, as if they had been shocked by a galvanic battery. Mrs. Poskett uttered an indignant scream; the Admiral could only gasp, "Gobblessmysoul!"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, purple in the face, came clucking down. "This, ma'am, is my youngest.

The youngest of four—at present."

The Lady looked him up and down. "I will give your wife instructions about their management —"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn danced with rage. "You'll—haha!—She'll teach Selina!—Hoho!—Oh, that's good!"

But the Lady had caught sight of Marjolaine, who with Barbara was standing by the Gazebo. Both young ladies, I regret to say, were laughing immoderately. Brushing the Admiral aside, she sailed imposingly across to them and addressed Marjolaine, who was by this time looking demure, and overdoing it.

"What do I see?" said the Lady severely, examining Marjolaine through her glasses. "Curls? At your age, curls? Fie!" Then shaking a lank finger at her, "Mind! your hair must be quite straight when next I come."

To the delight of the Walk Marjolaine made a pretty and submissive curtsey, and answered, "Yes, ma'am; but don't come again in a hurry. Give me lots and lots of time!"

Meanwhile Mrs. Poskett and Ruth had been urging the Admiral on. Now he approached the Lady in his quarter-deck manner, and said,

"Madam—hum—we give alms, and we do not take advice. You 're on the wrong tack. You 're out of your reckoning." Then, pointing grandly to the only entrance to the Walk, "That is your course for Pomander Lane."

"Yes," said Brooke-Hoskyn, with the same action, "That!"

"Yes," said all the ladies, pointing melodramatically to the corner, "That!"

"Jim," ordered the Admiral, "pilot the lady out."

"Ay, ay, sir."

The Lady eyed them all in turn through her *face-à-main*. "Very well," she said, with magnificent scorn. "I was told I should have difficulty here. I was told you only go to church twice on Sundays. I did not expect to find you so bad as you are. I shall come again. I am not so easily beaten. I shall certainly come again!"

In grim silence she gathered her skirts about her and departed as she had come, followed by the footman and the fat pug.

When she had turned the corner the Walk once more indulged in a burst of laughter.

"What a figure of fun!" cried Ruth.

"I gave here her sailing orders—what?" chuckled the Admiral.

And Mrs. Poskett gazed into his face with admiration.

"What a wonderful man you are, Sir Peter!"

When they had all recovered, Basil came to Marjolaine and eagerly reminded her it was high time for her singing-lesson.

Marjolaine appealed to Barbara: "Maman told me to ask you to come with me."

Barbara gave a little hop of delight, but Ruth exclaimed, "Shall I take your place, dear?"

"No, no," cried Barbara, almost as if she were in a fright, "I love to hear her." Barbara, Marjolaine, and Basil moved slowly towards Number Three, while Ruth approached Mrs. Poskett. "Will you come in and take a dish of tea?"

"No," replied Mrs. Poskett, "no, thank you," and then, with a giggle, "I'm going—you'll never guess!—I 'm going to comb my wig."

Seeing the ladies all strolling towards their houses the Admiral once more challenged Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn to play off the rubber at quoits. But he declined. "I think not, Sir Peter. Selina will be expecting me."

Mrs. Poskett stopped. "I wonder you can bear to leave her so much alone."

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn felt the implied reproach. With a countenance full of woe, he replied, "It tears my heart-strings, ma'am; but she will have it so. 'Brooke,' she says—or 'Jerome,' as the case may be—'your place is in the fashionable world, among the hote tonn.' So I sacrifice my inclination to her pleasure."

"How unselfish of you!" said Ruth.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn continued more cheerfully. "She has many innocent pastimes. At the present moment the dear soul is joyously darning my socks."

By this time Mrs. Poskett and the other ladies were on their respective door-steps. Mrs. Poskett gave a startled cry and called the Admiral's attention to the corner of the Walk, where four men in livery had just deposited a sedan chair. "Company, Sir Peter!" she cried.

Sir Peter turned abruptly and examined the person who was with difficulty emerging from the sedan. "Eh?— Gobblessmysoul! Is it possible?— My old friend, Lord Otford!" He bustled up to

the newcomer, shouting "Otford! Otford!"

Now the name had had a magical effect on Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. At the sound of it the colour had all vanished from his fat cheeks, the strength seemed to have gone out of his legs, and his knees were knocking together. "Lord Otford, by all that's unlucky!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Poskett had swept back to the elm. She happened to have a very becoming dress on, and she was determined the noble lord should see it. She caught sight of Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's face. "What's the matter?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn pulled himself together with a mighty effort. "Nothing, ma'am." Then with great dignity, "He and I differ in politics. There might be bloodshed." And while Mrs. Poskett exclaimed "Well, I never!" he had dashed into his house as a rabbit dashes into its burrow.

Mrs. Poskett sailed up to her house trying to catch his lordship's eye. I am afraid all the ladies were anxious to be noticed, for all lingered at their doors. A real, live lord was not an ordinary sight in Pomander Walk. And this one happened to be a handsome one; well set up, dressed in the height of fashion, yet quietly, as a gentleman should dress; and carrying his forty-five years as though they had been no more than thirty.

"You're looking well, Peter!" he exclaimed, still shaking the Admiral by the hand.

"My dear Jack! My dear old Jack!" cried the latter. "Here! come into the house!"

"No, no," laughed his friend, with a suspicious glance at the diminutive window. "Stuffy. No. Looks pleasant under the elm."

"Why, come along, then!" shouted the Admiral, dragging him towards the tree.

Lord Otford took off his hat to Mrs. Poskett with an elaborate bow. "I say, Peter, in clover, you rascal!"

"Dam fine woman—what?"

Here Lord Otford caught sight of Marjolaine just disappearing in the doorway of Number Three. He stopped short. "Ay, and pretty gel on door-step." Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, "By Jove!"

"Dainty little thing, eh?" said the Admiral with a chuckle.

"Yes," replied the nobleman, pensively. "Reminds me vaguely—" but he changed the subject. "Well! You're hale and hearty!"

"Nothing amiss with you, neither," laughed Sir Peter, sitting on the bench and drawing his friend down beside him. "I am glad to see you! Thought you was in Russia."

"Got home a month ago, Peter. Not married yet?"

"Peter Antrobus married? That's a good 'un." Up went the Admiral's finger to his nose. "No, my Lord. All women, yes. One woman, no!"

"Sure nobody can hear us?"

Sir Peter looked round cautiously. Save for the Eyesore, absorbed in his placid effort to catch fish, there was no sign of life in the Walk. Nobody was visible at the windows. From Number Three came the sound of a fresh young voice singing scales and arpeggios.

"Quite safe, Jack," said he.

"Peter, I want your help."

"Woman?" asked Sir Peter.

"Yes. Not my woman, though, this time. It's about my boy—Jack."

"Aha! Got into a mess? Chip of the old block—what?"

"No, no. Marriage."

"Gobblessmysoul! How old is he?"

"Twenty-five."

"Good Lord!"

"I want to see Jack settled. There 's the succession to think of."

"You talk as though you was a king."

"Well, so I am, in a small way. Think of the estate! I want Jack to take the reins."

"How can he, when he 's on the sea?"

"He's to retire as soon as he gets his Captaincy."

The Admiral jumped up. "Retire! Now! With Boney ready to gobble us up!"

Otford drew him down again. "Don't you see? With all this battle and bloodshed, now's the time for Jack to give me a grandson. He 's my only child, remember. Why, hang it, man, if he was to die without issue, the title and the estates would go to that infernal whig scoundrel, James Sayle."

"That won't do," Sir Peter assented, wisely nodding his head.

"Of course it won't. Now, there's old Wendover's gel—Caroline Thring."

CAROLINE THRING

The Admiral made a wry face. "Caroline Thring? I've heard of her. Never seen her: but heard of her. Eccentric party, ain't she? And did n't I hear there was an affair with Young Beauchamp?"

"That's fallen through. She's an estimable person."

"Ugh," said the Admiral.

"People call her eccentric," Lord Otford continued, hotly, "because she goes about doing good—distributing alms—"

The Admiral was about to exclaim, but Otford gave him no time. "You 're prejudiced, you old reprobate. Wendover 's willing, and there's nothing in the way. The estates join. She's sole heiress. Gad, sir, that alliance would make Jack the biggest man in the Three Kingdoms."

"Is Jack fond of her?"

"Does n't object to her. Hesitates. Says he don't want to marry at all. Says he has n't had his fling."

"Well—what's it all got to do with me?"

"Ever since Jack's been home on leave, he's done nothing but talk about you—"

"Good lad!" cried Sir Peter, slapping his thigh. "I loved him when he was a middy on board the *Termagant*."

"And he loves you. Coming to look you up. To-day, very likely. When he comes, refer to Caroline—carelessly. Say what a fine gel she is. Don't say a word about the estate. These young whipper-snappers have such high-and-mighty ideas about marrying for money. Refer to young Beauchamp. Say in your time young fellers did n't let other young fellers cut 'em out. See?"

"You 're a wily old fox, Jack. But, hark'ee! Sure he's not in love with anybody else?"

"He says he is n't. Oh, there may be a Spanish Senorita!—Gad! I should almost be ashamed of him if there wasn't!—But there's no—no—"

"No Lucy Pryor?" said the Admiral carelessly.

The name seemed to fall on Lord Otford like a blow. He sat quite still a moment, looking

straight before him into who knows what memories. At last he said very sadly, "No. No Lucy Pryor."

The Admiral realised his own tactlessness. He took Lord Otford's hand. "I beg your pardon, Jack. I 'm sorry."

"It still hurts, Peter," said his Lordship with a wistful smile. "Like an old bullet.—Well! You 'll do what you can, eh?—I don't want you to overdo it. Just edge him in the right direction."

"Keep his eye in the wind, what?"

"That's it.—Well? Any new-comers in the Walk?"

"Yes," chuckled the Admiral, "two oil lamps. One in front of my house, and one in front of Sternroyd's. They wanted to give us their new-fangled, stinking gas, but the whole Walk mutinied."

"Very fine, but—"

"They 're only used when there's no moon."

"But I meant new people!"

"Oh! Ah! Yes!—" Then with a sort of smack of the lips indicative of the highest appreciation, "A French widow and her daughter."

At once Lord Otford showed a lively interest. "French, eh?—What? the little gel I saw going in?"

"Yes," answered the Admiral, rising and leading his friend towards the Gazebo where his whisper would no longer make the windows of the Walk rattle. "Yes. They're not really French, y' know. Mother's the widow of a Frenchman. Madame Lachesnais."

This sounded very dull. His Lordship stifled a yawn, but he noticed the Admiral's kindling eye, and felt constrained to continue the subject.

"Pleasant?"

"De-lightful!" answered Sir Peter, kissing the tips of his fingers at an imaginary ideal. "The Walk was shy of 'em at first. So was I. Thought they was foreigners. Foreigners are all very well for you and me, Jack. We 're men o' the world. But think of Mrs. Poskett! Think of the Misses Pennymint! Think of Mr. and Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn!"

Lord Otford started slightly at the last name.

"Eh? Mr. and Mrs. what?"

"Brooke-Hoskyn. Sh!" pointing to the house with his thumb. "Very distinguished man. Moves in the highest circles. Hote tonn, Jack. Dines in town regularly four times a week."

"Man of family?" asked Lord Otford.

"Family?" roared the Admiral. "Well, I should say so. Four little gels in five years, and more to come! Never met him?"

"I seem to remember a man called Hoskyn," said his friend nonchalantly.

The Admiral shook his head in dismissal of the undistinguished Hoskyn. "No, no. This is Brooke-Hoskyn; Brooke—h'm—Hoskyn; with a hyphen."

Lord Otford had had enough of Brooke-Hoskyn. "Go on about the French widow."

"Well, one morning their shay was signalled from the back of the Misses Pennymint. We'd all been watching for their coming, y' know, because of their house having been painted white—but that's another yarn altogether. Shays can't get beyond the corner of Pomander Lane; so I had time to put on my uniform, and my medals, and my cocked hat—"

"Meant to show 'em you was Admiral on your own quarter-deck, eh?"

"That's it. And then—" the Admiral glowed with enthusiasm—"well, then Madame came round the corner; and then Mademerzell. They did n't walk, Jack, they floated. And what did I do? I just sneaked back into harbour, and struck my colours. Yes!— She was the most gracious creature I 'd ever seen. And the gel—! Well, you saw her." He paused for a moment, and then added in a curiously subdued voice: "They brought something new into the Walk."

Lord Otford looked at him enquiringly. "What do you mean?"

It was some little time before Sir Peter answered. He sat gazing into vacancy a moment, like a man who is remembering happier things, calling up a mental picture of a beautiful landscape—or perhaps of a beautiful face—suddenly smitten by the recollection of his own youth. At last, with something like a sigh he went on.

"We're rather an elderly lot, y'know. Beyond our springtime, Jack, and that's the truth. When we sit and think, we think of the past, and try not to think of the future. And, suddenly, here was this Grace and Beauty and Youth in the midst of us. It gave the Walk a shock, I can tell ye. All the women lay-to in repairing-dock for days. Mrs. Poskett never showed her nose till she 'd got a new wig from town; Pringle tells me he caught poor little Barbara Pennymint looking at herself in the

glass and crying; and Brooke-Hoskyn says his wife, who had watched 'em come from her window, not being able to get downstairs, poor soul, sobbed her heart out and made him swear he loved her."

"By Jove!" cried Lord Otford, "you make me want to see these paragons!"

"Well, Madame 's only gone shopping. She 'll be back directly. Wait, and I 'll present you."

"No," said his friend, signalling to the sedan-bearers. "Not to-day. I'm on my way to old Wendover, at Brentford."

"Ah! That marriage! Well, I hope I shall see Jack soon."

"You'll help me, won't you?"

"I will. I will. God bless you."

Sir Peter escorted his friend to the sedan; saw him safely into it and walked at its side until it turned the corner. As he came back he found himself face to face with Marjolaine, who had finished her lesson and was coming out of Number Three with a book in her hand.

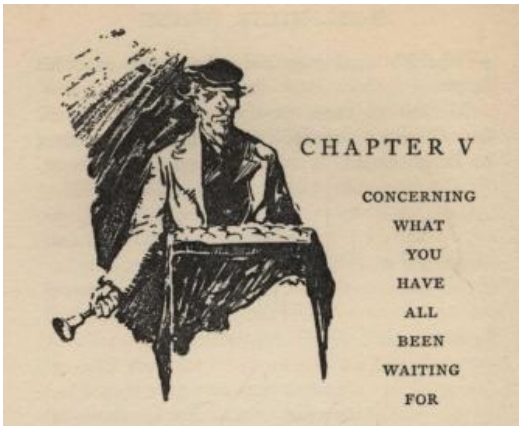
"There, now, Missie," he cried, "if you'd come a moment earlier, I'd have presented you to a very great man!"

"Oh?"

At his door the Admiral put his hand up to his mouth and whispered confidentially—a confidential whisper which could have been heard the other side of the river—"I say!—We 'll have a go at that horn-pipe by-and-by—what?" And chuckling he went into his house.

Marjolaine came slowly to the elm, seated herself, and proceeded to read the "Adventures of Telemachus."

CHAPTER V
CONCERNING WHAT YOU HAVE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR



Chapter V headpiece

The sun shone; the thrush sang; the leaves of the elm rustled; the great river flowed silently; the breeze came and kissed Marjolaine and whispered "Wake up! Wake up! Something is going to happen!" But she could not hear. She only thought Telemachus was even duller than usual, and as she read of Mentor she thought of the Reverend Doctor Sternroyd. Presently—whether it was the breeze that blew her thoughts away, or the singing of the thrush, I cannot say—she lost the thread of the story; stopped thinking at all; and just sat with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, looking with her great brown eyes into—what?

The Eyesore saw her. I cannot dip into the Eyesore's mind. I cannot tell you what influenced him. I only know he grew restless. He looked at her over his shoulder once or twice as she sat there, "In maiden meditation, fancy free," and suddenly he got up, laid his rod carefully across the chains, and stole out on tip-toe. Was it a glimmering sense that he was no company for this pretty maid lost in thought? Was it a dim realisation that his ungainly figure had no business to intrude on her meditations? Whatever the cause, he stole out on tip-toe and was lost to sight.

Perhaps he was only thirsty.

Marjolaine did not notice his going. Nor did she see Jack come. Jack came apparently out of the river. As a matter of fact he tied his boat to a ring at the foot of Pomander Stairs and leaped on shore. A delightful young fellow, the sort of young man you take to, the moment you set eyes on him. Obviously a sailor. His lieutenant's undress jacket was over his arm. A wiry figure, lissome as a willow and as tough as steel; a face tanned by many suns; true sailor's eyes looking frankly and fearlessly at the world.

He was evidently in search of something or somebody. He came down the Walk examining all the houses curiously; and suddenly he found himself face to face with Marjolaine.

His shadow fell across her book. She looked up; and their eyes met.

Marjolaine was much too well-bred to show any surprise, but, as a matter of fact, she was very much surprised indeed. Here was a new and terrible situation. A total stranger standing looking at her; her mother and Nanette gone to Chiswick; the Admiral shut in his house; and not another soul in sight. Even the Eyesore would have been a sort of moral support, but even the Eyesore had deserted her. However: Courage! If she went on with her book the stranger would go. So she went on with her book, grimly.

But the stranger did not move. When a young sailor-man sees an extremely pretty girl, his instinct is to stand still and look. Jack stood still. I will not say he was not nervous. He was. But he conquered his nervousness, like the brave fellow he was, and stood his ground.

Marjolaine began to get angry. This was an outrage. She looked up at him once more, and this time there was a flash in her eyes which was meant to annihilate him. It did. If she had not looked up, he might ultimately have gone reluctantly away. But this look finished him and rooted him to the spot.

Marjolaine returned to her book. But Telemachus had taken on a new shape. He had laughing blue eyes and he carried a naval jacket with gold buttons over his arm. Also he stood looking at her. This was intolerable. If the stranger would not move, she must. It went horribly against her pride to retreat in the face of the enemy, but if the enemy would n't retreat, what were you to do?

She closed the book with an angry bang and rose to her feet. The movement roused Jack to a sense of his own inexplicable behaviour.

"I beg your pardon!" he stammered, involuntarily.

Marjolaine eyed him haughtily from head to foot. She had read somewhere that this is what a well-bred young woman should do under similar circumstances.

"Why?" said she, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh, I'm so glad you said 'Why?'" cried Jack, with evident relief.

Marjolaine had not expected this. She was genuinely puzzled and a little off her guard. She could only repeat, but this time quite naturally, "Why?"

"Well," said Jack, very volubly, "if you'd said, 'There's no occasion,' or if you hadn't said anything, our conversation would have been finished, you know."

Marjolaine could have stamped with vexation. Of course she ought to have said nothing. And here she was entrapped into what this very bold young man described as a "conversation"!

"The conversation is finished," she said, trying to pass him.

But he held up his hand. "No. It's my turn to ask you a question!"

"*Hein?*" she cried, more than ever on her dignity. He had the impudence to accuse her of asking him a question!

Jack remembered his manners. With a low bow he presented himself. "I 'm Jack Sayle, at your service. I 'm a lieutenant in the Navy; and I 've just rowed down from Richmond—three miles. I 'm home on leave; and I 'm looking for an old friend."

"All that is very interesting," said Marjolaine, "but it is n't a question," and once more she tried to get by.

Jack felt rather injured. She might have shown a little more interest in the autobiography he had just favoured her with. "I thought it was polite to tell you who I was. As for the question: it 's uncommon hot, and when I saw this terrace I said there 'd be sure to be one here. Is there?"

"What?" cried Marjolaine, this time really stamping her foot.

"An inn?"

"Certainly not."

"Can't you tell me where there is one?"

"I do not frequent them," answered she, freezingly.

"No?" said Jack, crestfallen. "Sorry. I am dry. You see, I 've rowed all the way from Richmond. Five miles."

Marjolaine had manoeuvred safely inside her own gate. She felt she could afford a parting shot at him. "I 'm afraid you 'll have to row all the way back again. Good afternoon." By this time her hand grasped the handle of the door.

Jack addressed the world in general. "Curious, how different everything is."

Marjolaine turned. "Different what is?"

"Why, if I 'd met an old gentleman outside his house in Spain, and he 'd seen how I was suffering, he 'd have said his house was mine."

Marjolaine indignantly came down one step. "I am not an old gentleman; I haven't any house in Spain; and it's a shame to say I 'm inhospitable!"

Jack's face wore an inscrutable smile. He protested. "I didn't. I only said it was different."

Marjolaine came back to the gate.

"Are you really suffering?" she asked.

Jack turned away to hide an unmistakable grin. He spoke in a hollow voice. "Intolerably." Then he turned to her with a haggard countenance. "Look at my face!"

Marjolaine came out of the gate. Ah, Marjolaine! The moth and the candle!

"I can't ask you in, because Maman and Nanette are out."

Jack staggered to the seat under the elm, and sank on it like a man in the last stage of exhaustion. "It's of no consequence. I must row back. Seven miles. Against the tide. Ah, well!"

Marjolaine was genuinely sorry for him. He really was very good-looking.

"I'm sure Maman would ask you in, if she were here."

"I 'm quite sure of that."

"And I think she would not like me to be—as you say—inhospitable."

"I didn't say it; but I'm quite sure she would n't."

Marjolaine's kind little heart was quite melted. This good-looking young man spoke so very humbly.

"I might—I might bring you out something—"

A gleam of triumph crossed Jack's face, but he answered with the air of a martyr: "Oh! don't trouble!"

Marjolaine's sense of the proprieties got the better of her again. "What would the neighbours say if they saw me feeding an entire stranger?"

Jack leaped up in indignant protest. "But I 'm not! I 've told you my name. That's as much as anybody ever knows about anybody!"

Marjolaine was now in the shadow of the elm. She examined every house in the Walk. "Number One 's asleep; Number Two 's combing her wig; Number Three 's working; Number Five's nursing one of the four; and Number Six"—poor Doctor Sternroyd!—"doesn't matter. I 'll risk it." She turned to go in, but stopped. "What would you like?"

Jack protested, "Oh, my dear young lady!—It's not for me to say. Anything you offer me—anything!"

Ticking the items off on her pretty fingers, Marjolaine enumerated the various beverages stored in her mother's cupboard. "We have elderberry wine; cowslip wine; red-currant wine; and gooseberry wine."

Jack's face was a study. It had grown so long that Marjolaine exclaimed with genuine sympathy, "Why, you look quite ill! Which do you say?"

It was a choice between poison and discourtesy, but Jack was equal to it. "I 've been brought up very simply. I should never have the presumption to ask for any of those. Have n't you any ale?"

"Ale!" cried Marjolaine, "how low!"

"I said I 'd been brought up simply."

"We have no ale."

Before he could stop himself Jack had cried "And this is England!"

But Marjolaine had had an idea. "I know! There 's Maman's claret. She takes it for her health. What do you say to *that*?"

Jack had not tried it, and did n't know what he might be likely to say to it. He could only stammer, "Oh, it's better than—better than—" he was going to add elderberry, or cowslip, but caught himself up in time—"better than ale."

"Ah!—Now, will you wait a moment under the tree?"

"I'll wait hours, anywhere!"

Marjolaine caught sight of a figure moving about in Number Three. She came on tip-toe to Jack. You see, by this time there was quite a conspiracy between them.

"No! Better!" she whispered. "Go into the Gazebo."

Jack could only stare at her. "Into the what?"

She ran across to the summer-house, Jack following her.

"Here," she cried, "in the summer-house. And keep quite still."

For a moment a horrible suspicion crossed Jack's mind. "I say! You will come back? You 're not going to leave me here to perish of thirst?"

"That would be a good joke!" she laughed.

"I 'll carve your name while you 're gone!"

"No, you won't!"

"Why not?"

"Because you don't know it!—*Voilà*!"

And before he could stop her she had tripped into the house.

Jack sat for a moment in a sort of silent rapture.

Then all he said to himself was "By George!" three times repeated; and if you don't know what that exclamation meant, I 'm sure I can't tell you.

Marjolaine had left the "Adventures of Telemachus" on the seat in the Gazebo. Under ordinary circumstances Jack would have avoided picking up a book; but this was her book; it had been in her hands; her eyes had looked at it; it was not so much a book as a part of the little goddess; so he picked it up tenderly and tenderly opened it. There, on the fly-page, was a name. —"Lucy Pryor"—Of course! Her name! Lucy Pryor—just the sort of pretty, simple name she would have. Aha! but now he'd astonish her! She should find he had carved her name, after all! Out came his sailor's knife, and to work he went, and as he carved he sang a little song to himself, the words of which were, "Lucy, Lucy, Lucy Pryor." He was not a poet.

The Eyesore came slowly round the corner. Seeing the little lady was no longer on the seat, he drew his line out of the water—I need hardly record the fact that there was no fish on it. With a sigh he seated himself on his box, with his back to the Walk; patiently he placed a new worm on the empty hook, and in a moment he was immersed in his contemplative occupation. There was utter silence in the Walk.

Then the upstairs window of Number Five was thrust open and Mr. Jerome Brooke-Hoskyn, at his ease in his shirt-sleeves, and enjoying a church-warden pipe, leant out. He was evidently conversing with his wife, and was in his tenderest mood.

MR. JEROME BROOKE-HOSKYN, AT HIS EASE

MR. JEROME BROOKE-HOSKYN, AT HIS EASE

"What a pity, my dearest Selina, you are temporarily deprived of the use of your limbs! The river is flowing by—What? Do I expect it to stop? No, of course I don't. Why check my musings? I say, the river is flowing by. Not a living thing is in sight except the Eyesore; and he enhances the beauty of his surroundings by sheer contrast. My smoke does not incommode you, my own?—You can bear it?—Dear soul! Am I the man to deprive you of an innocent pleasure?—"

He might have gone on all the afternoon in this strain, but at this moment Marjolaine came very cautiously out of her house carrying a tray on which was a bottle of claret, a tumbler, and a cake. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was immediately absorbed in this new and inexplicable phenomenon. What could it mean? He watched Marjolaine half-way across the lawn. Then in his softest and most caressing tones he exclaimed, "Why, Miss Marjory—!" Marjolaine gave a little cry and very nearly let all the things drop. She stood aghast.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn continued, "Is your mother in the Gazebo?"

Before Marjolaine could think of anything to say she had said "No."

"Indeed?—Then why this genteel refection?" Here Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was forced to look over his shoulder into the room and answer the invisible Selina. "Yes, my own. I am speaking to Miss Marjory."

Meanwhile Jack was signalling frantically to Marjolaine, who, on her part, was as frantically motioning him to keep still. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn again leant forward, and Jack vanished only just in time.

Marjolaine explained. "I—I always take a little refreshment at this hour."

It was quite obvious that Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn did not believe her.

"How singularly unobservant I am! I have never noticed it. Wait one moment. I 'll come and help you."

This would never do. "No, thank you," cried Marjolaine, "I am sure your wife wants you." And she added, as a parting shot, "She sees so little of you!"

Then taking her courage in both hands she hurried into the Gazebo, where she and Jack

stood, pictures of horror, silently awaiting Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's next move.

The latter leant far out of his window vainly endeavouring to peer round the corner. "Curious, very curious," he muttered.

"Did you hear him?" asked Marjory, in a tragic whisper.

"If he comes here I 'll punch his head," growled Jack.

"Be quiet!"—And again they both listened.

But Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's attention was engaged by Selina, and it was clear from his remarks that the dear lady was not in her pleasantest humour. "No, my dear, of course I did n't mean to go.—*Do* you think her an ugly little thing?—Matter of taste.—Oh, come! Not jealous, my own one?—Hold your hand?—Oh, certainly, if you wish it!" And down came the window with a crash and what sounded very like a fine Saxon monosyllable.

Marjolaine and Jack, hearing the window close, uttered a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness!" cried Marjolaine; and then, being a daughter of Eve, "Now you see what you 've done!"

"'Pon my honour, I 've done nothing. Just waited hours."

"Hours, indeed!" said the girl, scornfully.

"It seemed hours," answered Jack, insinuatingly. "It seemed hours—Miss—Lucy Pryor."

"Lucy Pryor? Oh! you got that out of the book! That was Maman's name before she married. My name's Lachesnais."

"Beg pardon?"

"La-ches-nais. Marjolaine Lachesnais. You don't pronounce the middle *s*."

"Are you French?"

"My father was." She had filled the tumbler with claret and was holding it out to Jack. "Never mind about all that. Make haste."

Jack rose to his feet, tumbler in hand.

"Marjolaine—? That means Marjoram, does n't it?"

"Do you know French?"

Jack bowed as he swallowed the claret. He swallowed unwisely. It was a lady's claret, and that and a lady's cigar are things to be avoided by the judicious. Indeed Jack was shaken from head to foot by a convulsive shudder. "Oh Lord!" said he involuntarily. But he pulled himself together like a man. "I beg pardon!—Know French? Very little. Marjoram—sweet Marjoram—how appropriate!"

Marjolaine was eyeing him with grave suspicion. "You are not drinking. It is Maman's claret!"

Jack gazed stonily at his half-empty tumbler. "Does she—does she take this for her health?"

"Yes. As medicine."

"As medicine—I understand."

"You said you were thirsty."

"It's a wonderful wine. Quenches your thirst at once." He put the glass away from him.

"Take some cake?" said Marjolaine.

She had forgotten to bring a knife, so Jack, sailorlike, broke the cake in two pieces.

"I say!" he cried, "you must have some too, or I shall feel greedy!" And there they sat, like two children, contentedly munching and swinging their legs.

"I shall call you Marjory," said Jack, between two bites.

"They all do," answered Marjolaine, with her mouth full.

"Do they?" asked Jack ferociously. "Who?"

Marjolaine waved her cake at the Walk in general. "Oh—the neighbours."

"Impudence!" growled Jack. But he recovered quickly. "I say! Isn't this delightful?"

"It's very strange. Do you know, you are the first young man I 've ever spoken to, in all my life?"

Jack's eyes expressed his joy. "No!—that's first-rate!"

Marjolaine stared at him with astonishment. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I hate young men."

"Then you ought to live here. Here—everybody is—oh!—so old!"

"Poor little girl," said Jack, with deep sympathy.

"Why?"

"Must be so lonely."

"Oh, no! One cannot feel lonely where there 's a river. Twice every day it brings down news from the meadows, where the flowers are, and the cattle, standing knee-deep in its margin, and the *demoiselles*—how do you say?—dragonflies—and the willows, dipping their branches in it.

And then, when the tide turns, it comes back from the great town, and sings of the ships and the crowded bridges, and the King and Queen taking their pleasure in great, golden barges. And the sea-gulls come with it, and it sings of the sea!"

Her eyes were flashing; her face was transfigured; Jack was leaning forward eagerly, and if there had been any loophole of escape for him before, there was certainly none now.

"Do you love the sea?"

"What do I know of it?" said she, coming to earth again. "I have only crossed from Dunkerque to Tilbury. But that was lovely! It was very rough; and I stood against the mast, and my hair blew all about, and I shouted for joy!—Oh! I should love to be a pirate!"

"Fine!" cried Jack, as excited as she. "Tell you what! We 'll charter a ship, and sweep the seas, and bang the enemy!"

"'We'?—Why, you're going away in a minute, and I shall never see you again."

There was a pause. Marjolaine's words had brought them both to a sense of reality. Finally Jack spoke, and his voice had a new ring of earnestness.

"Marjory—do you mean that?"

She turned wonderingly innocent eyes on him. "Why should you come again?"

"Think a moment. Let us both think. We are very young, and I know I 'm hasty. Let us sit quite still, and think hard whether we 'd like to meet again. Let us look at each other and not speak."

"LET US SIT QUITE STILL AND THINK HARD WHETHER WE 'D LIKE TO MEET AGAIN"

"LET US SIT QUITE STILL AND THINK HARD WHETHER WE'D LIKE TO MEET AGAIN"

She met his look quite frankly for a moment—but only for a moment. Slowly her head sank and her eyes half closed, and when she spoke, she spoke very shyly. "I do not see why you should not come again," she whispered.

"I see why I should! I must!—But it must be differently."

"Differently—?"

"I mustn't come on the sly. I'll get an introduction."

"But none of your friends are likely to know anybody in Pomander Walk!"

Jack leaped up. "Is this Pomander Walk?" he almost shouted. "Why, that 's what I Ve been looking for all the afternoon. That's where my friend lives—the Admiral!"

It was Marjolaine's turn to be astonished.

"Not Sir Peter Antrobus!"

"Yes!—Do you know him?"

"Why, he's the King of the Walk! He lives at Number One. If you 're quite quiet you can almost hear him snoring!"

"Why, there we are then! I'm introduced! I'm on a proper footing! The whole thing's ship-shape! O Marjory, what a relief!"

"But I don't understand—"

"Yes, you do. He 's my father's oldest friend. I served under him as a middy on board the *Termagant*. I 'm very fond of him. I 'll come and see him to-morrow!"

Marjolaine clapped her hands. "And then he can introduce you to Maman!"

"Don't you see? It's grand! I'll come and see him often—every day—twice a day. If he 's out, I can sit under the elm and wait for him—with you. Oh! are n't you glad?"

"I'm very glad you 've found your old friend," she answered demurely.

"What's to-day?"

"Quintidi. Fifth Prairial. Year Thirteen—" she replied without thinking.

Jack could only stare. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh," she laughed, "I had forgotten I was in England. Saturday."

Jack's face sank. "Then to-morrow 's Sunday. Hang. Well! I'll come on Monday. Shall you be here?"

"I am always here."

"Be under the elm." He thought a moment, and then added insidiously, "Shall you your mother about to-day?"

Marjolaine hesitated. Perhaps it would be better to wait until the proper formalities had been observed. "On Monday; when you've been introduced."

"That's it!" cried Jack. "And now I'll be off." He took both her hands in his. "Good-bye. Oh, but it's good to be alive! It's good to be young! The river is good that brought me here! The sun is good that made me thirsty!"

"And the claret was good?"

"The claret—! Nectar!—Oh, Jack!—Jack!—"

Marjolaine held up the glass, still half full.

"Finish it, then."

Jack started back in horror, but seeing the dawning surprise on her face, bravely seized the tumbler and dashed it off. Thus swiftly was his perjury avenged.

"Good-bye, little Marjory. Till Monday!"

She looked up at him wistfully. "You think you will come?"

"Think!" cried Jack; and every lover's vow was in the one word.

"Slip to your boat, quickly!" cried Marjolaine, peeping round the corner of the Gazebo. But before he could move she gave a startled cry and motioned him back. For the Muffin-man had entered the Walk ringing his bell.

"Dash it! What's that?" cried Jack.

"Keep still! It's the Muffin-man!"

"I'm off!"

"Wait!" Now she was peeping through an opening in the box-wood hedge. "Jack! The whole Walk's awake! Look!"

Jack's head was very close to hers. "I can't see; your hair's in the way. Don't move!" For a moment they stood watching.

And indeed the Walk was awake. The Muffin-man's bell had acted like magic. The Admiral and Jim were already bargaining with him. Mrs. Poskett was on her doorstep with a plate in her hand. So was Ruth Pennymint. Barbara was in the garden, and Basil was telling her just how many muffins he wanted from the upstairs window; Jane, Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's maid, was waiting impatiently; and Dr. Sternroyd had come out of his house book in hand, and was making frantic signals so as not to be overlooked. And they were all talking, and gesticulating, and calling.

"By Jove!" cried Jack excitedly, "there's old Antrobus!"

"All of them! All of them!" wailed Marjolaine.

"They 're all buying muffins—greedy pigs!—They won't see me." He made as if to dash out.

Marjolaine held him back. "Yes, they will. Let me go first. I'll get them talking, and then you can slip away." But she started back with a suppressed scream.

"What now?" cried Jack.

"Maman and Nanette!"

Yes. As ill-luck would have it Madame Lachesnais and her old servant turned the corner at this moment, and with a friendly word to each of her neighbours Madame was coming slowly towards the Gazebo.

"They must not come here!" cried Marjolaine in distress. "I cannot explain you before the whole Walk!—Is my hair straight?"

"Lovely!—Monday?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm frightened."

"Monday?" insisted Jack.

"Yes! Yes!"

But meanwhile Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had come out of his house, and taking advantage of the hubbub in the Walk had crossed—shall I say like a sleuth-hound?—more like a sleuth-cat, if there be such an animal—to the Gazebo. So that when Marjolaine came forward to intercept her mother, she ran straight into his arms.

"All right, Miss Marjory," he whispered, with something very like a wink, "I'll fetch the things for you."

"No, no!" cried Marjolaine, in agony.

Her mother caught sight of her and called her.

For a moment Marjolaine stood irresolute. Then, with an almost hysterical laugh, she ran to her mother. "Me voilà, Maman chèrie!"

Jack was peering through the hole in the hedge, looking for a chance of escape. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn put his head slily round the corner of the Gazebo—and, sure enough, just as he had suspected—there was a young man!

What with the Muffin-man, and Madame, and Marjolaine running to and fro and button-holing everybody who seemed to be inclined to drift towards the summer-house, the Walk's attention was fully occupied. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn lifted his fat hand and brought it down with a sounding thwack on Jack's shoulder.

"What the devil—?" cried Jack, turning fiercely on his assailant. And then in amazement, "Hoskyn! By all that's improbable, old Hoskyn!"

If it were possible for a large man to shrivel, the great Mr. Jerome Brooke-Hoskyn seemed to shrivel as he recognised Jack. He could only stammer, "You, sir—you!—"

"Hoskyn!" repeated Jack. And then, suspiciously, "What the devil are you doing here?"

I hate to have to write the words, but Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had all the obsequious manner of a well-trained servant. "I beg pardon, sir," he muttered, and turned to go.

But Jack caught him by the lapel of his coat. "No, no, Hoskyn; you don't get off so easily. What are you doing here?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn turned sulky. "I'm living here, sir."

"The doose you are!—Well, you're in the nick of time. Be a good fellow and fetch my hat out of the boat."

"Certainly, sir," said Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. But as he started to do so, he caught sight of the Admiral. He turned to Jack and said respectfully but firmly, "I'm very sorry, Master Jack; but I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"I'm looked up to here, sir. I should lose prestige."

Jack eyed him half with suspicion and half with mockery. "I say, Hoskyn, what's your little game?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was getting angry. "What's yours, sir?" he asked defiantly.

"What the devil do you mean?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn pointed an accusing finger at the wine and the crumbs of cake. "I mean—this."

"What of it? What do you insinuate?" cried Jack fiercely.

But Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's blood was up, and he was not to be intimidated. "It ain't right, sir. It ain't right for you to come here like a snake in the grass drinking claret and making love to our little Miss Marjory. I won't help you! I'll be damned if I do!"

"Do you mean I'm doing something underhand?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn looked at him sternly. "Well—ain't you, sir?"

"I'll devilish soon show you!" shouted Jack, trying to pass him.

But now Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn fell into a sudden panic. "Don't betray me, sir! Don't, sir!" he entreated, trying to stop him.

Jack thrust him roughly aside with an angry, "Out of my way!" and poor Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn sank on the seat in the summer-house, gasping, "Good Lord! He'll tell the whole Walk!"

Jack had acted on the spur of the moment; but now that he was face to face with all the inhabitants of the Walk a sudden shyness took hold of him and he stood irresolute. Marjolaine had sat down exhausted on the seat under the elm, and Madame Lachesnais was coming towards her. Little Barbara Pennymint was the first to see Jack. She gave a demure little scream and ran to the Admiral. "Look! A stranger!" Sir Peter was on his dignity at once. He came straight at Jack. "Now, sir—may I ask—?"

"Admiral," cried Jack, saluting.

"Eh," said the Admiral, fixing his one eye on the young man, "Gobblessmysoul! what a coincidence!" He seized Jack's hand and nearly wrung it off, while the whole Walk watched with amazed curiosity, and Marjolaine looked on with delight. "I'm delighted to see you, my lad!—Delighted!" He turned to Madame Lachesnais as the social leader of the Walk. "Madame Lachesnais!" he cried, holding Jack by the hand, "Let me have the honour of presenting my gallant young friend, the Honourable Jack Sayle, son of my old friend, Lord—"

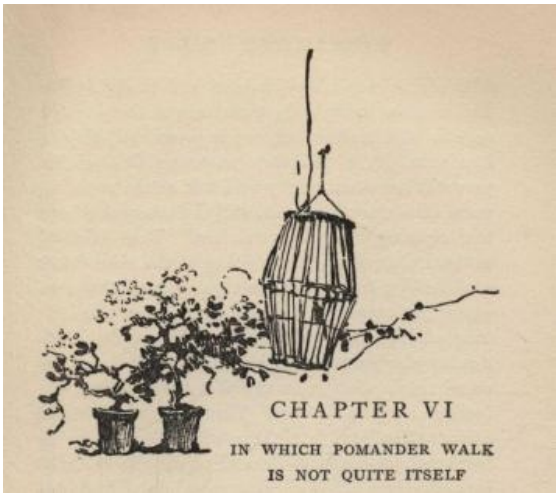
He never got any further. At the words, "Jack Sayle," Madame, who had been standing smilingly to welcome the young man, gave a sharp cry, swayed, and sank swooning in Nanette's arms.

Then what a commotion there was, to be sure! Marjolaine ran to her mother, Mrs. Poskett, Ruth and Barbara crowded round her or rushed about vaguely, crying, "Salts! Quick!" The Admiral stood petrified a moment. Then he hurried Jack towards the boat. "Get away, Jack!" Jack resisted. "But—!"

"Away with you!" insisted the Admiral in a raucous whisper. "Discretion!—They'll have to unhook her!"

But the Eyesore went on fishing.

CHAPTER VI
IN WHICH POMANDER WALK IS NOT QUITE ITSELF



Chapter VI headpiece

The Admiral was much troubled. A week had elapsed since Madame fainted, and although the mysterious process of unhooking her, together with a dash of water on her face, and the salts,

had brought her to very rapidly, a cloud had seemed to hang over the Walk since that moment. It was certainly not itself, and it had grown less like itself as the days passed. Madame was apparently quite well, yet she stayed within doors, or, if she came out, her face was more than usually sad, and she walked with slow steps, like one who bears a heavy burden of sorrow. She was not seen in church on Sunday. Marjolaine was there, bright and happy. She had assured everybody there was nothing really serious the matter with her mother: only a headache. On Monday morning Marjolaine was still her usual merry self, but as the morning wore into the afternoon and the afternoon into the evening she grew restless. The Admiral noticed that she kept on going to the river-bank and looking up and down stream as if she were expecting someone. On Tuesday she was out very early, still apparently watching. On Wednesday she grew silent, and refused to have her usual singing-lesson on the plea that she was not feeling very well. On Thursday she turned unnaturally gay, but there was a hard note in her laughter, and Sir Peter had caught her sobbing in the Gazebo. Fortunately she had not noticed him, and he was able to retire without disturbing her. But he himself was greatly disturbed. The more so as he had seen that Madame was watching her daughter intently, and that every change in Marjolaine was reflected on the elder lady's face.

Friday found Marjolaine pale and dejected; and here was midday on Saturday, and she had not yet appeared!

Could she be sickening for a serious illness? Sir Peter was nervous and anxious. He was also put out by the fact that although Jack Sayle had promised as he hurriedly rowed away, that he would come to see him on the Monday, the whole week had passed without a sign of the young lieutenant, and without any word of explanation.

But the entire Walk was nervous and anxious. It had grown so accustomed to Marjolaine's songs and merry laughter, that as she grew silent and grave, the Walk grew silent and grave with her. Mrs. Poskett's temper underwent a change for the worse, and she and Ruth Pennymint very nearly had words over a milk-can which the dairy-man had carelessly hung on the wrong railing. Ruth's ill-humour was aggravated by the behaviour of Barbara and Basil. They went about sighing and turning up the whites of their eyes; Barbara shut herself up two and three hours every day with the parrot, and Basil ground at the slow movement of the Kreutzer Sonata, repeating one particularly heart-rending passage so persistently that Ruth wanted to scream.

But the man who behaved most strangely of all was Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. That magnificent creature showed all the symptoms of a guilty conscience. It is true he strutted about the Walk, dressed as faultlessly as ever, swung his tassled cane with much of his old elegance, and took snuff with all the airy grace imaginable. And yet—and yet—! Somehow, his clothes seemed to hang loosely on him. Somehow, his hat, though poised at a rakish angle, no longer conveyed the old devil-may-care impression. His face no longer beamed with unassailable self-satisfaction. There was a furtive look in his eyes, as though he were constantly on the watch. It is a low comparison to apply, but if you have ever seen a dog who knows he has just stolen a piece of meat, you have seen Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. Once, when the Admiral, who was stubbornly resisting the universal depression, came up behind him unobserved and suddenly slapped him on the back, he screamed—he positively screamed. "Thought the Bow-street runners was after you?" roared the Admiral heartily. But the tone of fury with which he replied "Certainly not, sir! How dare you?" was so sincere that Sir Peter did not pursue the joke. Evidently he had indeed thought the runners were after him.

The Walk was like a drooping flower, and even the Eyesore felt the depressing influence; he fished less hopefully than ever, and it was noticed that he interrupted his fishing more frequently for excursions outside the bounds of Pomander Walk: excursions from which he returned wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and returned each time perhaps a trifle less steadily.

Now, all these good people had lost their usual good spirits and their cheery outlook on life merely because one little girl had left off laughing; and she had left off laughing because one very young man had not kept his word.

The servants of the Walk were very busy this Saturday morning. Jane, Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's nurse, was explaining to Abigail, Mrs. Poskett's little maid, that nothing should persuade her to continue wearing the Charity-School costume after she had risen to the dignity of domestic service. Jim was feverishly polishing the Admiral's little brass cannon. That brass cannon was the apple of the Admiral's remaining eye; and at the same time the plague of his life. On every state occasion, such as the King's birthday, or the anniversary of the Battle of Copenhagen, he would, to the great terror of the Walk, have it out, plant it pointing truculently to the opposite side of the river and, standing well away from it, apply a match. This was always an agonised moment of

suspense for the Walk. But invariably the gun refused to go off. The Admiral's expletives, however, supplied an efficient substitute. I am sorry to say the failure to explode was always due to an act of treachery on Jim's part. The Walk subscribed five shillings towards that ancient mariner's liquid refreshment, and the ancient mariner withdrew the charge in the dead of night. To-day he was polishing the gun well in view of all the houses. The King's birthday was approaching, and the Walk needed a gentle reminder that unless it wished to be stunned and to have all its windows broken, now was the time to start the usual collection.

Nanette came out of Number Four, carrying a rug and a bamboo cane, evidently bent on beating the former on the lawn. Jane drew Jim's attention to her. Then began a battle of tongues. Jim tried to explain that this was not allowed. If she wanted to beat the rug, she must do so in the back garden. Words, none of which either could understand, grew high; Abigail and Jane joined in, and the place became a veritable Babel of screaming voices and of wildly waving arms.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn opened his window violently. "What's all this?" he cried; and he was such an amazing apparition that the voices sank to sudden silence and the servants rushed, helter-skelter, into their respective houses.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was finishing his toilet. He was brushing his hair. It stood out on each side of his head like a sort of double mane, and his face looked exactly like the representations of a flaming sun on the cover of an almanac. He was carrying on a conversation with Selina, and both he and his wife were evidently in a bad humour.

"But, my own Selina," said he, "what was I to do? Be reasonable. I only wrote and told his lordship the boy was carrying on a clandestine love-affair.—No, of course I did n't sign the letter. —None of my business?—Now, Selina, if I had n't wrote he 'd have come again, and all would have been disclosed. We should have been obleeged to leave the Walk.—Drat the Walk?—Oh! fie! That is not how my ring-dove customarily coos.—What? soft words butter no parsnips?—Selina, Selina—! Does my Selina think she is in her kitchen?—Yes; I know I 've made Miss Marjory very unhappy; but we must make other people unhappy, if we 're to be happy ourselves. I 'm sorry for her, very sorry. She's a sweet creature." There was a sound of a broken tea-cup. "There you go again!—You scold me for making her unhappy, and you scold me for being sorry. There 's no pleasing you anyhow!"

In his perplexity he had brushed his hair over the top of his head, and now he looked like an angry cockatoo.

Marjolaine came slowly and dejectedly out of her house. She heard Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's voice and glanced up at him, but even his wild and wonderful appearance failed to draw a smile from her. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn could not retire, much as he would have liked to. He waved a conciliatory hair-brush at her, and cried with assumed cheerfulness, "Ah, Miss Marjory—! How do you do?" then in response to some remark from his wife, he turned and whispered peevishly, "I must speak to her; it's only polite. Don't snivel." He addressed Marjolaine again, deprecatorily, "You are looking a little pale."

Marjolaine drew herself up. It was intolerable that anybody should see she was in trouble.

"I never felt better in my life," she said defiantly.

"But more like the lily than the rose?" exclaimed Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn with a fine touch of lyricism; and then to Selina, "No; I am not talking nonsense! It was a quotation."

"How is Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn this morning?" asked Marjolaine.

"In the highest spirits!" cried Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "My dear Selina," he explained, turning towards the room, "Miss Marjory is kind enough to ask after your health, and I am telling her you are in the highest spirits. Do—not—snivel—she 'll hear you!" To Marjolaine, with a ghastly smile, "Her gaiety is infectious; positively infectious!" Some hard object, thrown with unerring aim, caught him in the small of the back. "Oh, Lord!" he cried. "Excuse me, Miss Marjory; Selina has just remembered a joke she wishes to tell me. Thus the hours pass in innocent mirth and badinage. Excuse me!" He turned away. "You really *are*—!" he cried, almost viciously; and slammed the window, and disappeared.

But Marjolaine never smiled. She moved as one who had no particular object in life. She drifted instinctively towards the river-bank although she knew that strain her eyes as she might the little boat she had looked for all the week was now less likely than ever to appear. At one moment she seemed almost inclined to speak to the Eyesore; to ask him whether he had seen what she had so long been vainly looking for. But the Eyesore was at that instant impaling a worm, and was altogether too revolting. She stood a moment looking up and down the stream, and then turned away with a great sigh.

Mrs. Poskett's great yellow cat, Sempronius, was curled up in the sun just behind the Gazebo.

Marjolaine looked at him. She and he were fast friends, and in happier times she would have had a friendly word for him and an affectionate caress. To-day, even that was too much of an effort. Fortunately Sempronius was asleep and did not notice her inattention.

Sir Peter Antrobus opened his upstair window and hung the osier cage with the thrush in it on its nail. He caught sight of the disconsolate little figure. "Missie, ahoy!" he roared, as though he were hailing a friendly craft in the offing. Marjolaine started.

"Oh, Sir Peter! You made me jump!"

"Sent a shot across your bows—what?" roared the Admiral.

"How's the thrush?" asked Marjolaine with an interest she did not feel.

"Peaky. Peaky. That confounded cat next door's been watching him. Seen him about anywhere?"

Marjolaine pointed to where Sempronius was lying wrapped in innocent slumber. "He's quite safe," she said. "There."

But the Eyesore was between him and Sir Peter, and the latter had to twist himself into what was for so portly a gentleman a very unnatural position in order to see him. "Eh? Where?"

"There," she answered, "there, behind the—" she was just going to say "Eyesore," but stopped herself in time. "Behind the Gazebo."

"Oh, there! Well, if he moves I'll kill him!"

Marjolaine wondered. Could Sir Peter tell her what she so much wanted to know? Could he, at least, be brought to talk about what her heart was full of?

"Sir Peter," she said, with as much of her old cheerfulness as she could summon, and with that pretty way of hers which no one could resist, "Are you very busy? Could you spare time for a little chat?"

"With you?" cried the Admiral, gallantly. "Hours!" He vanished from the window and was heard tumbling down his stairs two at a time. I believe if he had been only a few years younger he would have slid down the balustrade. Jim told Jane later in the day he had never seen anything like it.

Marjolaine waited for him under the elm, and pondered how she was to lead the conversation round to what she wanted to hear.

The Admiral burst out of his house. For once he took no notice of the Eyesore. The cat, however, did arrest his attention. Sempronius, scenting an enemy, was blinking at him out of one eye. Sempronius' attitude towards the Admiral was one of armed neutrality. He knew Sir Peter bore him no good-will, but he also knew Sir Peter dare not touch him. Wherefore, although he kept a wary look-out, even the Admiral's threatening gesture was not enough to make him stir from his sunny corner.

Sir Peter came to Marjolaine.

"He's sitting there, watching the Eyesore like a tiger. Shows cats have no sense. 'Pears to think the Eyesore's going to catch a fish! Ha! Never caught a fish in his born days!" He took both Marjolaine's hands in his. "Well, Missie; what can I do for you?"

"Talk to me," said Marjolaine.

Sir Peter was flattered and delighted. Their little Missie was coming to life again. "Ah!—tell ye what," he said, swinging her hands, "If we had that fiddler here, we might practise the hornpipe!" He whistled gaily and tried to force her into the step.

"No, no!" she cried, breaking away from him; and then, more gently, "No: not to-day!"

The Admiral looked at her anxiously out of his one eye. "Oh?" said he, sympathetically, "In the doldrums?"

"Sir Peter," she cried, impulsively, "was you ever broken-hearted?"

"Lord bless your pretty eyes, yes! Every time I left port."

"Ah! but did the world seem like an empty husk? and did you want to sit down and cry your eyes out?"

This was much worse than the Admiral had anticipated. He must try to make her laugh.

"Well, ye see, I could only have cried one out, was it ever-so!"

"Then what did you do? How did you cure yourself?"

"Why, with a jorum of rum, to be sure!"

Marjolaine was disappointed. "Oh!—I can't do that!"

Sir Peter came closer. "What? Are you broken-hearted?"

Good heavens! What had she been saying? Had she given away her precious secret?

"Certainly not!" she answered, with flaming cheeks. "Of course not. It's nothing. Only somebody—somebody has broken their word."

"Look-a-that, now!" cried the Admiral, puzzled. "But I'll cure you! I'll tell you a story. Something funny. How I lost my eye—what?" He drew her down beside him on the seat under the elm. "Ye see, it was on board o' the *Termagant*—"

"When you was with Nelson?" asked Marjolaine.

"Ay. Battle o' Copenhagen; year Eighteen-one."

Here was a possible opening. At any rate Marjolaine would try.

"I suppose you had many officers under you?" she insinuated.

"Hundreds!" cried Sir Peter, enthusiastically; and then, feeling he had conveyed an exaggerated impression, "well—when I say hundreds—!" his memory awoke. "Ah! I was somebody, then!—But this infernal government—!"

Marjolaine laid her hand soothingly on his arm. "I suppose some of them were quite young?" she said, with splendidly assumed indifference. Every woman is a born actress.

"Middies?" cried the Admiral, with magnificent contempt. "Lord love ye, I took no notice o' them! Passel o' powder-monkeys!" Then he added with a touch of tender recollection, "Not but what Jack Sayle—"

"Jack what?" said Marjolaine quickly, as if she had not heard.

"Sayle. Jack Sayle. You know. Young feller I presented to your lady-mother a week ago. Time she swooned—"

"Oh, yes."

"Gobblessmysoul! I was startled! I thought—"

The Admiral must not be allowed to wander from the only topic that mattered. Marjolaine interrupted him. "Was he on your ship?"

"What, Jack Sayle? Ay, was he. And a fine young feller, too. Of course you was much too agitated to notice him last Saturday. Gad! I wonder he has n't been to see me all the week. Promised he would. Said he 'd come last Monday."

"Did he?" cried Marjory. So he had broken his word in two places!

"He did. There! He's only on leave, and he has heavy social duties. Only son of Lord Otford, y' know."

"Lord Otford!" Marjolaine repeated, amazed. The name and the title somehow impressed her with a sense of vague fear.

"Ay, ay," the unconscious Admiral proceeded garrulously. "My old friend. Otford's selfish about him. Ye see, the boy 'll come into a great estate. Half a county. And the old man's anxious about his marriage."

"Whose marriage?" asked Marjory, almost voicelessly.

"Why, Jack's, to be sure!—Lord!—they marry 'em now before they 're out of their swaddling clothes. Otford's in a hurry to secure the succession—" He stopped abruptly. This was really not a subject to discuss with a young girl. "Hum!—what I was about to say—er—the Honourable Caroline Thring—!"

"Caroline Thring"—Marjolaine repeated the name to herself. It was a name to remember.

"Ay—daughter and sole heiress of Lord Wendover. Not my sort. Goes about doing good—like the party last Saturday. But the two estates 'll cover the county. It's an undoubted match—"

Marjolaine had heard all she wanted—and more. She felt she would break down if the Admiral went on. She looked all around the Walk for help; for some excuse to break off the conversation. There was only Sempronius. "I think—" she just gave herself time to make up her mind as to what she could think—"I think I saw Sempronius stirring!"

Sir Peter jumped up. "Damn that cat!" he cried—"Beg pardon!—I'll—" But the golden-haired Sempronius was sound asleep with his bushy tail over his nose.

Whether the Eyesore was shocked by the Admiral's bad language—which seems unlikely—or whether he was moved by his usual thirst, he dropped his fishing-rod, and vanished round the corner.

The Admiral hurried back.

"No. He 's quiet enough." He saw Marjolaine's sad face and added, "Gobblessmysoul! Here I 've been boring you about a young feller you don't know—" To his amazement Marjolaine turned her face away abruptly. The Admiral stopped short. Why did she turn away? Was it possible that —? How long had Jack been in the Walk when he met him a week ago? "*Do* you know him?" said he. Marjolaine was silent. Sir Peter gave a low whistle. He took her gently by the shoulder and turned her towards him. "Here, I say, young woman—You just look me in the eye." He pointed to his good one. "This eye." Marjolaine stood before him in confusion. It made her angry to feel confused. Why should she feel confused? "I—I have seen him once," she answered bravely.

"Have you, begad!—So that's what he was cruising about here for, was it?—But I'll teach him!"

Marjolaine was very angry indeed. "Sir Peter!" she flashed at him, "If you breathe it, I 'll never speak to you again!"

"D' ye think I 'll have him coming here—?"

"But he's not coming here!" cried Marjolaine; and with a meaning of her own: "Oh, don't you see he's not coming?—Swear you won't breathe a word to a living soul! Swear! Swear!"

"Damme!" cried the Admiral. "I must think that over. And as for you," he added, with humorous sternness, "you come and sit under the tree and I 'll talk to you like a Dutch uncle."

Marjolaine saw Mrs. Poskett at her window. It would not do for Sir Peter to talk to her like an uncle—Dutch or otherwise. "Sir Peter!" she cried, "Sempronius is going to jump!"

Sir Peter rushed to the cat again, and again found him sound asleep. He turned furiously towards Marjolaine, but Mrs. Poskett intercepted him. "Good morning, Sir Peter!"

Sir Peter looked up, where the widow was shaking the ribbons of her cap at him. "Morning, ma'am," he said, sulkily. "Your cat—"

"Hush!" interrupted Mrs. Poskett, craning forward to see her pet. "Dear Sempronius!—Don't disturb him! He's so happy!"

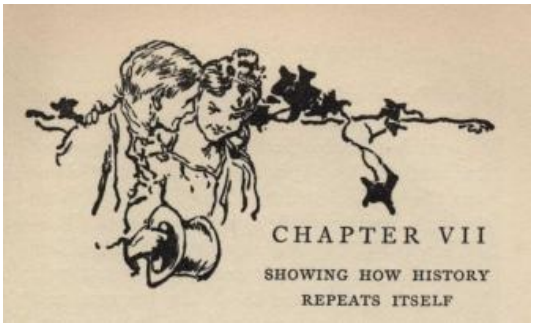
"But—!"

"I 'm sure it's going to rain," the widow explained. "He always sits there when he feels rain coming; because the fish rise, and he loves watching them."

"Confounded nonsense," growled Sir Peter.

Mrs. Poskett closed her window, and Sir Peter was on the point of returning to Marjolaine and having it out with her, when Madame Lachesnais came out of her house. Of course that made all conversation with the girl impossible, and as he did not feel he could meet the mother, knowing what he now knew, there was nothing left for him but to salute her and beat a hasty retreat into his own house and think things over.

CHAPTER VII
SHOWING HOW HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF



Chapter VII headpiece

Engrossed in her own gentle melancholy Madame crossed slowly towards the river. She was sincerely distressed about Marjolaine. What could be the matter with the child? This question had haunted her all the week; but whenever she had tried to speak to her daughter, the latter had evaded her on one pretext or another. In vain Madame racked her brains. Marjolaine was not ill; yet she had no appetite; the colour had faded from her cheeks; the spring had gone out of her step; and the laughter had died from her lips. Madame remembered the time—long ago: twenty years ago and more—when she herself had looked and spoken and moved, just as Marjolaine did now; but there had been a very good reason for that. In Marjolaine's case there could be no reason. No one had crossed her young life—or, was she mistaken? That young man who had so suddenly appeared: who had so suddenly revived the most poignant memories of her own youth! —Was it conceivable that he and Marjolaine had met? had perhaps met frequently? It was not

conceivable. Marjolaine was the soul of truth. Marjolaine had been perfectly happy until a few days ago. Marjolaine had not shown any signs of recognition when the young man stood there. And yet? Was it wise to be too sure? In her own case there had been secrecy, and, now she remembered, she had borne the secrecy unflinchingly; had shown a perfectly calm and happy exterior. The secrets of the young seem to them quite innocent: merely possessions of their own which they keep to themselves, which they cannot understand they are in duty bound to disclose to their elders. And, to be sure, her own father—she had lost her mother in early youth—had never tried to win her confidence. A great entomologist cannot be expected to allow his attention to be distracted by a girl's sentimental nonsense. But she—had she paid enough attention to her daughter? Had she not allowed herself to be lulled into false security by the remoteness of Pomander Walk? But if the young man—Jack Sayle, of all people in the world!—had won Marjolaine's heart, why, here were the beginnings of a bitter tragedy: her own tragedy all over again. It must be nipped in the bud. Mercilessly. She must be cruel to be kind. Could she be cruel to Marjolaine? Motherhood had its duties, however, and, now that this great fear was on her, she saw her duty plainly, and would do it.

She was interrupted in her meditations by the sound of weeping, and for the first time, she saw poor Marjolaine sitting under the tree, bending low, with her face in her hands, shaken with great sobs. She hurried across to the weeping girl, placed her arm very tenderly over her shoulders and gently called her by her name.

" SHE PLACED HER ARM VERY TENDERLY OVER HER SHOULDERS AND GENTLY CALLED HER BY NAME "

"SHE PLACED HER ARM VERY TENDERLY OVER HER SHOULDERS AND GENTLY CALLED HER BY NAME"

The touch of her mother's arm, the sound of her mother's voice let loose the floodgates. With a cry of "Oh, Maman!" Marjolaine threw her arms round her mother's waist and buried her face

against her. Madame sat down beside her and drew her very close. "Chérie—my darling! What is the matter?"

Marjolaine tried to master herself; tried to put on a brave face; dashed the tears from her eyes, as she answered—"Nothing, Maman. I think—it is so beautiful here!—So peaceful! It made me cry. Let me cry a little on your heart."

There was a sad smile on Madame's face. As if you cried because the sun was shining and the Walk was quiet! "Cry, Marjolaine," she murmured soothingly. "Do you think I have not been watching you all this week? Cry, my darling, and tell me."

"There is nothing to tell, Maman," said the girl between her sobs. "Realty and truly there is nothing." She looked wistfully towards the river. "There was something; but—" and down went her head on her mother's breast—"there is nothing now."

Madame stroked the fair head lying on her bosom. "My dear, my dear!—I tried every day to speak to you, but you would not. For the first time in our lives you and I, who should be everything to each other, were parted."

"Oh, Maman!" cried Marjolaine, looking up into her mother's face, "that was because I was waiting to tell you a great secret. But the secret no longer exists. It has"—she made one of her quaint little gestures—"it has—evaporated!" And with a new outburst of tears she again hid her face.

Madame looked at her lovingly, and kept silence a moment. So, then, there was a secret? What secret? What but one secret is ever in a young girl's heart? "Ah, chérie," she murmured, "you see? The secret exists: it is gnawing at your heart. It will hurt you and hurt you, till you tell me."

Marjolaine looked up. Her mother was right. Speaking might bring her some relief. She would tell her. She tried to speak; but a look of puzzled amazement came into her eyes. Now that she was willing and anxious to speak, she had nothing to say.

"Tell me," repeated Madame.

"I can't, Maman."

"Why not?"

"I cannot begin alone: I don't know how."

"Shall I help you, Marjolaine?"

"Can you?"

Madame could only guess; but even if the guess were mistaken, it might lead to the truth. So she spoke tentatively.

"Let us say, you were sitting here, under the elm? And that stranger, that young man—"

There was no need to go on. Marjolaine had already risen to her feet. Her thoughts were let loose: all the thoughts she had locked in her breast during the past week, the memories that had been tormenting her, the problems she had been struggling with. She saw Jack Sayle as if he were standing before her. "He stood over there, in the sun"—she spoke quietly but intensely—"and he looked at me, and I looked at him; and—" her voice was hushed, and although she addressed her mother she did not turn to her, but kept her eyes on the spot where Jack had stood—"Mother! what happened to me? I felt as if he and I had always known each other, and as if we were alone in the world. No! As if he were alone, and I were a part of him. And we spoke. Nothings. Things that didn't matter. Silly things; about his being thirsty, and what I could give him. But it was only our voices speaking. I know it was only my voice: it was not I. I was thinking of sunshine and music and flowers. And then we went into the Gazebo; and the foolish talk ran on! And all the time my heart was singing!—He told me his name; and my heart took it and wove music around it, and sang it! and sang it!" Her voice sank to an awed whisper. "And—Mother!—I seemed to step out of childhood suddenly, into—into what, Mother?—What was it?"

"Alas!" sighed Madame. The child's words had carried her back, so far, so far! Back to her own early youth. Just so had the day been transfigured for her. Just so the sunshine had taken on a new glamour. Just so her own heart had sung its hymns of rapture. Just so she had stepped across the threshold of childhood.

But Marjolaine continued. "When he went, I felt as if he had taken me with him: my heart and my mind. He said he was coming again—but he never came; and every day I have wandered about; looking for what he had taken; looking for my life!" she sank on her knees at her mother's feet. "He will never come again! He will never bring back what he has carried away!—Oh, mother, what is it?"

Her tears flowed freely now, but silently: tears of relief at having unburdened her heart. Madame looked down at her with such pity as only a mother can feel. "My darling! Is it so serious

as that? God help us, poor blind things!" She remembered what she must have been doing while this fateful meeting took place. "While my child was going through the fire, I was matching silks for my embroidery!"

Marjolaine looked up at her with great, innocent eyes. "But it would have been the same if you had been there!"

"I suppose so," said Madame, sadly. "There is no barrier against it: not even a mother's arms."

"But what is it?" asked Marjolaine, wistfully.

Her mother looked at her searchingly, and Marjolaine met her gaze steadfastly, with her clear, truthful eyes. It was patent she did not indeed know what caused this new pain at her heart. Madame looked long. Her daughter seemed, in a way, suddenly to have become a stranger to her. This child was a child no longer, and her mother no longer held the first place in her heart. Yes! and if Marjolaine had suddenly leapt out of childhood, then she, the mother, must begin to face old age: she was the mother of a marriageable girl. She would fight against this while she could; not for unworthy or small motives, but to keep her daughter's companionship. Who was this Jack Sayle that he should come like a thief in the night and steal Marjolaine's youth, her happiness and her peace of mind, and tear the girl out of her mother's arms? "No," she said, at last, "I will not tell you. If I told you it would grow stronger; and it must not. It shall not. You must win yourself back, as I did. Oh! but sooner, and more completely!"

Marjolaine was amazed. Had her mother gone through what she was going through now? "As you did—?" she cried, in a voice which betrayed her astonishment.

Madame smiled sadly. "My dearest dear, the young never realise they are not beginning the world. Your story is mine."

With a cry of "Oh, mother!" Marjolaine nestled closer.

"Yes; but mine was longer and therefore left more pain in its track. Chérie, chérie, I am not telling you this to make light of your sorrow, but to show you I know what your pain is: to show you how to fight now, now, with all your might, to win yourself back." She paused a moment, to gather her thoughts and to gather strength. Then she continued very softly, almost as if she were speaking to herself, "It was years and years ago, in my father's garden—in the old vicarage garden—that I felt the sun and the song enter my heart. He and I were very young and very happy." Madame paused. "And then he rode away; and I never saw him again."

"Maman!" whispered Marjolaine, stroking her mother's cheek.

"We had lived in our dream a whole year; so my love—"

Marjolaine started at the word. "Love!" Was this love?—

But her mother did not notice her, and went on; "So my love had time to grow. Its roots were twined round my heart; and when he left me, and tore the roots out of me, I thought he had torn my heart out with them."

"Like me," said Marjolaine, below her breath.

Madame drew her closer, and whispered, "Would you like to know his name?"

There was something in her mother's voice which told Marjolaine her mother had some special reason for asking her. "Yes; what was it?" she asked, hushed, and very tenderly.

Her mother looked straight into her eyes and answered slowly, "Jack—Sayle."

Marjolaine recoiled in amazement. "Mother!—I don't understand!"

"The father of the boy you have seen!"

"How wonderful!"

"Much more wonderful things happen every day. It's much more wonderful that I can tell you this now: that I ever grew out of my love. For I loved him—ah, how deeply!"

There was a long silence.

Here was a curious thing. If any profane eye had lighted on the group—the young girl kneeling at Madame's feet in the green coolness of the elm; that profane eye would have got the impression that here were a mother and daughter closely linked in some common sorrow, and clinging to each other for mutual consolation. In one sense that impression would have been the right one; but in one sense only. Their thoughts were worlds apart. Madame was remembering the days when she was Lucy Pryor, the daughter of the vicar of Otford. The great Lord Otford was Lord of the Manor, and his son, the Honourable John Sayle, being a delicate lad, was studying desultorily with the Vicar. The Vicar was more interested in butterflies than in Greek roots, and the boy and girl spent most of their time in the great vicarage garden. Thus the lad had grown strong and well set up. He was gazetted into the Army, and sent to America, where the war had just broken out. There he stayed five years. Lucy treasured the dearest memories of

her playfellow, and when he came back, a splendid lieutenant, it is hardly necessary to say that they fell seriously in love. Their love was patent to everyone except the vicar and the old Lord. When the latter discovered it, his fury was indescribable. He drove the vicar out of his living, and had him transferred to a miserable parish in the East-end of London, where there was n't a single butterfly; and he sent his son, who had retired from the army, on the Grand Tour. The lovers parted, vowing to be faithful; but young Sayle very soon forgot his vows in the excitement of travel. At Rome he met the Honourable Mabel Scott, daughter of Lord Polhousie, and, to cut a long story short, he married her, without a thought for poor Lucy, whom the shock nearly killed. Nor did he ever know the blow he had inflicted, nor ever hear from her, or of her, again. She was lost in the wilderness of London. A few years later he had succeeded his father, and was sent as Ambassador to Vienna. In the same year his son John—our Jack—was born, and his birth was closely followed by the mother's death.

Marjolaine, too, was thinking hard. All sorts of new ideas, new conceptions, were looming on her horizon. They came as angels, certainly, but angels with flaming swords. It seemed that great happiness could be inextricably interwoven with great misery, so that a simple human being could not tell where the one began and the other ended. It seemed that a man could say one thing and mean another: that he could look like the Archangel Michael and yet not mean what he said. It seemed that you could be wounded in all your finest and most sensitive nerves just for looking at a man. It seemed also, that your pride was of no use to you whatever, but deserted you when it was most needed, or, rather, turned against you, and helped to hurt you. This must be enquired into.

"Mère, chérie," she whispered.

"What, my darling?" asked Madame, coming out of her dream.

Marjolaine pressed her hand to her heart. There was an actual physical pain there, as if an iron band were crushing it. "Is this—is what I feel—love?"

"Ah!" cried Madame, "I have betrayed myself. I did not mean you to know. I am afraid it was going to be—love."

"Going to be! But it is! Or else, this ache? What is it?"

"Crush it now!" Madame was distressed. She would not allow Marjolaine's young life to be blighted as her own had been. "Crush it now! Fiercely! ruthlessly! and it will be nothing. You have only seen him once—"

"Does that make any difference?"

What could one answer to such a question? One could only ignore it. "You must be very brave; very determined; and put the thought of him away."

Marjolaine shook her head sadly. How could she put the thought of him away? It was in her. It filled her. It was she herself. And did she want to put it away? Would she put it away if she could? It seemed to her that if the thought were withdrawn now, she would be left a hollow husk of a thing, with no thought at all.

Madame saw she had gone too far too quickly. "Dear, I know. It took me a long time, because I had been happy so long; but at last, when your father came, I was able to put my hand in his, and look straight into his eyes."

Here was a new mystery for Marjolaine. So good and beautiful a woman as her mother could love twice, then?

"Mother," said she, with grave enquiry, "did you love my father as much as you had loved Jack?"

However good and blameless we may be, it is a very uncomfortable experience to be cross-examined by utter, single-minded innocence.

"Listen," said Madame, "life is long, and nature merciful. I recovered very slowly; but I tried to be brave; I tried to take an interest in the life around me: the sordid, sunless life of the very poor, so much sadder than my own. Then Jules Lachesnais came to live with us—with my father and me—in order to study the English language and our political institutions. A great friendship sprang up between us. When my father died, Jules urged me to marry him. I was utterly alone in the world; I felt a deep affection for him; and I consented."

She waited for Marjolaine to say something; but Marjolaine was silent.

"He took me to France, where you were born. We went through the horrors of the Revolution side by side. He played an active part in those horrible days; always on the side of justice and moderation. The aim of his life was to see his country under a constitutional government, such as he had learnt to admire during his stay in England. The excesses he was forced to witness disgusted him, and he resisted them with all his might." Madame was lost in her reminiscences.

"Ah, yes! You were too young to know; but we all ran grave risks of falling victims to the guillotine. Your father hailed Napoleon as a deliverer; but when Napoleon began to usurp power, he foresaw the dawning tyranny; still more when Napoleon was made consul for life. He retired more and more from public affairs, thereby incurring the tyrant's anger and again endangering his life. When Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor your father protested publicly—think of the courage! He was expelled, and he died disappointed and heartbroken. He was a brave, true man, faithful to his ideals. I was very proud of him; very happy and contented. And I *am* very happy and contented now," she added defiantly,—"or I shall be, when I see you have won the victory!"

But Marjolaine was merciless. This was all very well, as far as her mother was concerned. "But what became of poor Jack?" she asked.

"Poor Jack!" Madame laughed bitterly. "Poor Jack had married some great lady!"

At once poor Jack had lost all Marjolaine's sympathy. She muttered between her teeth, "Caroline Thring."

"I tell you," protested Madame—and perhaps she protested just a shade too strongly—"I ceased to think of him. I forgot him."

Marjolaine's brow was puckered in thought. Could one forget? "But, mother," she said, very simply, "if you had forgotten him, why did you swoon when you heard his name?"

Down went the cloak of self-deception Madame had so carefully wrapped round herself. She took her daughter's face in both her hands and looked at her sadly. "Ah! my little girl is become a woman indeed! The innocence of the dove, and the guile of the serpent!—Well! Think over what I have told you. Come, now, chérie, you promise to fight?"

"Yes," said Marjolaine, without conviction.

"You promise to conquer?"

"I promise to try."

"At least you see there can be nothing between Lord Otford's son and my daughter?"

"Yes." Oh, what a hesitating yes!

Madame folded her in her arms. "Try to lighten someone else's sorrow," she said, kissing her tenderly, "then you will forget your own, and the roses will bloom in your cheeks again."

The Walk was beginning to show signs of life. The Eyesore came slouching back, and resumed his fishing with a lack-lustre eye. The early housekeeping having got itself done, the ladies of the Walk were showing themselves at their windows, tending their flowers or dusting their ornaments. Miss Ruth Pennymint came bustling out of her door, with needlework. She looked up at the overcast sky and held up the back of her hand.

"Ah," said Madame, catching sight of her. "Coming into the fresh air to work, Miss Ruth?"

Miss Ruth was evidently not in the best of tempers. "Of course it's going to rain," she snapped.

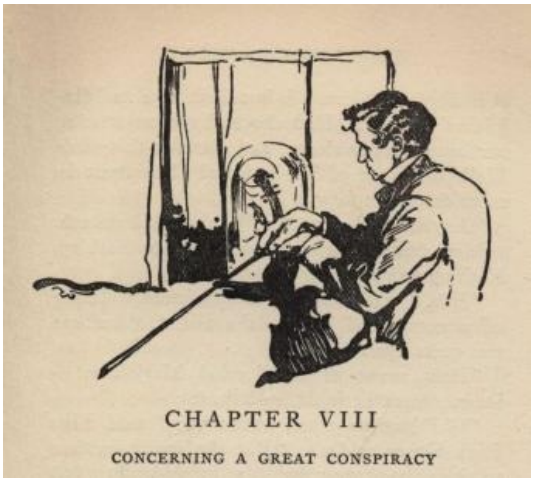
"Oh, not yet," said Madame, conciliatorily.

"Do you mind if I sew here?" said Miss Ruth. "It's so lonesome in the house, when Barbara's locked up with that precious bird!"

What could be the matter? The word "precious" was uttered in a manner which conveyed an exactly opposite meaning. Madame said soothingly, "That is so touching!" And Ruth snorted. There is no other word. She snorted. Madame and Marjolaine glanced at each other, and both moved towards the house. But Miss Ruth had no intention of being left alone. "Marjory!" she called. Marjolaine came back; and Madame went into Number Four alone.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING A GREAT CONSPIRACY



Chapter VIII headpiece

Now Marjolaine did not want to talk to Miss Ruth just at that moment, and it says much for her sweetness of character that she came back docilely. "Marjory," said Miss Ruth, looking at her searchingly, "you haven't had a singing-lesson this week."

Marjolaine was confused, and a little angry. She had just exhausted the subject with her mother, and it was too bad to be thrust into the midst of it again by this comparative stranger. So she answered rather coldly, "I have n't been quite myself."

"So I saw," said Miss Ruth, examining her over her spectacles. A hot flush rose to Marjolaine's cheeks. Had she really been wearing her heart on her sleeve, and showing the whole Walk the state of her feelings? She must be more careful in future.

"Anything the matter?" asked Miss Ruth.

Marjolaine answered hastily, "Oh, nothing. Nothing to speak of."

"H'm," said Miss Ruth, violently biting off a cotton-end. Then she added, "Barbara was quite upset."

"How sweet of her!" cried Marjolaine.—Dear, sympathetic little Barbara!

"Oh! Not so much about you," said Miss Ruth rather acidly. "But she looks forward to sitting with you and Mr. Pringle, when you are singing."

"Is she so fond of music?" asked Marjolaine, glad to turn the conversation into a less personal channel.

"Bless your dear heart, no!" exclaimed Miss Ruth sharply. "Now, would she sit and listen to you if she were? She does n't know one note from another."

It seemed to Marjolaine that the conversation was becoming rather personal, so she held her tongue.

But Miss Ruth evidently had something on her mind of which she was anxious to relieve herself.

"No, it is n't that," she said with a world of meaning which challenged enquiry.

Marjolaine obliged her, although she felt no interest. "What is it, then?"

Having succeeded in getting the question she wanted, Miss Ruth made a feint of retreating. "Pfft!" she said, with the action of blowing some annoying insect away, and then, cryptically, "Oh! grant me patience!"

"Ruth!" exclaimed Marjolaine, astonished at her violence.

"Well!" cried Ruth, still more sharply. "It seems to me the whole house is bewitched—that ever I should say such a thing."

Marjolaine grew more and more surprised. "Oh! I thought you were so happy!"

"I 'm happy enough," snapped Ruth, "because I 'm not a fool. But what with that feller upstairs, and Barbara down, a body has no peace of her life."

Now, what could she mean? Of course Mr. Pringle was upstairs, and of course Barbara was downstairs. How could that perfectly natural state of things affect the peace of Miss Ruth's life?

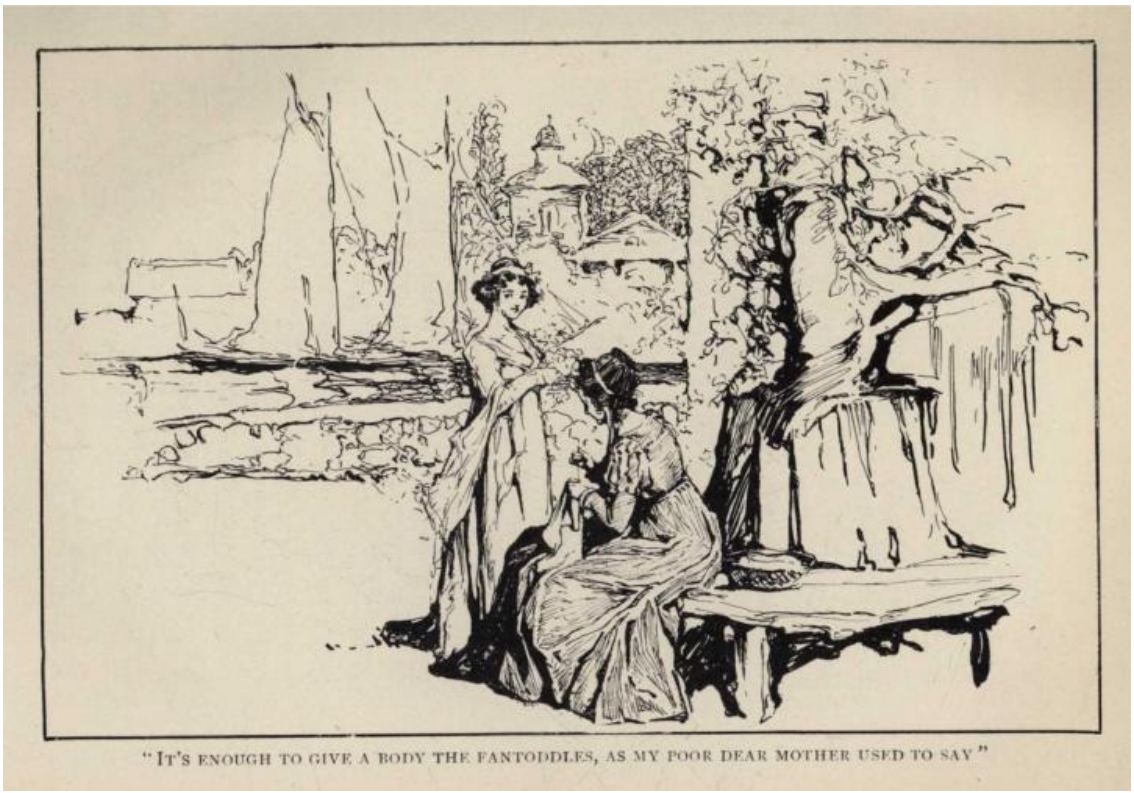
"Tell me," said Marjolaine.

"Ha' n't you noticed anything? No. I s'pose you 're too young. Don't know sheeps' eyes when you see 'em!"

What on earth had sheeps' eyes come into the story for?

"Sheeps' eyes?" Marjolaine asked, utterly puzzled.

"'T is n't for me to say anything," Miss Ruth continued, "but with him mooning about the house, like"—words failed her—"like I don't know what; and her moping, like a hen with the pip, it's enough to give a body the fantoddles—as my poor, dear mother used to say."



"IT'S ENOUGH TO GIVE A BODY THE FANTODDLES, AS MY POOR DEAR MOTHER USED TO SAY"

"IT'S ENOUGH TO GIVE A BODY THE FANTODDLES, AS MY POOR DEAR MOTHER USED TO SAY"

Marjolaine suddenly saw light. Here, under her very eyes, was another romance, like her own—only, of course, on an infinitely lower plane, because it held no thread of tragedy—and she had been blind to it. This was lovely! But she must make sure. She turned to Miss Ruth and asked eagerly—"Are they—are they fond of each other?"

Ruth quite unnecessarily bit off another cotton-end. "I don't know!" she cried crossly; but at once added, "Yes, of course they are!"

Marjolaine was more puzzled than ever. "Then, why don't they say so?" she asked, quite simply.

"That's what I want to know," said Miss Ruth.

Lovers who might be perfectly happy, kept apart for want of a word, thought Marjolaine. How wicked, and how silly! "You should speak to Mr. Basil," she said, with all the gravity of her nineteen years and of her bitter experience.

"Me!" cried Miss Ruth. "Bless your dear heart, he 'd up and run away. He 's that shy a body can't look at him but he wants to hide in a cupboard. He 's got it into his silly head he is n't good enough. As if anybody'd notice his shoulder!"

"Perhaps," said Marjolaine, pensively, "if Barbara showed him she liked him—Why don't you speak to her? Sympathetically."

"So I did, just now. Told her she was an idiot. What did she do? She burst out crying, and went and shut herself up with that parrot."

"Ah!" sighed Marjolaine, with a pathetic look at the Gazebo, where she had been so happy so short a time, so long ago, "Ah, yes! The old love!" How well she understood!

"Old frying-pan!" cried Ruth.

"Ruth!" exclaimed Marjolaine, deeply shocked. "The poor parrot."

"Oh, that bird!—Marjory!" said Ruth, firmly, as if the time had come to utter a bitter but necessary truth at all costs, "Marjory, there are times when I 'd give anybody a two-penny bit to wring that bird's neck!"

But Marjolaine had not been listening to her. The mention of the parrot had set her thoughts

working; her face suddenly lighted up with the inspired look of one who has just conceived an epoch-making idea. "Ruth!" she cried, running up to her.

Ruth naturally thought she was shocked. "Well, I don't care! I mean it. If it was n't for that bird—"

But Marjolaine had snatched Ruth's needlework away and was trying to drag her from the seat by both hands. "I was n't thinking of the bird! Yes, I was thinking of the bird, but I was n't thinking what you thought I was thinking. Oh! what nonsense you make me talk!"

"Whatever's got into the child's head?" cried Miss Ruth, swept off her feet.

"Come!" insisted Marjolaine. "Quick! Come, and tell Barbara I want her."

"What do you want her for?" asked Miss Ruth, struggling.

"I must n't tell you yet, she may refuse."

"Bless us and save us!" cried Miss Ruth, now on her feet, and struck by the change in Marjolaine's appearance, "now your cheeks are glowing again!"

"Maman said they would!" laughed Marjolaine. Positively, for the moment she had forgotten her sorrows. "Come along!"

"Wait! My mouth 's full of pins!"

Seeing the two ladies under the tree, Sir Peter Antrobus had come out, anxious for a little conversation. He was much disappointed when he observed they were leaving the lawn.

"Going in, just as I'm coming out?" said he, reproachfully.

"Yes," laughed Marjolaine on the top step, and looking up at the threatening sky, "like the little people in the weather cottages: you come out for the rain; and I go in for the sunshine." Which, of course was extremely inaccurate, but the correct statement would have spoiled her meaning entirely.

"How are the peas coming on, Admiral?" asked Miss Ruth, for the sake of politeness.

Sir Peter's temper was already ruffled by the disappointment of his sociable intentions. Now he burst out, "How the doose can they come on, Ma'am, when that everlasting cat roots 'em up every night?"

I am sorry to say, Miss Ruth laughed as he disappeared into the house. The Admiral came towards Sempronius, who was now wide awake and watching the Eyesore's float with lively interest; he shook his fist at him—I mean the Admiral shook his fist at the cat—with comic fury, and found himself shaking his fist at Lord Otford, who had just turned the corner.

"Shaking your fist at me, Peter?" asked Lord Otford, with a grim laugh.

"Hulloa, Otford!" cried the Admiral, feeling rather foolish.

Moreover, he was not particularly pleased to see Otford at that precise moment. Only half-an-hour ago he had surprised Marjolaine's confidence. He had not had time to think the matter over and make up his mind, and now that he found himself without warning face to face with Jack's father, he was torn between two conflicting emotions. On the one hand he felt he ought to tell Otford about Jack and Marjolaine. That was his plain duty; but it was one of those forms of duty which everybody tries to find some plausible excuse for evading. He had surprised Marjolaine's confidence: she had not given it voluntarily. On the other hand he suspected that Jack's breach of faith in not coming near the Walk for a whole week was due to some interference on the part of his father, and he was so fond of Marjolaine, and so jealous of the status of the Walk, that he resented such interference even before he knew whether Otford had interfered. His keen eye saw, even while they were shaking hands, that there was something on his friend's mind.

"How are you?" asked Lord Otford, perfunctorily. "Have you a moment to spare?"

"All day; thanks to this confounded government," growled the Admiral.

Lord Otford plunged into the thick of his business at once. "I am in great trouble," he blurted out, in the tone of a man who expects sympathy.

He didn't get it. "Damme! you're in trouble once a week!" said the Admiral. "Here! Come into the Gazebo."

Lord Otford started at the word. "The Gazebo?—Ha! Very appropriate!"

"Eh? Why?" asked Sir Peter, sitting on the seat in the summer-house and making room for his friend beside him. Lord Otford produced a crumpled letter from his pocket. "Here! Read this!" said he, thrusting it under Sir Peter's nose.

"Can't," said the latter, curtly, "haven't my spy-glass on me!"

"Well, listen." Lord Otford read the letter aloud, with ill-suppressed fury.—"'My lord—It is my painful duty to inform your Lordship that your Lordship's son, the Hon. John Sayle, is carrying on a clandestine love-affair with Mademoiselle Marjolaine Lachesnais, of Pomander Walk—'"

The Admiral had grown purple in the face. "Belay, there!" he roared.

Lord Otford took no notice, but went on reading: "'Yesterday they were together for an hour in the Gazebo—'"

The Admiral would have no more of it. "When did you get that, and who sent it?" he roared. The fact that the information was true was quite outweighed by the implication that an inhabitant of the Walk could have been guilty of the lowest form of treachery.

"It's signed, 'Your true Friend and Well-wisher,'" said Lord Otford, "and I had it on Sunday."

The Admiral could hardly speak. "Do you mean to say that damned, anonymous, Sabbath-breaking rag came from Pomander Walk?"

"I presume so."

"Who sent it?" cried the Admiral, jumping up and walking to and fro in a towering rage. "Show me the white-livered scoundrel, and by Jehoshaphat! I 'll break every bone in his body!" He turned sharply towards Otford. "Is it a man's writing, or a woman's?"

"It's vague: might be anybody's."

The Admiral was passing the houses of the Walk in review. "Can't be Sternroyd—Brooke-Hoskyn—Pringle—We 're none of us anonymous slanderers." His eye fell on the Eyesore with momentary suspicion. "Was it the Eyesore?"

"The Eyesore?" repeated Lord Otford, not understanding.

"That scare-crow, fishing. No; of course not. He does n't know you, and I don't believe he can write.—But, what of it, Jack? You're not worried by that rubbish! Why, it's a pack o' lies!" (Oh, Admiral, Admiral!) Lord Otford tried to speak. "Don't interrupt!—I'm here all the time. Nothing happens in Pomander Walk that I don't know. Don't interrupt!—I was here when Jack came last Saturday. He went back in his boat before you could say 'Jack Robinson,' because Madame swooned!"

He wiped his brow, and had the grace to add "Lord, forgive me!" as a silent prayer. After all, he had told no lie. He had only omitted to say how long Jack had been there before he saw him. And as he did n't know, what could he have said?

Otford found his opportunity of speaking at last. "Now, perhaps you 'll allow me to say it's all true," he shouted.

The Admiral shouted louder. "Do you take this blackguard's word rather than mine?" he roared, pointing to the letter. It was intolerable he should be doubted, even if he were not telling the whole truth.

"You confounded old porcupine," Lord Otford roared back at him, "Jack 's owned up to the whole thing!"

"What!" yelled the Admiral. "Don't shout like that! D' ye want the whole Walk to hear?—Sit down. Tell me again: quietly!"

"When I 'd read this letter, I taxed him with it," said Lord Otford, "and he owned up. He came here last Saturday: met the damned little French gel—"

"Jack!" roared the Admiral, flaring up.

"I'll withdraw 'damned.' Sat an hour in this infernal what-d'-ye-call-it, and thinks he 's in love with her." Sir Peter was about to speak. "Don't interrupt!—You know the Sayles when their blood 's up. My blood was up. Jack's confounded blood was up. You can imagine the scene we had. He's as pig-headed and obstinate as—as—"

"As his father," put in Sir Peter.

"Don't interrupt!" roared Lord Otford. "He's thrown over Caroline Thring—won't hear of her." Sir Peter chuckled. "The utmost I could get out of him was that he 'd wait a week to make sure of what he calls his mind."

"Aha!" said Sir Peter, delighted.

"Mind! Puppy! All the week he's gone about like a bear with a sore head! Had the impudence to refuse to speak to me! This morning he had the impudence to speak! And what d' ye think he said?"

"Serves ye right, whatever it was!" cried Sir Peter.

Lord Otford didn't hear him. "He said, 'The week 's up, and I 'm going to Pomander Walk!'"

"Good lad!" roared Sir Peter, slapping his thigh, and breaking into a loud guffaw.

"What!" shouted Lord Otford, jumping up. "You're mad! Think of what's at stake! Ninety-thousand acres!—For the daughter of a Frenchwoman from the Lord knows where. Who was the gel's father?—Or, rather, who was n't?"

"Jack!" roared the Admiral, in a burst of fury, jumping up in his turn and facing Otford.

"I withdraw!" cried Otford. "But think of it!" He was looking at the Walk. In the grey light of the coming shower the houses were certainly not seen at their best. "Think of it!" he said with a

sweep of his cane condemning the whole Walk to instant annihilation. "An Otford taking his wife from these—these—Almshouses!"

The Admiral was livid—apoplectic—hysterical. Words failed him. His voice failed him. He could only gasp, "Almshouses!—Pomander Walk!—Almshouses!"

Lord Otford was alarmed at the effect his words had produced. "There! there!" he cried, almost conciliatorily, "I withdraw 'Almshouses!'"

"Withdraw more, sir!" said the Admiral, and for all his almost grotesque rage, there was a ring in his voice which compelled respect. "How dare you come here, abusing the sweetest, brightest, most winsome—"

"I believe you 're in love with her yourself!" cried Otford.

"And, damme, why not?—Take care how you talk about innocent ladies you 've never set eyes on!"

"That's it!" cried Otford, glad to get on safer ground. "That's why I 'm here. You are to present me to this Madame—whatever her confounded name is."

"In your present temper?" roared Sir Peter, whose own temper was at boiling point. "I'll walk the plank first!" He pointed to Madame's house. "There's her house: the white paint. Go and pay your respects." He came close up to Otford, and spoke straight into his face. "Your respects, Jack! You 'll find you have to!"

"I can't force my way into the house, unaccompanied, and you know it!"

"Then stay away, and be hanged!"

Lord Otford was nonplussed. He caught sight of the Gazebo. "I 'll stay here," he said doggedly, sitting down like a man who means never to move again, "and if Jack shows his nose —!"

The Admiral had begun to stride towards his house. He came back and put his red face round the side of the Gazebo. "I shall be watching, sir!" this with blood-curdling calmness. "And if you dare raise a disturbance, I 'll—" he could not think of anything bad enough. "I 'll—damme! I 'll set the Eyesore at you!"

He stumped off towards his home again, while Lord Otford sank back in his seat, folded his arms, and said, "Ha!" with grim determination.

At that moment Jack came hurrying round the corner and ran straight into the Admiral's arms. At that fateful moment also Madame must needs come out of her house. Fortunately she was preoccupied and did not see the frantic pantomime with which Sir Peter tried to explain to Jack that his father was hidden in the Gazebo. Madame called, "Marjolaine! Marjolaine!" As we know, Marjolaine was with the Misses Pennymint, and Madame received no answer. Lord Otford heard her from his hiding-place. "Aha!" he said to himself, "the mother!" and he sat up at attention.

"Gobblessmysoul!" whispered the Admiral, hoarsely. "The father here, and the mother there! Jack! Get away!"

Madame had turned to her house and was calling her old servant. "Nanette!"

Jack refused to budge. What he said I do not know; but Sir Peter grew still more frantic. Nanette appeared at the upstairs window. "Quoi, Madame?"

"I 'll be hanged if I stir!" said Jack.

"Où est donc Mademoiselle?" said Madame.

"Je ne sais pas, Madame." Madame went back into her little garden, and looked into the ground-floor window.

"Come inside, then!" said Sir Peter to Jack. But Jack saw the Eyesore, who was placidly fishing, and a broad grin spread all over his face. "No! Better idea!" he chuckled. He imparted the idea to the horrified Admiral in a whisper.

Madame spoke to Nanette again. "Vite! Allez voir si son chapeau est dans sa chambre!"

Nanette disappeared from the window, and Madame stood impatiently looking up at it awaiting her return.

Whatever Jack had said to the Admiral was of such a nature as to fill that ancient salt with horror. He threw up his arms, cried, "I wash my hands of it!" and dashed into his house. Jack quickly said something to the Eyesore which caused the latter to fling his rod down with alacrity, and, amazing to relate, he and Jack hurried round the corner and out of sight together.

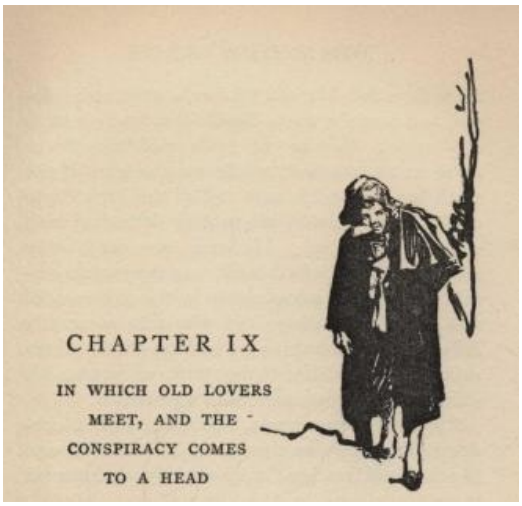
Nanette reappeared with a huge Leghorn straw hat. "Oui, Madame, voilà le chapeau de Mademoiselle." Then, pointing to the Gazebo, "Mademoiselle doit être au pavillon."

"Non," said Madame, "je viens de l'appeler." But a sudden suspicion flashed across her mind. Could Marjolaine be there with Jack, and afraid to show herself? "Serait-il possible?"—she cried,

and came hurriedly towards the summer-house.

Lord Otford had heard her conversation with Nanette, and had risen; so that Madame found herself abruptly face to face with her faithless lover.

CHAPTER IX
IN WHICH OLD LOVERS MEET, AND THE CONSPIRACY COMES TO A HEAD



Chapter IX headpiece

Madame knew him at a glance. To some extent she had been prepared for his coming by Jack's previous visit. As Jack was acquainted with Sir Peter, it was quite likely Lord Otford was also, and nothing was more probable than that he should come to look up his old friend. Nevertheless this sudden confrontation startled her, and she could not suppress a little "Oh!" of surprise.

Lord Otford, on his part, was too much occupied with his own anger, his outraged dignity, to pay more than very superficial attention to her. Moreover she had changed a great deal more than he. He had left her, a mere strip of a girl, and now she was a dignified and very beautiful woman. He was not thinking of Lucy Pryor at all at the moment, while her thoughts, if the truth must be told, were full of the Jack Sayle of old days. So they began their little duel with unequal weapons. Madame was absolutely self-possessed: Otford could not suppress a certain amount of nervousness in the presence of this calm and stately lady who was so utterly different from anything he had expected. However, he pulled himself together and put on his grandest and most overwhelming manner.

"I am the trespasser," he said, with a condescending bow, in answer to her startled cry. She inclined her head very slightly, and turned to go.

"May I detain you a moment?" said he, quickly.

She stopped and half turned towards him. "I am at a loss—" she said coldly, with raised eyebrows.

He explained. "I heard you calling your daughter." Then, very stiffly, "I presume you are Madame—ah—" he made pretence to consult the anonymous letter; this haughty person should know she was not of sufficient importance for him even to remember her name, "Madame Lachesnais."

Madame bowed almost imperceptibly and something very like a mischievous smile lurked in the corners of her lips.

"I am Lord Otford—" he gave his name quite simply, as a gentleman should, yet he managed to convey that it was a great name and that he expected the announcement of it to make its effect.

Madame made a slight movement with her hand as if she were brushing away something of

no moment whatever; as if she declined to receive a name which could have no importance for her; as if she did n't care whether his name were Otford or Snooks. This disconcerted him. It was a new experience, and it was unpleasant. For the sake of something to say he pointed to the seat under the tree. "Ah—pray be seated." Madame saw the advantage she had already gained. She spoke as she might have addressed a poor beetle: "What you have to say can be of so little consequence—"

Lord Otford flushed angrily. Here was he, a great nobleman with a grievance, and this totally insignificant woman was treating him like a child! He spoke with some warmth. "I beg your pardon! What I have to say is of the utmost consequence."

"I shall be surprised," said Madame—"and I am waiting."

Lord Otford was still fuming. Her manner was really most disconcerting. "You—you make it somewhat difficult, ma'am," he blustered.

Nothing could stir her calmness. "Then why give yourself the trouble?" she said; and again moved as if to go.

"Pray wait!" cried he, hastily. All the fine outworks of sarcasm and irony which he had elaborately prepared against this meeting had vanished before the icy blast of her imperturbable coolness. He was hot; he was uncomfortable. He could only stammer, "The fact is—my foolish son —"

Madame held up a delicate hand and stopped him. "Ah!" she said, with a well-bred rebuke of his excitement, "I can spare you any further discomfort. Your son forced his acquaintance on my daughter in my absence a week ago. Be assured we are willing to overlook his lack of manners. The circumstance need not be further alluded to."

Here was a nice thing! In those few words she had turned the tables on him. Instead of metaphorically grovelling in the dust at his feet and entreating his pardon, she had become the accuser, and he now found himself forced to speak on the defensive.

"It must be alluded to! I must explain!" he cried.

"No explanation or apology is required," she went on implacably, "since under no circumstances shall we allow the acquaintance to continue."

Was he on his head or his heels? These were practically the very words he had meant to use. This was the shell he had meant to hurl into the enemy's camp, and here it was, exploding under his own feet!

"But my son has pledged his word to come again, and—"

Again she interrupted him. "Make yourself easy on that score," she said; and now there was even a note of contempt in her voice. "He has broken his word."

"That was my doing!" cried Lord Otford, almost apologetically. "I persuaded him to wait a week. I regret to say he means to come to-day."

"Well," answered Madame, with the utmost indifference, "Pomander Walk is public, and we cannot prevent him."

"But he 'll see your daughter!"

"I think not. Unless he breaks into the house."

"Upon my soul, I believe he 'll go that length!" What Lord Otford had intended should be a menace, turned to an appeal. "That is where I ask for your co-operation."

Madame looked him up and down with indignant protest. Really, he might have been poor Snooks. "Pardon me," she said, "not co-operation." She drew herself up and her eyes flashed. "But I shall defend my own."

She laid a peculiar stress on the word "defend," which arrested his attention.

"'Defend'?" said he, with amazement. "What do you mean?"

She looked him straight in the face, and spoke with intense feeling. "I mean, that no member of your family is likely to cross my threshold."

There was something so threatening, so avenging in her voice, that he fell back a pace and said, hushed, "You speak as though you nursed a grudge against my family!"

Madame smiled scornfully. "Oh! no grudge whatever." Then she added slowly and very quietly, "But I remember!"

"Remember what?" cried he, more and more bewildered.

For a moment she did not answer. Then she turned to him and spoke. "Am I so changed—Jack Sayle?"

He stared. "Indeed, ma'am—" then suddenly he saw and remembered. He could only exclaim, "Good God!"

"Are you still puzzled?" she asked, with that mysterious smile of hers.

"Lucy!"

"Lucy Pryor," she assented. She bowed and turned away.

Lord Otford was stunned. "No—no," he stammered. "Stop!—this alters the case entirely!"

She turned on him with raised eyebrows. "How?"

He was entirely at a loss. He had spoken on the spur of the moment. All the past had suddenly risen up before him, all his youth had come flooding back. The birds sang in the old vicarage garden; his experiences, his worldly honours, sank from him, and he was a lad again, deeply in love; and here stood his first sweetheart—his only sweetheart—the woman who meant youth and spring-time and all the ideals of boyhood. He bowed his head. "I—I don't know. I am stunned!—After all these years!"

She was merciless. Also she was on her guard. She must not let herself be defeated by sentimentality. As she looked at him and saw him standing humbled before her, a still small voice in her heart cried out in pity. That would never do. He had blighted her youth; his son had hurt Marjolaine. She must remember. She must be firm. So she silenced the appealing voice and spoke with an admirable assumption of lightness.

"Why, what does it all amount to? After all these years Lord Otford meets Madame Lachesnais. These are not the Jack Sayle and the Lucy Pryor who loved, years ago. He does not meet a broken-hearted woman pining for her lost girlhood, but," she drew herself up and her voice grew firmer, "but one who has been a happy wife, and a happy mother—and a mother who will defend her daughter's happiness." Then the mockery returned, intensified. "So there is no cause for such a tragic countenance, my lord!"

Otford winced. He was humbled; he was angry with himself, and angry with her. "Madam," said he, "I am well rebuked. I wish you a very good day!" He made her a very low bow, and turned on his heel. Inwardly he was raging, and when, at the corner of the Walk, he ran right into the Eyesore who was innocently returning to his fishing, that unfortunate creature received the full force of his anger in a muttered but none the less hearty curse.

Madame stood where he had left her. Now that he was gone, she realised how the meeting had shaken her. Twenty years, and more, and he was scarcely changed! The same lithe figure; the same handsome face, with the bold eyes; the same appeal which had drawn her heart to him in the old days. The long interval which had elapsed, with all its varied adventures; her marriage, the Revolution, her husband's death, seemed merely an episode. She and Jack had parted yesterday, so it seemed, and to-day they had met again. She was dismayed at realising the sway he still held. The same sway as ever. It took the strength out of her limbs. She leaned against the summer-house in distress. This was unbearable. She must fight. The old pain must not be allowed to seize her in its grip. Jack Sayle was dead, buried and forgotten, and she would not let him come to life again.

Meanwhile Mrs. Poskett had opened her upstairs window and was leaning out. The sky was very threatening; there was going to be a thunder-storm; and there crouched that foolish cat of hers, oblivious of the weather, watching the Eyesore. "Sempronius!" she called. "Puss! Puss! Puss!"

But Sempronius had more urgent business than attending to his mistress's voice. A miracle had happened: the Eyesore had caught a fish! Sempronius looked on with eager interest as the Eyesore disengaged his prey from the hook and laid it on the grass. Yes; he would go in, said Sempronius to himself, making sure that the downstairs window of his mistress's house was open; he would go in presently, when he had safely stalked that fish. Not before.

The Admiral also had seen the skies darken. It was time to take in the thrush. So he leant out of his upstairs window to unhook the osier cage. His window and Mrs. Poskett's were so close together that—well—the Admiral and the widow could, at a pinch, have kissed if they had been so minded. But nothing was further from, the Admiral's thoughts.

"Sempronius!" screamed Mrs. Poskett.

"Ah!" chuckled the Admiral, "it's no use calling him, ma'am. He 's got his eye on the fish!"

"You don't mean to say the Eyesore's caught one!" cried Mrs. Poskett.

The Admiral laughed as he looked at the Eyesore. Laughed more than the occasion seemed to justify. "Ay, ay! he's wonderfully patient and persistent!"

The widow's face, as he leant out to see the fish, was very near the Admiral's.

"Astonishing what patience and persistence 'll do, Admiral," said she, coquettishly. She withdrew quickly and closed her window.

The Admiral was puzzled. What did she mean? But he shook off his forebodings. He turned to where the Eyesore, buried more than usual in his horrible old hat, was putting on new bait, and

gave a low whistle. The Eyesore signalled to him to be quiet and at that moment he became aware of Madame, who was moving away from the Gazebo. "Gobblessmysoul! Madame!" he muttered to himself with inexplicable confusion, and hastily withdrew out of sight with his thrush.

Miss Barbara Pennymint came hopping down her steps, followed by Marjolaine. Madame had recovered her self-possession. "Ah!" she cried, seeing Marjolaine, "I was a little alarmed about you. Did you not hear me call?"

"No, Maman chérie."

Madame turned to Barbara. "Don't let her stay out if it rains." And with a pleasant nod to the two girls she moved into her house. She had need to be alone.

Marjolaine and Barbara locked their arms round each others' waists and came across the lawn.

Barbara turned up her pretty nose. "The Eyesore looks more revolting than ever!"

"Dreadful," assented Marjolaine, with a shudder. At this instant the Eyesore caught another fish! and Marjolaine gave a cry of surprise. Sempronius sat and watched.

"What's he doing now?" asked Barbara, in a whisper.

Marjolaine looked. Then she covered Barbara's eyes with her hand. "Don't look!" and in a tragic whisper, "He's putting on a worm!"

"Oh!" cried Barbara, with a shiver of disgust. They came down to the elm.

"It was impossible," said Marjolaine, "to talk in Ruth's presence, with Doctor Johnson screaming in the next room."

"Dearest," answered Barbara confidentially, "shall I confess that sometimes that bird—" she broke off—"but no! it were disloyal. Only, if Charles had given me a lock of his hair, perhaps it would have made less noise. Yet, now I think of it, that is a selfish wish, for he had been scalped."

"How dreadful!" cried Marjolaine. But she was full of her great idea, and went on at once. "Barbara, were you very much in love?"

Barbara's face grew very serious. "Dearest," she said reproachfully, "is that quite a delicate question?"

"Well," said Marjolaine, "I mean, are you still as much in love as ever?"

Barbara avoided her eyes. But she spoke with almost exaggerated feeling. "Dearest! Do you think love can change?"

Marjolaine thought a moment. I suppose she was consulting her own heart. Then she spoke very firmly. "No! I don't think so!"

"And do I not hear the sound of my darling's voice every time Doctor Johnson yells? Is not that enough to keep the flame of love alive even in the ashes of a heart however dead? Oh! if only that innocent fowl had been present when Charles used different language!"

"But did he?" asked Marjolaine innocently.

"I sometimes wonder," answered Barbara, deep in thought.

Marjolaine felt she had said a tactless thing. She must try to soften it. "Perhaps the loss of his hair—" she began.

"Yes," assented Barbara. "But he concealed the honourable scar under a lovely wig." She turned her eyes fondly to Basil's window from which the familiar passage from the slow movement of the Kreutzer Sonata came throbbing. "And—oh, dearest!—can any physical infirmity affect true love?" she cried rapturously.

At last she was coming to the point Marjolaine had been insidiously leading up to. Marjolaine watched her closely. "I suppose not."

"I am quite sure it cannot!" cried Barbara with a burst of enthusiasm.

Marjolaine took both Barbara's hands in hers and forced her to face her. She spoke very earnestly. "Barbara, why are you quite sure?"

Barbara instantly fell into a pretty state of confusion. "Dearest!—how searching you are!"

"Tell me!" insisted Marjolaine, "why are you quite sure?"

Barbara looked this way and that; toyed with the lace on Marjolaine's sleeve; and said quite irrelevantly, "Dearest—did your mother match those lovely silks?"

Marjolaine was not to be put off. "Mr. Basil plays the violin beautifully," she said.

Barbara fluttered exactly like a sparrow taking a sand-bath. She hopped all round Marjolaine. "Oh, dearest!" she chirped. "Oh, you wicked dearest! You have guessed my secret!" Then, if I may put it that way, she perched on Marjolaine's finger and pecked her on each cheek.

"I was sure before I guessed!" laughed Marjolaine.

The Eyesore caught another fish; and, what was equally astonishing, for the first time in his

life, he moved from his accustomed place and came nearer the girls.

Barbara put on as solemn a face as she could contrive. "Promise you will never tell a living soul?"

"Look!" cried Marjolaine, "the Eyesore's caught another fish!"

"Poor darling!" exclaimed Barbara.

Marjolaine gave her a horrified look. "You are not in love with the Eyesore, too!"

"I meant the fish!" explained Barbara, "to be drawn out of the watery element."

"Ah," said Marjolaine, wisely, "that comes of a fondness for worms."

"Worms!" repeated Barbara, lugubriously. "Ah, worms!—I shall let the worm i' the bud feed on my damaged cheek."

The two were now sitting on the bench under the elm, and twittering together like little love-birds. The Eyesore came nearer.

"Barbara," said Marjolaine, with meaning, "suppose Mr. Basil's cheek is being fed on, too?"

"Dearest, that is impossible," said Barbara.

Marjolaine sat nearer and spoke more confidentially. "Suppose I know it is?"

Barbara pushed her away and looked at her. "You wonderful child!" Then she added, shortly, "Then why does n't he speak?"

"Suppose he 's too shy?"

Barbara appealed to the universe. "Oh! are n't men silly?"—She luxuriated in her sense of tragedy. "Then we must look and long."

Marjolaine breathed into her ear, "But suppose a third person spoke!"

"You!" exclaimed Barbara, with delight.

"No!" said Marjolaine, rather shocked. "That would not do at all. I could n't." The Eyesore was very near them. Marjolaine saw him. "Hush!" she whispered, and drew Barbara away. "Hush! The Eyesore!"

Barbara looked from her to the Eyesore and back again with bewilderment. "You don't mean he 's to be Cupid's messenger!"

Marjolaine laughed. "No, no. Listen." She sank her voice to a mysterious whisper. In spite of her own sorrow she was enjoying herself immensely. "Listen, and try not to scream." Barbara quivered with excitement. Marjolaine went on, "Doctor Johnson talks, does n't he?"

Barbara looked at her in amazement. "Doctor John—?"

"And he learns easily?"

"But what—?"

"Let Basil hear it from him!" said Marjolaine, triumphantly.

"Hear what?" almost screamed Barbara.

Marjolaine laughingly took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Oh, you little goose!" she cried. Then she added, very deliberately and clearly, "Teach the parrot to say—'Barbara loves you!'"

Barbara did, I assure you, leap into the air, and Marjolaine had her hand over her mouth only just in time to stifle a scream which would have brought the entire Walk to its doors and windows.

But Barbara was seized with instant remorse.

She put Marjolaine away from her with a gesture which would have done credit to Mrs. Siddons. She spoke in a tone of mingled heroism and reproach: "Charles's only gift, turned to such uses! Oh, Marjory!"

Marjolaine was quite unabashed. "Would n't Charles be pleased to know his gift had been the means of making you happy?"

"From what I can remember of him, I should say decidedly not," said Barbara, rather snappishly.

The Eyesore was now close to the Gazebo.

"Look!" cried Marjolaine. "The Eyesore's invading the whole Walk!"

But little Barbara cared. Also her momentary remorse had entirely vanished. If she had been on a tree she would have hopped from branch to branch. As it was she hopped all across the lawn, clapping her hands and twittering. "Oh! I can't bother about him!" she said. "Let him invade! Oh! it's such a splendid idea! Oh! you 're such a clever girl! Oh! my goodness, what shall I do?"

Marjolaine was anxious on the Eyesore's account. Were the Admiral to see him, there would be a terrible outburst of anger. "I'll speak to him," she said, summoning all her courage, "I 'll save him from Sir Peter's wrath!"

"No! no!" cried Barbara; "stick to business! Tell me more about the bird!"

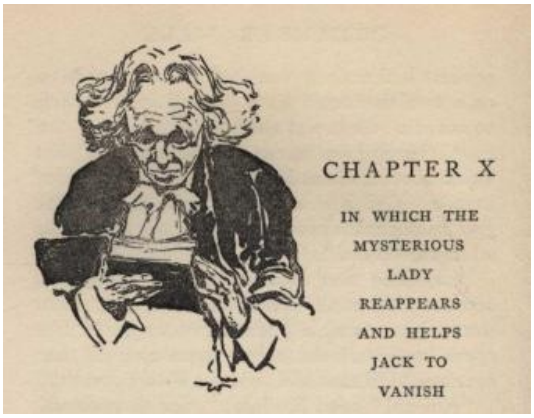
"Stand by me!" entreated Marjolaine. "Hold my hand!"

"I daren't! I'm frightened!" cried Barbara, "and—and—and I want to begin teaching the bird!"

"Treacherous Barbara!" cried Marjolaine. But before the words were out of her mouth Barbara had scuttled into the house and slammed the door.

And before Marjolaine had recovered from that shock the Eyesore had hurled his hat and smock into the Gazebo, and she was in Jack's arms.

CHAPTER X
IN WHICH THE MYSTERIOUS LADY REAPPEARS AND HELPS JACK TO VANISH



Chapter X headpiece

Marjolaine was bewildered, overjoyed, indignant, and too breathless even to cry out. Jack swept her off her feet. "Come into the Gazebo!" he cried, and before she could remember where she was, she was on the seat in the summer-house and Jack had hold of both her hands and was saying impetuously, "Marjory, I love you!"

She sank into his arms, utterly overwhelmed. It was as if a cyclone had whirled her away. "I love you, I love you, little Marjory," he was murmuring into her ear. "I loved you the first moment I saw you under the elm!"

Under the elm! Her memory came rushing back. She broke away from him and her eyes flashed indignantly. "How dare you!" she cried. "Oh! how dare you! I didn't know what I was doing. Go away! You broke your word! You never came!"

"I come now!" he answered, with a fine air of injured innocence.

"In a horrible disguise!" said she, looking with disgust at the Eyesore's hat and smock lying disconsolately where Jack had thrown them, "and too late!" She broke into sobs. "I have promised not to love you!"

"Whom have you promised?"

"My dear, dear Mother."

She had stood up and was trying to look like a dutiful daughter. But he made that very difficult by seizing her hand and drawing her down to his side again.

"Don't you love me?" said he.

"If I did, I 've promised not to!" she replied firmly.

"What 's the use of that, if you do?" Jack did n't know it, but he had put a question which undermined all first principles.

"*I* keep my word!" she replied, with great dignity. It was no answer to his question, but it saved her for the moment. The implied reproach turned his position and forced him to be on the defensive.

"So do I!" he said, quite boldly and unabashed: so unabashed that she could only stare at him

in amazement and cry "Oh!"

"Differently," he explained. "I told my father; and I promised I 'd stay away a week, to make sure. I 've made sure, and I 've come. Is n't that keeping my word?"

Marjolaine was shaken, and he had stated his case so cunningly that she could not, on the spur of the moment, put her finger on the weak point—the truth being, that she did not want to. "It seems so, when you tell it, but—"

"Do they want you to marry somebody else?" said he.

"No."

"Well, they want me to!" and he added with modest but conscious virtue, "but I refused."

"That's it!" cried Marjolaine, remembering all the Admiral had innocently let drop. "You 're a great man; by-and-by you 'll live in marble halls; and you never said a word about it!"

"Hang it all!" cried Jack, protesting with all his might, "I told you my name! I can't go about shouting I 'm a lord's son!"

But Marjolaine had not done. "And you 're going to marry a great lady who owns half a county and goes about doing good. The Hon—Hon—" what a nuisance it was that she could not keep her sobs down!—"the Honourable Caroline Thring!—Oh, does n't it sound horrid!"

"I 'm not going to marry her!" Jack almost shouted. "And she does n't want to marry me; and there 's only one girl in the world for me, and that's you—you—you!"

He tried to draw her down again, but she resisted. Caroline Thring was not the only obstacle. "Jack," she said, with tragic solemnity, "I 'm the one girl in the world you can never marry!"

Her manner was so intense, that even Jack was, for the moment, awed. "You speak as if you meant it!" he said, staring at her in astonishment.

"I do!" Her manner grew more and more solemn. She looked like the Tragic Muse, and I am not sure she did not rather enjoy the impression she was creating. Her voice rang deep and hollow. "We are fated to part."

"Why on earth—?" cried Jack, almost frightened.

"It is a terrible secret," she answered. Then she suddenly sat down beside him. "Sit close! Oh, closer!" Now she was a child again, revelling in a good story. "Listen. Your father loved my mother when they were both very young—"

"No!" cried Jack.

"'M. And he went on loving her for years and years and years! And then he left her for ever, just as you left me last Saturday; and went and married the Honourable Caroline Thring."

"What!" cried Jack, utterly bewildered.

"Oh, well—same thing—some other great lady."

Jack gave a low whistle.

"And Maman 's never forgotten it, just as I never should. And that's why she fainted when she heard your name."

Jack whistled again. Then a new idea occurred to him. "That accounts for my father's temper just now."

Marjolaine was puzzled. "Just now?" she asked.

"When I landed, he was here with your mother."

"Oh!" cried Marjolaine, astonished and frightened.

"Sir Peter told me," Jack went on. "It was a close shave. I had just time to borrow the fisherman's coat and hat. When my father came away he was perfectly furious. He did n't know me, but he swore at me horribly."

Marjolaine nodded wisely. "You see! Maman had been telling him exactly what she thought about him. Oh, Jack, they are enemies and we must part forever." She stood up and resumed her finest tragedy-queen manner. "It is what they call a blood-feud!"

Jack sprang to his feet. "Then we must marry to wipe it out!" he cried. "Marjory, we must fly!"

"Fly—?"

"Fly!—run away!—elope!"

"Leave Maman—!" cried Marjolaine, very properly shocked. "I could n't do it!"

"You 'd have to if we were married," he argued.

"Afterwards, perhaps," answered the ever-ready Marjolaine, "but not before."

Jack thought he would clinch the matter. "We'll be married at once. Then it'll be afterwards."

"No, no, no!!" cried Marjory. "It's no use." She turned to him with pretty appeal. "Don't ask me, will you?" Then she went on in a tone of middle-aged common-sense: "Besides, we can't be married at once. In your stupid England, the parson has to ask the congregation three times whether they have any objection. As if they could n't make up their minds the first time! and as if

it was any of their business at all!"

"Banns—! Hang!" said Jack, scratching his head. That helped him. "I know!" he cried, "Licence!"

"Don't ask me!" She caressed his coat-collar coaxingly. "You won't ask me, will you? What is a licence?"

"Well," said Jack, with an air of profound knowledge and experience, "You go to a Bishop, and he gives you a document, and then you go to the nearest church—and—and—there you are!"

"I don't believe you're there at all," she said, pouting. She turned away in despair. "Oh, it's no use!" But she turned back with new hope. "Do you know any Bishops?"

"Not one," said Jack, ruefully.

Her head rested on his shoulder, and made a prop for his. "It's discouraging!" they both sighed, sinking on the seat in the Gazebo, and looking as woe-begone as the Babes in the Wood.

Down came the rain, pattering on the leaves of the elm. The Eyesore had come back, hatless and in his shirt sleeves, and had executed a brief dance of delight over the three fish Jack had caught for him. He had only got back just in time to avert disaster, for Sempronius, seeing the Walk deserted, had been on the very point of raiding the fish. The Eyesore sat on his box and resumed his melancholy sport, resigned to the loss of his outer garment, oblivious of the rain, but keeping a wary eye on the cat.

The Reverend Doctor Sternroyd emerged from his house. I say emerged, because it was a slow and difficult manoeuvre. He was loaded as usual. His green umbrella occupied his right arm, while his left encircled a number of ancient tomes; so he had to come through his door sideways and down his steps backwards, and the gate presented a new and complicated problem. Then he discovered it was raining, and, of course, he tried to open his umbrella while he was still under the arch of his gate. At the best of times the opening of that umbrella was a matter of diplomacy and patience. You did not open it just when you wanted to, but only when it was willing. In a wind it would open itself and turn itself inside out; but in a shower it needed coaxing. Its ribs all went in different directions and it required the greatest skill to induce anything approaching unanimity. The chances were that by the time you had got the umbrella open, the shower had ceased and the sun was shining; and as it was just as difficult to close it, you probably gave up, and resigned yourself to looking eccentric.

The Reverend Doctor got inextricably mixed up with his books, his half-open umbrella, and the gate. He felt he must use strong language. "Tut, tut!" said he.

Marjolaine heard him. "Hush!" she whispered, warningly.

"Why?" asked Jack.

She peeped round the edge of the Gazebo. "The Reverend Doctor Sternroyd coming out of his gate!"

"A parson?" Jack almost shouted.

"Yes."

"By George!" exclaimed Jack; and while she was gasping, "What are you going to do?" he had rushed across the lawn and slapped the Doctor on the back.

"Dear me!" cried the startled Doctor, as his books slid from under his arm and the umbrella opened with a report like a gun's. "Dear me! Tut, tut!"

"I beg your pardon, Doctor," Jack apologised, picking up the books and helping the parson through the gate. Then he seized him by the sleeve and dragged him bewildered and protesting to the Gazebo.

HE SEIZED HIM BY THE SLEEVE, AND DRAGGED HIM, BEWILDERED AND PROTESTING, TO THE GAZEBO

"Sempronius! Sempronius!" cried Mrs. Poskett, appearing at her window. "Come in, you bad cat, you 'll get wet through!"

But Sempronius was deeply engrossed, and Mrs. Poskett closed her window in despair.

Meanwhile Jack had forced the outraged Doctor down on to the seat, Marjolaine had relieved him of the umbrella, and Jack had tossed his books into a corner.

"Sit down, Doctor," said Jack, "here, between us."

"But, my dear young friends—" began the Doctor, protestingly.

"You'd get your feet wet, Sir, and catch cold. My name's Jack Sayle."

Marjolaine interrupted him. "His name is the Honourable John Sayle," she explained with great importance, "and he's the only son of Lord Otford."

She had touched a spring. If there was one thing the Doctor was more familiar with than another, it was heraldry. He started off like an alarm clock, and all the exclamations and gesticulations of the impatient lovers were incapable of stopping him.

HE STARTED OFF LIKE AN ALARM CLOCK

"Otford: or, on a fesse azure between in chief, a sinister arm embowed and couped at the shoulder fessewise vested of the second, holding in the hand proper a martel gules, and in base a cerf regardant passant vert, three martlets of the first. Crest: out of a crest-coronet a blasted oak —"

"Oh!" cried Marjory, stopping her ears.

"—motto: Sayle and Return."

"Doctor!" shouted Jack, shaking him, "when you 've quite done, we want to get married; and you 've got to get a licence!"

The boy and girl were leaning excitedly across him. They spoke alternately and breathlessly.

"Because," said Marjolaine, "we 're in a dreadful hurry and Maman won't hear of it—"

"And my father wants me to marry Caroline Thring, which is wicked—"

"And of course I'll never do it, and it's no use asking me, but—"

"We're going to be married anyhow, and if you don't help we shall run away—"

"And you would n't like to be the cause of our doing that, would you?" She had slipped to her knees.

"And we love each other—" Jack also was on his knees, facing her.

"Very, very dearly!" they both concluded. And to the horror of the learned Doctor, their lips met.

He rose, indignant. "I am deeply shocked. Profoundly surprised. I shall make a point of informing Madame Lachesnais and his lordship."

Jack leapt to his feet. "Oh, I say, you can't, you know!" he protested, "because we took you into our confidence!"

The antiquary was as nearly angry as he had ever been in his life. "I did not ask for your

confidence!" he exclaimed.

"Well—you've got it!" said Jack, conclusively.

Marjolaine laid her hand on the Doctor's arm and looked up at him with great pathetic eyes—the stricken deer. "And, Doctor, dear—think of when you were young!"

"Eh?" said the Doctor, startled. "How did you know?—And if I did run away with my blessed Araminta—"

"Ah!—there, you see!" cried Jack, delighted.

"—I had every excuse," protested the Doctor. "My blessed Araminta was deeply interested in flint arrowheads."

"And I 'm sure you were very, very happy," said Marjolaine, laying her hand on his shoulder.

The Doctor looked at her. The Doctor dug his snuff-box out of a remote waistcoat-pocket. The Doctor took snuff. The Doctor drew out a great, brown handkerchief. The Doctor blew his nose. His snuff was very strong, and had made his eyes water. Finally he said, "Ah, my child, she has been dead thirty years!"

"Dear Doctor Sternroyd!" murmured Marjolaine.

He pulled himself together. "But this is so harebrained! A special licence is not so easily had. His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury—"

"Oh, my goodness! an *Arch*bishop!"—cried Marjolaine, deeply impressed.

"The Archbishop of Canterbury requires excellent reasons."

"I 've told you," cried Jack impatiently, "we love each other!"

The antiquary could not help smiling. "I fear that would hardly satisfy his Grace!"

"Wicked old gentleman!" pouted Marjolaine.

"We'll find a reason," said Jack, confidently; and after a moment's thought: "Here you are! My leave 's up in a month: only just time for the honeymoon!"

"H'm!" said the Antiquary. "Even that does not seem to me sufficiently convincing."

He had risen, and now turned and looked at them as they sat watching him eagerly and hopefully. They looked so charming, so young, so innocent, and so deeply in love with each other, that the Doctor was touched. For years he had been buried in his musty old books, and suddenly he was confronted with life, with youth starting out on its career. It would be good to make these children happy.

"I have an idea," he said, with a humorous twinkle. "The Archbishop, who is a very good friend of mine, is forming a collection of antiquities. Now—" he searched in all his pockets—"I found a rare Elizabethan tobacco-pipe here the other day." He produced it and polished it carefully on his sleeve. Marjolaine, I am sorry to say, hid her face in her handkerchief, and was attacked by a fit of coughing which shook her from head to foot. "Perhaps," continued the Doctor, eyeing the pipe with fond regret, "perhaps if I were to offer that to his Grace, it might oil the wheels." He sighed deeply. "Yes!—It will be a wrench, but I 'll take it to Lambeth to-morrow—Ah, no! To-morrow is Sunday!"

"Dash it!" cried Jack, petulantly. "What a way Sunday has of coming in the wrong part of the week!"

"Hush!" said Doctor Sternroyd, reprovingly, "Monday, then."

"And you'll marry us the same day?" asked Jack.

"No, no!" replied the Doctor. "The day after, perhaps."

Marjolaine ticked the days off on her fingers. "Saturday—Sunday—Monday—Tuesday—! Four whole days!—"

The lovers looked at each other disconsolately, and together sighed, "Oh, dear!"

"And what am I to do till then?" cried Jack. "I daren't go home. My father 's quite capable of having me kidnapped and sent to my ship!"

Marjolaine clung to him with a little cry. "Oh, Jack!"

He turned to Doctor Sternroyd with sudden decision. "Doctor! You must give me a bed."

The Doctor failed to understand. "Give you—?"

"A bed."

Doctor Sternroyd threw up his hands in protest. "And incur your noble father's displeasure?"

"On the contrary. He'd be deeply grateful to you for showing me hospitality."

"Ah," sighed the Antiquary, shaking his head, "you'll find me poor company, young gentleman."

"It's only for two days," said Jack lightly. "We can play chess." He turned to Marjolaine. "And every evening we'll meet in the Gazebo. I 'll whistle so:—" he executed a fragment which Marjolaine repeated, more or less—"and you 'll come out."

Doctor Sternroyd was troubled; but this young man had a way with him. "Ah, well!" he sighed, sitting down and motioning them to sit beside him. "Now you must give me full particulars: your names, ages, professions, if any—"

"How exciting!" cried Marjolaine, clapping her hands.

The Antiquary picked up one of the books. "'*Epicteti quæ supersunt Dissertationes*,'" he read, affectionately. "A pencil! Now, Mr. Sayle—" So they bent their heads together, and were very busy, giving the dates of birthdays, and all their histories, which Doctor Sternroyd meticulously entered on the fly-leaf of the tome.

The rain had ceased. The sun was again shining brightly, turning the rain-drops on the foliage of the elm into diamonds. The air sparkled, newly washed. The Eyesore in his corner had, for some time, been showing symptoms of discomfort. With appetites refreshed by the shower, the fish were displaying a lively interest in his bait. To be sure, they refused to swallow his hook; but they nibbled at his worm with great zest, and kept his float bobbing up and down in a manner which made it impossible for him to attend to anything else. Yet out of the corner of his eye he could see Sempronius, stretched at full length, creeping slowly, almost imperceptibly, but with deadly determination, towards the fish Jack had caught.

The Eyesore said "Hoo!" but Sempronius took no notice. The Eyesore kicked; but Sempronius was out of reach. The Eyesore shook his disengaged fist; but Sempronius only smiled.

As the sun came out, out came Mr. Jerome Brooke-Hoskyn, as resplendent as the sun. He was truly wonderful to behold: his magnificent beaver hat poised at an improbable angle, his buckles glittering, and his vast person imposing under the countless capes of his driving-coat. Just as he had swaggered to his gate he was evidently arrested by a voice from the upper chamber.

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"Eh? What?" he asked peevishly, making an ear-trumpet of his hand. "Late home?—Yes; I told you I should be. Pitt is to speak, and when once he's on his legs the Lord only knows when he'll stop. But I have the doorkey. What? Yes, I did! I found the keyhole easily enough, but the key was twisted. What?" He grew purple with indignation. "Sober!—Reely, Selina!—" The Walk was astir, as he observed to his confusion. "Dammit, Ma'am, they'll hear you howling all round the Walk!" He turned just in time to face Miss Ruth, who had come sailing up to him. Everybody was either at their open windows, or had come out to taste the fresh air. The Admiral was fussing with his sweet peas; Jim was helping him; Mrs. Poskett was watching the Admiral; Basil Pringle was struggling with the Kreutzer Sonata; Barbara had left Doctor Johnson and was leaning out of the lower window; listening to Basil. Even the servants were out and about; only Madame was missing.

Miss Ruth addressed Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "Off to the whirl of fashion so early?"

Brooke-Hoskyn did his best to edge her away from the house while he nervously pulled on his buckskin gloves. "H'm, it is a long way to the City," he explained, "my good friends, the Goldsmiths' Company—a banquet to the Chinese Ambassador—my shay is waiting round the corner."

Miss Ruth tried to pass him. "I'll go and sit with your wife," she said, with the kindest intention.

"On no account!" he answered, not too politely, interposing his solid bulk between her and the gate. Seeing her bridle, he corrected himself. "Most kind of you, to be sure; but—ah—not just now. I left the dear soul asleep, and dreaming of the angels."

Miss Ruth turned away disappointed, and her attention was at once diverted by the Eyesore's extraordinary antics. Sempronius, that intelligent cat, clearly comprehending that the fisherman could not leave his rod, was preparing to spring at the fish.

"Oh! look at the Eyesore!" cried Miss Ruth.

"Haha!" laughed Brooke-Hoskyn. "Sempronius is about to snatch his fish! Observe his antics! Reely, most amusing!"

In the Gazebo the lovers and Doctor Sternroyd had finished, and the Doctor closed the book with a sigh of satisfaction. "There! I think that's all!" They prepared to leave their shelter, unconscious of the excitement in the Walk.

But at that moment the Eyesore, driven to desperation by the threatened loss of his fish, sprang at Sempronius with uncontrollable fury, seized the animal by the scruff of his neck, and —*horresco referens*—hurled him into the river. Then he picked up his fish, and bolted.

THE EYESORE SEIZED THE ANIMAL BY THE SCRUFF OF HIS NECK, AND HURLED HIM INTO THE RIVER

THE EYESORE SEIZED THE ANIMAL BY THE SCRUFF OF HIS NECK, AND HURLED HIM

Ruth screamed; Barbara screamed; Nanette and Jane screamed; while Mrs. Poskett waved her arms and screamed louder than any of them: "Sempronius!—Save him!"

Ruth turned wildly to Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "Save him!"

"In these clothes!" cried he, much offended.

They had all forgotten the hero of the Battle of Copenhagen. To fling his coat to Jim; to seize the Eyesore's landing-net; to stumble down the steps to the river; and to capture the squirming cat, was the work of a moment.

Mrs. Poskett had rushed out of her house just in time to meet the Admiral bringing the drenched cat up the steps again. In his open window Basil struck up "See the Conquering Hero Comes," and, while Marjolaine, Jack and Doctor Sternroyd stood petrified in the Gazebo, all the rest of the Walk formed an admiring circle round the Admiral and Mrs. Poskett.

"Your cat, Ma'am," said Sir Peter with the simple dignity becoming to the doer of a great deed, as he handed her the struggling and yelling animal.

And what do you think she did? She tossed—tossed!—the cat to Jim, and, exclaiming, "My hero! My preserver!" flung her arms round the Admiral's neck and kissed him on both cheeks.

And at that precise moment, while the whole Walk had gone frenzied with excitement, while the Admiral was standing stupefied, only able to ejaculate "Gobblessmysoul!" a great many times in succession; at that precise moment the gaunt Mysterious Lady entered the Walk, followed by her gigantic footman. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn fled.

"'Ware pirate, Admiral!" shouted Jim. All the women, except Mrs. Poskett, who was lying half unconscious in the Admiral's arms, rushed to their doors, where they stood, watching further developments.

The Mysterious Lady had her *face-à-main* up, and her disgusted stare wandered from the excited women to the dishevelled group formed by Mrs. Poskett and the Admiral. "What horrible people!" she exclaimed. She bore down on Sir Peter, who had managed to shake off his fair burden, and stood panting with suppressed fury.

"You dreadful old man—" she began.

"Eh?" cried the Admiral. "You, again! Don't you speak to me! I'm dangerous!"

The three conspirators in the Gazebo were listening with all their ears.

"You don't know whom you're addressing!" said the Lady, haughtily.

"I don't, and I don't want to," answered the Admiral, mopping his brow.

The Lady drew herself up to her full height. "I am Caroline Thring!"

"Caroline—!" ejaculated the Admiral, who had caught sight of Marjolaine and Jack. But the situation was too much for him, and he sank speechless on the seat under the elm.

"Caroline! Oh, my stars!" cried Jack.

Fortunately the Honourable Caroline Thring turned away from the Gazebo and examined the houses, where all the women were standing on guard, prepared to defend the doors with their lives. Marjolaine had time to gather her wits. She saw the Eyesore's smock and hat lying where Jack had thrown them. "Put those on! Quick!" she cried.

"Where is the girl with the curls?" asked Caroline, turning fiercely on Sir Peter.

"I—I—I—don't know," he stammered.

"In the summer-house, no doubt," said she, beginning to advance towards it.

"She 's coming!" whispered Jack, who was not nearly ready. Then, to Doctor Sternroyd, who was standing first on one leg and then on the other and alternately opening and shutting his umbrella in his helpless bewilderment, "Doctor! Lie! Lie, as you never lied before in your life!"

But Sir Peter had jumped up, and was barring Caroline's way. "You mustn't go there!—You can't go there!—You shan't go there!"

Caroline gave him a look and brushed him away with a contemptuous motion of her *face-à-main*. "Stand aside, intoxicated person!"

"Intoxicated!—Me!" screamed the Admiral, sinking back on the seat.

Caroline found herself face to face with Doctor Sternroyd, whom Marjolaine had thrust forward, just as you throw your wife or your child to the wolves when you are sleighing in Siberia. "A clergyman!" she cried, examining him with surprise.

"A humble clerk in holy orders, Ma'am," stammered the Antiquary.

Now Caroline saw Marjolaine with difficulty supporting a decrepit old man in a very bad hat and a very dirty smock. Really quite a touching picture.

"Who is this?" she asked, almost mollified.

"A poor man, your Ladyship," said Marjolaine, with a pretty curtsey. "I'm teaching him his letters, your Ladyship." Another curtsey. Then she had an inspiration. She pointed to Doctor Sternroyd. "And this kind clergyman is going to give him some soup, your ladyship." When she had completed her third curtsey, she turned to Jack. "Come, good man. Lean on me."

Caroline was much moved. "I'm glad my first visit bore such good fruit," she said patronisingly. Then seeing with what extreme difficulty the poor old man walked, and not to be outdone by a mere chit of a girl, she said to Jack, "Give me your other arm." And so Jack was slowly escorted towards Doctor Sternroyd's house, while the Walk looked on and admired.

The Walk was puzzled. Here was the Eyesore, suddenly grown very old, being led into one of their houses, and the Admiral uttered no protest! As a matter of fact the Admiral was too much occupied in mastering his desire to laugh, to move from his seat. The rest of the Walk felt that Caroline was the common enemy, and even the Eyesore sank into secondary importance.

For all but Basil. Basil, who had watched the entire adventure from his window, nearly spoilt the whole thing. He had seen the Eyesore run away—yet here was the Eyesore—!

"But the Eyesore ran away! Who's—?" he shouted.

Sir Peter recovered breath enough to gasp, "Hold your tongue!"

"Well, but, Doctor Sternroyd—" protested Basil.

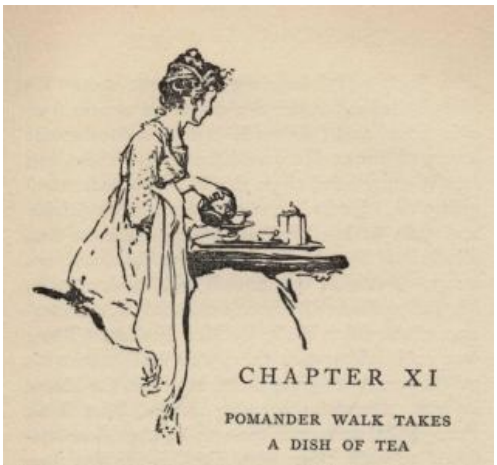
"Hold your silly tongue, sir!" cried the Doctor to Basil's infinite amazement.

Jack disappeared into the Antiquary's house and the Antiquary himself stood at the door waving his umbrella like a sword. Caroline turned to Marjolaine. "You're a good little girl," she said, kindly. "Here's a six-penny bit." Marjolaine, quite equal to the occasion, received it with a fourth curtsey, and a modest "Thank you, my Lady."

I think Caroline had some idea of following into Doctor Sternroyd's house to see that her ancient *protégé* was well bestowed, but just as she got to the gate the Doctor slammed the door violently in her face; and the whole Walk took its cue from him, so that as Caroline passed along the Walk haughtily tossing her head, every window was closed with a bang, and every door was slammed with a bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

And Marjolaine and the Admiral sat under the tree and shouted with laughter!

CHAPTER XI
POMANDER WALK TAKES A DISH OF TEA



Chapter XI headpiece

The Walk had got through Sunday as best it could. It had gone to church; it had read good books; the Admiral had carefully laid "Hervey's Meditations among the Tombs" open on his knees, and his bandana over his head, and had tried to sleep his Sunday sleep. But it was only a fitful slumber. Too many things had happened and were happening in the Walk. There was Jack,

concealed in Doctor Sternroyd's house, for one. What did that mean? Sir Peter had called on Doctor Sternroyd, but the latter stood in his doorway with the door only ajar, and would not allow him to cross the threshold. He had kept a wary eye on the Walk and he was sure Jack and Marjolaine had not met. He himself had sat under the elm to an unconscionable hour, and had made it impossible for the lovers to meet. He would not betray them, but on the other hand there should be no underhand goings on. He had tried to intercept Marjolaine and talk to her like the Dutch uncle he had alluded to, but she laughed in his face, and ran away. But that was not all that troubled him. He had undoubtedly been embraced, in the presence of the whole Walk, by Mrs. Poskett. There was no blinking that fact; and he felt that his neighbours, with gross unfairness, put the blame on him. After the morning service, Miss Ruth Pennymint, who had gone to church alone, refused to walk home with him for the first time in his experience, and only gave a very lame excuse. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn looked at him with a disapproving eye. Mrs. Poskett had not shown herself since the awful scene with the cat. He had instructed Jim to reconnoitre; I don't know how Jim carried out that delicate task, but he came back to his master with the report that Mrs. Poskett was mortal bad, to be sure. Even Basil Pringle had been very distant with him when they met after church.

The Admiral turned and twisted in his chair. Surely the flies were more troublesome than usual so early in the summer.

He was so put about that, contrary to his usual custom, he went to church again in the evening. Madame Lachesnais was there, and to his confusion asked him to escort her home. Marjolaine walked on in front with Mr. Pringle and Ruth.

Madame had noticed the curious discomfort that pervaded the Walk. She had seen and heard nothing of yesterday's occurrences, as she had been shut in her own little room at the back of the house, busy with her own troubles. She took the Admiral into her confidence. Did he know what was the matter with the Walk? It seemed as if some imp of mischief had set everybody by the ears. She had ventured to address Doctor Sternroyd that morning, and he had turned even paler than usual—positively green—and had run away from her. What was the matter with Mrs. Poskett? Why had not Barbara been to church all day? And he, himself, why was he so silent? Why did he seem to wish to avoid her?

The Admiral was greatly troubled. He could only stammer that he supposed it was the change in the weather. "Well," said Madame, "I cannot let our good friends go on like this. Why, we should be unable to live together in the Walk, if we were not all on excellent terms with each other." And so the next morning all the inhabitants of the Walk received a pretty little three-cornered note, asking them to an *al fresco* tea-party that evening, under the elm.

Jack had never spent such a Sunday, and privately registered a vow he would never spend such another. Doctor Sternroyd did all his own housekeeping; he said he would rather spend his money on a book than on a cook. He invariably rose at six. He routed Jack out at that hour. At half-past six he was at work in his study, even on Sundays. At nine he made his breakfast, a thin cup of tea and a very thin rasher of bacon. What Jack did between six and nine, I do not know. After breakfast the Doctor went back to his study and he gave Jack his great manuscript work on "Prehistoric Remains found in the Alluvial Deposit of the Estuary of the Thames, together with Observations on the Cave-dwellers of Ethiopia," to while away the time. When the Doctor went to church he locked Jack in his room. After church he went for a long walk and forgot all about Jack. And he had forgotten all about him when he came back, so that Jack was forced to raise a perfect riot before he could get released. By midday on Monday Jack had worked his way through every edible thing in the house, and on Monday afternoon the Doctor not only had to go and see the Archbishop of Canterbury on the subject of the licence, but had been strictly enjoined by Jack to bring home food.

Fortunately for Madame's tea-party, that Monday evening was an ideal one. June had come and the roses in the little gardens had taken the opportunity to burst into bloom. The elm was in its fresh summer garb. The setting sun shone level through its leaves and turned them all to burnished gold. It gilded the entire Walk, and set the panes in the windows flashing and flaming; even the dirty little oil lamps were glorified as they reflected the golden blaze. The river shimmered with opal and amethyst; and a great barge, drifting down with the tide, might have borne Cleopatra and all her retinue, so gorgeously was it transfigured.

Not all the Walk was present. The Doctor, as we have just seen, was engaged with the Archbishop, and with his own marketing. Miss Barbara had sent a polite excuse. Her actual words were "Miss Barbara Pennymint presents her Compliments to Madame Lachesnais and is

much obliged for her kind invitation to tea. Miss Barbara Pennymint much regrets she cannot avail herself of Madame Lachesnais' proffered hospitality as I am engaged in an educational experiment."

Mrs. Brooke-Hoskyn, of course, was absent, as usual, for purely personal and private reasons.

But all the others were there. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was resplendent in a plum-coloured suit, of which the breeches fitted so tightly, and of which the waist was so narrow, that he scarcely dared breathe.

Mrs. Poskett and Ruth had put on their best gowns; the Admiral wore his gala uniform with all his medals, and his three-cornered hat. Madame herself was a vision of loveliness. She had discarded her half-mourning for the occasion; but what she wore I cannot tell you, except that it was a soft blue, and that there was graceful lace about her neck and wrists. If you wish to see what she looked like, you have only to examine a Book of the Modes of 1805, and you will find her there. Even Mr. Basil Pringle was brushed.

Nanette and Jim—Jim in his best clothes—waited on Madame's guests. The latter were all on their best behaviour. You never saw anything more elegant than the way Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn stuck out his little finger as he raised his cup to his lips; you never heard prettier protests than when Marjolaine offered Mrs. Poskett a third helping of cake. "I couldn't! I reely and truly couldn't!—Well, since you insist!"

But do what Madame would she could not put her guests quite at their ease. A sort of blight brooded over their spirits. This was particularly noticeable in their attitude towards Sir Peter. They treated him with unaccustomed aloofness; they kept him at arm's length; they did not respond to his sallies; with the result that his sallies became more forced as the evening wore on. As a contrast to this gentle gloom, Marjolaine's high spirits amazed her mother. This child, who only last Saturday was broken-hearted, to-day was laughing and blithe, rallying her guests, prettily playing the hostess, the only life in the party. Madame watched her with puzzled anxiety.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, with the calf of his leg well displayed, and his little finger well at right angles to his cup, bowed elegantly. "Ah, Ladies, there is nothing so comforting as a dish of tea after dinner. It is prodigiously soothing!"

There seemed no appropriate rejoinder, but Mrs. Poskett exploded with "Nothing can soothe the broken heart." She spoke into her cup, but her eyes wandered towards the Admiral.

Sir Peter tried to change the conversation. Also he felt it was time to assert himself. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had been monopolising the notice of the ladies far too long.

"Hah!" he cried, "I 've always said Pomander Walk was a Haven of Content. Look at it!" You remember that the last time he made a similar remark everybody obediently turned at his command. Imagine his feelings, then, when on this occasion nobody paid the slightest attention. On the contrary, they ostentatiously turned to each other and began spirited conversations about nothing in particular. He repeated, "I say, look at it!" but only drew a glare from Brooke-Hoskyn.

Marjolaine came to the rescue. She tripped up to him and put her arm through his. "There 's something the matter with the Walk this evening, Sir Peter. I 'm the only merry one among you!"

Madame could not help exclaiming with grave remonstrance, "Marjolaine!"

Marjolaine came close to her mother. "Oh, let me laugh, Maman!" She proceeded in a whisper, "They are so droll! Sir Peter is afraid of Mrs. Poskett; Mrs. Poskett is almost in tears; Mr. Basil is gloomy; Ruth is in a bad temper; and Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn has n't got over Saturday's banquet."

"But you, Marjolaine—!" exclaimed Madame with quiet reproof.

"You told me to fight it, Maman," said Marjolaine, with a shy laugh. Then she ran across to Basil, who was watching the door through which Barbara might still come. He was wondering what demon had persuaded him to accept this invitation, which had brought him out of doors, when he might have stayed indoors where he would at least have been under the same roof as Barbara.

The Admiral had bravely recovered from his rebuff. He came up to Brooke-Hoskyn. "Well, Brooke, my boy! Did n't see you in church yesterday. Too much turtle on Saturday—what?" and down came the flat of his hand with a round thwack on Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's broad back.

To be accused of having overeaten yourself when you are suffering from a bad headache is extremely annoying; to be slapped on the back when you are swallowing hot tea is infuriating. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn turned on Sir Peter. "Nothing of the sort, sir!—I deprecate these unseemly familiarities. I was detained from divine service because I chose to sit at home and hold my dear Selina's hand!" And he turned his back on Sir Peter.

"Um," said the latter. His playful banter was certainly not being well received.

Mrs. Poskett looked up at Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn with melancholy eyes. "How is your wife?" she said, "that dear, innocent lamb."

"Gambolling, Ma'am," he answered, airily. "Figuratively speaking, Selina is gambolling."

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Mrs. Poskett, sympathetically.

Basil Pringle felt that something drastic must be done if they were to live through the evening. He addressed Marjolaine. "Miss Marjory, won't you cheer us with a song?"

Madame Lachesnais interposed quickly: this was putting her poor child's courage to too severe a test. "I am sure she would prefer not to sing this evening."

But Marjolaine exclaimed merrily, "Oh, yes, Maman, if they would like it!"

Madame could only admire her indomitable pluck. "Brave child!" she murmured.

"Sing that pretty little thing about the blue ribbon," cried the Admiral, and hummed the first bar.

"Ha!" mockingly cried Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn.

The Admiral faced him angrily: "Well, sir?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn eyed him calmly through his quizzing glass, and said coldly, "What, sir?"

Madame interposed with her most amiable smile. "Sir Peter, Mrs. Poskett's cup is empty."

"Is it?" growled Sir Peter, without moving. But Madame's hand was stretched out to receive it, and he had to yield.

"Oh hang!—Your cup, Ma'am." He almost snatched it from her.

"How kind and gentle you are," almost sobbed Mrs. Poskett, with an adoring glance.

The Admiral answered her with a glare. "Kind be—" he was silenced by a stern "Hush!" from Basil, and had to relieve his feelings by inarticulate splutterings.

Marjolaine stood in the centre of the circle, with her hands folded in front of her, and sang very simply and unaffectedly:

"Oh, dear! What can the matter be?
Dear, dear! What can the matter be?
Oh, dear! What can the matter be?
Johnny 's so long at the fair.
He promised he 'd buy me a fairing should please me,
And then for a kiss, oh! he vowed he would tease me,
He promised he 'd buy me a bunch of blue ribbons
To tie up my bonny brown hair."

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn applauded in the grand manner with the tips of his fingers, as if he had been at the Opera. "Brava! Brava!" he cried, with the discrimination of a connoisseur.

"Brava be hanged!" roared the Admiral. "Capital!" He turned to Miss Ruth. "Where's little Miss Barbara?"

To his consternation Miss Ruth hissed a fierce "Hsssh!" at him.

"Well, I 'm—!" he muttered to himself.

Marjolaine sang the second verse. You are to understand that she made a very pleasant picture as she stood warbling the quaint old ballad with unaffected simplicity. Jack evidently thought so, for, braving the danger of discovery, he stood, gaunt and hungry, watching her from behind the curtains in Doctor Sternroyd's window. Indeed, all the Walk was affected by her charm. Heads nodded to the tune; feet kept time to the rhythm; hearts melted—Mrs. Poskett's heart, especially. She gazed reproachfully at the Admiral. What, indeed, could the matter be? and why, indeed, was her Johnnie, whose name was Peter, so long at the fair? Jim and Nanette had come into the circle, fascinated by the song. Jim was trying to insinuate an arm round Nanette's ample waist, but only got pinched for his pains.

"He promised he'd buy me a basket of posies,
A garland of lilies, a garland of roses,
A little straw hat to set off the blue ribbons
That tie up my bonny brown hair.
And it's oh, dear! What can the matter be?
Dear, dear! What can the matter be?
Oh, dear! What can the matter be?
Johnny 's so long at the fair!"

Almost unconsciously the whole Walk drifted into the song, so that the last lines were being sung by everybody. The Admiral, indeed, who never knew when a song was over, went on long after everybody else had finished. In his enthusiasm he added weird shouts to the words:—"Oh! Damme! Ahoy! What can the matter be?"

Mrs. Poskett burst into loud sobs. "Oh, don't!—I can't bear it!"

Ruth turned fiercely on the Admiral. "Brute!" she cried.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was stopping both ears with his hands. "Mong doo! Mong doo!" he drawled. And then in that curiously official manner he sometimes dropped into, "Pray silence for the Admiral's song!" It was a very irritating manner.

Sir Peter made furiously towards him. "By Jehoshaphat—!"

But Madame, ever alert, stopped him. She held out a full cup. "Sir Peter," she said, with her sweetest smile, indicating Mrs. Poskett, "take her another dish of tea."

"Me, Ma'am!" protested the outraged Admiral; but there was no resisting that smile, and he took it like a lamb—an angry lamb. "It's a confounded conspiracy," he growled. He thrust the tea under Mrs. Poskett's nose. "Your tea, Ma'am!"

"How sweet of you!" sobbed Mrs. Poskett.

The Admiral danced with rage. "Dash it and hang it, Ma'am, you're crying into it!"

Marjolaine had taken Miss Ruth aside. "Where is Barbara?" she asked.

"It's enough to make a saint swear," answered Ruth, snappishly. "She's been locked in with Doctor Johnson since Saturday. Locked in! Only comes out for meals." Marjolaine laughed quietly to herself.

Sir Peter had been moving restlessly round the Walk. He now found himself face to face with Basil. "Pringle," he said, "can you tell me what's come over the Walk?"

Basil drew himself up. "The Walk has lofty ideals, sir," he said sternly. "Perhaps you have fallen short of them." He turned away and stalked towards Barbara's house.

The Admiral was left speechless. He—he! Admiral Sir Peter Antrobus—had been snubbed by Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, by Ruth, and now by this—this fiddler-fellow! He could only mutter, "Well!—blister my paint—!"

He was aroused by the booming of Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's voice.

"Yes, Ladies," that great man was saying, "Sherry was in fine condition on Saturday!"

The Admiral was not going to hoist the white flag. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn must be put in his proper place. "And port, too, eh, Brooke, my boy?"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn eyed him sternly and haughtily. "My name is Brooke-Hoskyn, sir, and I was referring to my Right Honourable friend, Richard Brinsley Sheridan!"

"Why couldn't you say so?" grumbled Sir Peter.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn continued. "As I was about to say when—" he looked contemptuously at the Admiral—"when I was interrupted—What wit! What brilliance!"

"Oh, do tell us!" cried Ruth. The ladies all hung on his lips. He tasted the full flavour of popularity. He let it linger on his palate. He was in no hurry. "In order to appreciate the point, you must remember how sultry the weather was on Saturday."

"Gave you a headache, what?" put in the irrepressible Admiral.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn did his best to wither him with a look. Then he resumed. "Brooke, says he—Brooke, my boy"—just like that—all craned forward: they must not miss the point—"it's a very warm night." His audience waited. Yes? The rest of the story? He looked from one to the other a little uncomfortably. When they found nothing more was coming they turned to each other, puzzled. Could this be all? Was their perspicacity at fault? or where was the joke? The Admiral, bolder than the rest, gave voice to the general feeling. "H'm. I don't see much in that."

THEN HE RESUMED. "BROOKE," SAYS HE,—"BROOKE, MY BOY,"—JUST LIKE THAT

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"Nobody ever suspected you of having a sense of humour," said Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, severely. However, he felt that his first effort had not been the success he had hoped for, and he tried again. "Ah!"—said he, brightening up, "and my friend, H.R.H. the P. of W.!" He uttered the cabalistic letters with a mixture of mystery and airy familiarity. There was an awed "Oh-h!" from all his hearers except Sir Peter. The latter exclaimed impatiently, "Your friend who?"

The reply came with crushing weight. "His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, sir!" The Admiral reeled under the shock of this broadside.

Mrs. Poskett leant forward eagerly. "What did the dear Prince say? My poor husband knew him well," she explained. "When Mr. Alderman Poskett was Sheriff, the dear Prince frequently dined with the Corporation, and many 's the time he said to Poskett, 'Mr. Sheriff, you must be knighted,' but Poskett went and died—"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was annoyed. He was being interrupted, which is a thing intolerable, and his own anecdote was being supplanted. He held up a deprecatory hand. "It was not so much what he said," he explained, "as his manner of saying it. Just:—'Ah, Brooke!'—but oh! the elegance! Oh, the condescension!"

Sir Peter broke out with, "Well, of all the—!"

But Madame stopped him with a touch on his arm. "Do you ever make speeches, Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn?" she asked sweetly.

The great man looked at her with something like suspicion. For a moment he was undeniably flustered. But he mastered himself with an effort and replied with a fair assumption of carelessness, "Short ones, Ma'am. Frequent, but short. I have proposed the health of many gentlemen of distinction."

"How clever you must be!" cried Ruth, admiringly.

"Oh—!" protested Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, with exquisite modesty.

Madame pointed to the river, now gleaming in the afterglow. "How strangely empty the Walk looks without our fisherman!"

"I was wondering what I missed," said Basil, "of course! The Eyesore!"

"He leaves a blank," added Ruth.

Marjolaine laughed. "He was a sort of statue."

Mrs. Poskett confided tearfully to her tea-cup. "The Walk is not the Walk without him."

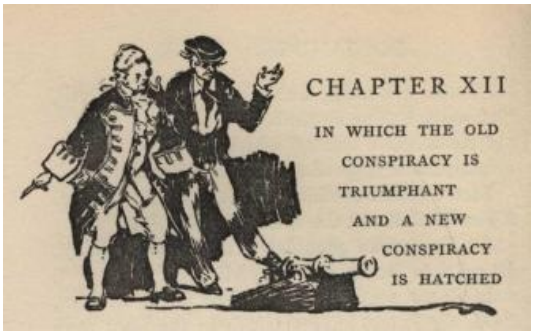
Sir Peter was genuinely astonished. "Why, he tried to drown your cat, Ma'am!"

Madame playfully shook her finger at him, "Oh, Sir Peter! have you driven the poor man away?"

The Walk eyed him severely, and all cried as with one voice, "For shame, Sir Peter!" Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn went on booming, "Shame! Shame!" all by himself, long after the others were silent.

The Admiral's patience was nearly exhausted. Here was Madame turning against him now. The injustice of it infuriated him. He stamped with rage. "But, hang it and dash it, I haven't seen him!" he roared. But nobody believed him. All shook their heads gloomily, and said "Ah!"

CHAPTER XII
IN WHICH THE OLD CONSPIRACY IS TRIUMPHANT AND A NEW CONSPIRACY IS HATCHED



Chapter XII headpiece

Little Miss Barbara Pennymint came flying out of her house: a little more and she would have flown over the railings. Her cheeks were glowing with joy, her eyes glittering with excitement. She saw nothing of the tea-party, but dashed headlong into the midst of it as a sea-mew dashes at a lighthouse. "Marjory! Marjory!" she cried. Then she saw all the people staring at her, and stopped, abashed. "Oh! I had forgotten!" she exclaimed, and spread her wings to fly back again, but Madame stopped her.

"A dish of tea, Miss Barbara?"

"No!" cried Barbara, violently, but remembering her manners she corrected herself. "Oh, no, thank you!" She hopped and skipped to Marjolaine, who had come half-way to meet her. "Marjory," she said, overflowing with excitement, "can I speak to you?"

Before Marjolaine could answer, Sir Peter had borne down on them. Here, at last, was somebody who had not snubbed him yet. "Ah, Miss Barbara," he bellowed, with clumsy playfulness, "I didn't see you in church yesterday!"

As if Barbara wanted to be reminded of that!

"Wasn't I there?" she stammered, utterly taken aback. "I don't remember." She tried to get away, but the Admiral was inexorable. "Come, now! Come, now! What was the text?"

Unhappy little Barbara saw all the eyes of the Walk fixed on her. She had to say something. "Oh! I know!" she cried at last, and proceeded volubly, "'If any of you know of any cause or just impediment—'"

"Barbara!" screamed Miss Ruth, indignantly, while the others laughed at her confusion. Basil heaved a great sigh. Still thinking of the lost one! Marjolaine came to the rescue and drew

Barbara away from her tormentor. "Come away, Babs!" She turned severely on poor Sir Peter, "Don't worry her, Sir Peter!"

"Try to put some sense in her, Miss Marjory," said Ruth, as the two girls ran away, with their arms, as usual, round each others' waists.

The Admiral was crushed. "Even Missie!" he groaned. But he saw Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn preparing to tell another anecdote. This gave him new courage. Putting on his courtliest manner, he exclaimed, "Well, Ladies! To-morrow is the Fourth of June!"

"As this is the Third," interrupted Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, with fine sarcasm, "you might safely have left us to infer that, sir!"

He was standing close to Mrs. Poskett, who had not moved from her seat under the elm. Sir Peter came and faced him, so that the poor lady found herself, as she afterwards described it, between the upper and the nether millstone.

If Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn could wield sarcasm, so could Sir Peter when he was put to it. He spoke with dangerous politeness. "But it seems necessary to remind the bosom friend of H.R.H. the P. of W. that it is the birthday of His Most Gracious Majesty King George the Third!—" The shot told. For a moment Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was silenced. Sir Peter went on, conscious of victory, "Ladies, I warn you not to be alarmed when you hear me fire the salute as usual!"

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn leaped—positively leaped at his opportunity. "As usual!—Ha! That brass popgun of yours—"

"Popgun!—" roared the Admiral, leaning across Mrs. Poskett.

"I said popgun, sir!—has never gone off, yet!"

Mrs. Poskett was in a dreadful flutter. She held up her cup and saucer deprecatingly to each of the infuriated gentlemen in turn, and each automatically seized them and rattled them in the other's face. Jim—moved by his guilty conscience—was signalling frantically to Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn not to betray him.

The Admiral was purple in the face. "Because some infernal scoundrel has always tampered with the charge!" The accumulated grievances of the evening welled up within him. "But to-night," he went on, thrusting the cup and saucer roughly on Mrs. Poskett and spilling the tea over her beautiful silk gown, "to-night, I'll load it myself! and, damme! I'll take it to bed with me!" And with that he stumped off in a rage into his house, thrusting the innocent Basil and the terrified Jim out of his way with horrible objurgations.

"Now, Ladies!" said Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, triumphantly, "you see the man's real nature!"

Poor Mrs. Poskett's nerves were completely shattered, and she was trying to drink tea out of her empty cup.

Ruth came and sat beside her. "We shall break the Admiral down, yet, my dear. His temper is all due to conscience."

"Alderman Poskett was just like that whenever he had sanded the sugar," said Mrs. Poskett, tearfully.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn was devoting himself to Madame. Jim and Nanette were removing the tea-things into Madame's house, and that rascally Jim, who was old enough to know better—but is anybody ever old enough to know better?—was making the most of his chances.

Marjolaine and Barbara had retired into the Gazebo. "Yes!" twittered Barbara, continuing their conversation, "he's learnt it! He does surround it with flowers of speech, but he says it quite clearly."

"Dear Doctor Johnson!" cried Marjolaine, laughing, and clapping her hands.

Barbara shuddered reminiscently. "But I cannot bear his eye on me! It's like Charles's. And he is moulting—which more than ever increases the resemblance. Oh, Marjory, he looked at me so coldly all the time I was teaching him!"

"Never mind how he looked, if he'll only talk!"

Barbara embraced her frantically. "How can I ever thank you?"

Basil was standing by the chains that separated the Walk from the river. The melancholy of the evening had entered his soul. Ruth came up to him. He was an idiot, to be sure, yet her heart went out to him in sympathy. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn and Mrs. Poskett were thanking Madame for her hospitality. Jack could be seen peeping impatiently out of Doctor Sternroyd's window, or striding to and fro in the room like a caged tiger at feeding time.

Marjolaine whispered to Barbara. "If you are really and truly grateful, you may be able to help me! I'll tell you a great secret." She drew Barbara close to her. "I am to be married to-morrow!"

Barbara screamed aloud, and all the people in the Walk turned in alarm.

"Is anything the matter?" enquired Miss Ruth, anxiously.

"No, no!" said Marjolaine, laughing. "Yes," she went on, when the others had resumed their conversation, "married secretly to-morrow. Swear you won't tell anybody if you live to be ninety!"

"Yes! oh, yes!" cried Barbara, hopping from twig to twig. (I cannot help it: she really was exactly like a bird!) "I mean, No! oh, no!"

"And you must be bridesmaid!"

Barbara's face expressed rapture. "Marjory!" And then with eager curiosity, "Who is it?"

"Sh!" whispered Marjolaine. She pointed to Doctor Sternroyd's house. "There!"

Barbara was genuinely amazed. She had heard of May and December, but this was May of this year and December of the year-before-last. "Not Doctor Sternroyd?" she asked aghast.

Marjolaine burst out laughing. "No, no!" She pointed again where Jack was standing behind the curtain, the picture of misery. "There! At the window!"

Barbara gazed and understood. "Oh, how lovely!" she cried, alluding to the romance and secrecy.

But, of course Marjolaine accepted the epithet for Jack. "Yes, is n't he?" She drew Barbara to the elm. "We are to be married by special licence."

"What's that?" asked Barbara.

"I don't know. Doctor Sternroyd's getting it. It lets you go and be married anywhere, whenever you like."

"Heavenly!" cried Barbara. "If Doctor Johnson teaches Basil what I 've taught Doctor Johnson, Doctor Sternroyd shall get me a licence, too."

"Yes," said Marjolaine, "we'll keep him busy." Then she turned to where Basil was gloomily watching them, and called, "Mr. Basil!"

Basil hurried forward eagerly, "Yes, Miss Marjory?"

"Barbara is not feeling very well," said Marjolaine, sympathetically; and immediately Barbara looked languishing and pathetic.

"Heavens!" cried Basil in genuine alarm, "Shall I play to her?"

"Oh, no!" cried Marjolaine, innocently, "it's not so bad as that. But it's her evening hour with Doctor Johnson, and she does n't feel quite equal to it."

Ruth had overheard this last statement. "Why, bless her heart!" she interrupted tartly, "she 's been sitting with that bird all day!"

Barbara lifted great reproachful eyes at her. "Unkind Ruth! The lonely bird!"

Marjolaine went on rapidly, addressing Basil, "So she wondered whether you would take her place for once."

"Why, of course!" cried Basil. "With the greatest pleasure in life!"

Barbara glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and said very demurely, "Oh, but you don't know what you may hear."

"Yes," exclaimed Ruth, sharply, "he swears horribly."

"I'll soothe his savage breast!" cried Basil, enthusiastically. "I 'll be Orpheus with his Lute! I 'll play the Kreutzer Sonata to him!"

Barbara turned anxiously to Marjolaine: this wouldn't do at all!

"No! no!" cried the latter, "just let him talk! Just let him talk!"

But Basil was already inside the house. Marjolaine and Barbara retired, giggling, into the Gazebo, where they sat and twittered mutual confidences. Ruth joined the other ladies, who were listening to Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. The Admiral was leaning out of his upstair window to take in his thrush.

"Indeed, yes," continued Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, "I have collected the witty sayings of my distinguished friends. I shall make a book of them. A small quarto. I shall call it, 'Pearls'"—he caught sight of the Admiral—"'Pearls before Swine.'" The Admiral disappeared. Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn proceeded, "Did I tell you my friend Sherry's bonn mott about the weather?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!" cried all three ladies, with alacrity, and fled from him, leaving him abashed and rather offended. He saw Barbara in the Gazebo, and brightened up. "Ah! but Miss Barbara was not there!" He crossed on tip-toe, and, much to her alarm, seized her by the arm and dragged her to the elm. "Imagine, then," he boomed, condescendingly, while Barbara signalled in vain to Marjolaine for help, "Imagine, then, that you are standing—ah—just where you are standing; and I am Sheridan." Barbara had no idea of what he was talking about. Had he suddenly gone mad? If so, was he harmless? "You remember how we perspired on Saturday evening?" "Oh!" cried Barbara, with disgust. "I come up to you—so." He suited the action to the word. "I place my hand familiarly on your shoulder—so—"

"Really!" cried Barbara, indignantly.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn explained. "You understand: you are Sheridan—no; I am Sheridan and you are me. And I—that is Sheridan—say to you—I mean, me—'Brooke, my boy—'"

Jane, Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn's pretty maid, came rushing out of the house. She was in a flutter of excitement; also she was in a dreadful hurry—and here was her master, talking to a lady!

"'Brooke, my boy'"—repeated Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, leading up to his point.

"Master—! Master—!" whispered Jane, hoarsely.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn waved her away impatiently.

"'Brooke, my boy—'" he repeated for the third time. But Jane was tugging at his coat-tails.

"What is it?" cried Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, peevishly. "What the devil is it? Go away!"

Jane clung to him like a limpet. "Master!" she cried again; and then, putting her lips close to his ear and covering them with one hand, while with the other she pointed frantically to the upstairs window, she whispered a piece of news which petrified him and made his eyes start out of his head. Then she ran back into the house as quickly as she had come.

"Eh? What?" he cried, in great perturbation. "There, now!—So like Selina! Spoilt the point of my story!" He turned to the utterly bewildered Barbara, with half a mind to continue his anecdote, but thought better of it, and with a brusque, "Excuse me!" dashed headlong into the house.

Madame, who had been quietly conversing with Mrs. Poskett and Ruth, came to Marjolaine. "I think I shall go in. Will you come, Marjolaine?"

"Oh, Maman," pleaded Marjolaine, "I have so much to say to Barbara!" She accompanied her mother to their gate.

"You are so feverish—so unlike yourself—! You are not going to be indisposed?"

Marjolaine caught sight of Jack in the Doctor's study. "Oh, Maman!" she cried, throwing her arms round her mother's neck and kissing her with quite unusual ardour, "I am so well, so well!—I never was so well!"

Madame looked at her searchingly. Could her daughter be heartless? To be sure, she herself had besought her to forget her girlish love, but Marjolaine had forgotten it too quickly. Madame went into her house with an uneasy mind and a troubled countenance.

Miss Ruth had been arguing with Mrs. Poskett. "Well," she said, evidently alluding to the Admiral, "That's what I should do! Bring him to his knees."

There was a dangerous glitter in Mrs. Poskett's eyes as she replied, "I brought Poskett to his: why should n't I bring Peter?"

"Strike while the iron's hot. He knows we're all disappointed with him, and he's ashamed of himself. Now's the time, when he ain't sure of himself. Come along in. Put on your prettiest cap. I'll help you."

Just as they were at Mrs. Poskett's gate they saw Doctor Sternroyd come shuffling round the corner. His manner was furtive, and he was burdened with a variety of small parcels.

"Dear me, Doctor! How you are loaded!" cried Miss Ruth.

The antiquary had evidently hoped to get home unnoticed. "Good evening, Ladies!" he stammered, in confusion. "Pray excuse me if I cannot remove my hat."

"And not books, this time?" said Mrs. Poskett.

"No, no, no!" cried the antiquary, looking as guilty as if he had been caught carrying stolen goods. "Not books. Not what you might call books. Just parcels. Simple necessaries, I assure you." He made a wide curve in order not to come into closer contact with Ruth and Mrs. Poskett, and they went laughing into the latter's house. But the wide curve brought him up against Marjolaine and Barbara, who had come out of the Gazebo. "More women!" groaned the Doctor; and before either of them had spoken he had added hastily, "Simple necessaries, I do assure you!"

Barbara hopped up to him eagerly. She touched all the parcels, which he vainly tried to keep out of her reach. "Doctor," she said, eagerly, "which is the licence?"

The Doctor was utterly taken aback. "Eh? Oh, dear! dear! Miss Marjory, you told her!"

"Of course," said Marjory. "She's my dearest friend!"

"Tut, tut!—Dear, dear!—What says the Swan of Avon? 'Who was't betrayed the Capitol?—A woman!'"

Jack had opened the window and now leant out and said in a ghastly whisper, "Doctor!—For Heaven's sake look sharp with the victuals!"

"There, there!" cried the flustered Doctor, as he shuffled on into the house, "the cuckoo in the nest!"

At the same instant Mr. Basil Pringle came bounding out of the Misses Pennymint's house, shouting, "Miss Barbara!"

Barbara leant half-swooning against Marjolaine. "Oh!—he's coming!"

"Oh, Miss Barbara!" repeated Basil, breathlessly.

"Has Doctor Johnson bitten you?" asked Marjolaine, mischievously.

"Oh, that gifted bird!" exclaimed Basil, rapturously.

"Did he speak?" asked Marjolaine, while Barbara panted expectant.

"Speak!—Ah!—" Basil had no words.

Doctor Sternroyd's window was violently thrown open by Jack. It was nearly dark in the Walk, and Jack was reckless. "Marjory!" he called. Marjory was very much startled. Anybody might come out at any moment.

"Oh! take care!" she cried, as she ran up to within whispering distance of him.

Barbara, with bent head and blushing cheeks was trying to keep Basil to the point. "What did he say, Mr. Basil?"

"Come closer!" whispered Jack to Marjolaine, and after assuring herself that no one was looking, she crept inside the little garden.

Basil came impulsively towards Barbara. "Shall I tell you? Dare I tell you?" he asked passionately, yet shyly.

"You know best," said Barbara, making an invisible pattern on the grass with her dainty foot.

Basil took his courage in both hands. "He said—it was all in one breath—He said, 'O-burn-your-lungs-and-liver-you-lubberly-son-of-a- lop-eared-weevil-tell-Barbara-you-love-her!'"

"Oh, Mr. Basil!" sighed Barbara, and threw herself headlong into his arms.

"But it's true!—It's true!" he cried enthusiastically. "Come! let me tell you my own way!" And without more ado, he picked her up and carried her bodily into the Gazebo.

"It's perfectly monstrous!" Jack was explaining angrily to Marjolaine, who was now under his window. "The old fossil's brought two eggs, a red herring, and a pot of currant jelly!"

"Poor Jack!" exclaimed Marjolaine sympathetically, yet with a note of laughter in her voice.

"Is that rations for a grown man?" asked Jack pathetically. "Says he'll make an omelette! Two eggs! An omelette! Ho!"

Here the Eyesore crept cautiously back to his post. He had not dared come in broad daylight, but now that it was nearly dark he hoped he would be unobserved.

From the Gazebo came the voices of the other lovers in long-drawn notes.

"My own!" said Basil, in a stupendous bass.

"My Basil!" echoed Barbara.

Rapture. Oblivion. An endless embrace.

"Can't you send that object for food?" said Jack, pointing to the Eyesore.

"I daren't speak to him," answered Marjolaine, with a little shiver of dislike. "He always turns out to be somebody else. Jack! if you 'll be good, I 'll get it myself!"

"Angel! But make haste! I'm starving!"

"If you hear me singing, look out of the window," whispered Marjolaine, kissing her hand to him. And with that she ran lightly into her own house, and Jack retired to wait with what patience he could muster.

"And now, what is the next thing to do?" asked Basil, rising and leading Barbara towards the house.

"We must tell Ruth," said Barbara, with a sound practical idea of clinching the matter. There should be no mistake this time.

"Yes! at once!" cried Basil, nobly. "Oh!" he exclaimed, with a burst of grateful sentiment, "I 'll buy Doctor Johnson a golden chain!"

Barbara's pretty head was reposing affectionately on his shoulder. "And I 'll wear it for him. The dear bird."

"The dear, dear bird!" they repeated in melodious unison.

Not otherwise did Romeo and Juliet breathe soft nothings in the gardens of Verona. Not otherwise did Paolo and Francesca talk exquisite nonsense when they had very injudiciously left off reading. Not otherwise—but why pursue the subject? You and I have been just as happy, and just as foolish.

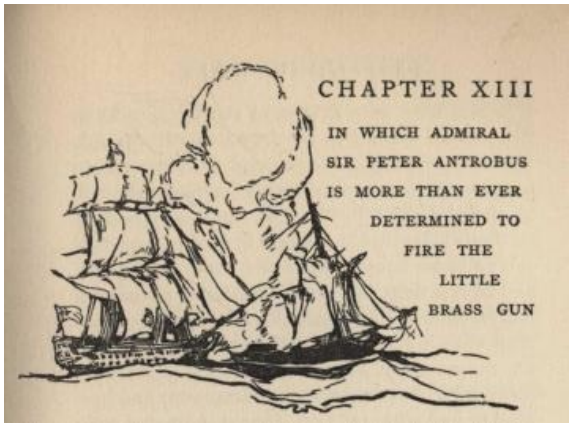
Ruth brought Mrs. Poskett, resplendent in a new cap and various other seductive devices, out of the house. Barbara fluttered to her sister. "Dear Ruth! Come in quickly! Basil and I have such news for you!"

Ruth saw it at a glance. At last they had shed one form of idiocy to take on another. Now,

perhaps, she would enjoy a little peace. "Very well," she said. Then she made a low curtsey to Mrs. Poskett, and said, meaningly, "Courage—Lady Antrobus!"

Alas, poor Admiral! The knell of thy freedom has sounded. Shut thyself in thy house as thou wilt: close thy shutters; make fast thy doors; yea, train the little brass cannon on the Walk: nothing will help. Thy fair enemy is cruising at the harbour's mouth, with pennons flaunting to the breeze, and all her deadly armoury of sighs, tears, threats, reproaches and languishing glances made ready for action; and nothing thou canst do will serve. Through long years thou hast sailed light-heartedly from many ports, leaving broken, or, at any rate, damaged hearts behind thee. Now the Hour of Retribution has struck, and the Avenger is here. Thy day of conquests is past, and it is thou who wilt be led captive in chains of roses. There is none to sympathise with thee. On the contrary, it is my firm conviction that the whole Walk will hang out banners to celebrate thy defeat.

CHAPTER XIII
IN WHICH ADMIRAL SIR PETER ANTROBUS IS MORE THAN EVER DETERMINED TO FIRE THE LITTLE BRASS GUN



Chapter XIII headpiece

Mrs. Poskett found herself—if you did not count the Eyesore: and nobody ever had counted him, yet—alone in the Walk. The sun had set, and the evening twilight itself had almost merged into night. The river gleamed a pale green, as if it were loath to surrender the last remnant of day. It was a propitious hour for amorous dalliance, but Mrs. Poskett felt she had much to do ere she could hope to be engaged in any such pleasant pastime. She sat some moments under the elm considering her position. She was face to face with a difficult problem. Here she was, under the elm, and there was Sir Peter, safely barricaded in his own house. That he was not in a good humour she knew. The house looked forbidding. The door was tightly closed. The windows were shut, and the blinds drawn. Somewhere behind those drawn blinds the Admiral was fuming. She yearned to hold his hand and comfort him and soothe his feelings, wounded, as well she knew, by the sneers and open mutiny of the Walk. But how to get at him? She could not go to his house. She could not call him. All the conventions and proprieties rose up like an impregnable wall against either of those courses. And even if she called him, he would not come. On the contrary, he would retire like Hamlet to some more remote part of his ramparts, and pretend he had n't heard her. She must employ some stratagem. But what stratagem? Pomander Walk was not a good nursery for stratagems, she thought, little knowing how many plots and schemes and conspiracies had been concocted and were still seething all around her.

She was on the point of giving up in despair when she caught sight of the Eyesore. She looked at his back—which was all she could see of him—and brooded a long time. At last she rose and stole over to him on tip-toe. She felt for a coin in the little bead-embroidered bag that hung from her wrist. Two or three times she opened her mouth as if about to speak, but each time she

closed it again upon the unspoken word. Finally, however, she made up her mind.

"My good man," she said, rather condescendingly.

The Eyesore never stirred. She might as well have addressed one of the chain-posts. She tried again: this time a trifle more urbanely. "Mister!—"

A sort of wave of acknowledgment ran down the back of the Eyesore's coat, just as a horse shivers at the touch of a fly; but that was all. She made one more effort: now with a courteous appeal. "Sir!—You threw Sempronius into the river on Saturday—here's a crown for you."

I cannot explain what connection there was in her mind between the crime and the reward, except that in some confused way she considered the former as a sort of introduction entitling her to address him.

The Eyesore only put his hand behind his back with the open palm upward. When Mrs. Poskett had dropped the huge coin into it, he brought it slowly round, bit it, spat on it, and pocketed it. But he said no word. Mrs. Poskett proceeded hastily, indicating the Admiral's house. "Now I want you to knock at that door."

The Eyesore followed the direction of her finger with a bleary eye. What! He knock at the door of his enemy and persecutor! and be captured by him! That was her little game, was it? And she thought to lure him to his doom with a miserable bait of five shillings. But he'd show her! To Mrs. Poskett's amazement, alarm, and admiration, he picked up a stone, hurled it with unerring aim at the door, and incontinently bolted round the corner. Mrs. Poskett fled behind the elm and awaited the upshot with a beating heart.

Jim appeared, red-faced, at the door. He looked up and down the Walk, but seeing it empty, muttered, "Cuss them boys!" and was turning to go in again, when Mrs. Poskett called him.

"Good evening, Mr. Jim," she said, in her blandest tones.

"'Evening, mum!" answered Jim, touching his forelock. "Them boys ought to be drownded, is what I says; and I wish I had the doing of it."

"You have a responsible post, Mr. Jim."

"Ay, ay, mum. Bosun o' the Admiral's gig."

"Oh, more than that, Mr. Jim. Chief officer, and cook, and gardener—what lovely peas!" It was much too dark to see the peas, but she knew they grew all around Jim's heart.

"Ah," he assented, and added with meaning, "takes a oncommon lot o' moistenin', though."

"It is thirsty weather, Mr. Jim." Mrs. Poskett was searching in her bag again.

Jim's eyes gleamed. "And a truer word you never spoke, Lady."

"Mr. Bosun," said Mrs. Poskett, insidiously, "I want to see the Admiral."

Jim shook his head gloomily. "Ah! 'tis dirty weather he's makin' of it, sure 'nough. He've a-locked hisself in by hisself if you'll believe me; an' he's a-swearin' somethin' 'orrible for to 'ear!"

"Mr. Bosun," said Mrs. Poskett, holding up a beautiful, bright new crown-piece between her finger and thumb, "would five shillings quench your thirst?"

Jim wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, Lady, I can't say but 'twould take the edge off it."

To his disgust, Mrs. Poskett retreated a step. "But I must see Sir Peter."

Jim scratched his head—which was his way of expressing deep reflection. He caught sight of the Admiral's flag hanging motionless. "I've got it!" he cried. "Sheer off a cable's length, Lady."

Mrs. Poskett retired to the extreme end of the Walk. Jim made a speaking-trumpet of both hands and bellowed, "Admiral, ahoy!"

The Admiral's window went up so suddenly, the Admiral's head shot out so abruptly, and his voice was so fierce, that Mrs. Poskett could not suppress a little scream.

"D'ye want to wake the dead?" roared the Admiral.

"Axing your pardon, Admiral—sunset."

"What of it, you lubber?" The Admiral was quite unaware of Mrs. Poskett's presence, or I am sure he would not have used such an expression.

"Shall I haul the flag down, Admiral?" asked Jim, with well-feigned astonishment.

You may judge of what the Admiral had gone through from the fact that this was the first time in recorded history he had neglected to perform this ritual.

"On your life!" he cried, in great agitation. "I've hoisted it and struck it with my own hands, morning and night, any time these five years. D' ye think I'll have a lubberly son of a sea-cook like you do it now?"

He vanished from his window as abruptly as he had appeared. Jim hobbled towards Mrs. Poskett. "Got him, Lady!" he chuckled.

Mrs. Poskett handed him the coin. "Here, and thank you."

"Thank you, mum."

Sir Peter appeared at the door. Unfortunately he caught sight of Mrs. Poskett. He retreated, half-closed the door, and only showed his head through the opening.

"Jim!" he cried.

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Haul it down yourself."

Mrs. Poskett gave a cry of disappointment. Had she spent ten shillings in vain?

But Jim was equal to the occasion. His voice was a beautiful blend of pathos and wounded dignity. "No, Admiral. Not after what passed your lips."

"Damme! I can't leave it hoisted all night!" roared the Admiral.

"That's as mebbe," said Jim, beginning to stump off. "Even the lubberly son of a sea-cook 'as 'is feelin's, same as them wot's 'igher placed." And he stumped round the corner.

"Here! Jim!" roared the Admiral, in distress and fury. "Come back! you mutinous scoundrel!" But Jim was gone.

What was the Admiral to do? Was he to leave the flag up, contrary to all precedent? That was unthinkable. On the other hand was he to offer himself as a target for Mrs. Poskett's sarcasms? Yet again, was he to show the white feather in the presence of the enemy? No! He'd be hanged if he would. He slapped himself on the chest to give himself courage, and came down the steps. "Cheer up, my hearty!" he cried; and then he hummed what he thought was the tune of "Oh! dear! what can the matter be?" and began hauling down the flag.

Meanwhile Mrs. Poskett had sidled casually along the railings, as if she were going nowhere in particular and didn't mind when she got there. But she timed herself carefully, so that she was close to Sir Peter just as he was entangled in the lines.

"Admiral!" she said, very gently.

"Ma'am?" growled he, continuing to extricate himself.

"Why do you force me to address you?" she asked reproachfully, and with great dignity.

Sir Peter was taken aback. "Me! Force you! Gobblessmysoul!" he exclaimed, "Well, I'm—"

"For your own good," said Mrs. Poskett, solemnly. "Oh, Sir Peter, you was King of the Walk on Friday. Now Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn will usurp that title."

This fetched him. He left the flag lying at the foot of the mast, and came out into the open. "Will he so, Ma'am!" he said, fiercely.

"So he will!" Having enticed him from behind the security of his railings, Mrs. Poskett knew he would follow wherever she led him. She led him at once towards the elm.

"The Walk says you have lowered the prestige of His Majesty's Navy."

The Admiral had indeed turned to go back; but this brought him to her side. "Dash it and hang it, Ma'am! what do you mean?"

"Well, you know what I mean," said Mrs. Poskett, with pretty confusion. "The entire Walk saw you press me to your heart!"

The Admiral was helpless. His own recollections of what had happened on Saturday were extremely vague. What with the rescue of the cat and the sudden appearance of Caroline Thring, together with the subsequent escape of Jack, he had lost all sense of actualities. Moreover, it was impossible for him to accuse Mrs. Poskett of having embraced him. A gentleman does not do such things. So he could only stammer weakly, "I didn't, did I?"

Mrs. Poskett flashed at him indignantly. "The entire Walk witnessed the outrage, and the entire Walk is indignant that nothing has come of it."

"Gobblessmysoul!" muttered the Admiral.

Mrs. Poskett followed up her advantage. "'Oh, how unsailor-like!'"—that is what the Walk says: "'How unsailor-like!'"

Imagine the stab. He, Admiral Sir Peter Antrobus, with more than forty years of service in His Majesty's Navy to his credit; the hero of Copenhagen; the friend of Nelson; he, who had given an eye for his country—unsailor-like!

He pushed his wig back and mopped his brow. "It doesn't say that!" he murmured, horrified.

But Mrs. Poskett was mercilessly emphatic. "It says that." Then she steered on another tack. "I 'm only a lone widow," she said, with an air of martyrdom. "If Alderman Poskett were alive, he 'd see you did the right thing by his wife. But I!—I must leave my once happy home!"

"But—dash it and hang it—!" protested Sir Peter, struggling in the web that was being woven around him.

"You cannot alter facts by swearing," said the widow. "Can I bear the sneers of a Pennymint? the arched eyebrows of a Brooke-Hoskyn? I cannot. I must let my beautiful house," with a side

glance at him and considerable stress, "my freehold house. Let it to an undesirable tenant: a person with a mangle."

A mangle in Pomander Walk! "Gobblessmysoul!" said the Admiral. Also he had been set thinking. Freehold, eh?

"To be sure, the expense of moving is nothing," proceeded Mrs. Poskett, airily, "when one has Four-hundred a year in the Funds. But oh! my lovely furniture will be chipped! and, oh! how shall I part from my friends?"

The Admiral was moved. He was undeniably moved. A freehold house, Four-hundred a year in the Funds, and lovely furniture.—And, mind you, the widow was buxom; he himself had described her as a "Dam fine woman." As she stood there in tearful confusion, she looked distinctly agreeable; plump and comfortable. To be sure, the sun had gone down.

"But it's not so bad as that?" said the Admiral, with something approaching sympathy.

"It's worse!" cried Mrs. Poskett. "And that innocent cat, Sempronius!—What will he say? He took a chill on Saturday and he's lying before the kitchen fire wrapped up in a piece of flannel. When I move, the change will kill him. Oh, why did n't you leave him to drown?" she sobbed aloud.

The Admiral was much stirred. A woman's tears always bowled him over. He could stand anything but that.

"Dash it and hang it, Ma'am, don't cry!"

"It is n't as if I was older," sobbed Mrs. Poskett. "I could be much older! But I'm young enough to have a tender heart!" She mastered herself with an heroic effort; swallowed her sobs; drove back her tears; and stood before him, the picture of stoic calm, of noble resignation. "But never mind! I will be brave! You—you—shall—not—see—me—weep!" Then she howled.

Sir Peter was indescribably distressed. "But—Gobblessmysoul!—" he stammered—"what am I to do with Jim, and the flagstaff, and the brass gun, and the thrush, and the sweet peas?" and, pointing to his house, "What am I to do with Number One?"

Mrs. Poskett raised one tear-bedewed eye from her handkerchief. "Knock a door through and make one house of them!" she exclaimed, as if sweeping away an absurdity. "Oh, these paltry details!" Then she lifted her face to his with a smile. Thus does the sun look when it emerges from behind a rain-cloud. "Sweet peas? What could be more appropriate? Ain't I Pamela Poskett? and ain't you Peter?"

The tearful smile, so winsome, so appealing, was irresistible. "Damme, you 're right!" cried the Admiral, surrendering at discretion. "You've swept me fore and aft! You've blown me out of the sea! By George, Ma'am, I 'll marry you if you 'll have me!"

Once more, as when he saved her cat, Mrs. Poskett threw her comfortable arms round Sir Peter's neck. "I 'll have you, Peter," she cried joyfully; and she added in a tone which clinched the matter, "I've got you!"

There was an eloquent silence. The old elm shook its leaves with a ripple of laughter. It had seen many things in its long life, but never anything so epically grand as the widow's victory and the Admiral's surrender. Troy town was besieged in vain during ten long years, and was then only conquered by a horse. Five years Mrs. Poskett had besieged Sir Peter and her victory was due to a cat. You seize the analogy? When you remember, further, that Basil had been inveigled by a parrot, you will realise the danger—or utility, according to your point of view—of keeping domestic pets: the undoubted risk of having any commerce with other peoples' domestic pets—especially if they are Greeks or widows. I mean, the people.

The Admiral was conquered, and like a gentleman, he made the best of his defeat. That is the way to turn it into a moral victory. "I 'll haul out the brass gun and fire it to-night!" he cried, enthusiastically. "That'll tell the Walk!"

"I 'll tell the Walk!" said Mrs. Poskett, masking her quite legitimate triumph under renewed endearments.

They say drowning men see all their past lives in a flash. As the Admiral felt Mrs. Poskett's arms tighten round his neck, he had a similar experience. All the eyes he had ever looked into seemed to be gazing reproachfully at him out of the darkness; all the names he had ever whispered seemed now to be whispering in his ear. Dolores, Inez, Mariette, Suzette, Paquita, Frederike, Jette, Karen—I know not how many more—like a swarm of bees they buzzed around him. Then, too, he suddenly remembered that upstairs in his old sailor's chest; the chest that had accompanied him all over the world, there was a splendid and varied assortment of locks of hair: black, brown, golden, auburn, frankly red, straw-coloured, chestnut, and one off which the dye had faded and shown it uncompromisingly grey. He must remember to destroy them before—

well, before the door was knocked through.

What escapes he had had! What a mercy he had not married that fiery Spaniard; that still more blazing Brazilian; that fickle Portuguese; that frivolous Mam'selle; that straw-coloured Dane. He began to realise that Mrs. Poskett was, like the Walk itself, a Harbour of Refuge. Here was no rhapsodical nonsense, but safe comfort, with a freehold house, solid furniture, and Four-hundred a year. Almost unconsciously his arms closed round her. She gave a great, contented sigh, as her head sank on his shoulder. To have drawn this response from him was, indeed, victory! I wonder what she would have done if she could have read his thoughts, if she could have seen the long procession of seductive females that was passing across his mental vision. I am convinced that the prospective title would have consoled her, and that she would have accepted his past for the sake of her future.

They were abruptly aroused from their happiness, however. Unperceived by them, Lord Otford had entered the Walk. He had come slowly along the crescent, examining each house in turn, evidently trying to make up his mind to knock at one of them. He retraced his steps and had his hand on the handle of the Admiral's gate, when his attention was attracted by the sound of murmuring voices. Evidently the voices of lovers. Quickly and angrily he came down, just in time to witness the Admiral implant a chaste but conclusive salute on Mrs. Poskett's ample brow.

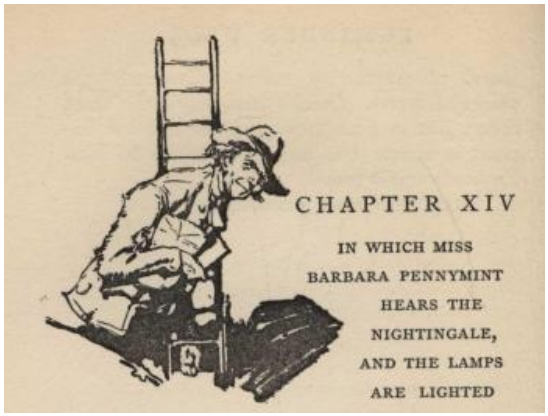
"Peter!" he cried, scandalised.

" PETER!" HE CRIED, SCANDALISED

"PETER!" HE CRIED, SCANDALISED

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH MISS BARBARA PENNYMINT HEARS THE NIGHTINGALE, AND THE LAMPS ARE LIGHTED



Chapter XIV headpiece

The Admiral tried to start away from Mrs. Poskett, but though her hands slipped from his neck they clung to his arm. "Gobblessmysoul! Lord Otford!" he cried.

Mrs. Poskett had a delicious foretaste of future greatness. Here, at the very threshold of her betrothal, was a real, live lord. It was well worth all she had been through. "Present me, Peter," she whispered, "and tell him."

It is not so easy to tell an old friend you are going to be married, when you yourself are old enough to know better. The Admiral made a bad job of it. "Um—my neighbour—Mrs. Poskett—" he mumbled, weakly.

"Widow of Alderman Poskett," she broke in. "And if Poskett had n't died when he did—"

The Admiral cut her short. He presented his friend to her. "Um—Lord Otford—" then he tried bravely to explain the equivocal attitude in which they had been discovered. "Um—I am—she is—we are—" He broke down under Otford's eye.

For Otford was looking at him in a confounded quizzical way, as much as to say "Do all the neighbours in Pomander Walk come out and kiss in the dark?" So the Admiral turned crestfallen to Mrs. Poskett, "No, hang it! You tell him!"

Mrs. Poskett was quite equal to the occasion. She made Lord Otford a magnificent curtsey, just as she had curtseyed to the Lord Mayor's Lady, years ago. "Happy to meet any friend of my future husband," she said, with charming condescension.

Lord Otford responded to her curtsey with an equally elaborate bow. "Am I to understand—?"

"Yes, Jack," interposed Sir Peter, impatiently, "understand. Understand without further palaver."

Lord Otford bowed again. "My felicitations," said he. Mrs. Poskett had expected more; but Lord Otford was evidently preoccupied, and abruptly changed the subject. "Madam, can you spare him a little while?"

Mrs. Poskett was much put out. Was she to be thrust aside so unceremoniously in the first flush of her triumph? She bridled, and answered with some asperity, "I am sure no real friend of Sir Peter's would wish to tell him anything his future wife may not hear."

Lord Otford recognised he had made a tactical mistake. He seized one of her plump hands, kissed it, and explained with an air of the greatest consideration, "I assure you, Ma'am, the matter is strictly personal to myself."

How could any lady resist such delightful manners? Mrs. Poskett melted at once. She shook a playful finger at him. "Naughty Lord Otford!"—she turned to the Admiral—"Well, Peter; I 'll wait at the gate. But not more than five minutes, mind!" And with a roguish shake of all her curls and all her ribbons she tripped up to the Admiral's gate, where she stood planning how his house and hers were to be turned into one, and how the sweet pea was to be trained over both, at the same time striving to hear as much as possible of what the two friends were saying.

"Peter!" exclaimed Lord Otford, as soon as she was out of earshot, "Jack 's disappeared!"

The Admiral's conscience smote him uneasily. He knew the rascally Jack was in Doctor Sternroyd's house; he himself had helped to get him there; and here was the unfortunate father, his own bosom friend, in distress. What was he to do? Betray Jack? Impossible. No. He would see the matter through. At any rate, he would gain time.

"Serves you right," he growled.

Lord Otford was deeply hurt. "Did I say, 'Serves you right,' just now?"

"Just now?" repeated Sir Peter, not grasping his friend's meaning. Lord Otford pointed with his gold-headed cane to where the widow was examining the houses.

"Otford!" cried the Admiral, angrily; but his friend interrupted him impatiently. "Peter! He 's run away with that gel!"

"That he has n't!" replied Sir Peter, greatly relieved at being able to speak the truth for once. "The gel's here."

"Fact?" asked Lord Otford.

"Solemn," affirmed the Admiral.

Lord Otford strode up and down in deep thought. He brought himself up in front of the Admiral. There was evidently something more on his mind. "Peter," he said, "do you know who her mother is?"

Sir Peter was getting impatient. He saw all the old, narrow-minded prejudices being trotted out once more. "You're not going to begin that again!" he cried, angrily.

"She's Lucy Pryor," said Lord Otford quietly.

The Admiral stared at him. For a moment the name conveyed no meaning. "Lucy Pryor—?" Then the meaning suddenly flashed on him, and he gasped, "Not Lucy Pryor!"

"Lucy Pryor!" repeated Lord Otford. "Ha!" he cried, with bitter self-mockery, "I was telling her how impossible the marriage was—"

"And she turned out to be Lucy Pryor!" The Admiral was so hugely delighted that for a moment he was unable to go on. "Jack, my boy," he roared, doubled up with laughter, "you must have felt like six-pennorth o' ha'-pence—what?"

"I did," answered Lord Otford, grimly; and then he added shamefacedly, "But now I—I want to see her again. I must see her again."

"Never know when you 've had enough, eh?" chuckled Sir Peter, wiping the tears from his streaming eyes.

"Laugh, you brute!" cried Lord Otford. "Laugh! Well you may. She 'll never allow me inside her house. She was magnificent! *Patuit dea*, Peter! She came the Goddess!"

"What did I tell you?" laughed Sir Peter, waving his handkerchief triumphantly. "Didn't I say —?"

"Can't you coax her out here?" interrupted his friend.

"Me!" cried the Admiral. "No!—I've told you: I 'll have nothing to do with it!"

Try how she might, Mrs. Poskett had only been able to pick up fragments of the conversation, but those had been enough to arouse her curiosity. Also she felt she had been standing neglected much too long. "Now, you two," she said, coming between them, "I'm sure you 've gossiped long enough."

Otford turned to her. "Madam," said he, in his most winning manner, "will you do me a great favour?"—

"I'm sure your lordship wouldn't ask me anything unbecoming," she replied, with pretty modesty.

"Will you persuade Madame Lachesnais to come out and taste the evening air, not telling her I am here?"

Mrs. Poskett looked at him enquiringly, and with a woman's intuition read an affirmation in his eyes.

"Don't do anything of the sort, Pamela!" cried the Admiral, warningly.

She turned sharply on him. How thick-headed men were, to be sure! "Peter, I'm ashamed of you!" Then she addressed Lord Otford, "With great pleasure, my Lord. Me and Peter 's that happy, we want to see everybody ditto."

The Admiral stared from one to the other in amazement. What did she mean? What could she mean, but one thing? "Gobblessmysoul, Jack!" he cried at last, in utter amazement, "Is that it?"

"That's it!" said Mrs. Poskett, with a laugh.

"That's it!" said Lord Otford, with a melancholy smile.

Mrs. Poskett tripped joyously to Madame's house; knocked, and was admitted.

The Admiral seized his friend by both hands with enthusiasm. "Here! Come in! Come in and have a glass of port-wine!"

"But if Madame—" began Lord Otford.

"Come in! She won't budge from the house if she sees you here. Pamela will warn us, when she's got her, and," ruefully, "she'll get her, fast enough." They turned to go towards Sir Peter's house; but Lord Otford stopped short, in surprise.

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had opened his upstairs window and was leaning out, fanning himself

with his handkerchief.

"Hoskyn, by all that's wonderful!" said Lord Otford, eyeing unconscious Brooke-Hoskyn through his lorgnette.

Sir Peter corrected him. "Brooke-Hoskyn; with a hyphen. I said you must know him."

"Know him!" cried Lord Otford, laughing, "Know my old butler! I should think so!"

"What?" asked the Admiral, not believing his ears.

"He married my cook, Mrs. Brooke! And now he 's City toast master."

Sir Peter gave a low whistle. "That's it, is it?" What a triumph! "When the Walk knows that —!"

"That's your man of fashion, is it, Peter?" laughed Lord Otford.

But the Admiral was thinking. "No!" he cried, suddenly, "Damme! No! he's a good fellow, and I'm not a blackguard!—Jack, follow my lead." He made a speaking-trumpet with his hands and roared, as if Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn had been a mile away, "Ahoy! Brooky, my boy! Here 's your old friend, Otford."

Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn nearly fell out of the window.

"Glad to see you, Hoskyn," said Lord Otford, cheerfully, with an amiable wave of his hand.

"Oh, don't!" groaned Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, hoarsely. "Oh, my Lord!—Not at this moment! I ain't equal to it, your Lordship! I reely ain't!"

"Sorry you're ill," said Lord Otford, with a pleasant laugh. "Too much to eat, and too little to do. What you want is a family to keep you lively!"

"A family!" almost shrieked Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn. "Oh, my Lord!" He disappeared abruptly from the window, and Lord Otford and the Admiral went arm-in-arm and laughing heartily into the latter's house.

It was now quite dark in the Walk: the translucent darkness of a perfect June night. The stillness was so great that you could hear the river lapping against the bank as it flowed by. Behind the tower of Chiswick Church the sky shone pale, but, above, it melted into purple in which the stars seemed to hang loose. Even the leaves of the elm had ceased to whisper together and had gone to sleep. Here and there in the Walk a faint light appeared behind drawn blinds and closed curtains. Presently the bow window of the Misses Pennymint's house was gently opened, and Barbara and Basil appeared. Their arms were twined round each other, and Barbara's pretty head reposed against her lover's shoulder. Framed in the jasmine that encircled the window, they made as touching a picture as you could wish to see. They stood quite still, inhaling the fragrance of the slumbering elm, and thinking thoughts unutterable.

As they opened their window Jack opened his. He was famished, and there was no sign of Marjolaine. Could she have forgotten him?

"'On such a night as this—'" began Basil, in his richest and deepest notes.

Jack whistled a flourish very softly.

"Hark, Basil," whispered Barbara, looking up into his eyes. "Hark! The nightingale!"

Jack whistled a little louder.

"Do you think that is the nightingale, dearest?" ventured Basil.

Jack whistled loud and impatiently.

"At least let us make believe it is," murmured Barbara.

Jack's whistle rose to a screech.

"My own one!" boomed Basil, in a voice like subdued but passionate thunder.

Jack was just on the point of a despairing effort, when Madame's door opened. He craned forward in the hope of seeing Marjolaine emerge, but had to withdraw swiftly, for Mrs. Poskett came down the steps, followed by Madame.

"The air is so balmy, it's a pity to stay indoors," Mrs. Poskett was saying.

"We were just coming out," answered Madame. "Marjolaine is strangely restless." She had come down the steps and now saw Barbara and Basil in the window. She stopped astonished. "Ah —?—Why!—Really?—"

"Yes!" cried Barbara, joyfully, clinging closer to Basil. "We are to be married at once! We are going to ask Doctor Sternroyd to get us a licence."

"My own one!" Basil's deep diapason reverberated through the night.

"Oh! I am so very glad!" said Madame, in her most charming manner.

But to Basil even this gentle congratulation seemed almost like a desecration. "Come in, my own," he throbbed, "lest the winds of heaven visit your face too roughly."

"Ah!" sighed Barbara. What beautiful language he used, to be sure, and how different from Charles's. Closely linked they sank back into the darkness of the room.

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Poskett, alluding to them. "I wonder who'll be getting married next!" She and Madame came and sat under the elm.

Marjolaine crept very cautiously down the steps. She was elaborately concealing something in the folds of her dress. She stole along the railings, watching her mother and Mrs. Poskett, till she got to Doctor Sternroyd's gate. There she swiftly deposited two packages just inside the railing. Then she joined the others, looking as innocent as a lamb.

Mrs. Poskett said simperingly, "I wanted you to be the first to hear of my betrothal."

"I hope he'll make you very happy," said Madame, cordially.

"I 'll see to that!" answered Mrs. Poskett; and her manner showed she meant it.

"Isn't it wonderful, Maman!" exclaimed Marjolaine. "An angel's wing has touched Pomander Walk, and everybody's going to be married!"

"Yes, my poor child," said Madame, and held out her hand sympathetically to draw her daughter to her heart. But Marjolaine had turned away, and was singing! Actually singing!

"In Scarlet Town—" she had begun.

"Surely, you are not going to sing!" said Madame, almost reproachfully.

"Let her, Ma'am," said Mrs. Poskett, "'t will keep her quiet."

So Marjolaine stood between her mother and Doctor Sternroyd's house, and sang.

"In Scarlet Town, where I was born
There was a fair Maid dwellin'—"

"Ah! these pathetic old ballads!" sighed Madame, turning to Mrs. Poskett.

At the first note of Marjolaine's song Jack had appeared at the window. Marjolaine now half turned to him, and went on:—

"A pigeon-pie and a loaf of bread
Are just behind the railin'!"

The lamplighter, a wizened little man with a face like a ferret's, came running round the corner with his short ladder over his shoulder. He put it against the lamp-post opposite the Admiral's house, swarmed up it like a squirrel, lighted the lamp, slid down the ladder, and ran quickly to the lamp at Doctor Sternroyd's.

Jack had the door ajar, and was eagerly peeping out; but in the darkness he could see nothing.

"The lamplighter!" exclaimed Madame Lachesnais, with some surprise. "I thought there was a moon to-night."

"Perhaps he's forgotten," answered Mrs. Poskett. "Anyhow, he 'll come and put out the lights as soon as the moon rises."

Marjolaine saw Jack's dilemma and began singing again:—

"All in the merry month of May
When green buds they were swellin'!"

The lamplighter was on his ladder lighting the Doctor's lamp.

"I should like to congratulate the Admiral," said Madame.

"I 'll send him out to you," answered Mrs. Poskett, eagerly. She saw her chance of obliging Lord Otford. Madame rose with her and accompanied her towards Sir Peter's house. Marjolaine turned towards Jack, pointing with violent gesticulations to where the victuals lay:—

"You'll find the parcels where I say
By lookin' or by smellin'!"

Then she ran into the summer-house.

Jack caught sight of the food, and with a delighted "Ha!" crept down the steps. Unfortunately, however, the lamplighter had heard Marjolaine's words and followed the direction in which she had pointed. His little ferret eyes gleamed greedily.

Madame left Mrs. Poskett to go into the house, and turned to where she had left her daughter, but no Marjolaine was to be seen. "Marjolaine!" she called, anxiously.

Marjolaine came slowly out of the Gazebo. Her hands were folded in front of her and her eyes were cast down. She looked altogether as subdued as a Saint in a stained-glass window.

"Me voilà, Maman," she said, demurely.

Madame sat under the elm, a little to the right of the trunk.

Marjolaine came and knelt at her feet and seized both her hands so that she held the poor, deluded lady with her back to the houses, while she herself could watch Jack in his quest of the pigeon-pie.

Madame was glad of this opportunity of saying a few well-chosen words to her daughter.

She began very gravely:—"Marjolaine, you are putting on this gaiety to please me—"

"No, Maman," said Marjolaine; but at that moment the lamplighter slid down his ladder, and, creeping on all fours, began stalking the pigeon-pie. She saw it was going to be a race between the lamplighter and Jack for the coveted prize, and she could not suppress a little startled "Oh!"

"Why do you cry out like that?" asked Madame, with deep concern.

Marjolaine had the greatest difficulty in the world to keep from laughing. "Nothing, Maman!" she said, volubly. "You are not to be anxious about me. I am quite, quite happy."

The race was continuing. Although Jack saw the lamplighter's manoeuvre, he could not move quickly, for fear of making a noise and being heard by Madame.

"I saw Lord Otford yesterday," Madame continued.

Marjolaine's entire attention was absorbed by the rivals. "You saw—?" she repeated, vaguely. But at that moment the lamplighter was perceptibly gaining on Jack. "Oh! Oh!" she cried, with a stifled laugh.

Madame was shocked. "Marjolaine, you are laughing!"

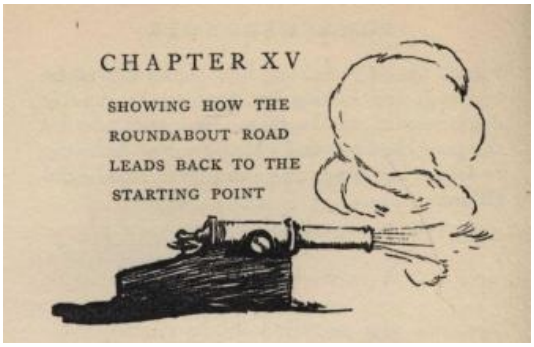
"No, no!" cried Marjolaine, "it was—it was surprise."

"He was very stern, very indignant," her mother proceeded; "but I did not flinch. I told him you—"

The lamplighter snatched the pigeon-pie and fled. Jack, speechless with rage and disappointment, was on the point of rushing after him, but, to his horror, he caught sight of his father coming out of the Admiral's house, and only just had time to bolt back into the Antiquary's.

Marjolaine gave up. In an uncontrollable fit of hysterical laughter she dashed into her own house, almost knocking Lord Otford over on her way, and leaving her poor mother utterly dumbfounded on the seat. Had grief affected the poor child's brain? Madame rose hurriedly to follow her daughter—and there stood Lord Otford.

CHAPTER XV
SHOWING HOW THE ROUNDABOUT ROAD LEADS BACK TO THE STARTING POINT



Chapter XV headpiece

"Lord Otford!" cried Madame.

"Forgive me," he said, very gently.

"Pray allow me to pass!" for he was standing right in her road. "I am very anxious about my child."

"If I am any judge," said he, with a smile, "that young lady is in the best of health and spirits."

Madame was indignant. "You are mistaken. She is—" but this would never do; she was just going to let out that Marjolaine was heart-broken because of Jack Sayle's desertion: the very last thing Lord Otford must know. "Yes, of course," she corrected herself. "She is well and happy, but —"

"Then," said Lord Otford, "will you favour me with a few moments?"

She could not help noticing with some satisfaction how different his manner was from when they had last met. Then he had tried to bluster and bully; now he was all deference. But she would not yield a jot. She drew herself up proudly.

"I can see no use in renewing our painful—"

He interrupted her deprecatingly. "I am in a grave perplexity. My son has disappeared—"

Madame took him up quickly. "And you suspect us of harbouring him!" she cried, with genuine anger.

"No, no!" he protested. "On my honour, no!"

"Then—?"

"Ah, do be patient," he continued, almost humbly. "I am here on an errand of conciliation."

"Conciliation!" echoed Madame, with a touch of scorn.

"Jack," Lord Otford began explaining, "is very dear to me."

"Marjolaine is very dear to me," said Madame, defiantly.

Lord Otford bowed. "Precisely. I have been considering. Are we justified in keeping these two young people apart?"

Madame looked at him in amazement. "Do you say that?"

"I do," he smilingly affirmed. "Marjolaine, being her mother's daughter, must be a charming gel."

Madame waved the compliment aside. He went on.

"And although Jack is my son, he is a thoroughly good fellow."

"But he is contracted to marry—" Madame interrupted.

"That is all upset," said Lord Otford; and the curious thing was that he did not seem at all put out. "Carrie Thring has taken the bit between her teeth and eloped with the curate."

Madame looked at him sharply. "And your hopes being dashed in that quarter, you come—"

"No, you are not fair!" protested Lord Otford. "I think I should have come in any case. Seeing you on Saturday has revived many memories—"

"It needed some such shock."

Lord Otford winced; but he continued bravely. "I made up my mind not to act my own father over again. If Jack loved your daughter, he was to marry her."

"That is no longer the question," said Madame with emphasis. "My daughter refuses to marry your son."

"Why? Because she does not love him?" His voice was very grave and very searching. Madame tried to answer. She would have given worlds to have been able to say "Yes." But she could not say it, and she was silent. Lord Otford was watching her keenly.

"No!" he said, almost severely. "No; but only because you tell her to refuse. She simply obeys out of habit. You are undertaking a heavy responsibility. Ah! Why punish these children because I behaved like a fool years ago, when I knew no better?"

Madame sank on the seat under the elm. Was he right? Had she acted in mere selfishness? Was she breaking Marjolaine's heart only to gratify something very like spite?

Lord Otford leant over her, and now there was a ring of passion in his voice. "And why punish me now, so late? Is it not possible for me to atone—Lucy?"

"Lord Otford!" she cried, trying to rise.

"Don't stop me now! Don't go away!" he entreated, motioning her back. "Ah! we are poor creatures at best! We go blindly past our happiness. Let us hark back, Lucy, and try to find the trail we missed!"

"We!" cried Madame.

"I."

Madame was profoundly stirred. His voice had not changed at all in all those years: just so had he murmured passionate words in the old vicarage garden. She must take care, or she would fall under the spell of it again—and that must not be. She must take care; harden her heart; put

on a panoply of steel.

"I have been quite happy," she said at last, very defiantly.

"I know it," he answered, "and I am glad to know it."

"But I purchased my happiness dearly." She turned on him with bitter resentment. "You have never realised the suffering you inflicted on me!"

"I can imagine it," he answered, almost voicelessly.

"No, you cannot," she retorted. "Only those who have gone through it can imagine it. Ah! think of pride insulted; ideals smirched; faith trampled on; tenderness turned back on itself!"

"I know it all," he murmured.

Madame went on, more as if she were communing with herself. "Nature is very strong, very merciful. I had not forgotten! Never, for one moment! But life covered the memory." She paused a moment, sunk in thought. When she spoke again it was in a gentler voice. "Then Jules came, and offered me his companionship. I gave him all I could, and he was content. Oh! the good, true, generous man!"

Once more Lord Otford winced; but he contrived to say with genuine feeling, "I honour him." After all, Jules was dead.

"And I honour his memory," said Madame, gravely.

Lord Otford spoke very earnestly. "We are quite frank, Lucy: you loved your husband; I loved my wife—"

"And there is no more to be said," concluded Madame, rising, with a little sigh.

"Ah! but there is!" he exclaimed, standing and facing her. "Face your own soul, Lucy, and tell me: did the thought of the old vicarage garden at Otford never haunt you?"

She looked straight into his eyes. "Never with any suggestion of disloyalty to Jules," she said firmly.

"That I am sure of. But it came. I know." He dropped his voice, came closer, and spoke with deep feeling. "Lucy, Lucy, it was always there! It never left you, as it never left me! It was the fragrant refuge, into which we crept in our solitary moments—never with disloyalty on your side or mine—but for consolation, for rest. Is that true?"

"It was merely the echo of an old song—" she murmured, under her breath.

"But how sweet! How tender!"

"And how sad!" Her strength was going. Every word he said seemed to draw the strength out of her. Her heart yearned to him; her whole soul cried out for him; and only her will resisted. She made one more effort. "No! No!" she cried, "I banished the memories! I banish them now!"

"You could not! You cannot!" he whispered, passionately. "No one can!—Think of these two children: Marjolaine and Jack. Suppose we part them now: suppose they go their different ways: do you think either of them will forget the flowing river, the sheltering elm, or the words they have whispered under it? Never!—Lucy, Lucy—" he was bending over her where she sat, and his voice had all the old thrill—"though we go astray from first love; though we undervalue it; yes! though we desecrate it, it never dies!—On revient toujours à ses premiers amours!"

But the years that had flown! the unrelenting years! what of them?

"We cannot retrace our steps," she said, sadly, "we cannot undo suffering; we cannot win back innocence."

"We can!" he cried. "We started from the garden; we have been a long journey with all its chances and adventures; and now we are at the garden gate again: the flowers we loved are beckoning to us; the birds we loved are calling us; we have but to lift the latch—Lucy, shall we not open the gate and enter the garden?"

"We cannot recall the sunrise—"

"But the sunset can be as beautiful!"

"We are old," she said; but her voice had no conviction. As a matter of fact, at that particular moment she felt she was eighteen.

"I deny it!" he laughed. He felt assured of victory. "Do I feel old? Do you look old?—I can't vault a five-barred gate, but I can open it and get on the other side just as quickly!"

She looked up at him with a wistful smile. "But—but there are other things—"

"There is, above all, happiness! If we have no children of our own, Lucy, we shall have our grandchildren."

"No!" she cried, rising, and shaking her head. "I have been too persuasive. Marjolaine's love has been nipped in the bud. And besides, Jack has run away from her."

"Not he, if I know the young rascal!" He took both her hands in his. "You tell me Marjolaine is well and happy?"

"Yes; but hysterical. You saw for yourself, just now."

"Is she a flighty coquette?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then I 'll bet you a new hat—No! a diamond tiara!—she knows where Jack is, and there 's an understanding between them!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Madame, as the possibility of this idea struck her.

"Lucy!" cried Lord Otford, drawing her to him, "both couples shall be married on the same day!"

You have no idea how pretty Madame looked in her confusion and happiness. You have no idea how young and handsome Lord Otford looked in his victory. Love had set the clock back for both of them—and they were young man and young maid again.

What had become of Madame's resentment? What had become of all the arguments she had thought of when he first began to speak? His voice had effaced them all. It was so natural to be loved by him and to love him, that no other thing seemed possible. She had nothing to say. She could only breathe a great sigh of contentment as he touched her: she felt as if she had parted with him in the garden only last night; and to-night he had come again; and all was as it should be; and all was well.

But suddenly she started away from him.

"Jack!" she cried, with horror, "we shall have to tell them!"

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Otford with comic dismay.

"I can't face Marjolaine!" said Madame, with a pretty blush, which, however, was wasted in the darkness.

"Jack'll roast me properly!" groaned Lord Otford.

"You see it's hopeless! We've been telling them how utterly impossible their marriage is, and now we propose to get married ourselves! How they 'll laugh at us!"

"Let 'em!" cried Lord Otford. "By Gad, it shall be happy laughter!" And therewith he drew Madame into his arms and kissed her; and I cannot honestly say she resisted.

But they were interrupted by Doctor Sternroyd, who at that very moment came stumbling out of his house. Also the Eyesore and Jim came round the corner together, with their arms affectionately round each other's necks and every symptom of having spent the larger part of Mrs. Poskett's bribes. The Eyesore found his box with difficulty and sank on it with relief. It was with a shaky hand he took up his rod and fell to fishing again. Jim meandered deviously into the Admiral's house.

"Sh!" whispered Madame, warningly, as she saw the antiquary. She turned to him with that preternatural calmness which ladies know so well how to assume under such circumstances, and said, alluding to something he was carrying in his hand, "Why, Doctor, are you fetching milk so late? I can give you some."

"No, Ma'am," said the Doctor, with suppressed rage. "I am not seeking the lacteal fluid. As you see me, I, the Reverend Jacob Sternroyd, Doctor of Divinity and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, am on my way to procure Ale!—" And with a face expressive of the utmost disgust he held out a very diminutive white milk-jug.

"Oh!" said Madame, with a tinge of astonishment. Then, in order to account for the presence of a stranger, she added, "This is Lord Otford."

With a cry of "Good Heavens!" the conscience-stricken Doctor let the jug fall. Happily it fell on the lawn and was not damaged.

With native courtesy Lord Otford picked it up and handed it to its owner. "Allow me: your jug, I think." Then, as a sudden idea occurred to him, "By the way, Doctor—" he cast a meaning glance at Madame—"can you tell me anything about a marriage-licence?"

Madame looked down, with another very becoming blush: but the Doctor's behaviour was quite extraordinary. He threw up his hands in guilty despair. "I said so! I knew it would come out! —" He appealed to Madame. "Miss Barbara told you!"

"Yes—but—" answered Madame, puzzled and astonished.

The Doctor continued rapidly, while the couple could only stare at him in mute amazement.

"I wash my hands of it! Two whole days, one of which was the blessed Sabbath, I have been up to my neck in cabals and intrigues! I have done!—" He fumbled in his pockets and ultimately produced a legal-looking document. "My Lord, it was very kind of you to approach the subject so considerately, but here is what you ask for. His Grace was very reluctant, but the pipe, which I now fear was not genuine, did it." Then, as if he had unburdened himself of some oppressive load of guilt, he cried, "Hah! My conscience is white again! I will tell the young fire-brand!" And with

that he hurried back into the house, calling, "Jack! Jack!"

"But what is all this?" cried Lord Otford. He unfolded the paper and took it under the lamp. As soon as he had read the first lines, he gave a cry of amused surprise. "What do you say now, Lucy?"—Then he read aloud, "John Sayle, of Pomander Walk, in the Parish of Chiswick, bachelor, and Marjolaine Lachesnais, also of Pomander Walk, spinster—"

"Under our very noses!" exclaimed Madame, half vexed and half amused.

"And old Dryasdust has been harbouring Jack! And now he 's gone to tell him!—Lucy, let's see what desperate thing they 'll do next. Come!" He drew her gently into the Gazebo, and for a moment there was complete silence in the Walk.

But suddenly this was shattered by a fierce outcry in Doctor Sternroyd's passage. The door was flung open and the Doctor appeared, vainly trying to bar Jack's way.

"But, my dear young friend—" the Doctor was protesting.

"Let me pass!" shouted Jack, livid, and thrusting his host aside. "For five years I 've been a sailor, and I can't think of the words I want!"

"Dear, dear! Tut, tut!" said the Doctor; but he did not wait. The conspiracy at any rate was off his mind. He retired into his house, and carefully locked the door.

Jack rushed to Marjolaine's house and boldly performed a long rat-tat with the brass knocker, muttering to himself all the time, "The old fool! Oh, my stars! the silly old fool!"

Nanette appeared.

"Tell Miss Marjory that—" began Jack, violently.

"Plait-il?" said Nanette, impassively.

"Oh, hang!—Er—deet ah Madermerzell—"

But Marjolaine ran into the passage. "Jack!" she cried, much alarmed. "Oh! What is it?"

"Come out! Come out!" cried Jack, seizing her hand and dragging her hastily down the steps, to Nanette's horror and indignation.

"Ah, mais!" the latter exclaimed, "Oú est donc Madame?" and went in to look for her.

Jack was incoherent. "Sternroyd!" he gasped. "He had the licence! Had it! We were to be married to-morrow! And he 's gone and given it—to whom do you think?—to my father!"

"Oh!" exclaimed poor Marjolaine, "then all is over!"

"No!" he cried, with magnificent determination. "All 's to begin again! Take me to your mother. Then I 'll take you to my father."

Lord Otford and Madame Lachesnais had come out of the summer-house.

"That is what you should have done at first, sir!" said Lord Otford.

"Father!" cried Jack, amazed.

With a half-frightened cry of "Maman!" Marjolaine threw herself in her mother's arms.

But Jack was not to be trifled with. He faced his father heroically. "It's no use, sir! You can cut me off with a shilling, but I mean to marry Marjory!"

Marjolaine was not to be outdone in courage. "Maman!" she said, with a radiant face, "he came back; and I 'm going to marry him."

Lord Otford turned gravely to Madame. "What do you say?"

"I say, God bless them."

"Maman!" cried Marjolaine, hugging her.

"And I, too, say God bless them!" cried Lord Otford, heartily.

"Marjory!" shouted Jack; and in a moment the lovers were in each other's arms.

"H'm," suggested Lord Otford, drily, "I believe this is a public thoroughfare!"

The lovers separated abashed. "Oh, sir!" said Jack, "please give me back that document."

"Why, no, Jack," answered his father, "I want that." And he and Madame glanced at each other guiltily.

"But, sir!" protested Jack.

"Um—the fact is—" Lord Otford had never felt so shy in his life. In vain he appealed to Madame for support; she was much too busy examining the very pretty point of her very pretty shoe. "I say, the fact is—with slight alterations—it may come in useful. Er—I, too, am John Sayle—and—um—I, too, am going to get married."

"Marjory," said Jack, very gravely, "my father's trying to be funny."

But Marjolaine's attention was divided between her mother and Lord Otford. The clumsy shyness of the one and the pretty confusion of the other gave her, as she would have said in French, furiously to think. Besides which, we must not forget she was in her Mother's confidence.

"Maman," she said, roguishly, "I believe!—Lord Otford! I believe—!"

"Believe, my child, believe!" cried Lord Otford, glad not to have to enter into further

explanations. He took her pretty head between his hands, and kissed her. "Here 's the document, Jack; and—ah—there is a pleasant seat under the elm; and agreeable retirement in the—ah—Gazebo."

So he and Madame sat in the arbour, and Jack and Marjolaine sat under the elm, and the leaves of that wise old tree having been awakened by Jack, asked each other with a pleasant rustle which couple was the happier of the two.

There was a great to-do at the Admiral's. I think Mrs. Poskett had been watching the lovers; for now the door burst open, and the Admiral and Jim hauled out the little brass cannon, followed by Mrs. Poskett, all in a flutter with pleasant alarm. While they were planting the gun close behind the unconscious Eyesore's back, the lamplighter came running in—he always ran—and put out the first lamp. Barbara and Basil came slowly out of their house, and leant over the railings in a close embrace, while Ruth stood watching them from the upper window. Basil, indeed, had brought his fiddle.

"Haul her out!" roared Sir Peter, alluding to the gun.

Mrs. Poskett uttered a little scream. "Oh, Peter! I 'm frightened!"

Jim reassured her in a hoarse grunt. "It 's all right, Mum, I 've emptied her."

The lamplighter put out the lower lamp.

"What are you doing that for?" cried Jack.

The lamplighter pointing over his shoulder, replied laconically, "Moon!" and ran off.

Sir Peter was just about to apply a lighted candle to the touch-hole of the gun, when Mr. Jerome Brooke-Hoskyn, much dishevelled, threw open his window, and cried in a horrified whisper, "Sir Peter! Sir Peter!—For Heaven's sake, don't fire that gun!"

"Why the devil not, sir?" roared Sir Peter, angrily.

"Sh!" cried Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn, waving a frantic hand. "*It's a boy!*"

"Gobblessmysoul!" cried Sir Peter, "I'll be godfather!"

And all the Walk was delighted, and the leaves of the elm clapped their hands together in the evening breeze.

Basil gently disengaged his arm from Barbara's waist and began playing the slow movement of the Kreutzer Sonata very, very softly.

Suddenly, behind the tower of Chiswick Church, up leapt the great full moon, turning the river to molten light, and flooding the Walk with gold.

The Admiral and Mrs. Poskett hurried to the Gazebo—but that was full. They turned to the seat under the elm—but that was occupied. "Gobblessmysoul!" said the Admiral.

So they had to be content to stand very close together, watching the river. And Sempronius came and rubbed his arched back against the Admiral's legs. Jim and Nanette looked on from their door-steps in amazement.

In his bow-window Doctor Sternroyd was gazing fondly at a faded miniature, while with his other hand he raised a glass of punch on high. "Araminta!" he sighed, and drank to her memory.

"Oh, Selina!" exclaimed Mr. Brooke-Hoskyn.

In the Gazebo there was a very tender whisper:—"Lucy!"

Marjolaine's head sank on her lover's shoulder with a happy, "Oh, Jack!"

Ruth was showering blossoms of jasmine on Barbara and Basil.

There was a great silence, emphasized by the yearning notes of Basil's fiddle. And through the silence came Ruth's voice, tender and wistful:—

"Ah, well!—I'm sure we all hope they'll live happily ever after!"—

And, for the first time in his life, the Eyesore caught a fish.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POMANDER WALK ***

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