

THE
EYES
OF
LOVE

WARWICK
DEERING

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McBRIDE

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A Novel

by

WARWICK DEEPING



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THE EYES OF LOVE

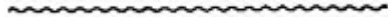
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THE EYES OF LOVE

CHAPTER I.

A boy who was passing along the Fox Farm road saw the horns and head of a black bull come crashing through the rotten weather-boarding of a cow-house wall. A stout rope had been fastened round the horns of the bull. The boy could hear men shouting in the byre.

“Tom, you muck of a fool, what be ye a’-doing with t’ chain——?”

“Maister Jesse, let t’ rope go! God save us, he’ll tear t’ shed down!”

The bull’s head had disappeared from the hole in the splintered timber, and in the black-fenced cow-yard the figures of men went scattering across the straw. In the byre itself the chain that had held the great beast dangled from the oak manger, and on the straw lay a searing-iron, a red sponge, and a bottle of disinfectant.

Briggs, the “vet,” a hard-faced little man in a green waistcoat, riding-breeches, and yellow gaiters, turned at the yard door with one hand through the latch-hole. Shirt sleeves rolled to the elbows, hands bloody, he still held a scalpel between his teeth, and his eyes were full of furious disgust.

Three men had climbed the high black fence, and were straddling it like banderilleros. The bull had stopped in the centre of the yard, nostrils smoking, horns shaking the rope that trailed behind him across the straw.

The veterinary opened the yard door, dropped the scalpel into a tuft of grass, and turned like a lean, plucky little terrier, his teeth showing in a snarl.

“Get the right side of the fence, Mr. Falconer. The beast’s dangerous.”

A big man in rough brown clothes stood by the byre entry, holding the end of the rope. Huge and impassive, with the head of a Norse giant, and the blue eyes of a dreamer, he stood watching the black bull, a slight smile lifting the corners of a melancholy mouth.

“All right, Briggs, one ought not to lose one’s dignity in the face of a beast.”

The veterinary turned to one of the men straddling the fence.

“Purkiss, you damned fool, what the blazes did you loose that chain for—before I gave the word?”

The man Purkiss grumbled through the scrub of a brown beard.

“T’ staple bruk, Maister Briggs. I be’unt such a fool—sure—as ter—! Sakes alive, Maister Jesse, come up out er t’ yard!”

The bull had swung round so as to face Falconer, who stood holding the rope that had been used by the men to draw the beast to the manger in the byre. The bull advanced a few steps over the straw, tossing his head, and looking at Falconer with ugly eyes. The farmer’s brown face showed no fear. It was the face of a fatalist, of a

man who had found life too sorry a business for him to cherish it too jealously.

Briggs bit his moustache.

“Tut-tut, Falconer. Dignity be damned! Don’t play with the black devil.”

Falconer kept his eyes on the bull.

“There is the rope,” he said, “I may as well get it off his horns.”

Briggs gave an expostulatory snarl. But he showed the pluck in him by shutting the yard door, picking up a pitchfork, and advancing across the straw.

Falconer spoke to him, without taking his eyes from the bull.

“Keep away, Briggs. I can manage the beast.”

The bull swung sharply to the right, bucked, lowered his head, and charged the “vet.” Briggs dodged, ran for the fence, and scrambled on to the palings, and sat there biting his moustache and swearing.

The bull went blundering round the yard, Falconer letting the rope run with him and turning much as a ring-master turns with a horse. He drew a claspknife from his pocket, opened it, and glanced for a minute at the farm-house whose red roofs and gables showed above the pollard willows growing about the pond. Someone was watching from one of the gable windows, for a face showed behind the leadlights of the casement.

The bull had come to a standstill in the centre of the yard, and stood staring at Falconer with dull malevolence. The man and the beast faced each other without moving. Then Falconer began to approach the bull, running the rope through his left hand.

“If I leave him a yard on his horns,” he said, “I shan’t waste much.”

The farm-hands were silent. Briggs glanced at the farm-house, and then prepared to jump into the yard to help Falconer if he were attacked.

“That’s a damned silly game to play,” he said, “with your wife watching you at that window!”

Falconer ignored the protest. He went step by step towards the bull, keeping his eyes on the animal’s eyes, and showing no hesitation. The bull stared and stood still. He allowed Falconer to come close to him, cut the rope within a yard of his horns, and retreat across the straw towards the cow-yard door.

Briggs swung himself off the fence.

“Confound it,” he said, “if I were an insurance tout I should keep clear of Fox Farm!”

Briggs washed his hands in a tub of water that stood outside the yard door. Once or twice he looked with an expression of cynical slyness at the window in the gable where Kate Falconer had appeared. He brought a gold ring from his breeches

pocket, slipped it on his finger, and then spat with vicious emphasis.

Jesse Falconer had coiled the rope, and passed it to one of the men. Standing with his hands in his pockets, his blue eyes staring into the distance, he let his great shoulders slouch as though they were too heavy for him to carry. Falconer did not hold his head like a man whose instinct is to strike back when struck at. His face was the face of a watcher and a dreamer, sensuous, meditative, and a little weak. If Briggs resembled a snappy, and valiant little terrier, Falconer reminded one of a great, sad-eyed hound.

The veterinary turned down his shirt sleeves.

“Lucky I’d just finished the job when that chain gave. I’ll run down to-morrow and have a look at the beast. Give him plenty of clean litter.”

Falconer nodded like a preoccupied god.

“Just as you please——”

Briggs’s sharp eyes swept the other man’s face. There was contempt, pity, admiration in the glance. He put on his coat and hat that lay on an old bench.

“I left part of my tackle in yonder. To-morrow will do. I promised Willoughby I would be down at The Pool by six.”

He nodded, smiled, and walked away with the wiry action of a little man who emitted the sparkle of self-confidence. Falconer watched him a moment, gave some orders to the men, and then passed on through the stockyard and behind the old brick stables to the orchard. He paused at the orchard gate, leant his arms upon it, and stared at the horizon.

Fox Farm lay on the ridge of a hill, and east and west the landscape fell away into vague blue distances. It was woodland country, a land of oaks and beeches, with here and there clumps of spruce, larch, and fir rising in darker knolls against the lighter green.

An empty landscape is interesting only to sentimental boys and young poets. The maturer eye seeks the personal, human mood, the significant touches of the hands of man. As for Fox Farm, nothing could have been more human. Wind-blown, bluff-chimneyed, ruinous as to its outbuildings, it stood up against the grey of an English sky with a sullen beauty that haunted the heart. Its tiles and walls were covered with lichen, the colour of verdigris and of old gold. The mortar between the bricks was grey, crumbling, and moss-grown. The casements blinked and chattered when a high wind blew.

Its very beauty was an autumnal beauty, a loveliness that glows with the ecstasy of decay. The roofs of the barns and byres undulated over rotting rafters, and showed many a gap where the tiles had fallen. The gates, green and bare of paint,

hung awry and dragged along the ground. The hedges, left uncut for years, had grown into great mysterious galleries where sheep and cattle sheltered. A wood of Scotch firs came close to the house on the northwest, sheltering the orchard from the north winds. In the orchard itself the old trees were twisted, gnarled, cankered and covered with moss and lichen. Weeds abounded, nettles, sheeps-parsley, docks, gout-weed, sorrel, and a hundred more wild flowers smothered the place. There were banks that were all blue and gold in spring, or purple with orchids. Buttercups blazed in the meadows, and the long grass glistened with great daisies and red sorrel.

In the hedgerows huge thorns spread green canopies and elder trees sent the sad fragrance of their white flowers on the wind. As for the garden in front of the house it was a delicious tangle, a passionate place where half-smothered flowers uttered cries of despair. The walls were grass-grown, the box edges ragged and full of gaps, the roses old and straggling, and full of dead wood. Flowers bloomed as they could, and fought each other and the weeds. A dozen scents contended for the mastery, the scent of stocks, jasmine, honeysuckle, roses, lavender, thyme, box, elder, bay, mint, lilies, and rue.

Jesse Falconer leant upon the orchard gate and watched the woods grow mystical under the light of the setting sun. A kind of languor was in his eyes. The autumn splendour of the oaks and beeches rose into domes of fire. For him the world was a sad, strange world. A man who dreamed, he had learnt to tell himself that nothing mattered.

Contemplate Nature, and she is beautiful; contend with her, and she becomes fierce and relentless. The farmer learns to accept the tempestuous, wayward moods of a power that as a pagan or a Christian he once strove to propitiate with offerings and prayers. Nothing is certain for him, nothing assured. Little wonder that he may become either a drunkard or a fatalist when the perversities of Nature press mockingly upon his senses.

Falconer turned from the orchard and moved with long, slow, melancholy strides up the brick-paved path leading to the back of the farm-house. A thatched porch stood out over the door, and an old yew had made the brick paving uneven with the upthrust of its roots.

Falconer entered the porch without remembering to scrape the byre muck from his boots. A broad, stone-flagged passage led right through the house, its walls distempered a dull brown, showing a few old prints hanging by green blind cord from brass-headed nails. Doors with thumb-latches opened on either side, and that indescribable perfume that clings to old farm-houses met one on the threshold.

There was the sound of steps descending the stairs. A hand came gliding down the rail, and a face looked over into the passage.

“You fool——”

Falconer glanced at his wife, and their eyes met and exchanged a challenge.

“Thanks, Kate.”

She turned at the foot of the stairs with one hand on the newel post, and stood confronting him. A tall, big-bodied woman with a fine bust and broad shoulders, her face had a hard comeliness with its apple cheeks, red-brown eyes, and closely curled black hair. It was the face of a capable and energetic woman, a woman of narrow aims and notions, unemotional in the higher sense, unimaginative, and a little mean.

“What a fool you are! You put me out of all patience.”

Jesse hung his hat on a peg. His movements seemed rendered more slow and lethargic by the presence of his wife.

“What’s the matter, Kate?”

“Matter! Haven’t we worries enough without your playing for a doctor’s bill. Oh, you make me mad.”

They looked each other in the eyes like antagonists who cross swords. The woman’s anger was not the perverse anger of love that has been alarmed.

She glanced along the passage, and then at her husband’s boots.

“Well, I never! Must you always bring your dirt in here? Jenny scrubbed the passage down this morning. You men never give a thought to the work you make. Look at that mess.”

Falconer turned slowly with the large, questioning forbearance of a great dog. Probably he had never realised how exasperating his dreamy fatalism was to this energetic, masterful woman.

“I forgot.”

“Oh, lord! Go and take those filthy boots off in the porch.”

“All right, Kate.”

He marched off down the passage, slouching and swinging his hands. His wife opened the kitchen door, and called to her servant.

“Jenny, bring your brush and pan. The master has messed up the whole passage.”

Falconer sat on the bench in the porch and unlaced his boots. He had ceased to marvel at this strange fact that two people who had once kissed with passion, now angered each other with every trick of body and mind. The pity of the thing moved him no longer. Those impulses toward reconciliation were part of the past. He

accepted the tragedy of their marriage even as he accepted the realities of wind and rain.

There were no children at Fox Farm. And as the dusk came down Jesse Falconer sat in the long parlour and stared at the fire. The room was oak-beamed, and paved with brick, and the open fireplace had its ingle-nooks, its jack and chain, its iron fire-back, and dogs. Sparks and flames went upwards into a great chasm. There were oak-doored cupboards on either side of the fireplace, cupboards that sank for three feet into the thickness of the wall. In one of them Falconer kept his pipes and tobacco-jar. He could reach them as he sat in his Windsor chair with his feet resting on the rough brick curb.

The clattering of pans and dishes came from the kitchen, and the busy practical voices of mistress and maid. Yet for the moment the man before the fire sat in a dim atmosphere of meditative and melancholy repose. He lit his pipe and stared at the flames, face impassive, muscles relaxed.

His eyes seemed to reflect the wayward happenings of life, even as they reflected the wayward light of the fire. It was possible to read all manner of experiences into the man's eyes, the gloom of a wet summer, of ruined hay, drenched crops, and unmet bills. There was no anger, no rebellion, no godwardness in him. Nature had created him in the beginning, and had perfected the creation with the rough touches of her impartial hands. Falconer's face had a mild, impassive, dreamy radiance. He was learning to be happy in being sad, to steep himself in a species of Oriental nonchalance. There were books in the cupboard where he kept his pipes and tobacco, but there comes a time for a man when books say nothing new to him. They become full of vain repetitions of things that lie like dust over the surface of life.

The kitchen door opened, and Kate Falconer came through into the firelit room. Her presence destroyed its atmosphere of passive contemplation. Antagonisms and a spirit of critical unrest stirred in the air.

"Jenny, bring the lamp."

Her eyes rested a little scornfully upon her husband.

"I'll have some of the fire, please. Have you seen to the beasts? Purkiss's nose might be kept closer to the grindstone."

Falconer shifted his chair, and the girl came in with the lamp. It was a gaudy thing in coloured glass with a globe that gave out a cold white light. Its glare had much the same effect on the room as Kate Falconer's presence. She was a woman without mystery, all sharp decided surface, lacking shadow.

"What's Briggs charging for that job yonder?"

"A guinea."

“I suppose he wanted the money on the counter.”

“No; I think not.”

The wife took her work-basket from one of the cupboards. She looked at Jesse slouching in his chair, chin on chest, his lips sending out lazy, rhythmic puffs of smoke. An impatient shrug of the shoulders showed how her own active nature clashed with his.

“Can’t you sit as though you had a backbone, Jesse?”

Falconer did not stir in his chair.

“I’m wondering how we are going to meet old Smunk’s bill by Christmas. Do you know where the money’s to come from? I’m not going to put my hand in my own pocket this quarter.”

“I don’t want to take any of your money, Kate.”

“Well, can you pay the bills?”

“Let them lie. They won’t grow less for our worrying over them.”

Kate drew her work-basket towards her, chose a reel of cotton, and unwound a yard or so and snapped it with an irritable jerk of the hand.

“Jesse, no wonder that everything you touch turns out a failure. You want someone behind you with a stick all day, to lay in and shout, ‘Git oop, Noddy, git oop, ye baste.’ It’s a pity you weren’t built smaller. I know little men who could knock the head off you for pluck and go.”

Her hand swept to and fro as she used her needle, and Falconer stared at the fire.

“What is—is,” he said; “it’s no use pushing against fate.”

His wife glanced at him, opened her mouth and closed it again with an air of resigned contempt. Presently she lifted her head and called in her hard, clear voice:

“Jenny, you can bring in supper.”

So the table was laid, and the monotonous meal gone through with by the light of the glaring lamp.

Kate Falconer turned again to the fire, drew a stocking over her left hand, and began to darn it in loud silence. Jesse filled his pipe, loitered a moment with an air of cumbrous indecision, and then went out along the stone-paved passage to the thatched porch, and the black-bosomed yew.

CHAPTER II.

Jesse turned into the high-road by the white gate and walked slowly in the direction of Ashhurst village. It was one of those nights when restlessness possessed him, and when the play of the wind in the hedgerows helped him to think.

Falconer had gone a quarter of a mile along the lonely upland road and was watching the flashing of the distant light on the Ram's Head when he heard voices coming from the direction of Ashhurst village. Heavy country boots scraped clumsily along the road with a stumbling irregularity that suggested the homeward wanderings of some rustic Omar.

A voice broke into song.

“Sh' wore a wreth o' roses
Th' first time that we met.”

The inspiration gave out abruptly, and changed to grumbling, querulous declaiming. Unsteady feet went scuffling to and fro across the road. Falconer heard another voice, persuading, reasoning, cajoling.

He drew back, under the hedge and waited.

“I tell 'ee I be chast and subor as a snowflake. Woa, Jolly, m' boy! Yon's t'light on Ram's Head. I can see ut, Nan, plain as a pub window.”

The girl's voice chimed in:

“Sure, Dad, we're near home. Take my arm, now.”

The scraping of feet came nearer, and Falconer saw two dim figures draw out of the darkness, moving close together in the middle of the road.

The man lurched badly, and showed a sharp flare of temper.

“What be y' a-pushin' for? Walk steady.”

The girl's voice had a quiet, patient comeliness. It was like a mellow breath of the wind amid the bells of a belfry.

“There, dad, you trod on a stone.”

“Damn t' stones; I wish they was in hell.”

They passed Falconer without seeing him, and went on down the road, the man muttering and grumbling into the night. The farmer hesitated and then followed them, walking on the grass so that his footsteps were not heard. He knew the man for Sam Wetherell, who lived in the cottage under the Quarry Bank down towards the ruins of Pool Castle. It seemed hard that this slip of a girl should have to bring home an old reprobate of a father.

Jesse followed the pair till the light from the window of a cottage shone through a

tangled hedge. He heard the click of a gate latch and Wetherell's footsteps going unsteadily up a brick-paved path. Then a door opened, showing a yellow oblong under the heavy thatch.

Falconer turned back, asking himself why he had troubled to shepherd Wetherell and his daughter. The man was a waster, and as for Ann, he remembered her as half child, half woman, a slim, sallow-faced girl with dark eyes, a girl whom a man might not notice till he had seen her many times. Yet sometimes it happens that a woman who has never existed save to be glanced at and forgotten, rises suddenly into the intimate inner consciousness of a man's thoughts. Jesse Falconer walked back to Fox Farm, thinking of Ann Wetherell, and the queer one-storeyed cottage by the old quarry. It was as though the sound of the girl's voice had penetrated his indifference and stirred in him a strange and mysterious sympathy.

There was both gipsy and gentle blood in the Wetherells, and the strains showed themselves in the man's method of getting a living. He was a vagrant who happened to live in a cottage, a brown, battered nest of a place that seemed to overflow with children. Wetherell had lost his wife five years ago, and the hands of Ann, the eldest, had become a mother's hands. That was why, perhaps, the girl's dark eyes looked older and sadder than her years. She had taken care prematurely into her heart, with a drunken, indolent man about the house, and six bodies to clothe and feed.

Wetherell was no man's man. A lean, fiery-eyed adventurer with slouching shoulders, prominent masticatory muscles, and a ragged black beard, he knew as much as any poacher, gamekeeper, or tramp in the county. Folk were a little afraid of him. His laziness disappeared with dangerous rapidity when a crackle of words boded the flare of a quarrel. Yet Sam Wetherell was something of a philosopher. He had begotten children, and he did not see why these same children should not be of use. The education authorities were troublesome at times, but Wetherell knew how to circumvent them by the use of the strap and by risings at three on summer mornings. Prosecuted on one occasion by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, he had been fined one pound and costs for thrashing his elder boy Slim. And to demonstrate the futility of these old women's methods Sam had thrashed the boy every day for a week, and no one had dared to tell.

In the country money may be made in many picturesque ways. Wetherell knew and practised them all. In the spring there were wild flowers to be gathered—primroses, blue bells, lilies of the valley, and king-cups, flowers that could be sold in Lymnor seven miles away. Young Slim Wetherell would be kicked out before dawn to steal plover's eggs in the fields. Then came hop-tying, hay-making, fruit-picking. Sam would lock up the cottage, and take his whole family a-wandering with the

piebald pony and the knock-kneed cart. Harvest and hop-picking were useful in their turn. Then there were mushrooms to be gathered in the dew-wet fields. In autumn the youngsters went out blackberrying while other folk were asleep. Nor must Sam's two cats be forgotten, fierce, predatory beasts, who were capable of contributing a partridge or a full-grown rabbit.

As for Wetherell himself, he would accept occasional odd jobs to get beer-money, and tobacco for his pipe. He bought dogs and resold them. A little hedging and ditching, some days in the hay and harvest fields, forking up sheaves at thrashing time, these labours served. In winter he earned money as a beater when the local gentry shot over their preserves, or by taking out his ferret and nets and disposing of rats and rabbits. Beyond an occasional hour's spade work in his own garden, he was not responsible for the raising of its crops. His life was largely a patriarchal life, passed in enforcing the labours of his children.

The pageant of the day opened for the Wetherell children with the blare of their father's voice.

"Slim, get up with ye, or I'll knock the life out of yer body."

And Slim would hustle out of the box of a bed where he slept with Joe, his younger brother, tumble into his clothes without waiting to wash, and go forth to chop wood, draw water, or thief something for a living. Slim was a thin, muddy-faced lad with a hard mouth and insolent blue eyes. Mischievous as an ape, he was at war with the world, and revered nothing so much as the buckle end of his father's belt.

Since blackberries fetched a fair price in Lymnor, blackberrying was the order of the day in autumn, and the young Wetherells were out early with baskets and hooked sticks. Ann stayed at home to wash, cook, and clean. She kept the cottage and the children sweet and neat, Slim being the only dirty member, owing to his having reached an age when his right to be dirty was insisted on with arrogance. Next to Slim in age, came Rose, a fat and smiling thing of fourteen. Sam's favourite, because she was merry and pleasant to behold. Prudence, the third girl, had a thin, brown, hungry little face, with pinched nostrils and open mouth. Wetherell disliked the child because she was sickly. Joe, the youngest, was a gentleman with fat legs, and a snub nose that rarely was irreproachable. He delighted in discords, and had a genius for making a noise. Prudence and Joe still went to the Board School at Ashhurst village, tramping off with bread and cheese in an old satchel, and carrying a brown umbrella when the weather was wet.

"Kids back yet?"

Sam Wetherell's head appeared at the doorway in the mellow sunlight of an

October morning.

“No, not yet, dad.”

Ann was laying the table, her brown forearms showing up against a white apron, her black hair drawn back on either side of her forehead. Her skin looked fresh, firm, and sleek, and her simple bodice fitted tightly to her figure.

“Kettle boilin’?”

“Sure.”

“Make the brew; I be hungry.”

Wetherell slouched in and sat down at the end of the table. The room with its pink rose paper, its strange and multifarious pictures, and its brick floor, was beautifully clean. There were geraniums on the table by the window, and the queer odds and ends of furniture showed no dust. Over the porch a few late roses nodded, and the old black soil of the garden carried green broccoli, cabbages, and purple kale.

Ann knew her father’s moods and habits. She made the tea and set a dish of bacon on the table. Sam Wetherell was never without money to buy good food. Ingenuity paid him better than hard work.

Voices came up the high-banked lane where the old quarry opened with its waving plumes of broom and furze and its reefs of bracken. The children were returning with their baskets full of fruit.

Wetherell gave a grunt and helped himself to bacon. The children’s voices died down as they entered the garden. They had learnt to wait in silence upon their father’s moods.

They came in through the sunlight: Slim, sly-eyed and hungry-faced; Rose, with juice-stained lips; Prudence with her black stockings in wrinkles on her little sticks of legs; Joe, round-eyed and sniffing. Wetherell did not glance at them. The children stood round and fidgeted, but did not come to the table.

“What ye got?”

He spoke with a mouth full of bread. The youngsters showed their tins and baskets. Slim’s eyes ogled the food. But his greed was subservient to the greater and more authoritative greed of his father.

“Humph! More bread.”

Ann cut slices from the loaf. She herself had touched no food as yet. Wetherell always sat down to eat ten minutes before his children, and took the best of everything that was on the table.

“Come on.”

He drew a white jam pot towards him, and emptied it before the sullen eyes of

his eldest son. If there was one thing that irritated Wetherell it was being stared at while he ate.

“Slim, what be ye a-rollin’ yer eyes round my plate for?”

“Wasn’t.”

“None o’ yer lip sauce.”

The boy sidled into a rickety chair. Ann’s hands were busy ministering to their needs. Wetherell sat and stuffed bread and jam into a voracious mouth.

“Where ye bin this mornin’?”

Rose answered for the rest.

“Down by Furze End.”

“Yah—no good! Take ’em down to the castle, Nan, after school.”

Ann poured out her own tea. She was the last to take her share.

“Yes, father.”

Wetherell felt for his clay pipe. He filled it with shag and began to smoke. Slim, blue eyes furtive, was eating like a starved rat. Nothing was certain so long as the humours of the patriarchal temper clouded the air.

“Slim.”

The boy looked up sharply.

“Greedy young hog, ain’t ye! Just you go out and put the pony in the cart.”

Ann interposed.

“I’ll do’t, father.”

Wetherell’s mouth curled.

“Sit down. Slim——!”

The boy jumped up, looking sullen and cowed. He had snatched a piece of bread, and held it behind him.

“When I speaks, I speaks. Don’t you waste no time, Slim, or I’ll be arter ye with my belt.”

Sam Wetherell drove away to Lymnor, leaving orders that the children were to go blackberrying down at Pool. The Pool was a great sheet of sheltered water lying in the valley below Fox Farm. In the midst of its lily leaves stood the old castle of The Pool, or Pool as the folk called it, a castle of ten towers linked together by a great curtain wall. The grey-black towers with their battlements and machicolations were reflected in the still, black water, and the more ruinous portions of the walls were overgrown with grass, ferns, young ash trees, gilliflower, and valerian. The pool had been made in the fourteenth century after the castle had been built upon its stone-faced knoll. A great bank had been thrown up across the side valley, and a small stream turned into the hollow. A shrub-covered bank that projected into the

water showed the old causeway that led towards the little island barbican whose two bridges had given access to the main gate. The castle with its sheet of placid water had a hundred moods, and a hundred legends. It was a silent, empty, tranquil place, gorgeous at dawn and at sunset. Jackdaws built in the towers, and littered the worn stairways with twigs.

When Wetherell sent his children blackberrying by Pool Castle he knew that they would return with full baskets. A wilderness surrounded it, where brambles had grown into great hillocks, and the bracken stood in places as high as a man. The Fox Farm lands came down to the water on the south, and Jesse Falconer never troubled to interfere with the gipsies who often camped there.

To Ann, purple-fingered and bare-headed, dragging down brambles with a crooked stick, came the frightened yelping of a dog. Prudence, who had been gathering beside Ann, had worked nearer towards the Pool. Rose and Master Joseph were far away beyond the castle, and Slim, that lazy rogue, had not been visible for half an hour.

Ann paused to listen, freeing her sleeve from the aggressive clutches of a trailing bramble. She heard Prudence calling her with the agonised eagerness of a lost child:

“Nan—Nan——”

“I’m here, Prue.”

A little figure came pushing through the bracken. Prudence’s face was a smudge of tears. She ran to Ann with a choking cry.

“They—they be drow—drowning a poor ’ittle puppy.”

“Who?”

“A young man and Slim. I don’t want it drowned—I don’t want it drowned!”

The child howled, and her softness of heart found full sympathy in Ann. She took Prudence by the hand, and leaving her basket and stick, pushed her way through towards the water. A burst of lads’ laughter came from the direction of the pool, laughter that was gloating and cruel.

Prudence’s “young man” was a crop-headed youth with great bony knees and hands, and a mouth that was a mere ugly slit above a weak chin. He had a rough-haired white mongrel by the scruff of the neck, a mere puppy by the size of it, and anything between a fox-terrier and a spaniel. Slim Wetherell stood by grinning as the lout swung the dog far out over the water. It fell with a splash, sank, reappeared, and came paddling back towards the bank, nose up, fore-paws splashing.

The lads jeered.

“Chuck a stone.”

“Ain’t got un.”

“Ere y’are.”

Prudence began to wail.

“Ben’t they cruel! I don’t want it drowned.”

Ann had gone dead white. A queer gleam came into her eyes. She left Prudence, and ran towards the water.

“Slim—throw that stone if you dare!”

Two insolent and jeering faces turned in surprise. The crop-headed lout had half a brick in his fist. He looked at Ann, and grinned.

“’Tain’t none o’ your business.”

He raised his arm, but the dog had reached the bank. It scrambled out with dripping body, and lay down to pant. This was the third time that he had struggled back to the bank.

Slim spread his fingers at his sister. Crop-head bent down, and took the dog by the neck.

Ann’s eyes flashed. She went red as a winter sunset.

“Don’t you touch it!”

“It be my dog.”

“No, t’ain’t. You’ve thrown it away.”

“Mind yer silly business.”

Ann flew at him like a young fury, but he dodged her, and threw the dog far out over the water.

“You coward!”

She caught him by the collar, and beat a small brown fist in his face. For the moment the lout seemed too astonished to defend himself. Then he blurted out foul words. A bony paw came up, and caught Ann by the hair.

“I’ll teach ye——”

He twisted his hands into her hair.

“Now, then, say yer sorry.”

She set her teeth, refusing to cry out, and tried to free herself from his grip. The lout chortled, and twisted her hair the tighter. Slim stood by and jeered; that was the sort of soul he had.

Suddenly something intervened. A big, brown figure loomed through the bracken, and caught Master Crop-head by the ear. The lad twisted, yelled, and then stood still.

“Leave go!”

He let go of Ann’s hair, and in an instant he was swept waterwards, and tumbled into the shallows.

“See how you like the game yourself!”

Ann stood looking at Jesse Falconer. There were tears in her eyes, tears of pain, pity, and anger. The white dog was still swimming some yards from the bank, but the little beast was exhausted and made no headway. Falconer saw that it would drown.

Slim’s comrade came crawling out, muddy and weed-streaked, as Falconer walked into the pool like an Atlas into the ocean. The water was up to his waist before he reached the dog, lifted him out, and brought him back to land.

Ann held out compassionate arms.

“Oh, Mr. Falconer, you be all wet!”

“So is the dog. He’ll wet you through if you hold him.”

None the less she took the half-drowned mongrel into her arms.

Falconer turned to the lout.

“Well, how do you like the game? I’ve a good mind to have you summoned, you cruel young beast!”

The lad blurted out sulky threats.

“I’ll tell on ye. ’Tain’t your dog. My dad’ll have the law.”

Falconer eyed him as a hound might eye a low cur.

“The best thing you can do,” he said, “is to shut your mouth, and go and change your clothes.”

The lad went, not liking the look in Falconer’s eyes.

CHAPTER III.

Sam Wetherell would have nothing to do with Ann's dog. He refused, with scorn that was almost venomous, to give a home to a beast that was not worth the price of a dose of poison.

Sam stood by the garden gate, and pointed with the stem of his pipe.

"Yah, a purty fool you be, Nan, to be come over by a dirt of a dog like that! Sure, you'd have to pay folk t' drown 'im. No slush, now! Hey, warrook, get out wid ye, yer white sausage on wheels."

He began to search round for something to throw, while the mongrel looked dubiously about him.

Ann stood irresolute. The cur's forlorn look touched her. Even the queer brown-and-white blotches on his coat, his bandy legs and flapping ears had a quaint pathos. He seemed one of the unfortunates, and Ann had a soft heart.

"Don't drive him away, dad. I'll take him up to Fox Farm."

Wetherell stared. Surely there could be no possible bargain in the business! Even Mr. Falconer was not fool enough to be landed with such a mongrel.

"Go on," he said; "do yer want 'un to shoot ut?"

Ann stooped for the dog, picked him up, and huddled him in her arms.

"Poor lad, then! We'll get him a home somehow."

So it befell that Jesse Falconer, gathering apples in one of the old orchard trees, heard a voice calling him as he clambered about the lichenous boughs. He looked down and saw Ann Wetherell standing in a slant of the evening sunlight, the white dog in her arms, and her eyes full of a shy compassion.

"Mr. Falconer, sir, I've come to ask you to take the dog."

The sunlight played upon her pale face. As for the mongrel, he seemed content to lie in her arms and cock one eye coolly at the man in the tree.

Falconer stood in the main fork with one arm round a bough. In his right hand he held a red apple, and the sunlight made gold glints in his brown hair.

"I thought you wanted to keep him?"

Ann flushed with sudden self-consciousness.

"It's father," she said; "he won't have the dog. And it seems hard to pick him out of the water, and then turn him adrift."

Her eyes met Falconer's, and they looked at each other with incipient curiosity. A slight frown of thought gathered on the man's forehead. Ann believed that he was going to refuse.

"Maybe you've got a dog, Mr. Falconer."

“Only the sheep-dog Bob, in the yard. And he’s more with the men than with me. The truth is——”

He shifted himself in the tree, stared momentarily into space, and then looked down at Ann.

“You’ll think it queer—what I’m going to say. I’ve had several dogs in my time, and they all came to bad ends. Now, a man gets fond of a dog——”

Ann’s eyes watched his, and they were full of a listening sympathy.

“How queer. But——”

“I said that I would never have another dog. There seemed to be something unlucky about me. And it didn’t seem fair to the beasts. When I got fond of one, something was sure to happen to him.”

Ann nodded a grave head. And Falconer noticed suddenly how sensitive her mouth and eyes were. He found himself wondering how Sam Wetherell had come to have a daughter whose face suggested mystery, pathos, and compassion.

“Then you think——”

Her lips trembled and remained open. Falconer tossed the apple into the grass.

“I lost one dog from poison, another under a reaping machine. An Irish terrier got shot for hunting. A retriever went into a mill-stream, and was sucked under the wheels. Four lives lost! What do you think?”

They eyed each other with ingenuous earnestness. Then Ann said:

“You’d be kind to him, Mr. Falconer, and he’d be happy—and nothing might happen.”

“Then you think he is willing to take the risk?”

Ann spoke to the dog, and he gave a wag of the tail and a sharp bark.

“There, see—he says yes.”

Falconer swung himself out of the tree. Ann’s head came to the level of his shoulder as they stood in the rank grass.

“I’ll take him. Has he a name?”

“I haven’t heard one, sir.”

“Then you had better christen him, since it was you who really saved him from that half brick.”

“Brick! Why, look, he answers to it! Call him Brick, Mr. Falconer.”

And Brick the dog was named.

On the day of the dog’s rescue down at Pool, Kate Falconer had driven to Lymnor in her pony trap. To a wife who had a small private income of her own, and a nature that was largely practical, the shops of Lymnor offered numberless

fascinations. Kate Falconer was a woman who loved to loiter in Lymnor with five pounds in her purse, and with the knowledge that she could buy most of the objects that she saw in the windows. The delight of buying was with her a potential delight. She loved the power of money, and money itself, better than the finest stuffs in the drapers' shops. It was her form of dissipation to wander up and down the Lymnor streets, and buy nothing more than two yards of tape. Yet her satisfaction would be complete. She had enjoyed the power of purchasing many things without spending a shilling.

Climbing back out of Lymnor with the reins slack on the pony's back, she was overtaken by a little, bullet-headed man riding a black mare. The rider drew in beside the pony cart, flourished a black felt hat, and showed a row of healthy white teeth.

"Hallo—how are we to-day?"

Kate Falconer looked round at him with a sudden brightening of her hard brown eyes.

"Why, Jack, where have you been?"

"Down at Curtis's, looking at some new machines. That fresh ground of mine is showing up like Lincolnshire stuff, turning buttercups into gold."

Mr. Jack Rickaby was a short, thick-set man with the face of a groom, pugnacious, black-chinned, merry about the eyes. His black-and-white check riding-breeches and brown gaiters were smart and new, and his wealth of cheerfulness ran into picturesque slang. This sleek, well-groomed surface was the green sheath hiding a hard, brown nut, for Mr. Jack Rickaby was a grim little man with a keen mouth, and muscular shoulders.

These two people, the fresh-coloured, capable woman in the pony cart, and the stocky young farmer on the black mare, talked the same language and thought the same thoughts. Their sympathy was the sympathy of vigorous pushfulness and dogged endeavour. Their eyes looked at the same things with the same expression. A like motive force worked towards like ends.

"Well, how's Jesse?"

Kate Falconer's face had changed. Her eyes had lost some of their hardness, and her crude comeliness showed vivacity and a more sensuous warmth.

"Oh, Jesse; he's messing along the same as usual."

"Lord! That man does take life calmly. Wish I had some of his weight."

Kate Falconer stared hard at her pony's ears.

"I wouldn't envy Jesse if I were you. Some people enjoy nothing so much as being miserable."

“Oh, come now; there’s something to be said for Jesse.”

“Is there? I wish you would give him some of your pluck.”

She glanced at Jack Rickaby with critical approval. The man had so many of the qualities that she admired—courage, energy, a grim determination to make money.

“Pluck! Jesse has plenty of pluck. Briggs told me a tale only the other day.”

“That’s not the sort of spirit I mean. If anyone threatened to shoot Jesse, he would say: ‘Life’s such a bother, I really don’t care whether you shoot me or not.’ One can’t help having a good grumble, sometimes.”

Mr. Rickaby stroked his mare’s neck. The playfulness had died out of his eyes for the moment. He was a hard little man, thinking hard thoughts.

“I tell you what,” he said bluntly, “Jesse was never the man for you.”

Their eyes met squarely and honestly. They were practical people, and they did not glaze things over with romantic sentiment.

“That’s the truth, Jack; but it’s no use blurting it abroad. Besides, Jesse’s a clean liver.”

“Well, other people do the blurting. Jesse’s not popular.”

“No, perhaps not; but he’s as clean a man as ever stepped. His mother was an old fool. Fancy her sending the lad to a public school, and to a blessed college to make him a scientific farmer. Jesse always had too much book-stuff in him, and he has been losing money for years. I’ve known him waste a whole day watching a lot of ants. The farm was clear, if a bit rickety in the buildings, when the old lady left it him. Look at it now—a blessed ruin, mortgaged up to the last brick.”

Jack Rickaby assented with a nod of the head. His eyes had picked out a hawk hovering over a distant field. He watched the bird, and whistled softly through his teeth.

“I can’t see the use of being in this world,” he said presently, “unless a man means to bustle and fight. One has to play the game of the hawk over yonder, whatever the parsons may say.”

Ashurst village showed its shingled spire and tiled roofs on the slope of the next hill. The church spire appeared to hold up an admonishing finger. Mr. Rickaby glanced at Kate Falconer, smiled, and began to tap the mare’s flanks with his heels.

“Well, I suppose I must bump on.”

Kate understood. Their sympathy was of a blunt, practical nature, and would wear.

“I’ll send you up a few samples, Jack. I want to know what you think of them. Jesse won’t bother.”

“All right, Kate, send them along. You can always count on me.”

At Fox Farm Kate Falconer unharnessed the pony, and ran the little cart into the cobwebbed coach-house. She had no objection to relying upon her own hands in these matters, yet it pleases a woman to have a man bustling to serve her. She was closing the coach-house doors when Jesse came into the yard with the white mongrel at his heels.

“You might have come five minutes sooner.”

“I didn’t hear you drive in, Kate.”

“No, I suppose not.”

And her tone implied that she disbelieved him.

Then she noticed the dog, and in her blunt and aggressive way she fell to catechising her husband.

“What have you got there?”

“A dog.”

He had no intention of being facetious, but when two people have fallen into the habit of quarrelling, any chance word is taken as a sting.

“Don’t try to be funny. What’s the animal doing here?”

“I have taken him in.”

“Oh, have you! Well, I may as well tell you I won’t have a dog about the house, much less a thing like that.”

Jesse’s face remained imperturbable.

“If you won’t, Kate, I will.”

His wife stared.

“Where did you pick the thing up?”

“Out of the Castle pool.”

“Someone was showing the sense to drown it. If one has to keep a dog, one may as well keep a decent-looking beast. Even a dog can impose on you, Jesse.”

“Perhaps he can. At all events, he is here to stay.”

Kate Falconer knew her husband’s obstinate moods. They were of rare occurrence, but their very rarity gave them an accumulated inertia that made resistance useless. Jesse would shut his mouth, hunch up his great shoulders, and maintain an impassive silence. It was the poise of a Pyramid, of a great rock half sunk in sand.

“Oh, very well, then. I’m not going to quarrel about a thing on four legs.”

And she crossed the yard and entered the garden by the rough gate that opened under the arch of an old white cluster rose.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. John Smunk, corn-merchant, miller, and hay factor, stood at the foot of the stairs, and shouted like a farmer calling to a man across a fourteen-acre field.

“Sarrah—Sa-rrr-ah!”

A prim, peeping voice came from above.

“Yes, dearie—yes?”

“Dearie be damned! Where the dickens have you put my hat?”

There was a thin, twittering sound, a rustling of skirts, and a diminutive woman in black appeared upon the stairs.

“What did you say, dearie?”

John Smunk showed a lean and sagacious face thrusting itself forward on the end of a long, sinewy neck.

“Where the dickens have you put my hat?”

Mrs. Sarah Smunk came mincing down the stairs. The curves of a high forehead and a receding chin seemed to meet at the tip of a diminutive nose. Mrs. Smunk never walked; she progressed with a peculiar tripping wriggle. Every gesture suggested deprecatory and flustered “niceness,” and a nervous inclination to giggle. But Mrs. Smunk had lived beyond the giggling stage. Moreover, she was deplorably deaf.

“What did you say, dearie?”

Her face put on the thin flutter of a smile.

“My hat?”

Her husband let fly like a blunderbuss, and his wife jumped.

“Oh, dear, John. I left it in the yard to dry.”

“Dry! What the——?”

“Now, John, dear, you know it was so very faded. I felt I must——”

“Must what—must what?”

“You do fluster me so! I sent Mary this morning for a little bottle of ink—only a penny bottle. Ink and water, John——”

The corn-merchant’s long neck seemed to collapse into his collar.

“Well, I’m damned! What next? I reckon you’d better ink the seat o’ my breeches. I never knew such a woman for messing about with ink, and cloth-reviver, and soaps, and dyes, and God knows what. You’ll be blackleading your legs next, and going out without stockings!”

His wife fidgeted and squirmed with an air of sweet and sickly forbearance.

“I’m always trying to be careful, John.”

“Yes, I know. Just fetch my hat.”

And when it was brought him, he crammed it on his grey pate, and walked out into the street, banging the door after him.

John Smunk was the wealthiest man in Ashhurst village, wealthier than Carlyon Lowndes, Esq., of Furze Park; wealthier even than Lawyer Catlack, whose smooth, shrewd suavity covered the memories of many discreditable transactions. Yet the corn-merchant was noted for his green hats and coats, his frayed ties and grease-stained waistcoats. He was a queer, ominous figure, round-backed, lean, and shabby, head thrust forward at the end of an abnormally long neck, lower lip blue and pendulous, eyes blue and hard. The crown of his head made a false show of benignity with its central patch of baldness and ring of grizzled, wavy hair. When walking, he looked like an old raven with a stick tucked under one wing.

John Smunk took the north road out of Ashhurst—Ashhurst, whose houses were packed like spectators on either side of one long street. The village had little beauty, since many of the old houses had gone, and Mr. Rottingben, the local builder, had a liking for slates, terra-cotta coloured ridge tiles, and string courses of blue brick. There were three stolid, staring Nonconformist chapels that competed in the matter of ugliness. The only picturesque building was the inn that boasted the sign of the Red Lion. The Ashhurst houses were prim, stiff, and dogmatic. The Red Lion Inn had an air of mellow tolerance and humour. It was like a buxom widow in the midst of a crowd of pious Tabithas.

Just below the alms-houses and the forge at the end of the village the corn-merchant was overtaken by a clattering milk-cart driven by a fiery-eyed little man with a huge brown beard. John Smunk’s big boots kept up their pounding in the middle of the road, so that the driver of the milk cart had to slow up.

“Sure, you be’s a thoughtful man, Mr. Smunk. It does un good to walk and think of un’s latter end.”

The corn-merchant turned with a birdlike cock of the eye. The driver of the milk-cart was one of the personalities of Ashhurst. His name was Jacob Bose, and by nature he was a fanatic. Ribald souls had nicknamed him “Gentleman Jesus.” He was a strenuous and aggressive vehicle of “grace,” and his piety knew no restraint and his tongue no discretion.

“Going down Fox Farm way, Jacob?”

“I be, sir. And a terr’ble goin’ down it may be for some folk in these parts. The road be steep that leadeth to destruction.”

John Smunk said “Ha,” and climbed into the milk cart.

Jacob Bose glanced at him with his fiery little eyes. He was a genius at beard-

wagging and at improving the occasion, and his zeal was the zeal of a Luther. Moreover, like the great Martin, he was not afraid of speaking out before the great ones of the earth.

“D’ye think ye’ll get through ut, sir, d’ye think ye’ll get through ut?”

The corn-merchant turned an impassive yet cynical face.

“Well, Bose, you don’t often tug me by the coat-tails.”

“Seize th’ occasion, sir. Throw in the leaven——”

John Smunk grunted.

“You’ll find ut in every goodwife’s basket, sir; th’ needle! And even the darning sort has a terrifyin’ small eye.”

John Smunk’s back had a certain resemblance to the hump of a camel. He gave a grim chuckle.

“I’ve got through some tight places in my time, Jacob. Don’t ye fret your insolent, godly pate on my account. There are people who are richer in pride o’ piety than in pocket.”

The apostle of Ashhurst flourished his whip.

“I be a humble servant o’ Jesus, Mr. Smunk.”

The corn-merchant thrust out an aggressive lower lip.

“Sure, sure. Don’t you doubt that He takes you at your value, Jacob! You trade in other sorts of bonds and mortgages and merchandise. And it pleases ye, it stuffs ye with satisfaction, and warms ye like good beer. A man may have a bellyful of self-righteousness as well as a bellyful o’ meat.”

There was silence for a while. The two worthies drove on cheek by jowl, chewing the cud of meditation.

“It be a won’erful thing ter be rich, Mr. Smunk.”

“Ah, you know all about it, hey? You know a power more about it than I do! There’s hoarding and hoarding. Some folks may have a potful of glory and salvation hid in their backyards.”

“There be the parable o’ the talents, sir.”

“Sure! And something else about your right hand and your left hand, eh? And the blowing of trumpets, and the making of long prayers! I’ve got my sense of smell.”

The driver of the milk-cart chewed his brown beard.

“All sorts o’ people quote the Scriptures, sir.”

“That’s true, that’s true. Babes, and sucking calves, and blobby bellowing bulls. You can set me down here, Jacob. I’m a hard old sinner, and it is good for the righteous to love a sinner for nothing.”

Mr. Smunk rattled the small change in his pocket as he descended.

“The Lord be with ye, sir. The children o’ this world——”

“Are damned fools, Jacob, mostly. The parsons might put up prayers for the blessings o’ common sense.”

The corn-merchant was bound for Fox Farm, and Mr. Bose, as he drove on behind the lazy, clomping hoofs of his horse, shook his whip solemnly as at some stiff-necked and altogether unanswerable blasphemer.

The click-clack of the white gate caught Kate Falconer attacking the accumulation of weeds and rubbish in the neglected garden. Brambles from the hedge had rooted themselves into one of the long borders, and those folk who have experienced the aggressive and pugnacious habits of the bramble know how the plant can spread over and possess a field. Kate had gone to work with swapping-hook and fork, rooting up the suckers, and cutting the old trails back into the hedge. Michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums gave splashes of colour to the scene. The grass had grown rankly in the little central plot, and yellow leaves were beginning to fall.

John Smunk was not a man who troubled about ceremony, or who distinguished weeds from flowers. He took the shortest cut across the garden, pushing through a sweetbriar hedge, and crushing green and succulent things under his great boots. Kate Falconer, sleeves turned up, hands protected by leather gloves, stood up and called to the corn-merchant with some asperity.

“Mind yon lavender bush, Mr. Smunk. We’ve got a path for people to walk on.”

The corn-merchant stepped round the lavender bush, gained the grass, and eyed the farmer’s wife with an air of admiring caution.

“Busy, hey?”

“Trying to make the place a little cleaner. Jesse won’t bother beyond scything the grass. Weeds don’t seem to worry him.”

“That’s bad for a farmer, Mrs. Falconer.”

“My man happens to be made that way.”

John Smunk set his stick in the ground and stood with his thumbs hooked in the arm-holes of his waistcoat. He stared at the wheelbarrow full of weeds like a “stock” judge criticising the points of a bullock.

“Jesse Falconer at home?”

“He’s down the farm.”

“He’s as well there as here. I reckon you wear the breeches. It’s a question of business, Mrs. Falconer.”

Kate laid her swapping-hook on the barrow.

“I suppose I have a better tongue in my head than my husband has.”

John Smunk gave a short and characteristic chuckle.

“I like to strike iron better than soft wood, m’am. Your husband owes me a little bit o’ money.”

“That’s not unlikely.”

“There’s my bill. And that there interest on the mortgage. He owes me for the whole year.”

“Jesse’s a casual man.”

“And I’m not, Mrs. Falconer. I can’t afford to be casual. I tell you, I’m thinking I shall have to foreclose.”

They looked each other in the eyes without flinching. Kate’s face lost none of its high colour, or its determination.

“You can press us if you please, Mr. Smunk. It won’t hurt Jesse. But ’t will be a nuisance for me.”

“Ah, sure.”

She squared her shoulders, and faced him.

“I’d rather not have any of my money in the farm, but if you press us,—well, I shall have to do ’t. It’s a dratted nuisance to have to sell good stock. The money’s there for you. It won’t be the farm you’ll get.”

The corn-merchant eyed her intently. A slow smile came over his face, drawing tight the crows’-feet about his eyes, and showing his blackened teeth. He had a liking for Kate Falconer, because she was hard, and shrewd, and stiff in the lower lip. She knew how to gain a point by hitting straight, and showing no fear.

“Well, I’d be sorry to inconvenience ye. I had been thinking——”

Kate laughed.

“That I’d let you get the farm at five pounds an acre, house and buildings thrown in! My husband may be a bad farmer, but I’m not a fool.”

John Smunk’s eyes twinkled.

“Ah, my dear, did I ever think it of you! As I was saying, I’d be sorry to inconvenience ye——”

“Well, don’t do it.”

“No!”

“You’ll get the money if you press us, but you won’t get the farm.”

The corn-merchant rubbed his chin, and regarded her with shrewd approval.

“I’m thinking——” he began.

“Well?”

“No——’tain’t to be said in so many words. Only it’s a pity. I reckon you ought to

make the farm pay.”

“You can’t get through a doorway when there’s a sack you can’t lift lying between the posts.”

John Smunk nodded, and put his hands in his pockets.

“You’ll take something before you go?”

“Sure, I don’t mind if I do.”

For half an hour the corn-merchant sat in one of the Windsor chairs, drinking ale from a pewter tankard, and talking to Kate Falconer with peculiar friendliness. Even if she had “bluffed” him, he forgave it her, for the sake of her shrewdness and her courage. There is a certain sense of comradeship between hard-headed people and John Smunk had such a contempt for his own wife that he reacted towards friendliness when he came in contact with a tough and determined woman.

Jesse was down the farm watching Jim Purkiss and Peter Stone who were trudging to and fro at the handles of their ploughs. The men had set out the Nineteen Acre in ridges, and were working round them completely inverting the furrow-slice as was the practice in those parts. Now and again Jesse would take the handles of one of the ploughs, and draw a straight furrow, the dog Brick running at his heels.

As Jesse turned the plough team on the land’s end and let Purkiss take the handles, that hairy-faced simian cocked his hat on the back of his head and scratched at an idea.

“Whoa—Billy—there—whoa!”

The great, glossy-coated horses stood still.

“I be thinking, Muster Jesse, that t’ old oak in t’ Clay Bottom be spoiling a fair piece o’ land. He be a terrifying nuisance shuttin’ un out o’ t’ ole corner.”

The tree had stood there hundreds of years, and little men had played round him with their ploughs. And now, in his forlorn old age, these little men were waxing insolent.

Jesse looked thoughtful. He had a certain love for the old shell with its dead limbs, and its one small sprout of green. The tree had stood so long against the roaring and insensate arrogance of the wind that a man who loathed wind respected the tree’s stolid spirit of resistance.

“Ah, he be a tough un, Muster Jesse, though he be but an ol’ shell.”

“You’d like to grub him, Jim?”

Purkiss tilted a sly head.

“Waste o’ good time, sir. A little pinch o’ powder would do ’t better. Set ut low, and split him under t’ ground.”

“I’ll go round home that way, and have a look.”

“Maybe I’ve cussed that tree terrible in my time. Ye mind it, Muster Jesse, when I was for ploughing closer in t’ him, and struck a root. Lordie, how he did smack t’ handles into m’ ribs. Sure, he made me rech like a dog.”

Purkiss grinned over the reminiscence, set himself to the plough, and started his team across the field. Jesse watched the round-backed, knock-kneed figure receding across the brown soil. Then he turned away across the unploughed stubbles, climbed a gate into a meadow, and saw the towers of Pool Castle rising against a pale blue sky. The meadow was a vivid green, with the grey spires of a plantation of young ashes bounding it on the north. Jesse cut across the grass towards a rough, bramble-covered hedge, dog Brick trotting beside him.

He stopped abruptly when he was close to the hedge, and stood listening, while the dog sniffed the air. Something was moving on the other side of the hedge, rustling through the weeds and grass, and brushing the twigs and brambles as it moved. There was a thin place in the hedge some two feet away where an old oak stub had prevented the growth of the thorns. Jesse saw a hand stretched out. A slim, black figure pressed itself into the gap by the oak stub. The sunlight fell on a red mouth, black hair, and a round white face.

Jesse was standing close under the hedge, and for the moment Ann Wetherell did not see him. She seemed to be looking for someone, leaning through the hedge, with a troubled light in her eyes. A strand of red bryony berries stretched themselves across her bosom, and their colour was the colour of blood. Her neck shone a pearly brown above the low-cut collar of her dress, and she held her head with chin thrust forward so that the line of her throat showed. Jesse had the most vivid glimpse of her that he had ever had of any mortal creature, perhaps because she had risen so suddenly before him, and he could look at her without her knowing that she was being watched.

She turned her head sharply as Brick ran forward, barking.

“Oh, Mr. Jesse——!”

She caught her breath and coloured from throat to eyes.

“I oughtn’t to be on your land, sir, without asking. I wasn’t after blackberries.”

The flushing of her pale skin had given a warm and indefinable radiance to her face. The eyes seemed brighter, the contours more comely. She looked older, plumper, more mature.

“It doesn’t matter. Are you looking for someone?”

Ann’s hands touched the spray of bryony berries. She ran the red rosary through her fingers, and looked at Falconer with grave eyes.

“You haven’t seen Slim, sir?”

“That’s the eldest lad, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“No, I haven’t seen him. What’s he doing on the farm?”

The flush had died from her face, but it gathered again with sensitive swiftness.

“It’s like this, Mr. Falconer. Father’s a terror when he’s roused; he doesn’t know how rough he is. And he set about Slim an hour ago, because old Mr. Moker had caught the lad stealing apples.”

Compassion lit up her face and made it urgent and appealing. There were very few people who would waste sentiment upon Slim Wetherell, and the boy had been thrashed, not for stealing, but for being caught in the act. Ann had heard Slim’s cries in the wood-shed, and the roaring voice of her father, like the voice of a furious man who lashes a dog that has bitten him. She had seen Slim escape, and run like a mad thing down the road, mouth bleeding, clothes torn. A glimpse of the wild animal fear in the lad’s eyes had shocked her even more than his cries had done. And she had followed Slim, her heart a tumult of compassion.

Falconer stood with thoughtful face, absorbing vivid impressions. Nor was he thinking so much of young Slim Wetherell as of the girl with the bryony berries in her hands.

“Which way did he go?”

“Over the gate on the road, sir, into the Holly field.”

“Well, he may not be much the worse. Boys will stand a good deal.”

“But father’s like a wild man when he’s roused. It’s cruel. The boy never had a chance. It’s father who’s made him sly, and cruel, and rough. I sometimes think _____”

She did not finish the sentence, for Brick had pushed through the hedge, and was thrusting his nose against her knee. Ann caught the dog in her arms, and broke into sudden, passionate weeping.

Falconer stood dumb. Like many silent men who feel acutely, a woman’s tears threw him into inarticulate self-consciousness. He rubbed the sleeve of his jacket with one huge hand, sighed, and remained silent. Ann had hidden her face against the dog’s shoulder. For a few brief moments sobs shook her. But she had will power that reacted quickly, and a spirit that did not sink into sudden woe.

“It’s silly of me, Mr. Falconer. I couldn’t just help it.”

“One can’t help things, sometimes.”

He looked at her timidly, almost furtively.

“You see, sir, it often comes over me—that—that the children don’t have the chance they should. And it worries me—it worries me terrible. I feel sometimes that

—I'm just—no good.”

She put the dog down, squared her shoulders, and stood up to the facts of life. There was an air of quiet strength about her, a strength that was sweet and clean.

“I wanted to find Slim, Mr. Jesse, and just put my arms round him, and try and soften the lad. He's hard and sullen. That's what worries me in Slim.”

“I am going down to the Clay Bottom. I'll keep an eye open for the lad. Things may go to a boy's heart, though he'd bite his tongue off before he allowed it.”

Her eyes brightened.

“Aren't we strange creatures, Mr. Falconer? It makes me marvel. There's so much trouble and pain in the world, and yet we're rough and cruel for nothing!”

Jesse nodded a grave and melancholy head.

“We are beasts, most of us, at times,” he said.

Ann loitered a moment, and then drew back from the gap in the hedge.

“I may as well go home, sir. I shall be between Slim and father, if the lad comes back.”

They moved eastwards with the wild, autumn-leaved hedge between them. There was a gate near the ash wood, and Falconer climbed over. Ann had become very silent. Her eyes remained fixed on the horizon, and she walked without turning her head. Jesse opened the next gate for her, and closed it after she had passed through. The path to Clay Bottom turned aside towards the left.

“Don't fret about the youngster.”

“That doesn't do any good, Mr. Jesse, does it? Thank you for being so kind.”

“Oh, that's nothing.”

And their eyes met for a moment before they went upon their different ways.

Strangely enough in the old hollow oak in the north corner of the Clay Bottom, Falconer found young Slim Wetherell. The boy crouched there, looking up like a sullen and scared animal, his chin and mouth stained with blood. He was collarless, and his blue check shirt had been torn open at the throat. Moreover the boy had been blubbering. Falconer could tell that by his swollen, bleary eyes.

“Hallo!”

The boy glowered and said nothing.

“Come along out. Your sister has been looking for you.”

“Which sister?”

“Ann.”

“More fool she!”

The boy had the mark of the beast stamped upon his face. He was the young male animal, with all the meaner cunning of a thing that has been taught to use its

baser wits. Falconer felt tempted to lift Slim Wetherell out and shake him.

“Come out, and cut along home,” he said.

Slim stood up, and caught sight of Brick. Dubious malice came into his eyes.

“Sha’n’t go home.”

“Yes, you will. You go and tell your father I’ve some apples left in my orchard that want gathering, and that I’ll give you a shilling a day to pick them.”

Slim stared, and then wriggled through the cleft in the trunk of the great tree. He fingered his cut lip, and looked dubiously at Falconer, as though groping after motives. Slim Wetherell was distrustful of kindness.

“What’s the game?” he asked sulkily.

“Apple-picking at a bob a day.”

“Nan’s been talking at ye——”

Suddenly an ugly grin spread over his face.

“It be somethin’ to have a growed-up sister. I’ll pick y’ apples for ye, Muster Falconer.”

And Jesse wondered why the lad’s eyes looked insolent.

CHAPTER V.

The episode of the thieving of Mr. Moker's apples symbolised Slim Wetherell's attitude towards the world. Society, the whole organised scheme of things, had for him the significance that the farmyard has for the fox. Hard facts had developed in Slim a spirit of vicious antagonism. Muscularly he was not a strong lad, and a rough school had taught him that cunning alone can compensate for lack of physical strength. Many thrashings and much bullying had sharpened his wits, and made him spiteful and vindictive. He had learnt to take a pride in his own guile, and in his ingenuity for mischief. So far as the criminal virtues were concerned, Slim had many of them. He could hold his tongue, climb like a monkey, run fast and noiselessly, plan an adventure with great cunning as to detail. Sometimes he thieved because he was hungry, sometimes for the vicious joy of pitting his wits against the organised tyranny of his elders.

The Moker affair had been an absolute debacle. True, chance had played him a scurvy trick by bringing old Moker home at an hour when no decent man should return from work. But facts were facts. He had been yanked down out of an apple-tree, and taken home by the ear to watch wrath and contempt gather on Sam Wetherell's face. His father's contempt had hurt him more than his blows, for Slim hated his father with a great and bitter hatred, and to be shamed before him was ignominy indeed.

Vindictiveness was a powerful motive force with such a lad as Slim. He was too much afraid of his father to retaliate upon him, and his spite concentrated itself against old Will Moker. As for Ann's attempts at mothering him, Slim staved them off with a sulky "Shut it!" He was not to be touched by tenderness. The only thing that appealed to him powerfully was a person's ability to inflict pain.

William Moker's cottage was a solitary, single-storeyed hut standing on a high bank above a solitary lane. The cottage and garden were surrounded by a thick hedge, and overshadowed on two sides by the oaks of Goldhanger Wood. No one lived within half a mile of the place; no one overlooked it. The ruddy grass-grown lane was used only by the wagons and country carts that went to and from one or two lonely farms.

Slim knew every ditch and hedge-row in the neighbourhood. In fact he had specialised in ditches, using them often as sunken ways when they were dry in summer and early autumn. Sam Wetherell had driven into Lynnor, and Slim knew that old Will Moker was working as a roadman two miles on the other side of Ashhurst. So Slim started out blackberrying, made for Goldhanger Wood, and

worked through it till he saw the brown thatch of old Moker's cottage.

The boy did an immense amount of reconnoitring before he ventured into the garden. This time he would leave nothing to chance. He had even borrowed a pair of his father's boots in case some intelligent person should think of looking for footmarks. But Slim found the place deserted. His nimble spite stood on tip-toe to seize every opportunity.

There were pig sties and a rough tool-shed at the end of the garden. Slim found the shed unlocked. He looked in and considered.

One of the first things to suggest many possibilities was a bucket of tar. A long-handled tar-brush stood in a corner amid rakes and hoes. Slim emerged with bucket and brush, and stood contemplating the pig sties. In one an old white sow lay asleep in the muck. In the other sundry young pigs grunted and scuffled, and snorted with pink noses between the palings. Slim put the bucket down, and dipped the brush in the tar.

Those pigs were an original sight when Slim had done with them. And the game was so ludicrous that the boy's eyes were wet. He had streaked, and blobbed, and splashed the beasts, routing them round and round with the tar-brush, and emitting noiseless and desperate mirth. Slim adjourned with the tar-bucket half empty. Old Moker's crop of winter greens stood up for martyrdom. Slim went into the shed for a reaping-hook, and made a clean sweep of cabbages, broccoli, and kale.

As yet he had not tried the cottage, and as he had expected, the door was locked. A loose brick in the porch caught his eye. Slim lifted it, and found the old man's hiding-place for his key.

He clutched it, and emitted gurgles of exultation.

"Gawd! What a swipe!"

He took a look around, and then unlocked the door. Old Moker's cottage was brick-floored, with whitewashed walls, and wonderfully clean. Its very cleanliness invited ravishment.

"Yoh, be 'unt the old fool tidy!"

A grandfather clock went tick-tack, tick-tack beside the door. Slim glimpsed it, and went for a dishcloth hanging on the mantel bracket.

"Here, who spoke to you? You shut it!"

And he opened the case door, and stuffed the cloth into the clock's works.

"Reckon that's given un t' belly ache!" and he spread his thumb and fingers at the clock.

Then he made hay. Drawers were pulled open and upset; the geraniums on the window-sill deposited in the oven. Slim collected old Moker's clean linen and

rammed it under the copper with a broomhandle. The old man's clean, quilt-covered bed, carefully made before he had gone to work, was too tempting to be ignored. Slim went for the tar-bucket, turned back the sheets, sluiced the tar in, and covered it, exulting hugely.

"Yah, what about black feet! Only wish I could stay t' see."

He surveyed his handiwork, and then retreated, locking the door after him, and throwing the key down the well. The whole campaign had not lasted forty minutes. And in half an hour Slim was two miles away, picking blackberries for dear life, and emitting occasional snorts of laughter. He worked right down to Willow End, and made a point of exhibiting himself at the various cottages along the road.

"Provin' a 'hally-buy,'" he said to himself, realising that the blackberry juice matched any tar that was on his fingers.

"Them pigs!" and he would sizzle like a baked apple.

But he made several mental notes during the day.

"Get at t' paraffin tin, and clean yer fingers."

"Get as quick as yer can out o' t' old man's boots."

Autumn scents were in the air, and the smell of a weed fire drifted across the Fox Farm orchard as Jesse came out of the old black tool-shed, with a spade over his shoulder, and a sack in his hand. He had reached the field gate when he heard Kate calling him from an upper window.

"Jesse! Jesse!"

He turned and looked towards her.

"Where's that wood? We haven't a stick in the shed."

"I'll carry some in when I get back."

He suspected that she was saying, "Drat the man," but they had quarrelled that morning, and Jesse felt stubborn. His wife was always belabouring him into action, pouring energy into his ears, and trying to make him more disgusted with himself. Sometimes he felt very tired, as though Kate sapped his vitality, and talked away his strength.

"I'll bring the wood in when I come back, or send one of the men up."

"Any time does for you," and she disappeared, shutting the casement noisily.

Jesse felt infinitely depressed that morning. He had shut Brick into the stable, and he could hear the dog barking and whining with strange and appealing persistence. But Brick would be in the way that morning, and Jesse went on down the fields alone. His depression took the form of gloomy apathy, a mood that bowed his great shoulders and made his face look dull and expressionless. Even the autumn colours seemed crude and raw, and too suggestive of decay. The sinking of the sap might

have brought lassitude and sadness upon the land.

What was wrong with him and the world? Why did he and his wife drift into absurd quarrels? How was it that he had always made a mess of things? What the devil did men mean by wanting such a thing as money?

Jesse's thoughts turned to old Smunk and showed him one of the figures of success. Certainly the mean, sly, unlovable people were the people who had succeeded best in Ashhurst. He grouped his acquaintances, and indulged in generalisations. Smunk, Catlack the lawyer, Benskin the butcher, were the most powerful men in the neighbourhood. Their influence went down deep beneath the surface, for the tiny rootlets of golden ore converged from all directions towards their stiff, upstanding forcefulness. The Furze Park people were treated with an easy civility that owed them nothing; they were of no real importance, even in politics. Then Jesse thought of James Bentall, gentlest of men, a bird-lover, wise in the ways of Nature, driven to the last breath to stave off bankruptcy. George Molt, that quiet, steadfast philosopher, was dying of cancer at three and forty, and suffering hellish pain. Rushholm, the local doctor, grey, meagre, but compassionate, had a drunken wife, five sickly children, and worries that had left him sad-eyed and silent. What was the use of decrying the golden dross, and trying to live above the plane of pelf? Money was the blood of the modern world. And those whose blood was thin were doomed to suffer.

A man's mind is a world in itself, and in it also is reflected an image of the greater world like a landscape in miniature seen in a hand mirror. Moreover some men are very sensitive to the impulses of the age; they live into its thoughts, its beliefs, and its denials. Even in the depths of the Fox Farm fields Jesse was a modern among the moderns. He knew that mediævalism had passed away, that the earth had become heaven and hell, that the old systems were broken. He had read and he had thought, and he smiled at the clamour some of the good Christians raised over the "strange indifference of mankind." England called itself Christian, though the younger men said in their hearts that the religion of Christ was doomed. A god had fallen, and an inter-reign was at hand. Men questioned their own hearts, and looked sadly for some Great Idea to take the throne and reign. There were prophets and preachers, and many high-sounding words. Humanity, Progressive Amelioration, Science, Solidarity—Empire. Some men sought for the Joy of Life, others for knowledge, others for money. It was an age of great discoveries and great disillusionments, a grand age for the strong and the fortunate, a sad age for those who were the creatures of evil coincidences.

Near Lymnor there was a College of Jesuits, and Jesse had often seen black

figures wandering in threes along the roads. They seemed to trudge miles, these Jesuits, with their eccentric, swarthy, foreign faces, and their appearance as of peasants who had been tumbled into queer, ill-fitting clothes. Jesse had stood and marvelled at these men. He wondered how it was possible for them to believe what they believed; in fact, he disbelieved in their credulity. He pictured them kneeling at their prayers, praying with a faith that was so fervent that their fleshly hands could almost touch the warm flesh of their God! After all, was it not a question of temperament? Some men loved beer, others hated it; some were adulterous by blood, others cold and unprovoked.

He thought of his mother, how she had died radiantly, Bible in hand. What a contrast between two generations! Organised superstition had ceased to exist for the son.

In its place he might have sought to set a beautiful humanism, the service of man to man. For Jesse had started his thinking life as an idealist. He had believed that the world was better, cleaner, kinder than it had ever been. Health, and the joy of living, these were the things to be desired.

Then, whatever was sanguine and hopeful in him had been given blow on blow. Nothing that he had done or had striven to do had seemed to matter. He had found the personal purpose of his life contradicted and re-contradicted by coincidences. At first he had striven, rallied himself, persevered. But the relentless succession of mischances had gone on and on. That was how Jesse had been driven towards fatalism. Sometimes he read astronomy, and it comforted him. When one took a glimpse of the vastness of space, the loss of a pig did not seem to matter.

Jesse came to the corner of Clay Bottom field where the old oak had stood for centuries in the wind and rain. It was a huge, grey shell, breaking above into a few dead and stunted arms. A large cleft gaped in the bole. The roots were twisted and covered with bosses, and there were hollows in which rain-water stood. One ragged bough still carried a few leaves, the last flutter of life under autumn skies.

Jesse stood his spade in the ground and laid his sack beside it. He went close to the old tree, looked into the chasm of its heart, felt the dead wood, and wondered. How long had it stood there? Perhaps eight hundred years. It had been a sapling when Rufus the King had lain dead in the New Forest. Wild swine had fed on the acorns under its branches. It had budded green in one of Chaucer's Springs. Lovers in quaint, bright-coloured clothes, had kissed there. It had heard the thunder of Spanish guns. And now in its gigantic decrepitude a little man came with a tin full of powder to blast it into fragments.

Jesse stood and meditated. A sense of shame came over him, that he should lift

his hand against this tree. It was like destroying a Gothic bell-tower, or burning strange and ancient books. Sentiment has made life liveable, and lifted it above the scramblings of beasts. And Jesse felt that he could not touch the tree.

He turned away irresolutely, put his hand on the spade, and hesitated once more. Jim Purkiss's grinning face obtruded itself upon his thoughts. He heard the men saying to one another, "Muster Jesse be a soft 'un!" Kate, too, influenced him from Fox Farm. "I'm glad you're going to clear a bit of rubbish away, Jesse. Why people make a fuss about mouldy old things, I can't think. They might as well treasure one of their great-grandfather's shirts!"

And Jesse hesitated. That fatal weakness of his, that inclination to drift with the whims of others, showed in his mind. After all, everything came to an end. Millions of splendid trees were serving in out-houses and under floors. Death and disintegration were inevitable. Man's puny breath of sentiment was but a puff of smoke from a chimney.

Jesse took off his coat, folded it, and laid it under a hedge. He picked up the spade, thought awhile, and then began to dig close to the trunk of the tree, cutting through a rotten root, and excavating a narrow tunnel under the huge stub. When he had finished his tunnelling, he returned to the sack, took out a canister full of gunpowder, two inches of candle, some string soaked in paraffin, an old metal powder-flask, and a lidless wooden box.

Then he set about making his mine, by packing the canister into the tunnel, and drawing a train from it with the powder-flask. He carried the train to a point about five yards from the tree, wound the oiled string round the piece of candle, set the candle in the shelter of the box, and then laid the other end of the string on the powder train. So he made his fuse.

Jesse looked at the tree awhile, before he lit the candle and walked off towards the ditch. The ditch was a deep one, and Jesse took cover in it about fifty yards from the tree. He sat down so that he could see everything, and waited.

Three minutes passed before a spurt of flame went running towards the tree. Jesse crouched, and waited for the explosion, and the silence was like the holding of a long-drawn breath.

The moments went by, and nothing happened. Jesse raised his head. The powder train must have failed. Very possibly some earth had slipped and fallen on it in the tunnel, and prevented the flame reaching the canister. Jesse sat in the ditch awhile, and waited, to give the mine a fair chance.

Nothing happened. Jesse climbed out of the ditch and crossed the ground towards the tree. A black line showed where the flame had run along the powder

train into the mouth of the tunnel. Some earth must have fallen and smothered the powder. He would have to clear it away, and start again.

Jesse was within three yards of the tree when the explosion came. Some earth had fallen on the powder train, but before the flame had been extinguished, it must have set some rotten wood a-smouldering. The smoulder had spread until a spark had fallen on the little pool of powder at the mouth of the canister.

CHAPTER VI.

Slim Wetherell had made his way from Willow End along the hedgerows of Fox Farm. The lad was hardly a furlong away when he heard the dull crash of the explosion, and saw earth and débris thrown up into the air. The old oak was down, and Slim ran to be in at the death.

He scrambled through the hedge, had one glimpse of Jesse Falconer, and scrambled back again with his face the colour of dough. The sight had scared Slim to the very marrow of his bones. He fled homewards in a panic.

The lad found Ann alone in the little back kitchen, her forearms sunk in a tub of soapy water, her blouse open at the throat. Slim was out of breath, and his face looked yellow.

“O, my Gawd! Master Jesse’s blowed his face off!”

Ann stood and stared at him, the soap-suds bubbling about her elbows.

“What——?”

“Over by t’ old oak. Tryin’ t’ blow ut up. Must ’ave caught un in t’ face.”

Ann did not move. She looked into the lad’s eyes, and the horror in them flashed back into her own. It was as though she had seen what Slim had seen. Her lips went white.

“Who’s with him?”

“No un.”

“All alone! Run back, then——”

Slim shook his head.

“Not me, not for ten bob!”

Ann gave him one look, and understood. She went and dried her hands and forearms on the roller-towel behind the door.

“Slim.”

“What d’ye want?”

“Run down to Ashhurst and fetch Dr. Rushholm. Run——!”

Slim reacted suddenly to a flick of excitement and a certain sense of self-importance. Even old Will Moker’s pigs were forgotten. He bolted out of the cottage and down the garden into the road.

Ann stood gripping the rough brown towel. She was trying to think, and her eyes and forehead were full of the effort of her thoughts. She went into the bedroom where she slept with Rose and Prudence, and took the first piece of clean linen she found in the chest of drawers. Ann did not wait to put on a hat, or to fasten her blouse at the throat. The urgent horror of Slim’s words drew her half-shudderingly

across the fields.

When Ann neared the hedge by the north corner of the Clay Bottom she saw that the dead boughs of the old oak straggled no longer against the sky. There was a thin place in the hedge, and a gap that Slim's passage had helped to widen. Ann ran to it and looked through, her hands pushing the twigs aside.

And straightway she saw Jesse, and for an instant her heart stood still. He was moving slowly, round and round, groping with outstretched hands, his face a mere blackness blurred with red. His shirt had been burnt away so that the bare chest showed. Beard and hair were singed to the skin, and his clothes were covered with soil.

Ann felt her senses swimming. Her knees shook under her, and the strength seemed to melt and flow away out of her body. Her hands clutched the thorn twigs and did not feel the stabbing of the thorns.

She looked again and saw Jesse stumble over a piece of dead wood, and fall forward on his knees. His blind, groping helplessness hurt her heart. Compassion overcame the sheer physical horror of the thing. She pushed her way through the hedge towards him.

Falconer had risen, and was standing absolutely still.

"Mr. Jesse, Mr. Jesse——!"

It was the intimate, familiar name that came to Ann's lips, the name that was used in the farmyard and the fields. Falconer turned his head slowly like a great, sightless animal.

"O, Mr. Jesse—Mr. Jesse."

It was all that she could say to him, but Falconer recognized her voice. He groped with his hands, and his scorched lips managed to speak.

"Child, take me home."

She dropped the linen she had brought with her, and caught his arm. Even her pity told her that she could do nothing for him.

"Won't you bide here, Mr. Jesse? They'll be coming soon."

His thick voice repeated the words.

"Take me home, child."

"But can you walk, sir?"

"Yes."

He had seemed stunned, and stupid. The shock had dazed him.

"O, my God,—I can't see!"

He leant upon her shoulder, and Ann tried not to shudder. Pity stood with clenched teeth, and strove not to be overcome.

“I can’t see; I’m blind!”

That was the last cry of bitterness that he uttered. Huge, sightless, in vile pain, a dumb patience seemed to come to him. His fingers felt their way down Ann’s arm to her hand.

“Lead me home.”

“O, Mr. Jesse, to think this should have happened!”

“Well, it just—happened. That’s what life is, child.”

They moved a few steps. Then Falconer remembered something.

“There’s my coat, in the ditch.”

She let go of his hand, and ran for the coat, feeling that his asking was the asking of a great, blind child.

“Here ’tis. I’ll lay it about your shoulders.”

His hands fumbled to help hers. A great sigh came from him. It was as though he realised everything, and put away all hope.

“Queer—how strong I feel! The stuff just hit me in the face. My luck! I might have known.”

Very slowly they went on side by side, Ann holding Falconer’s right hand. Tears were running down her cheeks, but she made no sound with her weeping. Jesse kept silence, for it hurt him to move his lips.

They came to a gate. Ann left him standing, opened it, and then led him through. A field of stubble lay before them, with a narrow path cutting across the centre. Ann walked in front of Jesse, her arm held behind her, her hand clasping his. Lines rose on her forehead, and her lips were pressed tightly together as she remembered the stile at the end of the path. The footboard had rotted away, and there were five bars to climb.

“There’s the stile, Mr. Jesse.”

“I can climb it, all right.”

His patience and his fortitude amazed her. He was walking steadily, so steadily that she was seized by a shudder of hope. Yet she could not bring herself to look into his face.

“Perhaps ye can see—a very little?”

He answered her without faltering.

“I could not even tell you whether the sun was shining.”

Ann climbed the stile, and turned to help him.

“Where are you?”

“Here.”

“Put my hands on the top rail.”

“There.”

“Now stand away.”

He was over quite easily. Ann took his hand again. There were two more fields before the home paddock, and gates led out of both.

When they came to the home paddock, Jesse asked her:

“Where are we?”

She told him, and he gave a great sigh, turning his face to right and left with pathetic helplessness. He was so near home, and all about him lay utter darkness.

His thoughts went to his wife. He walked on silently, wondering what she would say.

They came to the farm-yard, and through it to the brick-paved court at the back of the house. Jenny the maid came out, carrying a pail. She stared, dropped the pail with a clatter, and ran in screaming.

Jesse started as though someone had hurt him. Ann’s hand tightened on his. For the first time she felt to the full the incomprehensible cruelty that is part of life.

“You be home, Mr. Jesse——”

“Ah—! I know the feel of these bricks.”

It was then that his wife appeared under the dense shade of the old yew.

Her eyes were hard brown circles in a white face.

“My Lord, what a sight!”

She stood back with a look of shocked disgust, and from that moment Ann hated Kate Falconer from the bottom of her heart.

“My Lord, what a mess you have made of yourself! It’s enough to turn one sick!”

Jesse said nothing. He was still holding Ann Wetherell’s hand. The girl drew gently away from him, for Kate Falconer’s eyes were thrusting her into the background.

“Wetherell’s girl? Where did you find him?”

“Down by the oak.”

“Here, Jenny, run down to Ashhurst——”

Ann drew her hand away from Jesse’s. He was standing with an air of tragic patience, saying nothing, and making no movement of any kind. Ann heard him sigh.

“I sent my brother for Dr. Rushholm.”

“Oh, did you? So much the better.”

She caught hold of her husband’s arm, and her nostrils betrayed her disgust.

“Faugh! My Lord! Come along in.”

A strident, hard, and resentful figure, she disappeared under the porch, pushing

the man before her, while Ann turned wonderingly away.

In the stone-paved passage the girl, Jenny, threw her apron over her head, and fled screaming up the stairs. A flare of anger lit Kate Falconer's face.

"You silly slut——!"

She turned Jesse roughly into the parlour.

"Here's a chair."

He groped and sat down. Kate Falconer appeared to compel herself to look at him. A shudder of disgust went through her.

"My God,—where're your eyes? You're blind!"

He moved his head slightly.

"Good Lord! What next?"

She gripped her breasts with her hands, turned, and stared out of the window. Something rose in her throat. She fought it back, and stood biting her lips, and beating one heel on the floor. Her face was full of a hard and vivid understanding.

"Where's that fool, Rushholm? Always out when he's wanted. Wife drunk again, I suppose!"

Her impatience showed the brutal part of her. Jesse put up his hands, and touched his face. He dropped them again, so that they rested on his knees.

"You've made a fine mess of yourself this time, Jesse."

For a moment he was silent. Then he said—

"It's a pity I married you, Kate. Bad luck sticks."

She turned and looked at the bowed, blind, ruined head, and for a moment a glimmer of pity awoke in her eyes. The old love stirred in its death sleep, and stretched out quivering hands. But the impulse was not strong enough to smother the consciousness of the harder, fiercer self.

Kate turned away again to the window. And silence prevailed in the room like a cold greyness at the close of a sad day. And to Jesse his wife's silence was more bitter than any words.

CHAPTER VII.

To Jesse Falconer the world became a world of "voices," and of sounds that reached him through the darkness of a hopeless night. He sat in his chair in the oak parlour, and heard the crackle of the wood upon the hearth, the slow ticking of the grandfather clock, the noise of the wind in the trees and its piping in the chimneys. The penetrating smell of some drug pervaded the room, the smell of the dressings under the bandages, a smell that Jesse was never likely to forget.

At first he was dazed, and sat like a child gazing through a window at night and wondering at the strangeness of the stars. The self in him seemed dead, or, if not dead, drugged and shut away in some cool, dark place. He felt no pain, no bitterness, no despair. A kind of quiet amazement spread the mood into a smooth, tranquil surface.

Some days passed before the self in him awoke. It was like the return of sensation to a limb that had been crushed under a great weight. And it was terrible. His consciousness was so quick in him that his brain felt like a ball of glowing metal shining in the midst of impenetrable blackness. He had some of the feeling of horror of a man buried alive. The world had fallen on him, a black, smothering world that stifled his senses. He felt that he must struggle, cry out, or die. And his loneliness was the loneliness of a solitary hell.

True, there were the voices about him, but they had no intimacy, no nearness. They seemed to speak of him, not to him, and to come from a long way off. They spoke, and yet said nothing that was real, and resembled a murmur of sound in a hollow, empty space. Jesse, as he sat in solitude, heard the monotonous ticking of the clock. It was like the drip of water on his brain, and for a while he believed that he was going mad. His brain-case resembled a shell of steel strained to bursting-point. The ticking of the clock resounded in it like blows struck with a heavy hammer.

Then a simple thing happened. They had kept dog Brick away from Jesse, though why, God and the wit of a practical woman alone could tell! But Brick had waited for his opportunity and seized on freedom. A dog's paws trembled on Jesse's knees. He felt something warm and moist licking his hands.

The touch of the dog's tongue may have saved Falconer from madness. A great surge of emotion rose into his throat. He took the dog into his arms, and Brick lay there, licking Jesse's hands, and even the bandages over the blind face. The dog's sympathy, the warm caress of the beast's tongue, broke the dry anguish of his despair.

From that moment a quiet patience came to him. The storm had passed, leaving a mood of falling rain and June scents amid tall grass. It was a season of still, haze-wrapped meditation. Fortitude drew near out of the inevitable darkness. He was content to sit still awhile, and let the mongrel lick his hands.

The world was a world of voices, and as the days went by, Jesse found that these voices suggested various colours. The vivid distinctness of the impressions puzzled him. Each voice had its own colour, as though certain sound vibrations could impress upon the brain the same stimulus as it would have received from certain waves of light.

Kate's strident, Day of Judgment voice suggested a hard, raw red. It was a vigorous colour, aggressive, and able to dominate others.

Jenny, the maid, gave out nasal whinings, and her colour was a weak ochre. She inspired visions of an egregious and sallow democracy squeaking resentfully against the rule of the few, never realising that it is the doom of fools to serve.

Rushholm was all grey—tired grey.

Jack Rickaby resounded, and his note was a note of brass.

Jim Purkiss suggested a rich russet, streaked with the green of weeds.

As for the voice that Jesse desired to hear, it came but once, and from a distance, and for the moment left no colour note behind it. Jesse sat in his chair, and waited for the colour of Ann's voice. And presently it came to him as a mysterious blue, the colour of the far hills in the clearness before rain.

People turned into the farm gate, and sat in the oak parlour, talking to Jesse.

John Strutt, curate of Ashhurst, was one of the first to come, bringing a sense of yellow light with him, like sunlight on the golden leaf-buds of an oak. A brown boy, better in the cricket field than the pulpit, he filled Jesse's pipe for him, and talked great nonsense. His vitality was the vitality of perfect health and generous good humour. He did not sadden Jesse, perhaps because he was so little of an egoist, and not in the least self-conscious. His laugh was a hit to the boundary. It refreshed Falconer, without making him thoughtful and morose.

The vicar was very different. He smelt of the chancel, and talked of "Knowledge," and "Gud's providence." To Jesse he was the colour of dry bones. They did not humour one another, and the vicar came no more.

Bentall, the bird lover, wandered in and talked of tits and wild duck, though care was clawing at his heart. He was a quiet man, and his colour was the colour of the brown back of a wren. He and Jesse would sit long together, and in the spirit, they clasped hands.

"What a strange world! Nature is at the bottom of everything. We do not see her

hands move, or how she does it. It's juggling."

And that was all that they could say.

As for his neighbours, they were no more cruel in their judgment of Jesse than a boy is who shoots sparrows with a catapult. Human nature loves a disaster, mangled bodies, and huge death-rolls. And there were many egg-headed pietists in Ashhurst who rejoiced at the chance of flapping the rag of their religion in the face of a blind pagan.

Many men said, "Falconer always was a fool, and an unlucky one."

Some old women remarked, "The man did not fear God. This is a judgment on him."

And they exulted.

Yet there was one heart that put up a prayer for Falconer, a prayer that should have compelled the First Cause to create itself in the likeness of a god in order that it might be supplicated by the lips of young girls.

"O God, give Mr. Jesse back his sight."

It was to the unseen that Ann Wetherell prayed, to a possible god beyond the stars, for the girl had no theology. She was a rank heathen so far as doctrine and religious education went, and like most of the moderns she had no time to think of her latter end. Hours of insufferable boredom in a stuffy room, that was all the Church had given her. The pious folk instil much hatred and weariness into the hearts of the children, and the smell of the Sabbath clings, like a musty and unpleasant odour. With the burying of much old rubbish, people have grown healthier, and ceased to sweat self-consciously about their souls. Ann Wetherell did not know or care whether she had such a thing as a soul. She believed that there was "Someone who managed everything." Though sometimes it seemed to her that things were mismanaged rather than managed.

Dusk had fallen when Jesse heard the sound of Ann Wetherell's voice. The girl had come to the back porch, and knocked—rather timidly. Kate Falconer herself had opened the door.

Ann found herself looking into a hurried and impatient face. The elder woman's eyes said, "Well, what have you come bothering for? Hurry up, I can't stand loitering here!"

"How is Mr. Jesse, ma'am?"

The "Jesse" slipped instinctively off Ann's tongue. Kate stared, as though the girl were a presumptuous slut.

"Mr. Falconer is very well, considering."

Ann faltered before a raw insolence that did not attempt to cover its meaning.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

And Kate closed the door.

In truth her whole attitude towards her husband had become a closing of doors. Strenuous egoist that she was, she had taken the disaster as the final proof of Jesse’s supreme incompetence. From the very beginning her mood was a resentful mood, though she decorated it with a dictatorial pity. Her husband had become a great, useless, inert mass; a thing that had to be moved from place to place. It was not that she was unkind to him, though her kindness showed a busy, and half-contemptuous thoroughness. Since he could do nothing for himself, she seemed to assume that he could not be considered a free man. She managed Jesse, and treated him as a piece of furniture that had to be dusted, polished, and pushed hither and thither.

“Jesse, time to go to bed.”

“Jesse, come and sit in the kitchen. The girl wants to clean out the parlour.”

“Jesse, you’re too near the fire. Push your chair back.”

She helped him to dress, cut up his food, and even fed him till he began to manage these things for himself. Yet there was a subtle suggestion of impatience and haste in all that she did that made the man feel that he was useless and a burden.

Mr. Jack Rickaby called pretty frequently. Kate would see him in the best parlour, and Jesse would sit and listen to the distant murmur of their voices. Jack Rickaby came into the house with the air of a man in authority. He made Jesse feel like a blind ghost driven to mope in the dark corners of his own house. Some men are very sensitive, and all Mr. Rickaby’s wealth of blunt compassion could not conceal a certain brisk condescension that made some decent delay before it shouldered the helpless man aside.

Jack Rickaby advised about the farm. Jesse had attempted to help his wife by telling her what the men should be doing, and she had brushed his suggestions aside without much ceremony.

“Now, Jesse, don’t you worry your head about the farm. Just you leave things alone.”

He soon understood that they did not consider him as a man wielding authority. Jim Purkiss and the other labourers never came to him for orders. The truth rankled in him, even when it was plausibly asserted that he was better without all worries. He felt as though they were shutting him up in a cupboard.

Perhaps the saddest moment of the day was when he woke in the wooden bed in the spare room over the porch. It was a room of chintzes and solid mahogany with a scent of lavender about the bed-quilt. Each morning for many days Jesse woke in that room with an expected sense of light. Then the truth would leap at him out of the

darkness. There was no dawn for him—nothing but perpetual night.

It was a moment of exquisite anguish. Nature rebelled, and stretched out despairing hands. The live manhood in him cried out:

“Light, oh for light!”

Then the inevitableness of it all would descend upon his consciousness, like a great hand smoothing out a crumpled cloth. He would hear Kate and her servant moving about the house. Nothing mattered. He doubted whether there was a single person in the world to whom his blindness was not a matter of comparative indifference. Some of them spoke kind words, and then went their way. No heart was hurt by his misfortune, or suffered from any appreciable sense of loss.

The one creature who comforted him was the mongrel, Brick. The dog rarely left him. He would have slept on Jesse’s bed, had not Kate refused to humour so questionable a habit.

CHAPTER VIII.

At the cottage by the quarry Ann Wetherell had many things to keep her busy.

In the first place there had been the troubles that had followed the tarring of Will Moker's pigs. The old man had made a straight line for Sam Wetherell's cottage, and had poured out his wrath against the perpetrator of the outrage.

It was characteristic of Will Moker that he did not deal in vague suggestions.

He said to Sam:

"That lad o' yourn's med a tidy mess o' my cottage."

Nor did Sam Wetherell dispute the fact, or ask Will Moker to show his proofs. He shouted for Slim, and offered Will Moker a fill of tobacco.

Slim was confounded by the despotic injustice of his elders. They did not ask questions, or wait for the production of evidence. Calmly, grimly, they assumed him to be the culprit. Their method of procedure was an outrage that nullified all the beautiful ingenuity he had shown.

"Urrh—you little devil, what d' yer mean by 't, eh?"

Slim denied all knowledge of the affair. But they were brutally and tyrannically sceptical.

"Sauce me wid yer lies, will ye!"

And Sam unbuckled his belt.

Slim was thrashed into a confession by the time his father had struck five blows. And the confession brought further lashings with the strap. When Wetherell was in a rage he did not trouble how or where he struck, and he had a preference for the buckle end. Ann came out, and caught her father's arm, and had her ears boxed for her trouble.

Slim's chastisement went on for days, till Ann fought a moral battle with her father, and showed a fierceness that equalled his. She threatened to go to Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes of Furze Park, who held a brief for animals and children. Mrs. Lowndes was a fierce old lady when cruelty had to be suppressed.

Wetherell cursed Ann, but her courage conquered. He left off thrashing Slim.

Then, early in November, Prudence fell ill with bronchitis, and Ann had to nurse the child back to health. Sam Wetherell disliked Prue, and swore she should have no doctor. But within two days he was in the doctor's hands himself, and the whole cottage suffered when Sam Wetherell was in pain.

He had come by a broken wrist at Leatherbridge Cattle Fair, through quarrelling with some of the gipsies as to the age of a black pony. And since he and the gippos had all been in liquor, a rough scrimmage had soon ended the discussion. Sam was a

devil to fight, but the gipsies could hardly be called creatures of honour. They had set about Wetherell behind the shooting-gallery, and though he had broken one man's jaw, and kicked another below the belt, they had been too many for Sam and had left him a battered and blasphemous wreck.

So life at the cottage had few blessings for Ann. She grew very thin during the first weeks of winter, and went to bed weary with worry and overwork. Rose, being a lazy young rogue, thoughtless, and her father's favourite, had shirked her share of the work at home. But something that Ann said to the girl, and a certain thin sadness about her sister's face, touched young Rose and made her think. She was fourteen, and big for her years. To speak in metaphor Rose rolled up her sleeves, put on an apron, and suddenly became a woman.

Ann's thoughts went often to Fox Farm, though she might have come to all manner of conclusions as to Jesse Falconer's condition by listening to the irresponsible gossip of the people who stopped to chat with her father over his gate. They were quite ready to entice her into telling the tale of how she had found Falconer and taken him home.

"Be'unt it true, Nan, that his face be burnt to a cinder?"

"Lor, I heard say that the sight of him made Jenny Parsons sick."

Probably Ann was more sensitive than the common crowd, and their crude and aggressive curiosity disgusted her. She would as soon have stripped herself before them as have told the tale of that home-going across the fields. She hated these loiterers, and the greed they showed in hunting for morbid details. Any reference to Falconer's disfigurement roused in her a feeling of angry revolt. She asked herself whether Mr. Falconer would be disfigured, and if so, why these people should take an unwholesome interest in his possible ugliness. Yet it was when they pretended to pity him that she rebelled most strongly. Their pity had a leering condescension that insulted the man whom they pitied.

Jacob Bose of the milk-cart contrived more than anyone else to rouse in Ann a spirit of bitter scorn. The fanatic drew up outside the gate one evening, and began to talk to Sam Wetherell, who was smoking his pipe. Mr. Bose had caught sight of one of his opportunities. Ann, who was in the little parlour darning stockings, listened while he used Falconer's accident for the pointing of a moral.

"I tell ye God is not mocked. Many's the time I've spoke to Mr. Falconer. He was blind o' soul, and now God's made him blind o' body."

Mr. Bose exulted. He had the old, persecuting, brutal, hell-fire spirit strong in him. And to do him justice, he would have gone to the stake for his convictions. Yet the man's arrogance was a call to combat. Ann put her work aside, and joined her

father at the gate.

“Did God tell you that, Mr. Bose?”

“Sure, my girl, that be the Lord’s way.”

“Then God comes and gossips with you. Maybe He asks your advice about all we sinners?”

Mr. Bose smelt irony. And irony was an abomination in the mouth of a mere girl.

“The Lord smites the stiff-necked with the sword of the angel Gabriel.”

He shook his whip as though he held the rod of Aaron. Ann stood with her hands on the gate. Her flushed face was the face of an angry rebel.

“I wouldn’t have a word to say to your god, Mr. Bose, if he blinds a man for being honest.”

Sam cocked his stubby clay pipe, and looked at his daughter with an air of grim pride. Then he turned and stared fixedly, yet cynically at Jacob Bose.

“My girl, you don’t know what you be saying. We poor ignorant mortals be ’unt fit to judge o’ the ways o’ God.”

Ann shook her head.

“Then how comes it, Mr. Bose, that you dare to say that God delights in being cruel?”

Sam Wetherell chuckled, and demanded Jacob Bose’s attention with a thrust of the pipe.

“Surely, your God be ’unt no better than me. When young Slim gets at his games, I just takes t’ devil out of ’im wid t’ buckle end o’ my belt. Seems to me, I be ’unt half so rough on folk as your God be. I don’t go about putting out people’s eyes.”

It was impossible either to fluster or to humiliate the driver of the milk-cart. He merely gave an obstinate hunch of the shoulders, and looked grim.

“Don’t ye blaspheme, Sam Wetherell! The likes o’ you be ’unt wise in t’ Scriptures.”

“Tell me somethin’ new.”

“I tell ye thus. Mr. Falconer be a rank atheist. I’ve wrestled wid ’un, and I know. And many’s the time I’ve said, ‘Tis a stiff-necked generation as shall go down into t’ bottomless pit.’”

He inflated his short, stubby body, and struck the floor of the cart with the butt of his whip. Sam Wetherell made a noise in his throat.

“Jacob,” he said, “some day I shall see ye drivin’ a golden chariot, with angels a-ticklin’ y’ old brown beard. Lord, one must see some powerful funny sights in ’eaven! Sure, a man might die there o’ laughin’.”

Mr. Bose sat down squarely on his seat, flicked the sleepy horse with his whip,

and drove on down the road. There was nothing further to be said to such scoffers. His confidence in his Creator consigned them to the eternal flames.

About this time the many rumours that had haunted Ann were set at rest. Going up to shop at Ashhurst she met Jenny Parsons, the Fox Farm servant, trudging home in the greyness of the winter dusk. Rain had fallen most of the day, and the road ran muddily between dripping hedgerows. From a field close by came the sound of sheep cropping the grass, and a robin twittered plaintively amid the black foliage of a holly.

The two girls stopped to talk, and for the first time Ann heard how little Falconer had been disfigured.

“You wouldn’t know he’d been through it all, if it weren’t for his eyes. He just sits about with his eyelids down, as though he was thinkin’, or dozin’. I guess Dr. Rushholm ought to be proud of the job.”

Ann felt a sudden warming of the heart towards this flat-faced, clumsy-figured girl. She asked how Mr. Falconer passed his time.

“Lor, poor soul, he sits about afore the fire with the dog on his knees. Sometimes Mr. Bentall, or Mr. Strutt, come in for a chat. The missus just manages him as though he were a great big softy.”

Jenny’s voice grew resentful.

“She’s a fair terror, always a-shovin’ one from behind. It don’t signify what you do, or what you try to do, she’ll worry round, and find the one speck o’ dust you’ve missed in the whole house. She makes m’ life a misery about the milk-pails, and the sink. Cleanin’ up!—I might be cleanin’ all night! She’s always at ye, blaring like a cow that’s had her calf took away. I shan’t stick it much longer. I shall give her a bit o’ my mind, and quit.”

They parted good friends, and Ann went on through the dusk towards Ashhurst, thinking of Jesse Falconer sitting alone before the fire. A strange joy had leapt in her when she had heard Jenny’s words. Yet her heart was a little world of wonder and of pity. What a life for a strong man who had spent his days under the open skies, and who loved the colours of the land and the smell of the soil! How lonely, too, it all sounded! To be shut up in the dark like that! She was glad that he had the dog with him. It was as though Brick could express her pity, for she saw no chance of her speaking with Falconer again. He was like a man shut up in a lonely tower, and the path of her life went by it at a distance.

One Saturday night Mr. Jack Rickaby was at Fox Farm, sitting at Jesse Falconer’s oak bureau that stood in one corner of the beamed living room. Jack Rickaby had the air of a man in possession, with books and papers before him, and

the stem of a pipe between his teeth. Kate had set the lamp on the top of the bureau, and she was standing behind the farmer and looking over his shoulder as he examined some of Jesse's papers.

"Not much method, Kate. Receipts and unpaid bills seem to live in the same box. A balance of thirty-seven pounds at the bank! What's this?"

He opened a leather-bound book, and stared at it with an amused frown.

"Poor old Jesse!"

Kate leant a hand on his shoulder.

"What—verses! Fancy a man wasting time on such stuff! Put it away, Jack."

He slipped it into a pigeon-hole.

"Seems rather mean, this, Kate. The man might be dead. But we must see how matters stand. Now, let's have a look at that map of the farm. Wait a bit—I'll fill up my pipe. Sit down and let's go through everything together."

He shifted his chair to one side so that she could join him at the bureau. When his pipe was alight, he spread out a rough map with the various fields painted in different colours. The woods were represented by a stippling of miniature trees. A blue circle marked the water about Pool Castle.

"Now, if all the hedges were cut back properly, and the odd corners cleared, I reckon we should make a gain of several acres on the whole farm. Some of 'em are like bits of jungle. Now, see here. I should start straight away, and plough up some of this grass. There's a damned sight too much grass on the place. Make a start with potatoes; they'd help to keep the ground clean, and give you a good profit. You should see what some of those chaps have done in Lincolnshire. There's no reason why you shouldn't try some fancy crops. Take a bit to begin with, and try. There's money in it, for I've done it myself. It's just a matter of having the gumption to get out of the old ruts."

He paused suddenly in the full flow of his strenuous animation, his pipe cocked at an angle, his square jaw and round head thrown into relief against the light of the lamp. Kate had turned in her chair, and was listening to a shuffling sound, and the creaking of the stairs.

"It's Jesse!"

"I thought you had put him to bed!"

"The great ninny, he'll break his neck if he isn't careful."

The creaking of the stairs had ceased, and slow, cautious footsteps came along the passage. Jesse was feeling his way. His hand passed over the panels of the door, groping for the latch. Presently the door opened, and Jesse's blind face loomed in on them from the semi-darkness of the passage.

Kate Falconer and Jack Rickaby glanced quickly at one another. The farmer made as though to close the bureau. Kate shook her head.

“Why, Jesse, I thought you were in bed!”

“I heard you talking, and I got up and dressed.”

He moved in, closing the door after him. Nor could Jesse see that open bureau with his papers scattered over it, and this other man handling his intimate affairs. Jesse had heard their voices, and had recognised Jack Rickaby’s voice. His blindness had made him more sensitive, and more open to impressions, and the murmur of voices in the room below had stirred in him feelings of vague uneasiness. And suddenly he had grown horribly conscious of his own loneliness and isolation. He had hungered for human contact, and to hear his own voice making his ghostly self seem more alive.

“Is that you, Rickaby?”

“Hallo, Jesse; I’m here, right enough. Come and sit down, man, and smoke a pipe. I just dropped in to run my eye over a few things for Kate.”

Jesse’s face resembled the face of a sage wrapt in contemplation, with lids closed, and broad high forehead turned towards the light. He moved slowly forward, feeling with his hands, and the direction that he took was towards the oak bureau. Jack Rickaby pushed his chair back, and silently closed the flap.

Kate caught her husband’s arm.

“This way, Jesse, you’ll knock the lamp over.”

She drew him aside towards a chair, and Jesse sat down in it, his hands resting on his knees. His wife’s face showed a frown, as though she foresaw some inevitable problem and had hardened herself against it. Silence prevailed for some seconds, the uneasy silence of people who wait for each other to speak.

Then Jesse said:

“You were talking about the farm.”

Kate went up to the cupboard beside the fireplace and brought him a pipe and his tobacco jar. She set them on a little table at his side. Jesse was educating his hands to the subtler refinements of touch; he could fill and light his own pipe.

“There are a good many things I wanted looking to. Jack’s been all round the farm for me to-day.”

Kate and the farmer exchanged glances. His eyes seemed to ask her something, and she shut her mouth tight, and shook her head. Jesse sat upright in his chair, with the tobacco jar between his knees. His tawny beard and hair had grown again, and but for the closed eyes, and some scarring of the skin, he looked much the man he had been three months ago.

“You haven’t told me much about the farm, Kate, of late.”

His wife fixed her eyes on him as though she guessed what was coming. Her face was very resolute.

“No. But you were never wrapped up in the farm, Jesse.”

He raised his head, half questioningly.

“Well, I don’t know; it’s my farm.”

“Not quite your farm, Jesse. I don’t know that it doesn’t belong more to somebody else than to you.”

“I never heard that before. I ought to have the say as to what is to be done on my own land.”

Jack Rickaby’s pipe had gone out. He laid it aside, and sat with his fists on his knees, his eyes fixed half-pityingly on Jesse. Then he glanced at Kate. She frowned, and pointed meaningly at her husband.

“Can’t you tell me what’s in Goodman’s Gore, Jesse?”

He turned his face towards her.

“Wheat.”

“Oh—! And how many beasts have we in the long shed?”

“About seven.”

“Oh! And what hedges are the men turning down this winter?”

Falconer sat erect and motionless in his chair. His blind face had a puzzled and baffled look.

Kate gave one glance at Jack Rickaby.

“Now, Jesse, don’t you think me hard—but facts are facts, and one has to face them. Do you think you can do better now than you could when you had your sight? Can you tell when ground’s clean or foul, and whether a beast’s fat, or a cow’s with calf? Aye, you might use your hands to feel with. But could you tell when the hay’s ripe, or what the weather looks like, or whether folks are stealing your wood and your grain? Are you going to trust Jim Purkiss in everything? Just you face it out, and be reasonable.”

Jack Rickaby turned aside, refilled his pipe and lit it with a paper spill that he took from a holder nailed to the wall. None of the three spoke for some seconds. Kate watched her husband’s face. He stooped as he sat, and his fingers played restlessly on the arms of the chair.

“You don’t think me much use, Kate——”

“I can’t help the truth, Jesse, can I?”

“No, I suppose not.”

The way he uttered those words would have hurt a woman less hard and

determined than Kate Falconer. It was as though he had asked for a trifling share in the life that was going on about him, and had been shut up in an attic like a fractious child.

Jack Rickaby moved uneasily in his chair. He was about to speak, when Kate made a quick, fierce gesture with her hand. She wished these words of hers to be final.

“We’ll tell you how things go on, Jesse. Mr. Rickaby’s going to take a look round now and again, and do some of our buying and selling. I guess I can keep a pretty good grip on the men.”

Jesse bowed his head, and was silent. It was plain that they looked on him as a piece of lumber, but he did not discover his thoughts to them, or suffer them to see the wounded helplessness of his pride. He knew in his heart that these two would be too strong for him, and that they meant to take all authority out of his hands.

CHAPTER IX.

The smell of frost was in the air, and grass and hedgerows were white of a morning when the sun rose as a great golden sphere into the violet clearness of a winter sky. As men went to their work in the darkness, their heavy boots rang on the frozen roads, while the bare woods turned from black to silver with the coming of the dawn. Wheel ruts and the pits left by horses' hoofs were filled with white crackle ice, and the green stuff in the gardens drooped under the white rime. Fires burnt brightly, and the smoke rose straight from the chimney-tops into the still, glittering atmosphere. Wild birds worked nearer the haunts of men, and the sparrows and chaffinches rose in clouds from the stack-yards.

Then, as the sun climbed higher, a thaw set in, and the white lacework melted on the hedges and the grass. Blackbirds worked for food on the sunny side of the hedgerows. The brown soil took on the wet, spongy look, and paths felt like pulp under the feet. In the shade, however, and on the northern slopes of roofs and banks, the rime lingered. The polls of the old Scotch firs were very green against the blue, and their red throats warmed themselves in the winter sunlight.

Kate Falconer had driven down to Lymnor, where the sea was a broad band of silver beyond the grey-blue headlands of the coast. Jesse had risen late, and when he had dressed himself he had thrown open the bedroom window over the porch where a few China roses were still in bloom. The keen freshness of the morning floated in, and woke strange yearnings in him and a kind of sorrowful joy. He felt the sunlight, though he could not see it, and he knew that the rank green grass in the garden would be dappled over with gold.

Assuredly of all the seasons Winter is the most worthy to be loved. Her breath is bitter-sweet to the mouth of man, and her body sturdy and strong. She offers him no illusions as to herself, but gives him rain, and wind, and frost and snow, and sunshine for which he is grateful. Men plod through the day's mud to come back to her red hearth-fire. There is the cutting of wood, the piling up of logs, the gathering together in the snug, intimate dusk. Hunger is healthier, work more strenuous.

It is a season when man lives in expectation. "I will do this and this," says he. And his heart cries out joyfully: "When the green Spring comes! And the hay and the roses in the summer!"

But Winter—the wife—smiles to herself. She knows that the man's thoughts have gone a-dreaming after other women, and that Spring and Summer are but courtesans, moody, fickle, with mocking mouths. Man yearns for them, grows drunk with his illusions, and wearies when he has tasted their languor and held them in his

arms. Then Autumn comes with her hectic lips, kisses him, and dies.

And lo! man cries out at the sadness and the unexpectedness of life, but comes back to good wife Winter, who smites him a healthy buffet, laughs, and sends him to work for a hunger. By the fireside she spins him many a fable. For she knows what a fool man is when he is young, forever desiring what is not, and complaining that the green of yesterday was richer than the green of to-day. Yet as man grows older, he learns to love Wife Winter, because she cheats him with no false show, but gives him a beauty of her own. He learns that Spring is a mere wanton girl and Summer a painted thing whose coloured garments cover many sores.

Winter always stirred more of the man in Jesse, and he loved a white frost, and the sharp tingling of the air. When he had breakfasted in the oak parlour he told Jenny to let Brick in from the out-house where he slept. The dog scuffled through half-opened doors, snorting joyfully, his mongrel's tail wagging at full speed. He leapt into Jesse's lap, kissed him, and sat with tongue hanging out, the corners of his mouth wrinkled into a grin.

Jesse sat and smoked his pipe, and fondled the dog's ears. He appeared to be sunk in thought, and Brick remained motionless, as though he understood. A wonderful sympathy had grown up between these two. Brick would sit and stare into Jesse's face as though he were wondering what he could do for a man who was blind.

"Down, lad."

Brick sprang down, and Jesse rose and felt his way towards the door. He opened it, went out into the passage, and stood a moment with Brick looking up into his face.

"What about a little sunlight, lad?"

Brick gave a low bark and walked towards the door. Jesse followed, running one hand along the wall. He felt for the key and the handle, opened the door, and paused in the porch. For a while he stood there, smoking his pipe, and letting himself feel what he could not see. The dog seemed to understand that all this gave his master pleasure. He lay down contentedly in a patch of sunlight, showing that his time was Jesse's, and that he was there to serve.

Jenny was above, making the beds, and Jesse could hear the clumsy pounding of the girl's heels. In about ten minutes she appeared upon the stairs, cap awry, her apron none too clean, her arms full of soiled linen. Falconer turned as she reached the passage.

"Jenny, bring me a pair of boots."

"Boots, sir?"

“Yes.”

“Lor, sir!”

“I’ve got a pair, haven’t I?”

“Yes, sure—Mr. Jesse—sir. But the missus has locked ’em all up.”

“Where?”

“Oh, I can’t say for certain. Maybe they’re in the cupboard in her room.”

Falconer pressed the tobacco down in the bowl of his pipe.

“Jenny——”

“Yes, Mr. Jesse?”

“The mistress always keeps the key of that cupboard in the middle drawer of her dressing table. Run and get me a pair of boots.”

“Me, sir! Lor, I wouldn’t touch none of the missus’ things, not at any price. ’Scuse me for seeming rude.”

“Why, there’s no harm in this. I’m telling you to do it.”

Jenny turned obdurately towards the kitchen.

“I’d do ’t for you, Mr. Jesse, if it weren’t for the missus. I shouldn’t have no peace for the next seven days.”

Jenny fled with some of the shame of a coward. She was a flabby creature, and Jesse saw that he would have to rely upon himself. He waited till he had finished his pipe, and then started upon the adventure.

The journey to his wife’s room was not so very difficult, it being a question of care and time. He had not slept in it since his accident, and the memories that came back to him were full of a strange sadness. How they had loved each other and quarreled in that room! Jesse remembered the first nights of his married life when passion had smothered all that was incompatible in each of them. The room had no charm for him now, no virginal shyness of the eyes. Even the older memories had lost their tenderness, and had no more perfume than brown dust.

And here he was, fumbling at Kate’s dressing table, in search of a key that should unlock to him the right to don a pair of boots! Neither the pathos nor the humour of the thing struck him, even when he hit his head against one of the shelves. And Brick, who had watched every movement with an air of questioning intentness, barked approvingly at the sight of shoe-leather.

Jesse laced up the boots, and made his way back to the porch. Jenny had peered at him from the kitchen doorway, made a movement as though to interfere, and then remembered that young Will Morris was to unload two dozen faggots into the wood-lodge that morning. She had few opportunities of seeing Will alone, and she smiled to herself and giggled when she heard the front door close.

It was the first time that Falconer had been out of the house since the blowing-up of the oak-tree, and he stood bare-headed, letting the sunlight fall upon his face. He could picture the garden as he had known it in winter. The rank grass would be a vivid green; the holly hedges glistening in the sunlight. The flower beds with their old black garden soil would be dotted with the clumps of perennials that showed green during the winter. There might be a bud or two on the straggling roses. Over yonder was the arbour, a black mound of dense dark ivy, its rotten woodwork full of woodlice. The old stone roller that was never used would be lying there as it had lain there when he was a boy. Jesse fancied that he could smell the rank odour of the ivy, that dusty smell so familiar to adventurous boys. The twittering of a robin was the plaintive welcome of a winter day.

The path was edged with box, and Jesse went slowly along it, knowing when he was going astray by the brushing of his feet against the box edging. He reached the gate that opened into the farm lane leading to the main road, and for a while he leant upon the gate as he had leant upon it many a time watching the evening sunlight making the beauty of the earth even more beautiful. The thought that never again would he see the woods and hills filled him with a kind of wonder. Yet as he stood there he found that he could visualise the landscape, and imagine the browns and purples of the deciduous woods, and the solemn verdure of the Scotch firs.

A yearning for the open road seized him, a desire to feel the frosty ground ringing under his feet. Something to guide him, a stick to rap with, or a dog to lead him. A dog, indeed! Why should he not try an experiment? He would learn to rely on himself, and here was Brick to serve as a friend.

He spoke to the dog, and felt Brick's fore-paws against his knee, and the dog's cold nose touching his hand.

"Will you play blind man's dog, eh?"

Brick licked his master's fingers.

"Why not? At the worst one can only fall into a ditch."

He felt in his pockets, and among other things—his pipe and matches and a clasp-knife—he found a coil of string. It was fairly stout, and some six feet long. Jesse bent down, fumbled for Brick's collar, and managed to knot one end of the string to the brass loop.

Then he opened the gate.

"Softly,—Brick, old man,—softly."

The dog jumped at him, and then stood still, looking up into Jesse's face. He seemed to be reasoning things out, and bringing himself to grasp the new part he was to play in Jesse's life. Presently he turned, drew the string tight, and began to walk

along the lane.

When he had gone some yards, he turned and came to Jesse, put his paws against the man's knee, and gave a low bark.

"Is this what you want me to do?"

That was what Jesse understood the dog to say.

He fondled the mongrel's ears.

"Good Brick, good old man. Go on, slowly."

Brick walked on again with the string running taut from his collar. In due course he came to the main road, and Jesse knew by the slacking of the string that the dog had stopped. He waited for Brick to make up his mind. And Brick sniffed the air, looked up at Jesse with twinkling devotion, and turned to the left away from Ashhurst. Jesse knew that he was going downhill. He put his feet down heavily so as to be sure that he had the hard road under him and not the grass beside the hedgerows.

So Brick took his master down the road towards the disused quarry where the bracken had turned to gold, and the bramble leaves were stained all red. And in the garden of the Wetherells' cottage someone was spreading clean linen to dry upon the hedge.

Ann looked up, and stood motionless with a white towel stretched between her two hands, and her eyes set in a surprised stare. She saw Jesse, with the sunlight shining on his tawny hair and beard, walking with closed lids like a man who dreamed. And that which struck her most was the sad calm that covered his face.

Brick caught sight of Ann, and stopped with a proud and confidential wagging of the tail. Jesse, feeling the slackening of the string, stood still in the middle of the road.

"Hallo, lad, what is it?"

Brick glanced at him, and then at Ann. The girl's throat and face had flushed, and she had thrown the towel anyhow upon the thorns.

"Good morning to you, sir."

Jesse swung round like a man shot at from behind a hedge. His blind face met the sunlight, so that its sudden brightness was not wholly a matter of emotion.

"Is that you? I did not know we had come as far as this. Brick is in charge."

Ann's eyes said many things.

"It's good to see you out, Mr. Jesse."

"This is my first morning. Brick and I are trying an experiment."

Brick did much tail-wagging, and looked triumphantly from one to the other. The eyes in the flushed face that looked at him over the closely trimmed thorn hedge were full of warm pride.

“It’s quite wonderful, Mr. Jesse! Did he bring you all along the road?”

“Yes. I just followed the string.”

Ann moved along the hedge to the gate, and came out radiantly into the road.

“Mr. Jesse, isn’t he an old dear?”

She bent down and hugged Brick, and kissed him between his flopping ears.

“To think we pulled him out of the Pool, and now he’s doing this for you! The funny way things fall out! Bricky, you be a dear.”

She kissed the dog again, and stood back, breathing fast, her face and eyes aglow. There had been a thrill in her voice that had stirred Falconer very strangely. He thought of Ann as he had seen her that day when she had been in search of Slim, leaning through the gap in the hedge with a strand of red bryony berries across her bosom.

“I don’t know what I should do without the dog.”

“Such a thing as a dog do help one, Mr. Jesse.”

He seemed to see her pale, intent face with its full, red lips and questioning eyes. Her voice made him feel as though she were stretching out her brown hands towards him. He thought, too, of her hands stained with blackberry juice, as he remembered them on the day when they had rescued Brick.

“You know—I never thanked you for what you did for me.”

A pitying and half-frightened gleam came into her eyes. She seemed to quiver as the memory of that day touched her.

“O—Mr. Jesse——”

She faltered, and swung her hands together.

“I couldn’t get it out o’ my thoughts. I’ve lain awake o’ nights thinking what it must be like with you. And you were so patient.”

A kind of wonderment came over Jesse’s face. He stood very still.

“It must have been—ugly—to you. It was rather bad being blind at first. I used to wish the stuff had blown my head off.”

Ann’s face was full of a mute, intent compassion. It had the sensitiveness of tremulous water catching the sunlight that fell through trees.

“Sure. It must have been just horrible.”

Jesse felt himself flush from throat to forehead. A wave of self-consciousness swept over him. This voice that spoke to him out of the darkness had a deep, thrilling mystery.

“Well, nothing’s quite so bad as it seems. There are compensations. Brick, for instance.”

The dog jumped up and licked Falconer’s hand.

“He just loves you, Mr. Jesse.”

It was then that Sam Wetherell’s pony-cart came clattering down the road between the high banks with their bare, brown-gleaming hazels. Ann moved forward and drew Jesse to one side of the road. Then she returned to the garden to finish spreading her linen on the hedge. Young Slim, who was driving, pulled the pony up outside the gate, and stared at Falconer with sordid curiosity. Brick had started on the homeward journey, leading his master at the end of the string.

Slim looked at his sister.

“Be’unt that funny!” and he began to laugh.

“Looks like a white maggot a-pullin’ of Goliath.”

A chance meeting with a friend upon the road had saved two hours of Kate Falconer’s time, and sent her back to Fox Farm long before she was expected. She drove into the yard in time to see a horse and cart standing derelict by the back gate, and half a dozen faggots still waiting to be carried. What was more, she saw a burly young man sneak out of the house, and make a dive across the back yard for the wood-lodge. Then she heard the crashing of faggots.

Kate was out of the cart very briskly, and smiling one of those smiles that made her hard face look smug and self-sufficient.

“Will, put the pony and trap up.”

The burly young man emerged with an attempt at stolid surprise. He flinched when Kate looked at him, and slouched off through the gate. Jesse’s wife entered the farm-house.

“Jenny!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come here.”

“Coming, ma’am.”

“Come here at once. Don’t try to put things straight.”

The girl came from the direction of the stairs.

“How long’s Will Morris been in the house?”

“Lor, ma’am, he just run in for a drink o’ water.”

Kate’s sharp eyes looked Jenny over, and saw things that betrayed much to a woman.

“You lying trollope, going down with the lads when I’m away!”

Jenny flared up, flabby creature though she was. She began to shout after the fashion of cowards, and to cover her fear with noisy insolence.

“I won’t stay another night in this house! To be called dirty names, and insulted! I don’t care who you be. I tell you I’m fair sick of it all, slaving for a skinflint with a

tongue like——”

Kate put the palm of a big hand over the girl’s mouth, and pushed her aside.

“Shut up, you fool. Go and pack your box. Do you think I want totties in my house!”

“Don’t call me——”

“Quiet! Go and pack your box. Where’s the master?”

Jenny rescued herself from the verge of tears.

“Gone out.”

“What?”

“I’m telling you, he’s gone out.”

Kate looked ready to slap the girl’s face.

“Don’t talk nonsense to me. What d’ you mean?”

“Mister Jesse’s gone out with the dog.”

“Where?”

“‘Tain’t no business of mine. Nothing’s no business of mine here any longer. I’ll go and pack my box.”

“Yes, go. And if anyone asks for your character, I’ll tell them why I sent you packing.”

“Y’ didn’t. It was me gave notice.”

“Don’t answer me. Get out of my sight.”

So when Jesse returned with Brick marching before him and showing a self-conscious pride, he found Kate in one of her furies. She met him at the porch as he was feeling for the woodwork with outstretched hands. The dog had slunk aside at the sight of Kate Falconer’s ominous face.

“Well, you fool, you must run out and try to break your neck directly my back’s turned.”

Jesse paused with his hands on the trelliswork.

“Back again? I’ve been well looked after.”

“By that beast of a dog? I shall have to have the brute put out of the way if he’s going to lead you into mischief.”

Jesse’s face went white with sudden anger. This woman had no heart.

“Kate——”

His voice rang grim.

“Don’t you touch my dog! He’s been to me what no one else has been. I’ve stood much from you, but I’ve got a devil in me for all that.”

Kate stared at him with momentary respect. She thought none the less of Jesse for showing anger.

“Oh, very well. If the dog can take care of you, so much the better. I’ve got enough to worry about, without having you tied to my apron strings.”

CHAPTER X.

By Christmas time Kate Falconer had gained complete control of all her husband's affairs. She gave the men their orders, paid them their wages on Saturday nights, trudged round the fields, and attended the Ashhurst and Leatherbridge Markets with a hard-faced assurance that made men realize that she was no fool. Old John Smunk, showing his yellow teeth over his gin and water in The Chequers at Leatherbridge, gave his opinion of her with leering emphasis. Kate's rather insolent comeliness, her physical strength, and her air of indifference towards softer emotions, attracted certain types of men. Her harsh independence provoked them. She was like strong drink that would burn the throat, but flush a man to his inmost marrow.

"Lord, there's a woman for ye! What, afraid she'd do most of the attacking! Go on! It's a real man that's working Fox Farm. I'll bet ye five quid she'll pull the old farm round, and make it pay."

A big farmer in riding gear who had been listening, spat into the fire, and chuckled.

"Seems to be a sort of fat-stock show for Falconer. What's he do with hisself all day?"

The corn-merchant sneered.

"Him! He was made to browse. I reckon he does a great deal o' thinking. Some folks seem made to think. Dam' useless most of 'em, like cows in a yard."

"I hear Jack Rickaby keeps an eye on things for her. See him bidding for her today. Slates the men, too."

"No need o' that. She's got a tongue like a briar. I reckon those chaps of hers have had some scratches. Yah! she's a good un."

And John Smunk sipped his gin, and expanded his nostrils as he thought of the cooing flaccidity of his own wife.

As for Jesse Falconer, he had realised his own helplessness, and in the contest of wills he had surrendered to Kate. What was there to fight for, and what did it matter? He was like a blind child who had to be clothed and fed. In some ways they had come to a tacit understanding of the situation after they had fought a battle over the financial aspect of the case. Kate had been adamant over the money. There had been visits to Lawyer Catlack's, and sundry arrangements that had put the power of the purse into Kate's hands.

"I'm going to run this farm, Jesse," she had said; "and if I'm putting money of my own into it, I'm going to call the tune. I've got to earn your living for you. There's no

getting away from that.”

So Jesse sank slowly into the position of a pensioner. When he needed clothes, Kate bought them for him, ready-made. She allowed him two ounces of shag a week, and a shilling for pocket-money. For—as she said to herself—how could a blind man want money? He couldn’t read, he couldn’t shoot, or even be caught by the colour of a tie. Jesse had no need of money, and the absence of necessity satisfied Kate. Good food, liquor in moderation, tobacco, clothes, many men would be glad of such comforts.

Kate’s mind was eminently economical. She loved money, meant to get money, and felt in a shrewd way that Providence had intervened somewhat conveniently in her favour. As yet Jesse’s helpless bulk had not begun to weigh too heavily upon her patience. She even approved of Brick, and was persuaded that she could escape paying for a dog-licence because the beast worked for his own living.

For three weeks after Jenny’s departure Kate Falconer did all the housework with the satisfaction of knowing that she was saving money. Jesse had had some experience of his wife’s thriftiness, but he did not realise for some little while that she might find his blindness economical.

He could not see what was on the table, but he began to suspect that there was less to eat. A hundred petty things forced themselves upon his sense of taste. The dryness of the bread showed that it was used to the last crust. Joints were worked to the bone. The ale tasted thin, because it was of the cheapest. Jesse ate margarine for butter, because Kate could sell her own butter at a profit. He could not see what his wife ate, and his own impressions were gathered solely from what he found upon his plate.

It seemed to him petty, and much like graceless grumbling to complain of such things. But he did protest when some of the meat Kate gave him had reached the stage when it should have been relegated to the dust-bin.

“What’s the matter with the larder? We don’t seem to be living on the fat of the land!”

He heard her cutting bread.

“We haven’t too much to live on, Jesse, have we?”

“Well, but after all, it’s false economy with meat like this.”

“It’s only happened the once. And Jesse,—I don’t want to rub it in,—but facts are facts. It isn’t just fair to grumble, is it, when you aren’t earning a halfpenny.”

“I’m not grumbling.”

“I don’t know what else to call it. I have to eat the same as you do.”

Then there was the question of clothes. Jesse had put on a new suit that Kate

had bought him, but he did not know that it was second-hand. Nor did he realise that he looked shabby, that his shirts and collars were nearly worn out, and that his everyday trousers had had a patch carefully let into one knee. It never occurred to him to think of such details. One fact he certainly had discovered, that his winter socks were very thin and that he felt the cold. It did not trouble Kate to see him shabby. She had no pride in the man, and clothes cost money.

Someone—perhaps Mr. Jack Rickaby—pointed out to Kate the false economy of doing without a servant. Perhaps Kate herself had had enough of it, knowing that nothing drags a woman to pieces more quickly than child-bearing and heavy housework. So she began to look about her for a servant, some decent girl who would be content with low wages and who could be trusted to scour the milk-pails. And presently, after some disappointments, she thought of Ann.

Wetherell's cottage was hardly a desirable training-ground for servants, but Kate had heard very promising accounts of Ann. The girl was steady, clean, an excellent worker, and not given to gadding about the roads. So Kate went down to the cottage by the quarry, found Sam Wetherell trimming his hedge with a swap-hook, and told him bluntly that she wanted to engage his eldest girl.

Sam was astonished, but he scented the chance of a bargain. He decided in his own mind that Rose was quite capable of taking Ann's place at home. And if the eldest girl could earn decent wages while remaining near enough to be sponged upon, so much the better. Sam had grown a little tired of Ann. She was too moral and clean a force in the cottage to leave him undisturbed in his own rough ways. Wetherell felt that she exercised a sort of surveillance over him, and he preferred to be uncriticised and supreme.

So Sam and Kate Falconer debated the matter, Sam assuming the attitude of a man who could not be persuaded to part with the treasure of his home. The fact that emerged from the discussion was that they differed upon the question of wages. Kate offered eight pounds a year, and Sam said he would not let the girl go for less than fourteen. In fact there was no need for Ann to go out to service, and if Mrs. Falconer wanted to be obliged, she must oblige in turn. They compromised at twelve pounds, Ann to pay for her own washing.

Then Ann was called for.

Sam had a suspicion that the girl would refuse to go. He was not astonished when she went white over the news, and did not answer for some moments.

"It be doing Mrs. Falconer a favour, my dear. It be 'unt like going t' other side o' the county."

Ann went from white to red.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll be pleased to come.”

And so it was settled.

On the last Saturday in December Ann and Slim walked in the dusk to Fox Farm, carrying the girl’s tin trunk between them. Ann was flushed, but absorbed in silence. She breathed fast as they climbed the hills, more with excitement than because of the weight of the box. Slim seemed sulky. He had found, to his own surprise, that he was sorry Ann was going. There would be no one on the spot to intervene between him and his father’s strap.

They carried the yellow trunk in at the back door, and up the back stairs by candlelight to an attic in the roof. It was a bare little room, with a piece of frayed red carpet covering part of the worm-eaten floor. The walls were cut by the slopes of the roof, and a dormer window with its diamond panes gave a glimpse of the garden, with fields and woods beyond. In one corner stood a little iron bedstead with a text nailed to the wall above the head. A rickety washstand and a drab-coloured chest of drawers with two knobs missing and its paint blistered and worn, saluted one like a decrepit old couple who had served many folk in their time. A rush-bottomed chair stood behind the door, on which there were pegs for the hanging of clothes.

Slim left Ann in the attic, and she set to unpack her trunk. Kate Falconer had called to her from the landing below, and told her that she was going up to Ashhurst to do some shopping. There was some crockery to be washed up in the kitchen and she had better look in and see that the Master did not let out the fire.

Jesse, sitting with his feet on the brick curb, was surprised to hear someone moving about the kitchen. The steps were quick and light, and the sound of plates being washed suggested a deft handling that contrasted with Jenny’s clumsy and chaotic methods. Then the footsteps went up the stairs and into the bedrooms. They descended again, passed into the back yard, and returned to the kitchen.

Presently a hand lifted the latch of the door. Someone entered the room which was lit solely by the light of the fire.

“Would you like the lamp, Mr. Jesse?”

Falconer half rose from his chair.

“Who is it? Not Ann Wetherell!”

“Yes, sir. Didn’t you know I was coming?”

“No.”

“I’ve taken Jenny’s place; and I hope I shall suit you.”

Jesse sat back in his chair with the air of a man in whose mind some discovery had stirred swift and infinite understanding. He remained silent, while Ann put more wood upon the fire. He could hear her breathing near him, and her presence in the

room gave him a sense of mystery, and of soft gliding movement in the darkness.

“I’m glad you have come,” he said bluntly.

“Thank you, Mr. Jesse.”

“It’s rather lonely here.”

“Is it, sir? Well, I shan’t mind.”

“No?”

“No.”

He heard her move towards the door, and there was a moment’s silence before she closed it. Ann had turned and was looking at him, and her eyes glimmered in the dusk.

As Jesse lay before sleep came to him that night, he heard light footsteps going to and fro in the attic above his room. Presently all was silent. Yet he felt a wonderful new presence in the house, and a strange rustle of emotion in his world of darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

New Year's eve found three inches of ice on the less sheltered ponds, and the ground as hard as granite.

Ann, winding at the well-winch in the brick-paved yard, saw the whole sky dusted over with frost-brilliant stars. It was a dry, crisp cold, with no wind blowing, and sounds carried far through the stillness of the night. Ann heard laughing voices going down the road towards Willow End and Pool Castle. She knew that a great bonfire was to be lit beside the pool, and that people were going to skate the New Year in and the Old Year out.

The bucket appeared in the mouth of the well, dripping musically into the black void below. Ann lifted it aside on to the bricks, unfastened the clasp, and closed the well-flap. A momentary breeze moved in the boughs of the great yew that overshadowed the porch. Ann stood listening to the distant clatter of a horse's hoofs on the frozen road.

Rats squeaked and scuffled in the wood-lodge, and from the stable came the sound of a horse pulling his rope through the ring in the manger. Ann picked up the bucket, and made her way into the house. She heard Kate Falconer's voice in the living-room, the animated, bustling voice of a woman about to enjoy herself. Jesse answered her in monosyllables as he smoked his pipe before the fire.

Ann was filling a saucepan with water from the bucket when she heard the grinding of wheels in the farm yard, and the ring of hoofs. The door of the living-room opened. Kate Falconer, buttoned up in a brown ulster, a red tam-o'-shanter pinned on her black hair, appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"See to the fire, Ann. I shall be late."

"Yes, ma'am. Shall I sit up?"

"No, I've got the key. Leave a candle in the passage."

There was a cheerful thundering at the front door. Kate turned, and the blades of the skates she carried clashed together as she went down the passage.

"Good-bye, Jesse."

She was in the good humour that preceded pleasure. Jack Rickaby was waiting in the porch, muffled in a shaggy overcoat, and holding one of the carriage lamps by the candle socket.

"Hallo, here we are."

He flashed the light on Kate's face and figure. She looked tall, vigorous, and comely, wrapped in her long brown ulster, and the red tam-o'-shanter went well with the black of her hair. Her eyes had a glitter in them, and she smiled and showed her

teeth.

“Got your skates?”

“And my prayer-book! What a night! Pity there isn’t a moon.”

“We shan’t want any moon. There’s a good old blaze on the bank, and we’ve sent down two or three naphtha flares. And we haven’t forgotten some whiskey and hot water.”

She laughed, and went out into the porch, locking the door after her.

“I feel I could skate all night.”

“Ah, you’re a clipper! I remember you sailing about, that year of the long frost. Plenty of blankets on?”

“Yes.”

“Come along then. I’ll go first with the light.”

They made their way round the house and into the farm yard where Rickaby had left his dog-cart. He replaced the lamp, and climbed into the cart, Kate following him.

“Jove, it’s parky! Plenty of rug, though.”

He spread it round her with a cheerful and intimate audacity.

“Tuck you up—warm! How’s that?”

“Fine. Where are you going to put the trap up?”

“I’ve sent a lad down to take the mare across to Wild’s at Willow’s End.”

He tightened the reins, and the mare swung round sharply, throwing Kate against him. They laughed.

“Hold up there! I haven’t done the Dutch roll for three years.”

Their laughter mingled with the ring of the mare’s hoofs, and the grinding of the wheels as they swung out between the white gate-posts along the frosty road. The cold brilliance of the night called to the brisk, vigorous blood in them. The brittle air seemed ready to crackle into sparks, and overhead the stars throbbed in the black velvet of the sky.

As for Jesse, he was left to smoke his pipe and meditate before the fire, with Brick asleep at his feet, and Ann moving to and fro in the kitchen. It was plain that if Jesse, because of his blindness, could not see his wife in the flesh, she, on her part, was blind of soul and had no knowledge of the real man—her husband. The people we live with day by day are apt to become to us like pieces of furniture. They are there, that is all, and no thought is given to them, save perhaps when they break or get out of order. Jesse’s heart and head might have been filled with old lumber so far as Kate was concerned. It never occurred to her that this man was living a strange, new, and singular life in the midst of darkness, and that his brain was like a great city

where a multitude of thoughts passed to and fro. She supplied his material needs, that was all. His inner, intimate life was to her a closed book which she never troubled to open.

Ann had learnt many things during those short December days, and life at Fox Farm had come to her as a revelation. She was a silent watcher of Kate Falconer's economies, of her indifference and her tyranny towards her husband, and of the little meannesses she practised towards him. Ann saw his shabby clothes and the poor food that he was given. Compassion and scorn grew up together in her heart, though Kate saw nothing but a quiet-faced girl who went about her work with silent thoroughness.

Ann found Jesse smoking his pipe when she went in to clear away the supper things. As she entered the room he turned his head with the air of a man glad to be disturbed. Ann was a vivid figure to him despite his blindness. He always pictured her as he had seen her that day in autumn, a pale, slim girl, in a close-fitting print dress. She had a white throat and strange alluring eyes, and her sensitive red mouth made the simplest words she uttered sound full of a mystical significance.

"I'd better put some more wood on the fire, Mr. Jesse."

"Yes; it's cold to-night."

"Bitter cold. Have you had enough supper, sir?"

"Yes, plenty."

She put more logs on the fire, and began to pile the plates and dishes on the tray. Brick stirred in his sleep, woke, looked at Ann, and rearranged himself before the fire.

"They'll be having a gay time down at the pool, Mr. Jesse."

"It makes me remember when I learned to skate there."

"Ah, I never tried that. I used to slide when I was at school."

"Slide? And without turning round and round?"

She laughed.

"Yes. I was as good as the boys. And then I grew out of it."

Jesse nodded like a blind philosopher.

"We have to grow out of things—to grow into them again," he said.

Ann had filled the tray. She moved towards the door, and then paused with her arms taut, and her face turned towards Jesse.

"Is there anything I can do for you, sir? Read—or the like?"

Jesse raised his head sharply as though, between them, they had made a great discovery.

"Why shouldn't you?"

"I'm not a clever reader, Mr. Jesse. I shall boggle the big words."

"Well, try."

"I'd love to. Wait till I've finished my work."

Jesse was touched by this thought of hers. The girl's sympathy had a rich, human sound in the lonely silence of his life. He sat and waited, listening to her moving about the kitchen. In twenty minutes she returned, and Jesse pointed towards one of the cupboards beside the fireplace.

"The books are in there."

Ann stepped over the sleeping Brick and opened the cupboard door.

"What shall I read, Mr. Jesse?"

"You will find a little book bound in red leather. It is called the Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius."

Ann searched and found it. She drew up a chair on the other side of the hearth. Her silence questioned Jesse.

"Open the book at the twenty-third page."

Ann did so.

"What does it say on the margin?"

She held the book nearer the lamp.

"Life is a pilgrimage, Mr. Jesse."

"That's it. The time of man's life is a point, the substance of it ever flowing, the sense obscure."

"Why, you know it by heart, Mr. Jesse."

"Some of it. Begin it here."

Ann began to read to him, slowly and a little laboriously, her face intent, her brows knitted. Jesse listened, one hand holding the bowl of his pipe, the other resting on his knee. Her blunders and her hesitations did not trouble him. The sound of the girl's voice was even more soothing than the words of the dead Emperor. He found himself listening more and more to the sound of Ann's voice, and less to the wisdom of that ancient book. She was alive, and utterly real to him, and contradicted in some way the stuff that made philosophy.

He stopped her when he thought that she might be tired.

"That was splendid."

He could not see her flush of pleasure.

"Oh, Mr. Jesse, it makes me feel a fool."

"I wish you could read to me every night."

"Yes—I——"

She faltered, and they both fell into silence, thinking the same thoughts.

Ann had never touched anything that could be called serious literature, yet she had a natural quickness and could seize the meaning of a thing as swiftly as a swallow snaps up a fly. This book that she had been reading reminded her of the Bible, and had you put Marcus Aurelius among the Prophets, Ann would not have rejected him. It was a resemblance of sounds, and of solemnities in the arrangement of the words. The sayings of Mr. Joseph Bose recurred to her, and his condemnation of Mr. Falconer as an atheist. What an atheist was Ann did not know for certain, but she knew that Jacob Bose had used it as a term of reproach.

She mused awhile, and then threw her ignorance at Falconer's feet.

"Is this one of the books of the Bible, Mr. Jesse?"

"The book you have been reading?"

"Yes."

She saw a smile steal over his face, but it was not a smile that made her ashamed.

"This book was written by a Roman emperor."

"Yes, Mr. Jesse. Like Nero was."

"He was unlike Nero—in that he was the noblest of men. But, like Nero, he persecuted the early Christians."

Ann meditated on this. The stubby, arrogant figure of Jacob Bose rose up before her. Perhaps the early Christians were like Mr. Bose. If so they must have been very impudent, self-satisfied, and officious people, and she could understand why Roman emperors had chastened them. She gathered sundry facts and impressions together in her mind, and worked them into a quaint mosaic.

"What is an atheist, Mr. Jesse?"

"Atheist! Where did you get that word?"

"I've heard folk use it."

"Some folk are very fond of throwing it about. An atheist is a man who says there is no God."

"Was this Roman Emperor an atheist, Mr. Jesse?"

"Marcus Aurelius? No. He was what is called a Stoic."

"What may that be, sir?"

"The Stoics were men who had thought a very great deal and who saw that it was no use for mere men to fuss against forces much stronger than themselves. They knew Nature and her ways. They took whatever came, without grumbling, because they knew that grumbling made no difference. They bore pain bravely, were not to be astonished by misfortune, and did not grovel or whine."

Ann's sensitive mouth and eyes quivered with interest. She leant slightly forward

in her chair, the book lying in her lap.

“You mean, sir, that they knew we can’t prevent some things happening?”

“Exactly.”

“That if a man or beast’s struck by lightning, it just happens so because it’s part o’ nature?”

Jesse’s face kindled to the light of her understanding.

“Yes, that’s it. A man’s only part of Nature. There’s no special power put to keep him out of trouble. Things happen to him just as though they would happen to an animal. He gives names to all sorts of things, but he doesn’t know about the why and the how.”

Ann stared at the fire.

“The folk who go to church and chapel don’t think like that, Mr. Jesse.”

“No. You see, someone gave them a God hundreds of years ago, and their God had arranged everything. And when something particularly ghastly happens, they either pile the responsibility on a person called Satan, or say that we poor mortals aren’t in a position to know why God does these things.”

“And we aren’t—are we?”

“I can’t see how.”

“But how do they know?”

Jesse gave a shrug of the shoulders.

“That’s just it. That’s the very question the world’s been asking them so much of late. And they just smother themselves in a cloud of words. Some of us have been through it—till we grew just sick of words. It seems to me no man knows. How can he know? It all ends in people having to believe what other people have said and written. And they were no better, and not so clever as we are, though they did live hundreds of years ago. Men have taken other men’s tales and tried to believe that they were true. That’s what it comes to when you get down to the hard rock.”

“But then—the atheists—Mr. Jesse? How do they know there isn’t a God?”

“They’re no better than the other side. One man says there is—because someone else told him so; another says there isn’t—because he knows there isn’t. And both of them are like a couple of ants arguing about what’s down in the middle of the earth. An ant can’t know what’s there. He never could know, being what he is.”

Ann mused, and stared at the fire. Then she said:

“Then—you—stand in between, Mr. Jesse?”

“I stand in between.”

“’Tisn’t easy to do that, is it?”

“To me it seems the only thing to do when you’ve threshed things through, without humbug.”

She curved the fingers of one hand over her chin, and her eyes were full of the firelight.

“If there isn’t a God who speaks to us, Mr. Jesse, then there isn’t anyone with a stick to drive folk the way they should go.”

“Oh, yes, there’s something that does that.”

“What?”

“A man’s knowledge of the way Nature works. If you put your hand in the fire, you get burnt. That’s the sort of knowledge that teaches us something.”

“But other folk——”

“You mean what we call duty to one’s neighbour?”

“Yes.”

“Well, take it this way. Would it give you any pleasure to hit a child across the face with a stick?”

“Mr. Jesse!”

“Isn’t that plain enough? We learn not to do what hurts us, or what hurts other people. We learn to do what does us good, and what does good to other people. And if there is a God who troubles about things, he won’t quarrel with that, will he? That’s all I know for certain.”

The clock by the door struck eleven. Ann started round in her chair, and Marcus Aurelius slipped from her lap, fell on Brick’s nose and woke him.

“Eleven o’clock, Mr. Jesse!”

Her words were a self-accusation.

“I’ve tired you.”

“Me? O, no, sir.”

“Well, it has done me good to talk.”

Ann rose and brought a candle in a brass candlestick from the kitchen.

“Are you ready to go, Mr. Jesse?”

“Yes. I may as well be moving.”

She lit the candle, put out the lamp, and gave a glance at the fire.

“I can take you upstairs, Mr. Jesse. I’ll carry the candle. You hold to my arm.”

They passed out together, along the passage, and up the stairs. Ann led Falconer into his room.

“I’ve taken the light, Mr. Jesse. Good night.”

“Good night.”

She closed the door, and climbed the narrow stairs to her own attic. A kind of

astonished gladness filled her heart. It seemed wonderful that this man could talk to her as he had talked that night. It seemed equally wonderful that she could talk back to him like one who understood. Ann Wetherell was very happy.

Three o'clock had struck before Kate Falconer and Jack Rickaby drove back from Pool Castle. A tired silence had possession of them, or perhaps it was the silence of two people who had travelled beyond the pale of words. The night had been merry enough, with the fire and the flambeaux burning, and the black ice ringing under the blades of many skates. Round and under the dark walls and towers the figures had swept with laughter and a murmur of voices, and the brisk zest of blood that is warm on a winter night. There had been music, square dances, supper served on a table made of planks laid upon two barrels. These two had rushed through the cold air together, sometimes sweeping apart—to glide near again in the darkness and hold hands.

Kate yawned when they reached the white gate.

“Lord, I do feel sleepy!”

“Well, don’t complain of that! You’ve earned it.”

He climbed down, and took one of the lamps from the socket.

“Silly fool,” said the voice from the trap.

“Now—who?”

“Me—you—anybody.”

“The whole bally world, in fact.”

Kate sprang down from the dog-cart, the blades of her skates jangling together.

“Get off home, you idiot. I know you’re dead tired.”

“Oh, am I?”

“Show me a light as far as the door.”

“Yes, ma’am—your servant, ma’am.”

She turned on him almost fiercely.

“Oh, shut up. My temper’s run out.”

“I see,” he said, “I see.”

Jack Rickaby walked round the house, carrying the lamp, a yellow blur in the midst of the darkness. Something seemed to have sobered him abruptly. He stood aside when he reached the porch.

“Good night, Kate.”

His voice was casual, informal, bluntly sane.

“Good night, Jack. Thanks for a jolly evening. You won’t forget about those catalogues?”

“You shall have ’em to-morrow.”

And he turned, and walked off, whistling.

Kate unlocked the door, stepped in, relocked it, and meditated a moment when she had lit the candle. She put her skates down on the bench, and went slowly up the stairs, yawning. Jack Rickaby had sense. How few men there were who could cease playing the fool when a woman was tired!

CHAPTER XII.

As the winter went by, Jesse learnt to do many things that would have seemed impossible to him in the early days of his blindness. Not only could he hear more acutely, but sounds came to possess more subtle and suggestive variations. His sense of touch too became very delicate, and he developed a kind of sensitiveness of the body that made it capable of receiving impressions without the occurrence of actual contact. He could feel more than when he had had his sight. A draught of wind could guide him, and his ears became wonderfully quick in picking out the direction of certain sounds.

His chief helpers through those winter months were Brick and Ann Wetherell. The dog had learnt to lead Jesse about the place, to avoid rough ground, and to draw to the side of the road when a horse and cart appeared. He was grave, sedate, and careful, and went everywhere as though he realised the responsibility that rested upon him. Other dogs found Brick utterly imperturbable. Nothing would induce him to romp or gossip when his master's lead was tied to his collar.

As for Ann, she took every chance that the life at Fox Farm gave her to help Falconer towards some new conquest over the darkness that shut him in. She was so quiet and so unassertive in all that she did that Kate hardly noticed how deeply the girl had entered into Jesse's life. Kate's mind was busied with material considerations. She had thrown all her energy and her thoughts into the management of the farm, and when she talked of the things that were vital to her, Jack Rickaby was her confidant. The routine of her husband's existence was the less noticed by her the more regular it became. If she had thought of the matter at all she would have felt grateful to Ann Wetherell for saving her unnecessary trouble.

Now Falconer was a strong man physically, and his strength chafed in him, lusting to spend itself through his great hands and powerful arms. He spoke to Ann of it one wet day when Kate had gone to Lymnor, and Jesse had been moping in his chair. The girl saw and understood. Many of the long, dark hours meant misery to this strong man. He got no exercise beyond walking slowly at Brick's heels along the muddy winter roads.

"Why shouldn't you cut wood, Mr. Jesse?"

"Why not?"

She took him by the arm, and led him out to the big wood-lodge at the back of the house. Faggots were stacked in one corner, and along one wall ran a pile of bigger wood that had to be cut into logs for the fires. A sawing-horse stood in the centre of the lodge, and a chopping-block beside it.

The familiar smell of the place and the crackling of the dry twigs under his feet were very pleasant to Jesse.

“The saw used to hang up yonder, Ann.”

“It’s there, sir. I’ll get it.”

She laid a log of chestnut wood upon the sawing-horse, and brought Jesse the saw. Then she guided his hands, and then watched him cut the chestnut log into billets.

He lifted the wood and smelt it.

“Chestnut.”

“Yes, Mr. Jesse.”

“I can manage this, easily enough.”

She laid another log on the sawing-horse. Jesse felt the bark.

“Oak this time.”

“Yes, Mr. Jesse.”

She took several armfuls of the logs and laid them close to the sawing-horse.

“If I leave you—you won’t cut yourself, sir?”

His blind face smiled at her.

“No. The feel of the thing comes back to me. I have often cut wood in the dark.”

They grew more adventurous after that experiment in the sawing up of logs. Ann taught him to cut up the faggots into kindling for the fire. He learnt to draw water at the well, and to carry it into the house. Kate Falconer had bought a number of beasts for fattening, and there was cake to be crushed and roots to be cut. Ann would lead Jesse into the great barn and fill the hopper of the root-cutter with swedes and mangels while he worked at the handle. The work eased him, satisfied the hunger of his body for exercise, toned up his muscles and his heart, and made him feel less of a useless clog. There was some comfort even in playing the blind Samson. His health improved, and the ruddiness returned to his face.

Being the creatures of our digestions, and seeing that no man shall call himself a philosopher until he has proved himself independent of a sluggish liver, it follows that we should honour and exalt those mortals who are the vessels of perfect health. We are the slaves of our secretions and our excretions, and good living may be more a question of Bile than of the Bible.

Perfect health is a rare thing, and is said to kill sympathy in its possessor. Yet there is no doubt that some supremely healthy people exert an almost mesmeric effect upon those with whom they come in contact. Anyone who saw the Rev. John Strutt at the wicket on a blazing July day might have gained a glimpse of what the

world might be if all men were brown, vigorous, and superbly healthy. It was good to see him open his shoulders and swipe a ball to the boundary. It was even better to watch his face when his balls went flying. This man radiated vitality, and he played the game. He smiled at you, and you felt that it did not matter a cracked half-penny whether he believed in the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, or any dogmas under the sun. With some men dogmas do not matter. They are the stuff of which life is made. It is impossible for them to be prigs, or the blatant beasts of an impertinent piety. They are just big, warm-hearted men who happen to be walking along a certain path.

During the first two months of the year, John Strutt came often to Fox Farm. He read Kipling to Jesse, and talked of the open air. These two men knew that they disagreed on some of the vital questions of life, and they were content to disagree. The manhood of the one sufficed the manhood of the other.

The fact of their friendship was that Strutt did not thrust the Bible at Jesse, but he did move Jesse's bile. He may have realised what so few pietists ever realise, that to dose a man with the tonic of a healthy and radiant goodwill is better than making him sulky with nostrums that he cannot swallow. The grip of hand on hand always tells. It is possible to bring sunlight into life without insisting that it must shine through the mystical glass of immortality.

At all events John Strutt came to Fox Farm and did Jesse great good. The blind man felt a breeze in the house. Here was something that was big, vigorous, and vital, something that did count in the health of the world, something that bettered life because it could not help but better it.

Strutt would sweep in on him like a boy to a boy.

"I say, Falconer, come for a walk. There's a roaring wind blowing. I'll leave my hat to dry here; it's had a roll in the mud."

They would trudge away together, Strutt's stick serving as a connecting-rod between them. Brick, freed from responsibility, hunted and scuffled in ditches and hedgebottoms. The wind buffeted the hedges, and made the trees bellow and rock. It did not matter what these two talked about. Jesse knew that it was the fact of being with such a man that made his blindness seem less black.

John Strutt broke up many of Jesse's morbid moods. He even went some way towards shaking Falconer's spirit of fatalism. Jesse learnt to love the man, and then lost him when he was becoming part of his life. John Strutt and his vicar were incompatibles. It was hinted that "Gud's Providence" desired him elsewhere, and the younger man abandoned Ashhurst for work in a crowded South London parish. The loss of Strutt's comradeship meant much to Jesse. It was like the withdrawal of sunny weather at the critical period when a man was recovering from an attack of

melancholia. Jesse often thought—when the afterwards came upon him, that life might have gone differently if John Strutt had remained within two miles of Fox Farm.

Further developments showed themselves in Kate Falconer's management of the farm. She was set upon taking over old Smunk's mortgage upon the place, and it was necessary that Jesse as mortgagor should transfer the debt from one mortgagee to the other. To all intents and purposes the farm would become the property of his wife. There was no likelihood, so far as he could see, of his ever being able to redeem the debt.

When asked what he had to say, he could say everything and nothing.

"If you hold on, old Smunk will step in," was what Kate told him.

And Jesse was bitterly conscious of his own helplessness. Not only had he lost the power to rule, but the dear privilege of ownership was slipping from him. He surrendered sadly and grudgingly to the inevitable. It would have been a matter of sentiment if his wife had spared him this, but Kate Falconer had no desire to be sentimental. They were strangers to one another in the deeper sense, and this debt of the one to the other intensified their estrangement.

One wet and windy day in March, Lawyer Catlack, his clerk, and old Smunk drove down in the Red Lion fly, and gathered in the low-ceilinged and beamed room at Fox Farm. Mr. Jack Rickaby had ridden over. He sat in a corner by the window, smoking one of his short, briar pipes, and looking the observant but officious friend. Jesse was in one of the Windsor chairs before the fire. He not only felt forlorn, but he looked it, the more so, perhaps, because he was wearing some of his rough old farming clothes.

Catlack's clerk was taking various documents out of a leather bag, and arranging them on the table. Smunk watched him, shot a look at Rickaby, and then crossed the room to where Jesse sat by the fire.

"I gather it must be a comfort to you, Falconer, having a wife who can make things hum. It takes the worry off your shoulders, man—eh?"

He stood over Jesse, rubbing his chin, and looking down at him with a kind of insolent interest.

"Someone must look after the farm."

"I don't know whether my experience be peculiar, but I've found that women can make 'emself a tidy sight more unpleasant than men. They don't mind using their tongues. The bother is they generally overdo it, and turn men sulky. Lack o' judgment in the finer details—hey!"

Parchment crackled on the table. Catlack had turned the narrow suaveness of

his white face to the two men by the fire. He had been talking in undertones to Kate Falconer.

“We are ready now, gentlemen.”

Kate crossed the room to her husband.

“You come and sit by me, Jesse.”

Old Smunk thrust out his lower lip, and leered at her.

“I don’t know that I wouldn’t change places with ye, Falconer.”

No one smiled save the clerk, who showed a line of tobacco-blackened teeth. Kate led Jesse across the room. For one moment her eyes met Jack Rickaby’s eyes. Catlack’s dry fingers were crackling among the papers on the table.

“I will read through all the documents to you.”

There was a scraping of chairs as they gathered round. The lawyer tilted his pince-nez, and began to read in a clear and colourless voice, breaking off at intervals to explain some of the legal phrases, or to answer a question. Jesse’s face showed a sad, listening acquiescence. Kate sat alert beside him, her elbows on the edge of the table. Old Smunk sprawled, hands in pockets, waistcoat all wrinkles, his black tie bulging under his chin. He punctuated Catlack’s reading with grunts and little inward observations. Now and again he shot a question at the lawyer over the protruding edge of his lower lip.

Then they came to the affixing of signatures. Catlack put a sheet of paper in front of Jesse.

“Let us see what you can do, Mr. Falconer.”

Jesse was given a pen. He produced a very passable signature as a proof of what he could do. The lawyer scrutinised it.

“Very good—very good.”

The documents were signed and witnessed, old Smunk grinning grotesquely to himself, while the March wind blew the rain against the windows.

Kate pulled the bell-cord. Jack Rickaby was refilling his pipe, and staring out into the wet dreariness of the garden.

“Ann, you can bring in the glasses.”

Jesse had risen and was standing before the fire when Ann Wetherell came in with a tray full of glasses, a decanter, and a jug full of hot water. Instinctively her eyes seemed to seek out Falconer. He looked a blind and isolated figure in the midst of these busy, gossiping people.

John Smunk patted Kate’s shoulder.

“Well, my dear, I’ll drink good luck to ye. You’ll do all right, you’ll do.”

The clerk was putting papers back into the bag. Ann’s eyes travelled from face

to face as she went round with the tray. And all these faces struck her as hard and cold, absorbed in the contemplation of the needs of self.

She found herself standing beside Falconer.

“Won’t you take something, sir?”

His blind face turned to her slowly. It was the face of a man who was very lonely and very sad.

“No, nothing, Ann, thank you.”

Her heart went out to him.

“Just a glass of wine, Mr. Jesse.”

He shook his head, and she turned away with the tray. From the far side of the room Jack Rickaby had been watching her with half-closed eyes that expressed nothing. He finished the glass of whiskey and water that he held, put it on the table, wiped his mouth, and relit his pipe with the detached and thoughtful air of a man whose intelligence had been touched by some sudden suggestion. Once or twice he glanced at Kate. She was talking to the corn-merchant, and Rickaby saw how the old rogue’s shrewd eyes glimmered over her with worldly approval. The farmer did not look at Jesse, but he was conscious of the blind man’s bulk shutting off the light of the fire.

CHAPTER XIII.

Spring came to Fox Farm, but not such a Spring as the aged folk knew in their youth, a dream Spring that never existed, save in dreams. The poets tell us that greenness and joy come bubbling in, but what of the sleet in May, the roaring northeasters that lay the daffodils flat, the hard, cold lights that make the fresh colours look metallic. It is doubtful whether anything can be more dreary than a Spring evening, with pale flowers shivering in a cold, windy twilight. One is tempted to hustle the Green Season out, slam the doors to, and sit with Winter by the fire.

Spring came to Fox Farm; and the primroses were out in the orchard, and the Lent lilies in the garden. The first week in April snow fell heavily, and a roaring wind chased melancholy clouds across the sky. Then came five days of sunshine, crude, raw, dusty sunshine that made folk feel that they were being played with. Rain followed—then more sunshine that toned towards evening into those dewy, luminous sunsets that have persuaded poets and painters into idealising Spring. Such evenings are the smiles of a charming and moody woman, but they have served their purpose. The hard folk of the soil are not to be cajoled by them. They know that the weather goddess is waiting for fruit buds to expand and green things to show before she drops a late and malicious frost upon the orchards and the gardens.

Ancient men looked at the blackened potato shoots, and grumbled.

“Goo—Lord; dunno what’s come to t’ weather these years! Why, when I was a boy—! Bless you—April—that was a month, then. Yer could feel things pushin’ the soil aside. Sunshine? We knew what sunshine was! The sun’s been on the booze, and the blessed earth’s got the rot.”

Farmers cursed that Spring. They had too much of everything in the wrong place. Perhaps the only farmer within ten miles of Ashhurst who was not driven to blasphemy by it was Jesse Falconer. He woke early, and heard the birds singing even when a bleak wind was blowing greyness over the world. He knew when the elder sprouted, and when the hedgerows were turning to green clouds. The sparrows had been picking off the crocuses, pulling the buds out of the polyanthus, and dropping straws from the gutters. Windflowers and primroses shivered in the wind. The wry-neck came with its plaintive cry. And the sweet, strange joy of the few warm days passed into Falconer’s blood.

He passed many hours in the garden, sitting, when it was wet, in the ivy-domed arbour and listening to the rattle of the rain on the leaves. The perfume of growth ascended into his nostrils. He imagined the flowers on the wild banks, and they were more beautiful to his imagination than they were in reality. Memories kept time with

the dial of the days. In his mind-pictures tulips were never so red, myosotis never so blue. Going through the lush-green grass of the orchard, he could smell the faint, sad fragrance of primroses, and he would bend down and touch the flowers with his hands. Even when the snow came and flattened the daffodils, and the wind broke the hyacinths, he was spared the spoiling of many illusions. He could not see how grey the sky was, though he might miss the warmth of the sunlight. The song of a thrush at evening gave him visions of a tranquil and golden west.

The breath of beauty that had touched him might have been traced to a certain red-lipped mouth. Nothing reawakens a man's joy in the strangeness of beauty so quickly as the surge of some great emotion. Jesse had divorced many of his ideals. There were very few things that he believed in, very few truths that he trusted. He believed in the love of his dog, in the certainty of death, in the mind's limitations, in the calm and casual indifference with which Nature honours man. Yet he had begun to believe again in something that his wife had almost destroyed. And since the coming of Spring had coincided with the resurrection of this belief, the glamour of April reasserted itself, and Jesse caught some of the spirit of youth. For to youth the evil and dreary days of the year are exceptions, coincidences, lapses to be overlooked. Hope smiles confidently through Spring chilliness and Summer storms.

Ann Wetherell had become a very great part of Jesse's life. He had begun to live again through her, to receive his impressions of life through the sensitive ether of her senses. In the darkness into which he looked he had seen a mysterious radiance arise like the light of a sacred lamp far down the colonnade of some dark temple.

All the softer touches that a wife might have given to his life, this cottage girl contrived to give in her quiet, gliding way. The details of his existence drifted more and more into her hands. Kate Falconer spent many hours on the farm. She went out more, too, to the houses of country neighbours. Fox Farm seemed to become more and more a place of business to her, and less and less of a home. And into the spaces that she left in Jesse's life, Ann's slim figure glided.

She mended his clothes, read to him whenever she could, and supplemented Kate Falconer's meagre rations with bowls of hot milk, and little secret delicacies of her own contriving. She put fresh flowers in his room, led him about the garden, and forestalled his smaller needs. Whichever way he stretched them, Jesse's blind hands seemed to touch her sympathy and her compassion. The darkness about him was full of her presence.

And Jesse had begun to trust her, timidly, wonderingly, with the cautious delight of a man who had grown sceptical, and shy of his emotions. He asked himself why this girl should trouble to make a difference in his life. He could give her nothing in

return but gratitude. And yet she continued to move softly about him, to minister to him, to flush his blindness with supernatural light. Sometimes Jesse had moments of blank fear. He told himself that all this meant nothing. The girl had a warm heart, and was sorry for his loneliness. Some day she would go away, and the blackness would remain. It could not be that any dear necessity bound them to one another.

One evening, early in May, a man who was sitting on a field-gate near Fox Farm, saw Falconer and Brick pass up the road to Ashhurst. Jesse made a habit of carrying an iron-shod stick, which he used to tap the ground about him if he happened to be in doubt. When they were on the open road together he would often let Brick off the lead, and guide himself by rapping with his stick.

Kate Falconer had driven to see some friends in the neighbourhood of Leatherbridge, and Ann had been left alone in the kitchen. She had taken her work-basket out into the porch, and was sitting on the oak bench, darning stockings, when she heard the farm gate open and close. She knew that the men had gone home, for Jim Purkiss had brought her the stable and granary keys, and she had hung them on a nail behind the parlour door, the place where Kate Falconer had decreed they should be kept.

The appearing of a shabby cloth cap and a cautious profile round the corner of the wood-lodge reminded Ann that she had such a thing as a father. She had vigorously discouraged all promiscuous intercourse between the Fox Farm kitchen and the cottage by the quarry. Sam had sneaked up once or twice, and since he had obtained what he had come for, a portion of his daughter's wages, he had made a pretence of being ready to humour her wishes.

"Well, my dear, a model of industry, as usual!"

He trailed his long legs into the yard, and stood with his hands in his trousers pockets, and a surreptitiously sly smile hanging about the corners of his mouth. It had come to Ann's knowledge that her father had been drinking more heavily of late, but he was one of those lean, hard men whose eye remained bright, and whose skin was free from blotches.

"Well, father?"

She did not betray any pleasure at seeing him. In fact, her grave face was a surface of protest; and since Ann and her work-basket occupied the whole of the bench, and she did not attempt to make room for her father, he had to stand on his dignity under the yew-tree.

"God be blessed for a dootiful daughter."

Ann looked up at him with eyes that were disconcertingly clear and steady.

"You promised you wouldn't come up here."

“Lord, now, did I! That’s a rum promise for a poor ol’ father to have to make! Ain’t I fed and clothed ye all these years?”

“No. Mother did it when she was alive. Afterwards we’ve done it for ourselves.”

Sam Wetherell chucked up his chin, and looked eloquently at the wash-house chimney. But the chimney was irresponsive. It did not reply with a “Well—I never!” and an upthrowing of the hands.

“What do you want, father?”

Sam pulled his cap over one eye.

“What do I want? Ain’t I a daughter livin’ here?”

Ann watched him steadily.

“Talk straight, father; it pays with me. This isn’t my house, and you’ve no right here.”

“Oh, ain’t I!”

“No. And I am not going to give you any more of my money.”

Sam spread his feet, reared, and looked down at her grimly.

“Wait till I ask for’t. How d’you know I want yer money?”

Ann laid a stocking aside, and took up another. Her hands were amazingly deliberate and unflurried. She wished to be rid of her father, and she knew that the simplest way would be to give him money. But the weakness of such a surrender displeased her. Moreover, she knew where that money would find a temporary resting-place.

“Supposing I be hard up, Nan?”

“You always will be.”

“Why? Now tell me why!”

Ann’s mouth paled and hardened.

“You know as well as I do.”

Sam Wetherell swung his body forward from the hips, and stared at her fiercely.

“Look you here—ain’t you no respec’ for your father?”

The silent look she gave him was an answer.

“Yah! What’s the use of havin’ growd up children. I’d like——”

“To thrash me. I know. I’m past that now. Mrs. Falconer will be back any minute.”

She kept her head lowered, and her eyes on her work. Sam’s glare emptied itself on the crown of a comely head. Moreover, it was a fact that he stood in some awe of Kate Falconer. He couldn’t hit her, and that was fatal to all argument.

Sam changed his tone.

“Well, since I ain’t wanted, I’ll clear out. But you’re a hard little devil, Nan; a hard little devil, with a face of brass.”

“No, I’m not, father.”

“Oh, ain’t ye! Of all the cocksure chits——”

She looked up at him quickly.

“Oh, will you go—or shall I have to get up and shut the door on you like a tramp.”

Sam seemed cut to the quick. It was as bad as though a publican had refused to serve him, asserting that he was not sober.

“Well, I’m damned! You’ll never see me inside this yard again.”

He pushed his cap on to the back of his head, spat, and sheered off. Ann’s eyes followed him, a little sadly. Sometimes she was very sorry for the man, though she knew him to be utterly worthless. Much of Wetherell’s life had carried him past forgiveness, and she did not want him hanging about the Farm.

It happened that Falconer returned while Sam Wetherell was talking to Ann under the shade of the old yew. He heard the sound of voices as he came slowly down the garden path, holding Brick by a leather lead, and tapping the box edging with his stick. He reached the gap in the edging that told him where the side path branched off to the ivy-smothered summer-house. Jesse spoke to Brick, and turning aside along the path, he felt his way into the summer-house, and sat down on the bench.

He could still hear the voices drifting from the back of the house, and though he recognised Ann’s voice, he could only tell that the other was a man’s. Yet it awakened in Jesse a feeling of strange depression, and threw him into a mood that reacted to the vaguest suggestions. A man may know that his prejudices are illogical, and yet he feels them all the more keenly. Often they are nothing more than the primitive sex instincts, refined and subtilised into delicate sentiments. The voice of the man who talked to Ann was a coarse voice, harsh and resonant. It might have been the voice of one of the farm labourers, but Jesse could not recognise it as such. All he knew was that it filled him with vague discontent, and resentment. He was not pleased that Ann should talk to any male thing that came to the door. When a man is blind, and at a disadvantage, his very prejudices become more sensitive. Nor was it impossible that a thought struck across Jesse’s mind, declaring that this girl might have a lover.

And since a man is often foolishly reticent over any inclination towards jealousy, Jesse said nothing to Ann Wetherell about the voice that he had heard. Yet it continued to resound in the darkness about him, an absurd discord that filled him

with a sense of incompleteness and unrest.

CHAPTER XIV.

A girl and a lad lay in the sunlight among the flowering gorse about Pool Castle. It was a love-affair on the lad's part, but the girl was a masterful young person who condescended to be stared at and adored.

Three years ago the lad and the girl had fought over some insolence on the lad's part, and Slim Wetherell—like an over-confident young dog—had been put to shame by the girl's courage. Miss Ida Marchant's superior prowess, the wiriness of her forearms, and the sharpness of her nails, had compelled Slim to grant her a grudging reverence. None the less he had hated her for her laughing insolence and her sharp wit, and because her eyes had mocked him whenever they had met on the road between Willow End and Ashhurst.

Then a strange change had fallen upon the crudities of their antagonism. Miss Ida Marchant's skirts had lengthened towards her ankles, and there was more mystery in the management of her hair. She was an alert, tall, brown-eyed girl, thin and very strong, with a mass of rust-red hair that revelled in strenuous disorder. Her short, sharp nose, and her big mouth were mischievous and provocative. The freckled roundness of her face caught a quick, high colour when she ran, or when she was excited.

Slim had noticed a marvellous change in her and in himself. He remembered that he had been first struck with it one particular Sunday when he had seen Ida Marchant in a longish, white frock, and a black hat trimmed with roses. She had worn gloves, too, and carried an umbrella. A kind of breathlessness had seized on Slim. He had stared at her, and wondered what had become of the long-legged, romping, impertinent past.

From that moment his fear of Miss Ida Marchant became quite a different species of fear. Her cheekiness, her sharp tongue, the insolent way her eyes had put him aside, these tricks of hers that had made the boy in him hate her, changed suddenly into characteristics that piqued and drew him. He began to feel that it was a great thing to be noticed by this girl, even though she used her mischievous tongue on him. He conceived a grim desire to impress her with a sense of his own importance. And the fact that Ida Marchant was not to be impressed filled Slim with disgusted anger. He called her a "cheeky beast" to himself, and yet grovelled more ardently before her genius for making him look contemptible. This girl was the very first being who had made the lad discontented with himself. His desire to shine before her had filled him with an absurd craze for proving that he was a very devil of a fellow, and no fool.

Slim lay with his forearms crossed under his chin, his cap over one eye, and a piece of grass between his teeth. He was staring morosely at the girl who had stretched herself under the shade of a gorse bush, and was watching the white, piled-up clouds as though she had forgotten the existence of such a creature as Slim Wetherell. The lad had been making ferocious efforts to seem magnificent. And Miss Ida Marchant had laughed him into silence.

Presently she turned on her side and looked at Slim as she lay, and her brown eyes had a keen, quizzical brightness that made young Wetherell blink. He had grown rapidly in the last few months, the sleeves of his jacket showed lengths of bony wrist, and his trousers seemed unable to decide whether they were the genuine article, or merely elongated knickers. Slim was at the raw stage when a lad is both shy and aggressive. He had not thought so well of himself since he had come to know this girl better.

Her mouth was half contemptuous, and half amused.

“You’re a fine good liar, ain’t you!”

“Me——?”

“Had a licking lately?”

He looked at her with dour disgust.

“Oh, shut it.”

“I should like to see my dad thrashing me!”

“It ’ud do you good.”

She plucked grass and laughed.

“Fancy a lad o’ your size loafing about, and being smacked by his dada!”

Slim scrambled into a sitting position, and hugged his knees ferociously. This girl had a detestable knack of rubbing the truth into a chap. She had told Slim things that he had told only to his secret self, and that did not make them any the more pleasant.

“What be you always crabbing a chap for?”

“Sure, it might do you a bit of good. Why don’t you learn to work?”

“Work!”

He mouthed the word as though it were a piece of gristle.

“Yes, work.”

“Ain’t been taught nothing.”

“Oh, you silly kid.”

Slim frowned, and hugged his knees.

“Jolly easy to talk. You wait. You don’t know what’s inside o’ me—yet.”

“Poor stuff.”

“Yah—I tell you I could do things as would make folks jump.”

He tried the air of a desperate dog. But the quizzical eyes kept him under observation.

“What sort of things?”

“Woo—break into houses; I know a thing or two. I’ve got something inside of me.”

She burst out into hearty, healthy, scornful laughter.

“I never! Break into houses! I’d like to be in the house you broke into. I’d frighten you into a fit.”

Slim protruded a ruffian’s jaw.

“It ’ud be blood—bl-l-lood—I tell ye.”

“Oh, you ninny!”

“I’d just cut yer throat—ssst—like that.”

She sat up sharply, and looked at him with a sudden fierce seriousness. Slim’s boasting had brought them both to grave issues.

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I!”

“No, because you’re a coward.”

“Tell me another!”

“Because you’re a coward. That’s what’s wrong with you.”

He dashed a retort at her.

“You’re a liar!”

“No, I ain’t.”

“Yes, you are.”

She turned over on her knees, and went close to him, and stared him in the face.

“You’re a coward.”

“And you’re a liar.”

“Look me in th’ eyes. You can’t.”

“Bet I can.”

“Do ’t then.”

Their white and ridiculously fierce young faces were within a foot of one another. Slim tried to glare the truth into confusion. But the girl’s eyes would not flinch or flicker. Slim’s lids were the first to show a flutter of indecision.

“Silly rot!”

“There—see; you can’t do it!”

“Shut up.”

“Say you’re a coward.”

“Shan’t.”

“Say it, or I’ll never speak to you agen.”

Slim tried the tired air of “Oh, these fools of women.”

“All right, I’m a coward. There!”

“Mean it?”

“Yes.”

Ida Marchant subsided and sat regarding him with something akin to motherliness in her eyes. She appeared to be thinking out Slim’s case with thoroughness and penetration.

“Yes, that’s just what’s wrong with you. It’s cowardice.”

“There be lots o’ things I ain’t afraid of.”

“I dare say. You go sneaking round people’s orchards in the dark, and pulling folks’ belongings to pieces when no one’s about, and you just think that fine. But it isn’t. It’s the slinking sort of a thing a coward would do.”

Slim’s eyes gleamed sulkily.

“I’ve said it. Why don’t you shut up?”

“Because it might do you a power o’ good. You ought to be grateful to me for taking the trouble.”

She rose with perfect serenity, smoothed her skirt, put on her hat, and looked about her as though Slim Wetherell did not exist. The lad sat still, but the corner of an eye watched the girl’s skirt. She waved to someone who was passing along the road.

“There’s Sarah Millar. I’ll be going.”

Slim remained silent. A struggle was going on within him. Suddenly he looked up.

“I say—Ida——”

“What?”

Already she was pushing through some of the furze bushes that overgrew the path.

“Suppose I say it’s reely true?”

“What’s true?”

“That I be a coward.”

She turned sharply and looked at him, and her brown face caught the sunlight. There was no mischief in her eyes.

“Well, get up and be different.”

Slim got up—and fidgeted.

“Should you like me a bit better?”

“Like you, silly? What’s that got to do with it? But if I were you, I wouldn’t be

you—that's all.”

And she left him to puzzle it out.

Slim idled home in a state of profound and boyish self-discontent. Things had so happened that this tease of a girl had awakened the lad's self-consciousness, and with the awakening had come those introspective moods that bring humiliation and pain even to a rough boy. Slim saw dimly that he was a mean, slinking young beast, and that his malicious escapades were nothing much to boast of. Ida Marchant had shown hearty contempt for his sneaking adventures. She had insisted that he was a coward. And when Slim came to face the matter, he was compelled to agree with her.

Drat it! What could he do to prove himself to be something of a man? He looked round on life, the sordid, loafing, brutal life that he knew, and fell abruptly into that black hole—a sense of his limitations. Above his little horizon loomed the figure of his father, tyrant and bully, cadger and sot.

Slim felt bitter.

“It's all along o' him,” he said to himself. “What can a chap do? I don't know nothing. He won't let a chap know nothing. Durn it, I'll go for a sodger!”

The idea pleased him. It brought back a little of his swagger, with visions of a red coat, a dandy cane, and parades through Ashhurst on a Sunday. Sam Wetherell would have to respect the dignity of a Queen's uniform. And a soldier could not be called a coward. That red coat would crush all carping criticism.

“I'll go for a sodger. What'll Ida Marchant say to that!”

He came up the road with his chin in the air, shoulders squared, and a stiffer bone in his back.

“Slim.”

The harsh twang of his father's voice caught him in the flush of his martial moments.

“Slim.”

“I'm 'ere.”

“Where've you bin, hey?”

Sam Wetherell came out of the rickety wood-shed that was patched with rusty tin plates and odd boards from sugar boxes. He was in one of his bad moods, when the bully was rampant in him.

“Where've you bin?”

“Down the road.”

“Come here, you lazy young hound. I'll give ye somethin' t' think of.”

All Slim's bitter hatred of his father rushed suddenly to a climax, and his dread of

the man made this hatred ten times more vicious. The terrorised and misused self in him sprang up and uttered a savage cry. The young blood in him seethed into revolt. Ida Marchant's taunts came to him, and seconded him in his attitude of "fists up."

"You let me alone."

"Wha-a-at!"

Sam reared at the snarl of defiance in the lad's voice.

"You let me alone."

Sam made a grab at his son's collar. There was a scuffle, a wild interchange of kicks and blows, and then Slim found himself lying on his face and being pounded by Sam Wetherell's heavy boots.

The lad wriggled aside in a frenzy of fear and of fury. An ash-stake lay in the doorway of the wood-shed, and Slim grabbed it and scrambled to his feet. He dodged Wetherell, turned, and swung the ash-stake with both hands. The blow caught Sam over the left eyebrow, split the skin, and sent him reeling.

Slim had one glimpse of his father's face, and that one glimpse was enough for him. He dropped the stake, and fled for his life, half leaping, half charging through the hedge into the road. Wetherell was after him with the silent, blanched fury of a man who was more than capable of committing murder.

Slim ran for his life. He went up hill towards Ashhurst with those furious feet pounding at his heels. They passed some children who screamed and fled into the ditch. Wetherell had not uttered a word. His silence was the silence of a man who was ready to kill.

But youth was served, and Slim outdistanced his father up the long slope of the hill.

Wetherell was panting, and the blood ran into his left eye. He shouted after Slim. "I'll catch ye before night. By God, don't you forget it!"

Slim fled on, knowing that his father had shouted no mere threat.

The square, stunted chimneys of Fox Farm rose above the green of the hedgerows, red pillars seen against the blue. A turn in the road had hidden Wetherell, and Slim saw a chance of throwing him off the trail. He scrambled over a gate into a field, and ran along the hedge in the direction of Fox Farm.

Ann had flashed across his mind, and for the moment he had a queer memory of once having fled thus to his mother. He panted to put himself at a distance from his father's fury, and he ran for the farm like a rabbit to a warren. Not a soul was to be seen when he came to the farm buildings and the rickyard. For an instant he thought of hiding in one of the barns, but the prospect of being alone scared him. He wanted to be near some human thing that might stand between him and his father.

Ann was in the kitchen, sewing, when the back door opened cautiously, and Slim came in. The lad's white face and the way he panted for breath reminded Ann of the day when he had brought the news of Falconer's accident.

"Nan, he's fair mad—and he's after me."

She sprang up, the red petticoat she was hemming dropping to the floor.

"What's the matter, Slim?"

"Dad started on me, and I hit him over th' head with a stick. He's after me—up the road. I cut across the fields. I'll never go home no more."

Slim had left the back door open, and Ann closed it, and put up the bar. She was alone in the house, for Falconer was out on the Ashhurst road, and her mistress down the fields.

Slim was all of a quiver.

"Don't let him come at me, Nan."

"That I won't."

"Maybe he won't think of comin' here."

Ann went down the passage, and turned the key in the lock of the front door. She was returning to the kitchen when she heard heavy footsteps in the yard. Someone hammered on the door, and she could catch the sound of heavy breathing.

"You there, Nan?"

Wetherell tried the door, and found it barred. Ann had slipped into the kitchen. Slim had hidden himself in one of the ingle-nooks so that he could not be seen from the window.

"Ssh!"

Ann went slowly to the back door.

"Who's there?"

"That you, Nan?"

"Is it you, father?"

"Young Slim here?"

"Slim?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Sure?"

"What should Slim be here for?"

"I've got somethin' t' say to the young devil. Open the door! I'll show ye the mark he's med on me."

Ann was silent a moment.

"I shan't let you in, father. You're breaking your promise."

“Promise be damned! Nice lot o’ dootiful kids I’ve got. You open that door.”

“If you don’t go, I’ll call Mr. Jesse. He’s in the front room.”

Wetherell answered with a snarl. He kicked the door, and then Ann heard him go stamping across the yard.

Ann waited awhile before she slipped the bar, opened the door cautiously, and went out into the yard. Sam Wetherell might be hiding, and waiting to burst out on her. But she saw no sign of him save a few drops of blood upon the bricks. Her father had gone.

While Ann was in the yard Falconer came to the front door and found it locked. He felt for the iron bell-pull, discovered it, and was about to ring when he held his hand and stood listening to sounds that came from within the house.

Jesse heard whispering voices, and then the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs. They seemed to go right up into one of the attics and to descend again almost immediately. There was more whispering, and Jesse heard someone go out by the back door. Jesse hesitated, and then turned back into the garden, pulling Brick after him by the lead. He made his way to the ivy-covered summer-ouse, and sat down on the bench with the look of a man who had overtaxed his strength. And Brick, understanding something and nothing, licked his master’s hands.

Presently Jesse heard the key turned in the front door, but for the moment he felt loath to enter his own house.

CHAPTER XV.

Jesse said nothing to Ann concerning the locked door and the sounds that he had heard in the house. He was curt and strange with the girl when she came to meet him in the passage.

“Will you have your tea, Mr. Jesse?”

“Yes. You can bring it in.”

She looked with quick surprise into his blind face, for Falconer’s voice seemed to thrust her aside. She had meant to tell him all about Slim and her father, but Jesse had the air of a man who meant to be left unmolested. Ann felt a momentary bewilderment. She recoiled upon herself, realising that Falconer might be tired and out of temper. He had entered the house half an hour after Slim had left it, and it never occurred to Ann that the episode had come within his ken.

She laid the table in silence, putting everything well within his reach, and watching him with an expression of anxious wonder. It struck her that he looked tired, and a little morose as he sat with Brick on his knees, and fondled the dog’s ears. She decided that the mood might be beyond her horizon. Possibly he was busy with some deep thought, for the books in the cupboard beside the fireplace had impressed Ann with a sense of the profundity of Falconer’s learning. She looked on him as a wise man whose mind was busy in the depths of the darkness.

As she sat in the kitchen, hemming the red petticoat, her thoughts were drawn away from Jesse to the cottage by the quarry. Ann was troubled by Slim’s quarrel with his father. The lad had sworn that he would never go home again, and Ann had climbed to her attic, taken ten shillings from the old black purse she kept in a drawer, and given the money to Slim. She had advised him to go to Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes, at Furze Hall. That severe but eminently just old gentlewoman had an absolute genius for dealing with the minor social problems of the neighbourhood. True, some of her influence was marred by her husband, who was a gabbler and a fool, but Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes was a woman who triumphed because of her ponderous earnestness. She was so serious that lighter people gave way as before a something that was inevitable. The neighbourhood had gauged her persistence. She would go on uttering the same phrases, and performing the same evolutions with the patience of an old brown bear in a cage. Such characteristics count in the world. Strength is sometimes a matter of inspiring a sense of weary impotence in others. They learn that it is less boring to surrender than to resist.

Ann’s restlessness increased as she sat alone in the kitchen. She felt that she must go down to the cottage and find out if anything further had happened. It would

not take her much more than half an hour. She would ask Mr. Jesse to let her go before Kate Falconer returned.

Ann put her work aside and went into the living-room to clear away tea. Falconer was smoking by the open window. He had Brick on his knees.

“Would you be wanting me for half an hour, sir?”

“No.”

“Might I run down home a moment?”

“Go, by all means.”

His curtness cut away her impulse to explain. She looked at his half-averted and irresponsive profile, and felt vaguely pained. This hardness in Jesse was strange to her, but for the moment her more urgent thoughts carried her towards the quarry cottage.

“Thank you, Mr. Jesse.”

He did not speak again, and she went out wondering what this reticence meant.

Jesse’s mood was both simple and complex. He was suffering from the sense of disgust that catches a man in the thick of a storm of jealousy, and tempts him to sneer at himself for idolising some chit of a girl who is ready to romp with any rough lad who catches her under a hedge. Jesse—in his blindness—had stumbled the more clumsily upon suspicion. The very darkness about him seemed to intensify the emotions that had been stirred in him, and the inward suffering was the more detestable and keen.

His common-sense strove to get a grip of the matter, and to lift him out of the slough in which a man’s worst passions may flounder. But jealousy and self-disgust speak crudely and brutally at such times. All the more delicate tones and tints are swept away. That strong thing—sex—breaks to the surface, and its great arms crush and bruise the god in man.

Even in the thick of his uglier emotions, Jesse was able to feel that any marring of his belief in the girl would mean nothing less to him than a disaster. Through Ann he had begun to live anew. Her senses might have been wedded to his in a mystical marriage that was sacred. It did not help when he told himself that nothing was more natural than that this girl should have a lover, and that he—Jesse Falconer—had no claim to quarrel with such a fact. In that hour he discovered the girl had become infinitely dear to him; that she was a vital necessity, and that it horrified him to feel the insurgent ugliness of a vicarious passion. He wanted Ann untouched and untrammelled. He wanted her in the darkness about him, a sweet movement, a gliding tenderness that no breath of any impurity could touch. And yet he felt the lamentable incongruity of his own desires. Youth went towards youth. What right had

the self in him to cry out against nature?

Ann had slipped off her apron, and without waiting to put on a hat, had hurried off to the Quarry cottage. She went by way of the rickyard and the fields, for Wetherell's garden joined one of the Fox Farm meadows, and one could climb over a twisted ash stump that served as a kind of stile. It was one of the few warm evenings in May, and faint wisps of white mist were gathering in the valleys. The meadows were covered with cloth-of-gold, for each thread of grass seemed to have a buttercup to gild it. Spring was in one of its lush, green, glimmering moods. Oak buds were expanding. The snakesheaded bracken was thrusting through amid the blue bells and the snow-white stitchwort. Each tree had its lyric note. The wooded valleys thrilled with the singing of birds.

Ann made her way across the fields, and met nothing but a couple of cows. As she neared the cottage she saw the grey, bramble-grown deeps of the quarry lit by the yellow flower torches of the broom.

She found Rose and the two younger children at tea. They had been out in the woods, and knew nothing of the fight between Slim and his father. Neither of them had returned, and Rose, after waiting an hour, had given the youngsters their tea.

Ann glanced round the cottage and saw that it was fairly clean and tidy. She took Rose out into the garden, and told her what had happened, and Rose's fat placidity proved of value at such a crisis.

"I'm not afeard of the old man," she said, "'cept when he be too far gone. If Slim don't show himself, it'll make things quieter."

Ann mused a moment.

"It will be better for the lad not to come back. He get's no chance here."

Rose agreed. She appeared to have thriven upon her responsibilities.

"Dad's not so bad if you show him a smile, and manage to give him plenty o' food. He gives me money reg'lar."

Ann's eyes betrayed surprise.

"Yes, he does. Me and dad always did hit it, didn't we? I make a bit of fuss of him. And it goes a long way with a man."

Ann felt comforted by Rose's fat and buxom philosophy. She kissed her, and started homewards, thinking that it would be better for Slim and his father if the lad never went back.

Dusk had come and a heavy dew was falling, and the west was a gorgeous lure. Ann, hurrying home under the shade of one of the great thorn hedges that had not been cut that winter, overtook two people who were walking slowly on the other side of the hedge. She heard their voices when she was some thirty yards away, nor

did they assume any unusual significance for her till she had drawn somewhat closer.

“Don’t do that, I tell you!”

“You don’t care, then?”

“If I did——”

“Oh, damn it, Kate, look here. Is it human nature——?”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“I’m not the man to go trotting round after you like a woolly lamb.”

Ann stood still. The high hedge ran north and south, and a few yards further on was an arch-like opening framed by the trunks and boughs of two straggling thorns. The arch was full of the yellow glow of the western sky. And looking obliquely through it Ann could see the black and sharply-outlined figures of the two whose voices she had heard. The man had caught the woman by the arm. They remained for a moment, tense, black and motionless. Then the man kissed the woman. They moved on across the golden arch, and disappeared, and their voices died to fierce and intense whispers.

Ann stood bewildered. They had neither seen nor heard her, and for the instant she felt a rush of shame. If she had known—! But then—! Her thoughts broke into a confused swirl. They were like autumn leaves blown by the wind, rushing hither and thither, tumbling and fluttering in perplexed eddies. She pressed her hand to her eyes, listened, and then walked rapidly away across the field.

When Ann reached the further hedge she was hot and flushed, and possessed by a sense of infinite discomfort. Her nature was so essentially a generous nature that there was more bewilderment than active condemnation in her mood. Even her intuition seemed to stand and stare. She was conscious of having stumbled upon something that had so startled her that it had taken away her power to think.

She must get back to the farm before Kate Falconer returned. Nor did Ann realise for the moment all that was implied by this first flash of determinative volition. No sooner had she started to follow the dark curvings of the hedge than the mere physical movement gave rise to an equal activity of mind. One forward gleam, and the whole picture revealed itself. She saw Falconer—blind and alone—waiting in the dark house up yonder with nothing that remained loyal to him save his dog. Ann’s vision may have been a prejudiced vision, but that did not prevent her holding her breath when a sense of her own responsibility caught her as she ran. She stopped as though a voice had called her through the dusk.

If this should prove true—if she was convinced of its truth—what then? Had Falconer any glimmerings of suspicion? The feeling of bewilderment returned to her. Her compassion for the man’s blindness was like a strong wind blowing through the

vague darkness of her impulses.

Ann was breathless when she reached the farm, and her shoes and the hem of her skirt were soaked with dew. No light shone in any of the windows. Darkness was settling over the buildings, and bats were skimming to and fro. Ann hurried in and lit a candle in the kitchen. She passed on into the living-room and saw Falconer's head and shoulders dimly outlined against the window.

There was something about the man's figure that spoke of infinite loneliness. Ann's heart went out to him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Jesse?"

He did not turn his head.

"Nothing, Ann, thank you."

She was struck by the tired tranquillity of Jesse's voice. It was the voice of a man who had been suffering, and had come to a patient understanding of pain.

Ann had lit the brass lamp and put it on its bracket in the stone-paved passage, when Kate Falconer returned. She came in by the garden door, and stood the thistle spud that she carried in the iron stand beside the bench.

"Ann——"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You can have supper ready by eight. Bring the lamp in."

Ann wondered at this woman, as she lit the lamp, and turned the cogs of the wick. Kate Falconer had re-entered the house as though nothing of any significance had happened out yonder. But Ann had the narrowness of youth, and lacked the broader, human vision. She could not look into the heart of this vigorous and ambitious woman, or realise that Jesse Falconer had proved himself a weakling in the eyes of his wife. Kate had much to justify her. A man may commit sins that are more fatal than adultery and theft. Sometimes a woman can forgive him these, but a woman of Kate Falconer's calibre could not suffer a man who seemed a fool.

"Ann——"

"Yes?"

"Bring me a candle, will you?"

They met in the passage, and Ann's eyes swept her mistress' face as the lighted candle passed from hand to hand. Ann's eyes discovered nothing, save that Kate Falconer looked harder and more resolute than usual. There was no trembling of the hand that carried the candle. Jesse's wife went up the stairs with the air of a woman who had not been shaken by any deep emotion.

CHAPTER XVI.

Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes was at dinner when Slim Wetherell pulled the Gothic bell-handle in the red brick porch of Furze Hall. A barbaric simplicity of purpose had carried Slim up the broad drive with its gorgeous rhododendrons and choice conifers, and round the sacred circle of exquisite turf to the front of the great house. He was conscious of inward squirms of nervousness, but the insolence of ignorance brought him to the front door.

Thomas was busy with an entrée dish, and the boy in buttons confronted Slim in the porch. They stared at each other for some seconds before Slim began to grin. It was superfluous for Reggie Tufton to puff himself out and look so absurdly important. Had not he and Slim once upset old Parkin's water-butt into his cellar, and stretched barbed wire after dark across the posts by the church? Reggie Tufton's presence as the page at Furze Hall gave a touch of comforting familiarity to rather formidable surroundings.

"Hallo, Reg."

"Back door, please."

"I say—shut it. Don't you put on airs with me."

The lad in buttons maintained a snub-nosed and resolute aloofness. He took his dignity with determination. It was an impertinent thing for young Slim Wetherell to ring the front bell when Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes was dining, and to tell her liveried man-servant not to put on airs.

"Back door. Round by the stables, and don't you forget it!"

Slim seemed puzzled. He gathered that there must be some solid reason for this very grave display of dignity.

"I say, Reg, I want to see t' old lady."

Mr. Tufton appeared on the point of saying "rot!" He restrained himself, and was haughty.

"You go round to the back door, Slim Wetherell."

"What for? Can't you cut and tell——"

"Look 'ere, nip it."

"Go on, you needn't be stuck up because you've got a row o' silver bullets down your front!"

Reginald was about to close the door on Slim, when Thomas appeared in the hall.

"What's this, what's this? Can't have all this chattering. Mrs. Lowndes wants to know who it is, making a disturbance at this hour."

The butler was an astute and busy little man who appeared to be hovering perpetually on the edge of a smile that never matured. He was sallow, sleek, and beautifully shaved. His eyes had a twinkle in them, and Slim took a fancy to Thomas.

“Beg pardon, sir; come up to see the lady. Sorry to be givin’ trouble.”

Thomas completely effaced Master Reginald.

“Well, there’s a back door, young man. But what is it? Sharp’s the word.”

“M’ father’s bin knockin’ me about. I thought that maybe Mrs. Lowndes ’ud do some’at for me.”

Thomas gave a unique rendering of a grin.

“Indeed! What name?”

“Wetherell.”

“Just wait there a moment.”

He marched off in his dapper, gliding way, and disappeared into a room at the far end of the great hall. Slim and Reginald Tufton ignored each other. A dignity that had been trifled with showed its displeasure by remaining portentously silent.

“Well, Thomas, what is it?”

Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes was one of those women who are fat without appearing so. She had a presence, and a preference for blacks and purples. Her grey hair, waved back from her forehead, gave a gleam of softness to the austerity of her face. She had a nose of the Iron Duke order, and the clear and ruddy skin of an active woman who loved the open country. There was something final and complete about her, a decisive, decalogic air that left nothing to chance.

Thomas cleared his throat.

“It is a lad, madam, who says that his father has been ill-treating him. He has come to the Hall for help.”

Mrs. Lowndes broke bread.

“What name, Thomas?”

“Wetherell, madam.”

Mrs. Lowndes said “ah.” She meditated, and looked across the table at her husband with eyes that did not appear to see anything of particular importance.

“Tell the lad to wait in the hall, Thomas. I will see him in the library after dinner.”

So Slim sat on one of the heavy oak chairs in the hall, and absorbed a sense of his own insignificance. He had never been in such a house before. The solemnity and the spaciousness of the hall reminded Slim of Ashhurst church. There was mystery here, and a reticence that he did not understand. The carpet had made him feel that he ought to take off his boots; and the furniture bewildered him. Slim had learnt to use his eyes, but there were so many strange things here to observe that he felt

crushed by mere weight of numbers. There were birds in glass cases, trophies of arms, antlers, oak chests and cabinets, an old French clock, settles, chairs, and a huge fire-place with an oak log resting on iron dogs. Then—the portraits on the walls. These painted folk had fixed their eyes on Slim with insolent unanimity. They stared, and stared, and stared, till Slim felt tempted to put his tongue out at the lot.

Oppressed by the massive dignity of the place, Slim screwed his mouth up, and before he had realised the enormity of the thing he had whistled the first few notes of “Put me among the Girls!” Slim was shocked by his own absent-mindedness. The whistle died into a silence that seemed packed with thunder. The painted people on the walls stared at him accusingly.

“All right, I did ut! Y’ needn’t stare so!”

He twisted his cap, and began to dust his clothes, remembering that he still carried some of the dirt from the cottage garden. A door opened suddenly, letting yellow light into the hall, and giving Slim a glimpse of the Furze Hall dinner table. A magnificent figure swept before him with a rustling sound that made Slim shiver. Then he saw Thomas’ white shirt-front, and the crisis was at hand.

“Now, my lad.”

And Slim was taken before the “magnificent presence” that filled the library of Furze Hall.

Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes had a note-book on her knee. The light from a red-shaded standard lamp fell on the grey waves of her hair and the gold rims of the pince-nez perched upon her nose. She looked Slim over, and Slim felt less than nothing. He had put on a clean collar for Miss Ida Marchant’s benefit, but his father’s fingers had crumpled it into dirty linen. And Slim was sure that this imposing old lady had stared for half a minute at the gaps between his boot-tops and the frayed edges of his trousers. Those trousers had been a woe to him for weeks. He had adjusted them till no more adjustment was possible, and those grey worsted socks grinned in the interspaces.

“You are Samuel Wetherell’s eldest boy?”

Slim dropped his cap, went red, and nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I remember. We had your case before us some years ago. So your father is still ill-treating you. Now, Wetherell, give me a full account of your home life and your father’s habits.”

Slim took a deep breath, caught Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes’ eye, and was put to confusion. An hour ago he would have thought it a trifling affair to have to tell an old lady what a beast his father was. But Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes seemed different. Even

the multitude of books about made Slim nervous.

Mrs. Lowndes held up her pencil.

“Now, Wetherell, take time. There is nothing to be afraid of. I want the whole truth.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now—begin again.”

It was like witness and barrister. Mrs. Lowndes elucidated information, jotted down notes, and hunted Slim’s home-life into all its various and unsavoury corners. Her insistence upon detail astonished the lad. He wondered what it all had to do with the pint-pots at the Red Lion and the buckle-end of his father’s belt.

At the end of half an hour Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes seemed satisfied. She had decided to do her best for Slim. And she rang the bell.

Thomas appeared.

“Yes, madam?”

“Send Tuffon to the stables to tell Gates to come to me at once.”

“Yes, madam.”

And Mr. Gates was sent for.

The boy in buttons found him in the harness-room, polishing the metal work on a horse-collar.

“The old woman wants you—up at the house.”

“Whart?”

“The old woman wants you.”

“Me! Now?”

“Yes, buck up.”

Mr. Gates looked disgusted. He was in rough breeches and grey shirt, with a stumpy black pipe stuck in one corner of his mouth.

“Darn it, what’s she want me for at this time o’ day?”

“Dunno,” said Reggie.

“Blessed if I don’t give her a bit o’ my mind.”

“You try it, and see.”

Mr. Gates proceeded to put himself in order, and he was marvellously quick about the change. For a man who had a grievance he meant to air he appeared to be in too much of a hurry. Mr. Gates was quite a great person in Ashhurst. Dressed in well-cut muffi he looked like a second-hand copy of a gentleman, with the title erased. Gossips had agreed to admire his “clear cut, haristocratic features.” Yet in the presence of Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes this great man had the air of a colour-sergeant in the presence of his colonel.

“Ah, Gates, I believe you said something to me a little while ago—about your being able to find work for a second lad about the stables.”

Gates stood stiffly to attention.

“I did, ma’am.”

“Very well; I am engaging this lad on trial.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

“You will instruct him.”

“As you wish, ma’am.”

Gates’ eyes travelled momentarily over Slim’s figure. But he refrained from betraying any expression of disapproval.

“And—Gates.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You and your wife have a little room that is unoccupied.”

“We have, ma’am.”

“You will take Wetherell as a lodger, at my expense, until other arrangements may be arrived at.”

Gates looked uncomfortable.

“Certainly, ma’am. But if I might say a word—Mrs. Gates—ma’am——”

“This room of yours is unoccupied?”

“It is, ma’am.”

“And you have no children.”

“That is so, ma’am.”

“Very well then. This lad will occupy that room.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

“And if Mrs. Gates has anything to say, tell her to come and see me.”

Gates gave a bob of the head. He glanced at Slim, and his eyes hinted at many emotions.

Mrs. Lowndes turned to the lad.

“Now, Wetherell, I am going to give you an opportunity. You will have three shillings a week, and your board and lodging to begin with. And, Gates, send Wetherell down to Vintness’ to be measured for some stable clothes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As I have observed, Wetherell, I am providing you with an opportunity. See that you make use of it. Do everything that Mr. Gates tells you. And Gates, you will have that bed made up at once.”

“I will, ma’am.”

“Mr. Gates, Wetherell, is the best man with horses in the county. And he is a man

who will stand no nonsense. You obey him, and you will not regret it. I will communicate with your father. I do not think we shall have any further trouble in that direction.”

Slim picked up his cap. Strange things had happened with amazing rapidity, and he was not quite sure for the moment whether he was glad or sorry. But he felt that something was due to the lady.

“I thank you, ma’am. I’ll do my best for ye.”

And Gates marched him out.

Said the wife to her man:

“Well, what next, I wonder! And you stood there and let her do the high and mighty over you! Well, of all the——”

Gates drank his supper beer. Slim Wetherell was in the Furze Hall kitchen, at the mercy of a very merciful and motherly cook. And Mrs. Gates had a reputation. She was a round-backed woman with a “just-what-I-expected” species of stoop. Her head looked as though it had dragged her neck forward, and she poked her chin when she walked. A nose, broad and spreading at the nostrils, gave her the expression of a cow.

Gates had a knowing air.

“The ol’ woman’s a nailer! I don’t grumble. She knows what a man’s worth.”

He was passing Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes’ words over his tongue. “Best man with horses in the county. Stands no nonsense.” No, durn it, he did stand no nonsense. Only, he did wish somehow his wife had a straight back, and no whine.

“Well, I call it ty-rannical. I might have been consulted. And you sit there like a mug, and let anyone pour any stuff they please into you.”

“No, I don’t,” said her man.

“Oh, don’t argufy! Impidence, I call it. Who’s she, I’d like to know, managing my house! I’m as good as her, any day. And you call yourself a Radical—in private—and you let the old Tory——”

“Oh, shut it!”

“That’s right, be nasty. I’ve a good mind to go and tell her what I think.”

“Well, go.”

“I don’t know as I shan’t.”

“I’ll bet you a new temper, you won’t.”

“And why? I’d like to know——”

“Because she’s a bit o’ blood-stock, and you—of all the wind-suckers! Now, don’t you pretend. She’d gallop all over you in ten seconds, and you know it.”

Mrs. Gates accentuated the poke of her chin. Her nose grew broader, her

expression more lugubrious. She relieved her feelings by fussing about the kitchen and making a noise.

“There ain’t no sympathy in this world,” she remarked; “what’s the use of a woman doing anything for a man who hasn’t a bit of pride!”

“You’re a fool,” said her man; “the missus is the finest old cavalry colonel this side o’ London. She knows a good horse, and she knows a good man. She’s got both, see. That shows she’s a woman o’ sense. I’ve got no quarrel with a woman o’ sense.”

His wife sniffed, and proceeded to wash up.

CHAPTER XVII.

Fox Farm had become a place where three people lived together, each holding a secret hidden in the recesses of the heart.

As the days passed, Ann Wetherell became the more troubled by the knowledge that had come to her that night in May. At times she was tempted to doubt the reality of the thing, and to ask herself whether she had not enlarged some piece of fooling into a passion play that had no actual existence. Often she felt mean and ashamed in Kate Falconer's presence, for the elder woman was kind to Ann, and went on living as though the quiet yet busy life of the farm filled all her consciousness. Kate seemed the same hard, practical, and self-assured woman of affairs, saving halfpennies wherever it was possible, and holding the farm hands in the uttermost subjection. Again and again Ann felt that her suspicions were incredible.

As for Jesse, like a man shut up with a wild beast in a dark pit, he had fought his jealousy and had cowed it. At times it whimpered and made a tentative move towards him, but it skulked when he turned on it in wrath.

May had proved a sad month for him in other ways, for he had lost the two men friends who had been left him in the neighbourhood. Bentall had become a bankrupt early in the year, and his friends had shipped him off to Canada. George Molt had died on Whit Monday after a week of desperate anguish, and Jesse had not seen him buried. A sense of the sadness of life had deepened in Falconer, and softened his own instincts. He fed upon the sufferings of these two friends, and the mystical food of pain strengthened him.

Ann found him more gentle and more silent. He was the same man and yet very different, nor could she set the torch of her sympathy upon what had suffered change in him. And yet he appealed to her compassion more than he had ever done in the months that were past. She felt the tragic blindness of his life more keenly since she had become conscious over this other shadow that threatened him. One thing she felt convinced of, that his loneliness had increased. He sat about more in the garden and dreamed, and walked less along the roads.

Falconer was trying to look at life through the girl's eyes, and to eliminate the prejudice of self. He compelled himself to foresee the working of nature in her as a beautiful and reasonable necessity. If youth bent to touch youth, what complaint had he to make? He tried hard to grant Ann a lover, and to promise himself that he would maintain a silent and reverent acquiescence in all that might happen to her by reason of her love.

Kate had troubled herself less and less about her husband. He was one of those

established facts that are not questioned so long as they do not get in the way of progress. Had Kate Falconer interrogated her inmost self, she would have found that Jesse's blindness had not proved to her to be the calamity that a sentimentalist might have imagined. Kate was a shrewd woman, and she showed her shrewdness in the management of the more delicate developments of her life. A woman of less self-restraint might have indulged in a melodramatic assertion of self. She might have wished Jesse away, or have rebelled against being bound to a blind man for whom she no longer cared a jot. Kate Falconer was wiser than that. She saw Jesse's uses, and her inclination was to use him, and to maintain him in a state that promised the least possible expenditure of time and money. She and Jack Rickaby were made of the same stuff. They did not want noise and excitement, and they were reasonable in their demands upon the possibilities of life.

The one thing that invariably angered Jesse was any roughness shown towards his dog. From the very first, Kate had taken a dislike to the mongrel, but was kind to Brick when she saw that it meant humouring Jesse over something that did not greatly matter. Once, in the winter, she had trodden on one of Brick's floppy ears as he lay before the fire, and the dog had jumped up with a yelp and brought Kate to her knees.

"Drat the beast!"

She had picked up a book of Jesse's and thrown it at the dog. And out of this incident had risen a bitter quarrel between her and her husband. The quarrel had showed Kate the one point where she would fail to dominate her husband. She was a sensible woman, and she did her best to tolerate the dog, though to her he was a round-legged and ugly beast whose complacency should have been chastised by the use of a stick.

Yet it was Brick who gave rise to a seemingly trivial incident that caused the first faint crack to appear in the stability of the life at Fox Farm. On the evening of the first Saturday in June Kate was away at Leatherbridge, and Ann had gone shopping at Ashhurst. Jesse, who had been sitting in the garden, was groping in one of the living-room cupboards for a fresh tin of tobacco, when Brick, who was with him, gave a gruff, questioning growl.

Jesse had heard nothing, but the dog was standing with ears pricked, and his muzzle in the air. He trotted out into the passage, stood listening, and then made a rush for the back door that stood open. Jesse heard an unmistakably vicious growl, and then the sound of some movement in the yard.

Brick's voice went up in an agonised yelp that lengthened into a series of broken howls. The pain in the dog's outcry acted on Jesse with extraordinary fierceness. He

went blundering out, knocking the heavy table askew with one thigh, upsetting a chair, and driving one shoulder against the jamb of the doorway. He fought his way through the darkness out into the yard, where Brick was holding up a forepaw, his howls dropping to a complaining whimper.

“Who’s been hurting the dog?”

The yard was empty.

“Speak up—curse you—who is it?”

Jesse swung this way and that, but no one answered him. Brick came limping up on three legs, and Jesse heard the dog whining close to his feet.

“Brick, old man, what is it, then?”

He stretched out his hands, found the dog, and took him up into his arms.

“Who was it, eh? By George, I wish you could speak!”

Brick grew confidential, talking to Jesse as only a well-loved dog can talk, with queer little whines and short sharp barks.

Jesse felt him over. The dog winced slightly when he touched the right fore-leg.

“Ah, that’s it, is it? Stick, I suppose.”

He felt Brick’s leg very tenderly, but could find no sign of a bone being broken. Brick licked Falconer’s hand. He gave a succession of short whines and barks, as though to say, “It’s all right. No great harm done. Sorry I made such a fuss. But a dog does like a bit of sympathy all the same.”

When Ann returned from Ashhurst she found Falconer sitting on the back porch with Brick upon his knees. The anger was still hot in him against the unknown person who had struck the dog. He told Ann what had happened.

She stood very still, looking down into Falconer’s sightless face.

“I wonder who it could have been. Was it long ago, Mr. Jesse?”

“Not more than half an hour.”

“I don’t think it could have been any of the men.”

“No—a tramp more likely.”

“Tramps don’t often come this way, Mr. Jesse. I’ve only had one at the door since I’ve been at the farm.”

Jesse remained silent. His thoughts had left Brick for the moment, and were reaching out towards that creation of his own brain, Ann’s possible lover. A gust of jealousy went through him. It angered him to think that there might be a part of her life which she kept hidden from him—in secret.

Ann bent down and stroked Brick’s head. And in doing so, her face came very near to Jesse’s face.

“Poor old man, then.”

Falconer started. He had not realised that she was so near to him, and the sudden consciousness of her nearness filled him with strange emotion. His hands trembled. And he uttered the thought that for the moment held his heart.

“Ann, if you knew who had struck my dog, you would tell me.”

She looked at Jesse with quick and startled eyes.

“Oh, Mr. Jesse, I would tell you. You know I would tell you.”

“Yes, I know it.”

And he felt that he trusted her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

About three o'clock one Sunday afternoon Slim Wetherell came down the road from Ashhurst, and turned in at the farm-yard gate. Slim's outer man had suffered a transfiguration. He was wearing a pepper and salt serge suit, new boots, a clean and rather lofty collar, and a black tie with a prize-packet pin in it, imitation lapislazuli set in imitation gold. A check cap, two sizes too large for him, had its peak pulled well over his nose. He boasted a rosebud in his buttonhole, and carried a penny cane. In three weeks Slim Wetherell had developed a horsey air, and caught some of the technical jargon that fell forcibly from Mr. Gates' lips.

Ann appeared to have been warned of his coming, for she was waiting for Slim at the gate that led from the garden into the rick-yard, where an old white rose smothered a rotting arch. Ann and her brother looked at each other and smiled. Slim tapped the top rail of the gate with his cane, and tried to rid himself of an embarrassing self-consciousness. He was not wholly at ease in his new clothes.

"Hallo, Nan."

"Hallo."

"Nice day, ain't it?"

She agreed. There was pleasant laughter in her eyes.

"Well, you do look smart!"

Slim accepted the compliment with an affected carelessness. He had gained his first personal glimpse of the pomp and pageantry of life, bought his first little shreds of finery, and was wearing them with secret pride. He had the sum of one shilling and fourpence halfpenny in his pocket, also a packet of cigarettes. The joys of a connoisseur and a capitalist were before him.

"Well, I'm all right," he said.

Ann smiled on him with intent eyes.

"And you like it up at the Hall."

"'Tain't half bad. Mr. Gates and me are getting along prime."

"Slim, I'm so glad," said his sister.

The lad glanced at her with a gleam of benevolent approval. Miss Ida Marchant had given him a more subtle insight into the uses and the virtues of women.

"There's that ten bob you lent me, Nan."

"I don't want it back."

"I'm going to pay it you back. I've made up my mind to do it."

She was surprised, and Slim saw that she was surprised. Probably Ann did not believe him, and he himself had a moment of incredulity after he had uttered the

words. He, Slim Wetherell, promising to pay back the sum of ten shillings!

“Very well, you shall pay it back. But I’m not in any hurry.”

Slim still seemed wrapt in the contemplation of his own amazing virtue. And the most amazing thing of all was that he really meant to pay the money back. It was the soundest and most disinterested resolution he had ever made.

“You’ll be wantin’ the money, Nan,” he said. “I mean to stick on up at the Hall. Work ain’t a bad thing, but, I tell you, it’s the food that’s making me feel a different sort o’ chap. Three good weeks o’ stuffin’, why, it packs you full of pride.”

Ann laughed. But she felt sad over the well-remembered fact that Slim had never had enough to eat. It had been one of Sam Wetherell’s methods of tormenting the boy, refusing to let him begin a meal until the other children had been eating for five minutes.

“Father hasn’t been bothering you, Slim?”

“No, not he. Mrs. Lowndes had a little talk with father. He won’t get a sight o’ my wages.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then Ann said:

“Where are you going, Slim? Not home?”

“Willow End way.”

“Friend down there——?”

Slim tapped the gate with his cane.

“Sort of a friend.”

His casual and mature air, taken with the extreme self-consciousness of the grin he gave her, was enough to enlighten any girl. The buttonhole, the penny cane, and the blue-headed tie-pin shouted the truth.

“Who is it, Slim?”

“What——?”

“You know——?”

He glanced right and left, worked a piece of rotten wood out of the gate with the point of his cane, and approached the affair with mystery.

“Well, I’ll tell you, Nan.”

“Will you?”

“You won’t tell no one else.”

“No.”

He looked at Ann as though he expected her to throw up her hands and exclaim. But Ann did not appear to be so greatly impressed by the confession. She took it with extreme calmness, after the fashion of sisters.

“Ida Marchant isn’t a bad sort of girl.”

“What——!”

“She’s better than most.”

Slim supplied the essential fire.

“She’s a wonder. She makes me feel the size of her thumb!”

Ann said “Oh,” and looked at Slim with a twinkle of interest and affection. Truly, strange words were issuing from the mouth of her thieving and furtive scamp of a brother! She had always doubted whether anything of value could be fashioned out of Slim. But here were signs of an unmistakable regeneration.

“I’m very glad, Slim,” said she; “you’re but a bit of a lad yet, but it won’t do ye no harm.”

Slim tried to look convincingly serious.

“It’s done me good.”

“Ida?”

“She’s took some of the conceit out of me. And then, up at t’ Hall there, first day, I felt I’d give old Gates some lip when he did the high and mighty. But I didn’t. And I like the ’osses, and the yard, and th’ smell o’ the place. Maybe it’s the food too. Rummy—but when I get a good meal inside of me, I feel a different sort of chap. My stumjack was always a-grousin’ and growlin’ down yonder. Seems to me there be a lot o’ good in grub.”

So Slim went on towards Willow End, walking jauntily, but with some haste past the quarry cottage, and keeping an eye fixed on the garden gate. He heard the bark of a black retriever that his father had bought at Leatherbridge a few weeks ago.

“Lie down, will yer, lie down!”

Slim felt the familiar furtive feeling sweep over him at the sound of Sam Wetherell’s bullying blare of a voice. He hurried on past the mouth of the quarry, disowning any inclination he had felt to show off his new clothes before his father.

Willow End was a green and placid place hidden away among dim green meadows. It lay along the bank of a brook where Marsh marigolds blazed in spring, and the purple willowherb and loosestrife in late summer and autumn. Brown water-rats swam in the brook, and lived in the overhanging banks amid the roots of the willows. These tristful trees grew by hundreds about the sleepy meadows, letting their grey-green locks wave in the wind when it blew strongly down the valley. Here and there were aspen groves that would break out into sudden, perturbed mutterings on the stillest day in summer. Westwards the towers of Pool Castle could be seen black and strange against the sunset.

There were cattle in the meadows, fat, glossy, somnolent beasts who stood under the willows and whisked their tails to ward off the flies. Many of the fields

were all tawny and purple with the ripening hay, and the wind would send waves sweeping over the long grass. Willow End itself was a chain of queer cottages strung along a curve of the brook. Some were thatched; others tiled and blazoned with lichens and stone-crops. They were sleepy, small-eyed cottages that seemed to meditate among flowers, for the folk at Willow End were fond of their gardens. In spring the old black soil would be covered with anemones, polyantheses, hyacinths, tulips, and white alyssum, as with sleek and gorgeous damasks. Roses were—just roses. The herbaceous stuff grew rich and strong, blue delphiniums in noble spires, phloxes the colour of plum-juice and of milk. Sleepy, dewy growth seemed everywhere. Willow End had laid itself down in a valley, and let the green foam come plashing against its walls and windows.

An uneasy self-consciousness showed itself in Slim by the time he reached the aspen wood at the western end of the hamlet. He stopped to dust his boots, and seemed concerned about his tie. The brook touched the road here, in the shape of a shallow pool, and Slim took advantage of this Venus' mirror. He bent over his own reflection in the water, took off his cap, dipped a hand and plastered his hair. The lad's elaborate carefulness suggested that the romantic spirit had only waited for its opportunity. Slim's vernal splendour had begun to blossom in three short weeks. The Marchants' cottage was the first on the left as one came from Ashhurst. It had a thorn hedge, white palings in front of the little flower garden, drying-posts, lattices, and a green front door. It was a fat old apple-woman of a cottage, big-bosomed and comely. Its little grey eyes looked at Slim and twinkled from behind a big rose bush and a couple of trimmed yews.

Slim made a call upon his courage. He was hesitating with his hand on the gate in the white fence when he saw a pink thing moving just above the top of the thorn hedge. This pink thing fascinated Slim, and he stood and stared at it as a pious young Jew might have stared at a miraculous flame rising from a burning bush.

“My word——!”

He heard a sound of laughter, and a white figure appeared round the end of the thorn hedge.

“Hallo——”

“Why if it isn't young Wetherell! What are you doing down here at Willow End?”

Slim tapped the fence with his cane. He was conscious of a pair of mischievous eyes that romped all over him from cap to trousers. Miss Ida Marchant took note of every detail—at her leisure. And to Slim it seemed a marvellous and incredible thing that he should be standing within two yards of Ida Marchant on a Sunday afternoon in June. But why it should be so marvellous and so strange, he was at a loss to say.

Now, the girl was on tip-toe with curiosity, but she showed none of her eagerness to Slim. She had heard sensational rumours concerning him, that he had broken his father's head, and been taken into the stables at Furze Hall. The noisy newness of Slim's clothes proved that some phenomenal thing had happened.

"Come for a walk," said Slim, gruff with nervousness.

"Me?"

"Yes. Why not?"

She laughed at him.

"Suppose I'm going for a walk with somebody else."

"But you ain't, are you?"

Miss Marchant resented the insinuation that she was unbesought by multitudes of males.

"I only go out as a great favour. There are such a lot of silly chaps who worry a girl so."

"Of course," said Slim, "I'd count myself lucky. I've come all the way down from Ashhurst."

Slim had lost all his cunning in the presence of his beloved. He was a shorn Samson. He laid his heart bare before Miss Ida Marchant and let her strike where she would.

"Well, I might go as far as Burnt Barn."

Slim made haste to open the gate.

"It be a rare fine day," he said.

"That's news, isn't it!" quoth the girl.

They started off side by side between the sleepy cottages, Miss Marchant silent and demure, with not a single dimple in action. The afternoon was hot and drowsy, and no one seemed in the mood to hang over garden gates and gossip. Sloth possessed Willow End. Even a dog lying near the old pump by the Meeting House got up and scratched himself languidly when necessity bit too fiercely into his skin. There were no loungers on the bench under the big chestnut by the inn.

Miss Marchant had opened a pink sunshade, and she was wearing white cotton gloves. Slim looked askance at this splendour, and a blight of shyness fell upon him. He twiddled his cane, glanced at the girl's demure profile out of the corner of one eye, and tried to think of something to say. This decent, sedate, Sabbath silence oppressed him. He would have given sixpence to have heard Ida Marchant break out into a giggle.

"Cutting hay yet?"

"'Tisn't ripe."

“Oh.”

“No.”

“I see.”

Slim felt, “Oh—drat it!” His own ineffectualness annoyed him. Had he dressed with such nicety, and trudged all the way from Ashhurst in order to make fatuous remarks about hay! He must make an effort to break the spell.

“Well, how are you, Ida?”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m very well, thank you, Slim.”

“That’s all right.”

“Yes. My appetite couldn’t be better.”

Slim glanced at her suspiciously, but her face was as serious as the Meeting House door.

They took the field path that began at the “kissing gate” beyond the Forge, and their way lay across meadows. The long, purple-headed grasses were very still, and the only movement was the movement of winged things that hummed and fluttered. Slim knocked off daisy heads with his stick. The pink sunshade still suggested queenliness and the height of fashion. The silence was becoming abominably oppressive.

A queer brown-backed cottage with its chimney all askew, peered at them over a high thorn hedge. The air became suddenly full of the nasal bleating of an accordion. Then, like a cork out of a bottle, a woman’s voice burst into song, the opening note sounding like the yell of a huckster shouting in an alley.

“Jesus loves me——”

It was an emphatic, fierce, and assertive scream, with the accordion wheezing and sneering furiously.

Slim caught Ida Marchant’s eyes, and went off into hysterical gurgles. The voice had broken his spell of shyness.

“My word—does He!”

“Ssht—you bad——”

“Jesus loves her! Oh, I say! What about——!”

The hymning yells broke, and diverged into mere mundane declamation.

“Cissy—Cissy, you dirty little devil—you come out o’ that there ditch, or I’ll smack yer!”

Slim whispered with an air of incredulous awe.

“And Jesus loves her!”

Ida Marchant gave him a buffet with her sunshade.

“Shut up. Don’t be blasphemious.”

“I wasn’t. Who be it? My, what a squealer!”

“Only Sally Soames. She’s got a voice.”

“No, reely! She sits among the cabbiges, and warbles! If I were—you know who——”

“Slim, stop it. Behave yourself.”

“Don’t you see the fun of it?”

Miss Ida did. They went on with splutterings of laughter. As for that “dirty little devil” Cissy, she must have ascended out of the ditch, for the voice flew up again into a thrilling yell.

The spell of Slim’s shyness had been broken. Ida Marchant’s pink sunshade had pushed his cap askew. He readjusted it, and then began to talk.

Said the girl:

“What’s all this about your knocking your old dad over the head?”

Slim told the truth.

“It was after you’d called me a coward down at the Pool. The old man started bullyin’ me d’rectly I got home. I stood up to ’im, but he’s a fair devil when he’s nasty. I picked up a stake and gave him one on the nob. That settled it. I had to run like blazes.”

Miss Marchant maintained an unprejudiced and attentive calm.

“Then you went up to the Hall?”

“I saw Nan first at Fox Farm. Father hunted me up there, but Nan barred him out. She gave me ten bob, and told me to go and see old Mother Lowndes, and they took me into the stables.”

“And you mean to stick to it?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

She looked at him from between half-closed lids.

“I wonder if you can.”

“Bet you ten bob I can.”

“Now, don’t be cocky. You’ve had just three weeks at the Hall, the first decent three weeks you’ve done in your life.”

Slim looked hurt.

“I say, Ida, you are rough on a chap.”

“Oh, am I?”

“Don’t you see the won’erful change in me?”

Her provocative and mischievous face tilted its insolent little nose. Under the

pink sunshade her reddish hair glowed against the green of June.

“New clothes. That means so many shillings in old Mercer’s till.”

“But clothes be clothes.”

“Is the jam-pot the jam?”

Slim humbled a huge dock with a sweep of his cane.

“Tell you what, Ida, I used to be a sneaky little beast, and I know it. But can’t a chap change?”

“Inside as well as outside?”

“Why not?”

“Praps.”

“Look here, you help at it.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You started it—like. It’s a sort of responsibility you’ve taken.”

“Well, I never!”

She went off into healthy laughter, but Slim’s solemn face kept her to the main issue.

“Well, what d’you want me to do—teach you your catechism?”

“Oh, drop it! You know. Help a chap to take a pride in himself.”

“Dear me, how serious you are!”

“Say you will. I’ll make a man o’ myself for your sake.”

The girl gave him a push with her sunshade, but her eyes were not unkind.

“Now say you’ve no mother!” she said. “I’ll be patient with you so long as you don’t talk treacly stuff.”

CHAPTER XIX.

Sam Wetherell would have made an excellent barbaric god, ever on the alert, to catch some earthly underling offending and to exercise a healthy spite in retaliating upon the offender. It was a distinct pleasure to Sam to be in the possession of a grudge against a neighbour. It spiced his mug of beer for him, and enabled him to gloat over some plan for the crying of "quits."

A big black retriever had come to inhabit an empty barrel in the cottage garden. Sam had bought him for two shillings at Leatherbridge, and the dog, being savage, quarrelsome, and a bully, appealed to Wetherell by showing some of the qualities that he himself possessed. The dog's snarl, when another dog passed by, was music to Sam. He liked to see the beast wrinkle up his nose and show his big white teeth.

For Slim had been a distinct loss to Sam. The bullying of the lad had provided him with one of his favourite recreations. There had always been something to curse and to cuff, and none of the other children had piqued Sam's love of cruelty as Slim had done. Hence, Wetherell had found himself in the mood of an ogre who had not tasted blood for many days. A Saturday night brawl in a village inn and a rough-and-tumble with a hawker of brooms and baskets had proved useful in letting out some of his bad blood. But he drank more, shirked all kinds of work more assiduously, and found himself the poorer for the loss of Slim and of Ann. It made him savage to think that he could get no more money from these two, but Mrs. Carlyon Lowndes stood like a grim angel in Sam's path, and behind her loomed all the majestic officialdom of the State.

Sam had one particular grudge that he was waiting to settle, and the chance came to him one hot and dusty day in June. He was working in the road outside his cottage when he saw a familiar figure come over the hill in the shadowy way between the high hazel hedges. Sam stood up, and an alert and ugly gleam came into his eyes. Falconer was some fifty yards away, walking slowly and tapping the road with his iron-shod stick. He had Brick with him, but the dog was not on the lead. He was scampering to and fro across the road, investigating the hedgerows and ditches with all the panting keenness of a dog full of the joy of life.

Sam rubbed his chin, threw his shovel over the hedge, and went in and unfastened the retriever's chain. He bent over the dog, and talked to him in a queer, sibilant whisper, and the beast looked into Sam's eyes and growled. Wetherell led the dog to the gate, and kept him under cover of the hedge, with his cap held over the dog's eyes. The black body quivered. The retriever seemed to understand that he was being held in ambush, and that adventure was in the air.

Falconer came along between the hazels, striking the road with his stick. The sunlight scattered through the boughs, and from the distance came the rattle of a "reaper" cutting hay. Flies settled on Wetherell's ears and neck as he crouched behind the hedge. He brushed them away with quick, irritable jabs of the hand, and listened to the approaching footsteps and the rapping of the stick.

Falconer passed the gate, but Brick, tempted by some fatal lure in one of the hedgebottoms, had loitered and hung behind. Wetherell peered round the gate post and saw the white dog who had attacked him at Fox Farm, trotting slowly along the far side of the road. He drew back and let Brick go by before he unfastened the retriever's chain and showed him the mongrel sniffing the ground about the entrance to the quarry.

Sam did not utter a word. He waved his cap, made a hissing sound by blowing sharply through his teeth, and saw the black dog go galloping down the road, leaving a trail of shimmering dust. Brick had turned aside into the quarry whose rough, precipitous walls were overgrown with grasses, brambles, and stunted trees. The hollow of the quarry was a wild rock-garden, where the fronds of the bracken made a kind of mystery. Foxgloves bloomed on inaccessible rock-ledges, and pink champions grew in sheaves amid the grass. Brambles and oak stubs had piled up mounds of foliage, while here and there was a black patch where gipsies or the cottagers had made a fire.

Brick had not seen that black devil come galloping down the road. He was sniffing at a grass tussock where a rabbit had been sitting when the retriever swung into the quarry and charged straight at him. The white dog cocked his ears in amiable surprise, and saw the black death rushing at him. This was no challenge to a romp, but a grim affair of red eyes and flashing teeth.

Falconer had gone some twenty yards past the mouth of the quarry when he heard the snarls of two dogs fighting. He turned, and shouted to Brick, but the snarling grew more furious, with Brick pinned and fighting for dear life. For the first time since he had been stricken blind Jesse broke into a run. He stopped opposite the mouth of the quarry, for the hollow place seemed to gather the sounds of the fight, and throw them back upon the road. Jesse had learnt to judge his distances from Fox Farm. He guessed that he stood facing the mouth of the quarry.

"Brick—Brick!"

He might as well have shouted at one of the stones in the grass, for Brick's white body was half hidden by the body of the retriever. The black beast had the mongrel by the throat, and was shaking him from side to side. Jesse heard that fierce and half smothered growling that a big dog makes when he has his teeth fastened in his

enemy's flesh. Brick was kicking and twisting, and scraping at the retriever's chest with his forepaws. But death had him by the throat, and his growls changed to a stifled whimpering.

Falconer listened, and understood. He seemed to go mad for the moment, and the shout he gave was like the roar of a beast as he charged blindly into the quarry. His first rush took him into a mass of brambles, and he fell headlong, his body crushing its way into the tangled foliage. The thorns drew blood, and sharpened his blind fury. He scrambled up, and tried to judge where the dogs were by the sound of the retriever's growls. Like a blind Polyphemus he blundered about among the stones, stumbling, cursing, smiting the ground and the brambles with his stick, enraged by his own helplessness and by the bestial snarling of the dog whom he could not strike. Brick had ceased to growl and to struggle. He was a mere quivering, bloody thing, dragged to and fro by Wetherell's retriever.

Jesse's stick struck the ground within a foot of where the black dog still worried Brick, and he seemed to become alive to the fact that a blind fury in the shape of a man was looming over him and striking right and left. Sam's dog let go of Brick, turned with a snarl, and caught one of Jesse's haphazard blows full upon the muzzle. That chance blow daunted the devil in the dog. He yelped, sneezed, and fled at a gallop.

There was silence in the quarry, and with the return of the summer stillness, the wrath went out of Jesse's heart. A great fear came upon him, because of his love for his dog. He threw down his stick, and began to feel about with his hands, calling softly "Brick—old man, Brick—where are you?" Not a whimper answered him. And presently—Falconer's brown hands touched the warm body of his dog.

The dog was dead. Jesse had known it when he had touched him and felt the torn, warm-blooded throat. And yet there was no anger now in Falconer's heart. The spirit of fatalism came, and breathed a cold breath upon his forehead. A voice within him said that it was useless to rebel, to kick against savage nature, to ask oneself unanswerable questions. So Jesse knelt in the rank grass, one hand touching Brick's body, his blind eyes staring into space. The sunlight tangled itself in his tawny hair and beard, and the voices of the haymakers drifted from the Fox Farm fields.

Falconer's thoughts went back to the autumn day when Ann Wetherell had brought Brick to him under the apple trees. He had been loath to take the dog, because all the dogs that had owned him as master had died violent deaths. Jesse had heard it said that people who are unfortunate bring misfortune upon those who become too dear to them in this world. He had found this true in his own person. And he brooded over it as he stroked Brick's head, and felt the blind emotion

struggling in his throat.

Presently he took the dead dog in his arms, and rose slowly to his feet. A cart passed along the road, and the sound of the horse's hoofs guided Jesse towards the mouth of the quarry. He made his way out on to the road and turned back towards Fox Farm.

Sam Wetherell was watching him over the hedge. The retriever had bolted back to the cottage, and taken to his kennel, and was licking a fore-paw that Brick had bitten.

Sam saw Falconer go by with the dead dog in his arms. He tilted his cap, and scratched his head with the nail of his thumb. "Darn it, 'e must 'ave bin fond o' the dog."

And Sam, who had one soft spot of sentiment, felt sorry.

Ann had been sent up to Ashhurst, and as she climbed the steep slope of Pardon's Hill, she looked back and saw Fox Farm red against the green of its orchard, its willow trees and dusky firs. She had a glimpse too of the white gate, and even as she looked towards it, a brown shape moved up and hid a part of the white pattern from her view. Ann was near enough to see a man on a brown horse turn in at the gate. Nor was she too far away to infer that the rider was Jack Rickaby.

The men were out haymaking, and Ann herself had spent a morning with fork and rake, tossing and turning the fragrant swathes that had changed from green to grey on the yellow, shaven grass. Rickaby put his brown cob in the stable, and entered the garden by the gate under the white cluster rose. Monkshoods and peonies were out in the rough borders, and the China rose on the front of the house was a mass of pink flame.

Silent as the place seemed, with all the balm of a sunny June about it, it had for Rickaby a suggestion of expectancy. There was no floweriness about the hollow-backed, broad-chinned little farmer, and yet the colour that crowded the old garden set colour notes vibrating in the world of his emotions.

It was a June day, hot and still, with the scent of hay in the air. And in the cool stone-flagged passage of the house a woman waited for him, holding a tray set with the good things of a country summer, cream, white bread, red strawberries on an old green Wedgwood plate.

"Hallo, how are we getting on?"

Kate was brown as a hazel nut, and her white linen dress had a red rose thrust into its belt. The half light of the passage softened the harsh strength of her face. And yet it was this brown strength of hers, this magnetic health, that appealed to a man of

Jack Rickaby's fibre. She was a big woman with powerful limbs, and she might have wrestled with him on equal terms.

"We shall carry the upper field to-day."

"Couldn't be better."

"I heard you ride into the yard, and made the tea."

"That's fine! Where's Jesse?"

"Out with the dog. He won't be back for another two hours."

Rickaby hung his hat on a peg, and followed Kate into the front room. She put the tray down, and moved to the window, and he saw her draw the white chintz blinds dotted with pink roses, along the tapes. The sudden shutting out of the sunlight made Rickaby's swarthy face look grim and sinister.

Kate turned from the window. They began to talk like people who were uneasy when they were silent.

"Well, now, what a thing it is to have a thirst."

"Just the right sort of weather. I'm having luck my first year."

"You are, that's a fact. Why, I never knew Jesse strike the right week."

Kate had drawn one of the Windsor chairs to the table. She looked up at Rickaby with a frown of protest.

"Let's leave Jesse alone."

He drew up a chair, and settled himself slowly with the air of a man feeling the ground under him.

"As you like."

Kate handed him his tea.

"You must know what it makes me feel at times."

His eyes met hers as he took the cup.

"Well—what?"

"Oh, never mind. One grows accustomed to such things. It's like having a big tree piled close up to your house. You don't notice it—when you are feeling fit. It's only when you are out of sorts that it gives you the blues."

Rickaby stirred the sugar in his cup, and then watched the bubbles go round and round.

"I don't know," he said, "that it isn't a rotten thing to have to hide the best part of your life."

"It might be worse. One gains more sometimes by putting up with worries and keeping quiet."

"All the same, it's a game I don't like. I tell you, Kate, I often feel that I should like to square up to the world, have a damned good row, and get it over."

Kate looked at him steadily across the table.

“Well, I don’t want that,” she said.

“No——?”

“Not unless I’m driven to it. I’m only taking the line that most of you men take when you crowd two lives into one.”

“Oh?”

“You know quite well what’s under the crust of respectability here in the country. People let things lie for the sake of peace and quietness, and to save themselves from their neighbours. It’s only when someone gets in a mad temper that the truth is dug up. I reckon it’s the same all over the world.”

Rickaby sat square in his chair, his stubborn face thoughtful and a little sullen.

“Well, supposing some tattling fool——?”

“I’d face it all right—if the storm broke; don’t you doubt that, Jack. But as things stand I don’t see why we should jump right into the thick of a rumpus.”

Rickaby stared at his plate.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said; “but I tell you I don’t like it, when I think of Jesse.”

They had finished their tea, and half emptied the strawberry dish when Falconer turned in at the farm gate. Neither of them heard the click of the gate catch. Rickaby was standing by the window, one hand feeling in the side pocket of his coat.

“Suppose I’d better not,” he said.

“What——?”

“Smoke.”

Kate laughed. But even in the midst of her laughter a startled, listening look came into her eyes.

“Who’s that?”

“Where?”

“Coming down the path. It’s Jesse.”

“No!”

“It is.”

“Had I better clear?”

“Yes.”

“Tell him I’m down the fields, having a look at the men.”

Rickaby made a move towards the door, but Kate beckoned him back. They heard Jesse’s footsteps in the porch.

“You can’t. You’ll meet him in the passage. Here, stand in this corner; the door will cover you when it’s open. I’ll give you a chance to slip out.”

Rickaby looked savage. He spoke in a vicious whisper.

“I’m not going to play the skulker.”

“I tell you you must. A woman knows what’s best.”

“It’s a low game.”

“Ssh——!”

She caught him by the elbow and half hustled him into the corner so that the room door would cover him when it was open. They heard Jesse’s footsteps at the end of the passage. Rickaby glowered at Kate. This hole-and-corner business went against his sturdy courage, yet he dared not speak now that he stood committed to the woman’s passion for concealment.

Kate opened the door.

“That you, Jesse?”

“Yes.”

“There’s some tea left in here.”

She held the door back so that Rickaby stood closed up in his corner. He heard her utter a sharp exclamation. She had had her first glimpse of Jesse carrying Brick’s blood-stained body in his arms.

“Good lord, Jesse, you haven’t let the dog get under the reaper!”

Falconer strode straight through the doorway. Kate had to fall back to prevent him blundering into her.

“Mind! You nearly knocked me over.”

“Did I.”

“What’s happened to the dog?”

“Happened? He’s dead!”

Kate stared at him in vacant silence. She pressed the door back upon Rickaby, as though the bitterness in her husband’s voice might have gone to the heart of this other man. Falconer’s mouth twitched. Kate saw moisture glistening in his beard. The front of his shirt was bloody.

“How did it happen?”

“Some dog killed him.”

Jesse stretched out one hand, felt about him, and touched the table that stood in the middle of the room. Kate stared, opened her mouth, and started forward with a sharp exclamation of disgust.

“Jesse, what are you doing?”

He was about to lay Brick upon the table.

“Don’t put the thing down there! What are you thinking of?”

Jesse ignored her. He swept one arm across the table, brushing plates and cups

aside with the large carelessness of a man whose heart was gripped by one emotion. A plate faltered, and then fell with a crash upon the brick floor.

“Jesse——!”

She swung the door away from Rickaby, and gestured him to go. Then she rushed to the table, glanced over her shoulder, and pushed a dish over the edge of the table.

“Take the dog up, can’t you! You’ll have the whole tray over! I never did——!”

She caught at the tray and drew it aside so roughly that the crockery clattered together.

“Pick the thing up. Haven’t you any notion of decency?”

Jesse turned on her with a sudden rush of anger.

“Let me alone, will you.”

“My tea-table isn’t a butcher’s shop.”

His blind face blazed.

“Kate, I tell you there’s a devil in me. I charge you let me be.”

“Oh, very well, very well! Perhaps you would like me to go and pick an armful of flowers!”

Rickaby had slipped away, snatched his hat from a peg, and gone softly down the passage, blessing the strip of carpet that covered the centre of the flagged floor. He felt ashamed of the business, of this hiding behind doors and slinking down passages. For the man was open and bold by nature, and his heart had gone out to Jesse over the death of his dog.

The back door stood ajar. Rickaby pulled it open, only to find himself face to face with Ann Wetherell. The girl’s arm was outstretched in the act of pushing the door before her.

Rickaby said nothing. For the moment they stood and stared at one another, questioningly, distrustfully, with the tense silence of doubting thoughts. The man noticed the basket the girl was carrying in her hand.

Then Ann stepped aside, a slight colour spreading over her pale face. Rickaby brushed past her, and walked off across the brick-paved yard.

“Damn!” was all he said as he flung the stable door open, “damn!”

CHAPTER XX.

Half an hour later Kate Falconer appeared in the kitchen doorway. She held a pink sun bonnet by the strings, and her face was still flushed and harsh with anger.

“Oh, you’ve got back, Ann. I am going down to the hay-field. The master wants someone to help him bury his dog.”

“His dog, ma’am!”

“Yes—Brick; isn’t that plain?”

“Do you mean that Brick’s dead?”

“A dog set on him and killed him. One of the men can bury him—if you think your wages don’t cover digging a hole in the garden.”

Kate turned back down the passage, and Ann heard her take a stick from the rack and go out by the garden door.

Ann stood very still, staring into the gloom of the great yew that overshadowed the kitchen window. The casual way the news had come to her had made Ann react the more deeply to the shock of the dog’s death. She watched sunlight making golden blurs through the black foliage of the yew, and the glimmering light had a touch of the glimmer of tears. Brick dead! What must it mean to Jesse! And Ann’s thoughts went back to the autumn day when she had brought the dog to Jesse in her arms. He had been loath to take the dog, and lo—those strange tristful forebodings of his had proved too true. Ann told herself that she had brought pain and sorrow in her arms to Jesse that autumn day. It might have been better if poor Brick had been left to drown.

“Where were Jesse and the dog? In the front room?” Then she must go in to him and say:

“Mr. Jesse, I have come to help you bury Brick.”

And Ann, smitten by the thought of Falconer’s sorrow, hung back with a species of timid pity. Often in life we are voiceless and afraid in the presence of grief. A distraught self-consciousness makes the mind timid and mistrustful of its own voice. Sometimes sheer selfishness refuses to be roused to the effort of sympathy, and slinks by without a look or a sound. More often a poignant sense of the inadequacy of words makes a friend come half shrinkingly to gaze on the face of the friend who suffers.

Ann roused herself. She had a sob in her throat.

“How cowardly! You must go to him.”

And she passed out into the dim, cool passage, pressing her lips together, and clenching her hands.

Falconer was sitting in a chair by the window, with Brick upon his knees. One of the chintz window-blinds had been drawn back, and the sunlight poured in upon Falconer's head so that his tangle of tawny hair shone like gold. Ann had but to look at him, and at the dead dog lying across his knees, for all her self-consciousness to disappear.

"Oh, Mr. Jesse—to think that he's dead!"

She crossed the room, simple and primitive now that her compassion carried her away. Her figure seemed to stoop tenderly into the haze of sunlight. Her hands quivered as though she yearned to touch Jesse, and comfort him.

Falconer raised his head.

"Ann, I want to bury him."

"Oh, Mr. Jesse——"

"Somewhere in the garden where he'll lie quiet."

Ann touched the dog's head.

"I wish I had never brought him to you."

"No, don't say that."

"You were against taking him, Mr. Jesse."

"Yes, I was afraid of my bad luck. Even Brick could not break it. It broke him—instead."

Ann's eyes filled with tears. But her voice remained steady.

"Whose dog did it, Mr. Jesse?"

"I don't know. It was down in the quarry near your cottage."

Ann looked troubled, for Jesse's words threw the shadow of a suggestion across her mind. She had noticed the black dog from Leatherbridge when she had gone down one evening to see the children. And Rose had told her that the dog was savage.

But for the moment she said nothing of this to Jesse.

"Do you want me now, sir?"

"It is no use waiting. Will you get a spade from the shed?"

"Yes, Mr. Jesse."

"And bring one of my old coats down from the cupboard. I'll wrap him up in it."

"Yes, sir—Brick would have liked that."

Jesse's memory had chosen the spot where he meant Brick to be buried. It was at the roots of an old bush-rose where the box-edged path curved off to the ivy-smothered summer-house. There were lavender bushes in this border, and a mass of self-sown pansies covering the black earth.

Jesse told Ann to lead him to the rose bush.

“It is the old pink rose at the corner,” he said; “I could see it—if I had eyes—as I sit in the summer house.”

Ann led him to the spot.

“There are pansies and lavender here, Mr. Jesse, and a clump of white pinks. But there is a bit of bare earth near the rose.”

“Dig there, but try to keep clear of the roots of the bush.”

Ann dug the grave, putting the earth carefully aside so as not to soil the many-coloured faces of the pansies. Jesse stood with the dog in his arms, his blind eyes turned towards the pools of blue between the white cloud mountains of the summer sky. The scent of roses and of box coloured for Jesse the warm stillness of that June day.

“It is finished, Mr. Jesse.”

“Spread the coat in it.”

She did as he desired.

“Lay him in and cover him over.”

“Yes, sir. Just give his poor old head a kiss. He looks so pretty.”

She laid Brick in the grave and covered him with the coat. Then she picked two roses from the bush.

“I’ve picked a rose, Mr. Jesse. Will you throw it in?”

He nodded and held out his hand. Ann gave him the rose, and their fingers touched.

“I’ll guide your hand, sir.”

She took him by the wrist.

“Now, Mr. Jesse.”

The rose fell into the grave, and after it Ann threw the second flower that she had picked.

“Would you like to go in, sir, while I cover him up?”

“No, I’ll stay here.”

Ann’s eyes glimmered at him. She took the spade and began to put the earth back very gently, while Jesse stood by in silence, his hands holding the collar of his coat.

“It’s queer what a difference it makes when one loves a thing, Mr. Jesse.”

He nodded.

“Some folk would laugh at us, doing all this for a dead dog.”

“Then they’d be poor-hearted people. Most men would understand, wouldn’t they, sir? Wasn’t Mr. Rickaby sorry?”

“Rickaby?”

“Yes.”

Jesse looked puzzled.

“Why Mr. Rickaby?”

Ann glanced at him over her shoulder.

“He saw Brick, sir.”

“When?”

“Why, Mr. Jesse, when he was in the house an hour ago.”

“But he wasn’t there.”

“But he was, sir. I met him coming out of the back porch when I came home from Ashhurst.”

Instantly Ann realised what she had said, and she looked round at Jesse with an upleap of troubled light into her eyes. Yet how should she have known that Falconer had been ignorant of John Rickaby’s presence in the house? It had never occurred to her that she had caught the man in the act of beating a secret retreat.

She stood with her hands resting on the handle of her spade, and watched Falconer with a kind of prophetic dismay. His hands still gripped his coat collar, and a perplexed frown showed upon his forehead.

“But what do you mean, Ann? Was John Rickaby in the house—and I did not know it?”

“Mr. Jesse—I thought you had had tea together.”

Falconer stood quite still, and did not utter a word. The phases of thought that passed over the surface of his consciousness showed themselves on his blind face like light and shadow on a screen. His silence frightened Ann. It was like the hush before the lifting of a curtain that covered some hidden shame.

Presently Jesse’s lips moved.

“Was I in the house when you met John Rickaby at the door?”

Ann had to moisten her lips before answering him.

“Yes, Mr. Jesse. I heard your voice.”

CHAPTER XXI.

An uneasy silence possessed them both. Ann felt her heart beating fast under her white apron. She wanted to slip away and hide herself, and think over the significance of what she had said.

“May I go, Mr. Jesse? I have some work to do.”

He turned his face towards her, as though he would have searched Ann with his eyes had he not been blind.

“Yes. I shall stay out here a while.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jesse.”

She left the spade standing beside the rose-bush, and fled away with her fear of what might be passing in Falconer’s mind. The thought that Jesse might ask her angry questions had made her heart beat as rapidly as the heart of one in a fever. The psychology of her panic would have puzzled Ann. She was like a child who had cast a stone at random, and had fled in terror when she had seen the stone strike someone who was passing by. She reproached herself, and yet met the reproach impulsively with a cry of “How could I have known!”

Falconer, when Ann had left him, stood with his blind eyes turned toward the ground. His broad, brown face looked grave and massive in the sunlight. There were no petulant, mean lines upon it; no suggestion of the more animal impulses that may rise to the surface when jealousy breaks up a man’s commonplace and habitual reserve.

A minute passed before he moved along the path to the summer-house, stretching out his hands to feel for one of the oak posts that was covered with ivy. Falconer knew that he was close to the place, for he could smell the acrid, dusty scent of the ivy leaves. The stone roller lay in the corner where it had lain when he was a boy. Spiders’ webs glistened in the sunlight, and Jesse heard the despairing buzz of a trapped fly. He felt his way in and sat down on the bench where the woodlice lived in the rotten wood.

One of the lessons that a mature experience should teach a man is that he should not think it strange and wonderful when he is wronged by other men. The man who is truly wise strives to accept such wrongs as part of the inevitable selfishness of life, keeping a calm haughtiness that moves above the petty rogueries and meannesses of the world. And though there may be a difference between picking a pocket and stealing another’s honour, the fatalist who has built up a steadfast pride may meet the greater wrong with the tranquillity with which he would have met the lesser. Sweating, tempestuous rages solve no problems. A man may come to that high level

of tolerance and self-knowledge when he can see that his own failings may have justified what anger and jealousy would damn as sin.

Brick's death had given a solemn softness to Falconer's mood, and he gazed calmly and without passion at the truth that a few chance words had suggested. This single incident had been sufficient to colour his suspicions, but the state of suspicion is ever a mean state, and an honest man prefers to confront the uglier truth. That Kate cared for him no longer, Jesse knew to his own cost, nor could he condemn her for this lack of love when he himself had lost his love for her. Jesse went yet deeper into the truth. He told himself that Ann Wetherell had taken the share in his life that Kate had lost, and that if he had found someone who was nearer to him than an estranged wife, why should not Kate be the child of a like impulse? Too often the essentials of life are ill assorted, and thrown into hopeless and pitiable discords, and few people have the moral courage to insist on the individual's right to rend the laws agreed upon by the many. Yet sincerity is impossible unless a man is brave enough to stand alone, and to carry his thoughts grimly down to the bed-rock of truth. Perhaps this was in Falconer's mind as he sat in the summer-house and heard the bees working, and smelt the acrid scent of the ivy. In thought he spread his hands and said, "If this is the truth, have I not helped to make it true? Had my love been perfect, then indeed might I have cried, 'Behold—I am wronged!'"

Over yonder beyond the house they were carrying hay from the hay field, and Kate Falconer had met one of Jesse's big blue-faced waggons rolling up hill under full sail. Jim Purkiss, who was in command, showed a hot, beery, and sunburnt face, and grinned at his mistress with cheerful pride. Jim Purkiss was one of those happy mortals who, when an undertaking turns out well, accept the success as a proof of their own immoderate virtue. His grin was a knowing and triumphant "what did I tell 'ee?" On such occasion the sun and Jim seemed to enjoy an affectionate and beery intimacy. Purkiss had had private and confidential information as to the state of the weather. But when things turned out badly Jim humped his shoulders, and denied all intimacy with that depraved and debauched person—the Sun. He was not responsible, not he. In fact, he had had his doubts, all along.

But that day, Jim grinned at his mistress.

"What did I tell 'ee now? Sure, I never carried a finer load. Says I to Mister Rick'by down yonder, 'Sur, old Daddy Purkiss be 'unt no fool.'"

Kate laughed. She was ready to humour the men at a time when they were carrying home fat crops.

In the hay field she found John Rickaby sitting his horse, and watching three or four of the Ashhurst loafers raking up the hay that could not be carried that evening,

and piling it into cocks. They were queer customers clad in queer clothes. One long lean gentleman with a sardonic face, and a piece of grass in one corner of his mouth, had once topped a stool in a lawyer's office. He wore a black billicock hat, a red waistcoat, and white trousers. His comrades were short, weary-looking men with red faces, who moved as though three blades of grass on the end of a pitchfork were enough to break their lazy backs.

Rickaby took off his hat to Kate as though it was the first time they had met that day. He dismounted, and looped the bridle over his arm.

"I was taking care that you had no cases of collapse from over-work. Let's go and have a look at the next field."

She saw that he was angry.

"Well, what is it?"

"I ran right into your girl as I was playing the sneak—at your request."

"What—Ann?"

"Yes. A thing like that shows how one stands to be caught out. Supposing she happens to ask Jesse what Mr. Rickaby thinks of dead dogs!"

Kate's face hardened.

"Bother the girl. Some people always arrive at the wrong moment."

They walked down over the shorn grass towards the gate that led into the next field. When they reached the gate, Kate leant her arms upon it, and Rickaby waited beside her. The land dropped away from them into the soft lights of a summer evening and in the woods the dome of each tree stood out with a distinctness that made Rickaby mistrust the weather.

"Better leave this field a day or two, Kate. Now, about this afternoon. Make some explanation to Jesse. It's best to be in with the first word."

Kate looked stubborn.

"No, I shall say nothing. Don't you know that for a woman to start explaining to a man is to rouse suspicion in his mind? That's the wrong line to take."

Rickaby put one foot on the lower bar of the gate.

"But look here, my dear girl, if Jesse finds out——"

"Well, what then? Does he expect me to keep him a list of every person who comes into the house? Besides, a servant's gossiping! I could say sharp things if he acted on that."

"You're bold, Kate."

"It's the best farming—at times."

"And only an hour ago——"

"Yes, I know. But didn't I say that I could put my fists up when there was

nothing left but a square fight?"

He eyed her with grim approval.

"Well, have it as you wish. You've got the grit that makes a man ready to face anything."

Meanwhile, Ann had got over her panic, for when a girl has milk-pans to fill and calves to feed she touches those healthy facts of a country life that should save her from "the vapours." As she watched the young beasts with their noses in the frothy milk she was near to the elemental needs of the flesh, and saw in the soft violet eyes a little world of pity and of pain. This work steadied the beating of Ann's heart. She was as one who had come to the edge of a cliff, and been seized with a dizzy blindness and a nameless fear. But now her nerve had returned to her. She was able to open her eyes and gaze steadily into the void below.

But the simile of the cliff remained. It served to symbolise the edge of a crisis, from which Ann looked into a vague and haze-wrapped future. This incident of to-day had amplified and strengthened the memory of that evening when she had seen those two black figures clinging to each other against the sunset. Ann had a feeling that this drama would go on, that she was fated to bear a part in it, that the words she had spoken to Falconer were full of prophetic meaning. Unknowingly, she had opened Jesse's eyes to this other life that had been developing so near him. And now, perhaps she had a part to play in the little world of this sombre, red-walled house.

Ann was scouring the pails which had held the milk for the calves when she heard footsteps crossing the bricks of the yard. A hand rapped at the back door that hung half open. Ann, looking through the kitchen doorway, saw her father standing in the porch.

"That you, Nan?"

Sam had the hesitating look of a man under the influence of unfamiliar emotions.

"What is it, father?"

She placed herself so as to keep Sam in the porch.

"Mr. Falconer about?"

"He's in the garden."

Sam Wetherell appeared to consider some line of action. It was the attitude of a man struggling to put aside a natural impulse that persuaded him to sidestep responsibility.

"Say—Nan, is he cut up about th' dog?"

Ann's eyes gave a significant gleam.

"So it was your dog, father?"

“Aye—the beast. I’d let him off the chain, and he set about Mr. Falconer’s dog in t’ old quarry. I didn’t hear nought of it till it was all over, and Boss came back with a bloody paw. Then I saw Mr. Falconer go by with the dog in his arms. I guessed he was dead by the look of ’un. I tell yer, Nan, I ’adn’t a word in me.”

Wetherell had told lies, but he was sincere enough in his rough regret for the death of Falconer’s dog. And Ann felt his sincerity. She looked at him kindly.

“It’s half broken Mr. Jesse’s heart. He was so fond of the dog.”

Sam swore.

“Darn it, I be sorry. But I’d like him to know how it was my dog—and that I be sorry.”

“Will you see him, father?”

“Me? Somehow I don’t fancy it. You tell him, Nan; say I be real sorry. I know where I can get the best lurcher in Leatherbridge. I’ll give it to Mr. Falconer—on my own. I will—sure.”

Ann’s eyes glimmered, and that soft, tender look curved her mouth.

“I’ll tell him, father. Thank you for coming up.”

Wetherell hesitated as though he had something more to say, and then slouched out of the porch. He paused in the middle of the yard.

“Tell him, Nan, it be the best lurcher in Leatherbridge. Aye, a regular sly, romping beauty. I’ve seen ut at work. Rabbits! Lord, that dog’s quicker nor any terrier after a rat; I’ll get it him, sure.”

And Wetherell departed, a man with morals when he was concerned about a dog.

CHAPTER XXII.

When her father had gone, Ann went into the front room and glanced at the brass face of the oak-cased clock. Kate Falconer would not be back till supper time, and Ann thought that if Jesse were still in the garden she would seize her chance of giving him Sam Wetherell's message. She was glad that her father had come up to tell the truth.

Ann found Falconer in the summer house, sitting with his hands clasped between his knees. The sunlight came from behind her, and touched his beard and chest, but the upper part of his face was in the shadow.

"May I speak to you, Mr. Jesse?"

He bent forward slightly so that his whole face came into the sunlight.

"What is it, Ann?"

"My father has just been to the house. He wanted me to tell you, Mr. Jesse, that it was his dog killed Brick. He's fair grieved about it, and he says he'll get you the best lurcher in Leatherbridge. Father's fonder of dogs than he is of his own children."

Falconer moved back into the shadow.

"It wasn't his fault, Ann. Dogs will fight."

"Will you let him give you another dog, Mr. Jesse?"

She knew what his answer would be.

"No, Brick shall be the last."

Ann believed that he desired to be alone. She half turned to go, but Jesse made a sudden movement with his hands.

"Ann."

"Yes, Mr. Jesse."

"You don't see much of your own folk, do you?"

He was leaning forward again so that the sunlight fell upon his face.

"No, Mr. Jesse."

She had a feeling as though someone were thrusting thoughts into her mind. She looked at Falconer and wondered. His face resembled the face of one who listened intently.

Ann hesitated.

"Father used to come up sometimes, but I told him not to."

"Why?"

"He used to bother me about my wages, and I did not want him hanging about here."

“No.”

“And Slim—my brother. I never told you about Slim, Mr. Jesse; I meant to long ago. I had to hide him here one day when he and father had had a fight.”

Jesse raised his head like a thinker roused abruptly from some reverie.

“Oh!”

“It was about a month ago, sir. Slim ran away, and came here, and father chased him. I hid Slim, and shut father out. Then—Slim went up to Furze Hall. I never told Mrs. Falconer about it, Mr. Jesse. I was alone in the house, but I didn’t feel there was any harm in hiding Slim. I shouldn’t have done it, only he was so frightened.”

Falconer leant back in the shadow.

“I remember,” he said, “it must have been the day I found the front door locked.”

Ann glanced at him.

“I did lock it, Mr. Jesse. It was for fear of father. I went up to my room to get Slim ten shillings out of my purse. I sent him away as soon as I found father had gone.”

Falconer drew a deep breath.

He said, “Tell me more about your brother.”

Leaning back against the wall of the summer-house he sat and listened to Ann’s voice, with strange spasms of exultation leaping through him, the exultation of a man’s love when it casts off the unclean rags of doubt. He was astonished at the simplicity of the thing, and at the hyper-sensitive complexity of those imaginings that had created for him so much pain and doubt. Ann had had no love-tale to hide. The simple happenings that he had twisted into the schemings of sex were smoothed and straightened even as crumpled silk is smoothed by the sweep of a woman’s hand.

Falconer felt his blind love for this girl clamouring suddenly for utterance and expression. A voice within him cried out that she belonged to him, that the intimate tenderness of his yearning towards her was justified by its sincerity. He longed to stretch out a hand and touch her, to draw her near to him in the darkness of his life.

“Ann.”

“Yes, Mr. Jesse.”

“Do you know, child, I thought you had a lover.”

“Mr. Jesse!”

“Well, it’s not impossible, is it?”

She laughed and reddened, and then fell into a startled earnestness. Some thought had arrested the lighter mood. She looked at Jesse with serious and intent eyes.

“But I don’t want that, Mr. Jesse. I’d rather be here at the farm.”

Falconer’s face remained in the shadow.

“And I don’t want to lose you, Ann. I don’t suppose you know what a difference you have made to my life.”

“I—sir?”

“You and Brick. I’ve lost the dog. Some day I shall lose you.”

Ann’s eyes gave a startled, questioning glimmer. She looked at Jesse as though his words were sinking slowly into the deeps of her heart. Her pale face caught a quick, warm colour.

“I don’t want to go away from you, Mr. Jesse.”

He bent forward so that his face was in the sunlight. His big brown hands quivered.

“I don’t want you to go away from me, Ann. You have been very good to me; you’ve taken away some of the pain and the trouble. But a man can never say what to-morrow will bring. But some day I should like to see you happy.”

She made a movement with her hands. Her head drooped a little, and her eyes looked at the ground.

“I’m happier here than anywhere, Mr. Jesse. I’d like to spend my life——”

She faltered, reddened, and then went white with the passionate yet virginal pallor of a woman who has come near to betraying the secret of her heart.

“I’d like to live here—always, if I could help you, Mr. Jesse—a little.”

Falconer fought back the strong man’s love that rushed out to her.

“You don’t know what it means to me,” he said, and then, after a deep silence, “but things change. They may change here.”

His sad and steadfast face sank back into the shadow. It was as though he withdrew from the life fire at which he yearned to warm his hands. And Ann too felt a chill at the heart. Her young face looked older, and more intent.

“But it may be years, Mr. Jesse.”

“We cannot see through a few days, much less years.”

Ann opened her lips to answer him, but some sound from the direction of the rick-yard drove the words from her mouth.

“I must be going, Mr. Jesse.”

He lifted his face sharply.

“Ah—! Well, I’ll stay on here awhile.”

She gave him one long, indescribable look, and then turned away down the box-edged path with the evening sunlight shining on the rose-bushes and the sheaves of summer flowers. The solid earth seemed to have grown less sure under her feet. The

shadow of some impending change lay athwart the calm of the June day. Yet Ann felt a stirring of deep and secret joy within her heart. She mattered to Jesse. Had he not told her that! And all her innocent impulses went toward him with quivering and outstretched hands.

CHAPTER XXIII.

That evening Kate Falconer brought old John Smunk back to supper. He had appeared in the hay field like some grotesque and saturnine rustic god, stick under arm, green felt hat jammed on the back of his head. Kate and Jack Rickaby had caught sight of him as they climbed the rising ground towards the farm house, perched like a great black bird against the sunset.

He leered at them, and thrust out his blue, protruding lower lip.

“I reckon you ought to be pleased with yourself, my dear. Best stuff I’ve seen this side of Ashhurst—and carried dry as a bone.”

He twinkled at Rickaby.

“Who says I beat down the quality, eh! I’ll give Mrs. Falconer top price, sure.”

Mr. Rickaby looked sulky. He was a man capable of wholesome and vigorous hatred, and old Smunk’s leering insolence carried its own smell. His character had an assertive and penetrating odour that made his enemies edge away with savage disgust. For though one might hate old Smunk, the man had power, and was a dangerous old devil to offend.

Kate broke a bristling silence by asking after the corn-merchant’s wife. Mrs. Sarah was providing the women of Ashhurst with gossip, for she had been operated on for some grave internal trouble. A surgeon had come down from London, and it was said that old Smunk had been in a savage temper for days after he had paid the gentleman’s fee.

He sneered when Kate asked after his wife.

“Sarah? Oh, she’s got her tom-cat and her praying-book. The doctors say she won’t last three months.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He cocked a sly and callous eye at Kate.

“Are ye now! Well, that’s what everybody says. And yet my Sarah doesn’t count for two penn’orth of turnip-seed in Ashhurst. It puzzles me whether they’re sorry for me or for her. Can’t say I count much on’t either way.”

He glanced dourly at John Rickaby.

“A heap of nonsense in this world, ain’t there, Jack?”

“And a lot of good sense, too.”

“Ah, to be sure. But the nonsense seems to be the sort of muck folk top-dress their lives with. They must grow bits of flowers to make a show, and make a fuss about clean window-curtains, lace caps, parsons’ talk, missionising, and all that. Yah! My Sarah always had a taste for the nonsense. She’s—she’s genteel.”

He made an insolent mouth, and grunted.

“Don’t you go in for being genteel, my dear. You get your grip on the real stuff. It’s the money that counts.”

And he chuckled.

Rickaby had had a sufficient dose of the old man’s arrogance by the time they reached the farm-yard. He mounted his horse, and rode out by the white gate, and left Kate to take John Smunk in to supper.

“Where’s the master, Ann?”

“In the garden, ma’am.”

“Fetch him in. Sit down, John. You don’t mind cold stuff, do you?”

“Not I, barring—in certain places.”

He dragged a chair across the bricks and sat down. Kate began to carve a sad-looking leg of mutton. Then Ann came in, leading Jesse by the arm.

Smunk glanced up at him.

“Well, Jesse, my man, learnt to sew your own buttons on yet?”

It was the tone he might have adopted towards a boy or a fool, for the corn-merchant had never troubled to reach that level of culture when a man ceases to blurt out his free opinions. His contempt for Falconer was as patent as his admiration for Falconer’s wife. Ann, who still had hold of Jesse’s arm, looked at old Smunk with a significant gleam of the eyes. Falconer himself appeared to throw aside the insult of the old man’s pleasantry. He sat down in the chair that Ann brought for him.

“Is that you, Mr. Smunk?”

“Sure-ly. I’m here. I’ve been talking about your wife’s farming. Mutton? Thank ye. Any pickles? Onions preferred! Your wife’s a wonder, Jesse Falconer. She’s got a lucky touch, that’s certain.”

Falconer began to use his knife and fork. He had become pretty expert, and fed himself more cleanly than old Smunk, who used the blade of his knife as he would have used a spoon. The corn-merchant watched Jesse with a kind of interested contempt.

“Not bad—not bad! You don’t have to feed him, Mrs. Kate.”

They laughed, and Jesse reddened.

“I’m not quite helpless,” he said.

“No, sure. But I tell ye straight, man, your giving up the farming has brought the land luck. Whisky? Just a drop. ’Tain’t a polite thing to say to a neighbour, but truth’s truth. I’ve seen it happen before. I’ve known a farm that broke man after man, turn out a little goldmine with some chap who didn’t seem able to do anything wrong. The luck of the land’s a rum thing. But then, what most people call luck ain’t

anything of the kind. I ain't the man I am, just because I was lucky."

He impaled a pickled onion and thrust it in over the blue edge of his lower lip.

"But when luck and grit go together, then the cash comes in. My dear, here's good health to you. I shall see you farming your thousand acres before five years go by."

The meal was a silent meal so far as Jesse was concerned, but his thoughts were busy while the others talked. John Smunk's blunt and insolent way of stating a truth had thrust Falconer yet further towards the future that had opened for him like a grey dawn. He was becoming less and less a part of the life at Fox Farm. Another personality had ousted his from byre, fields, and orchard. And as his grip upon the place grew feebler, the prosperity that had always eluded him returned to the place where another ruler ruled.

When a man falls into a certain phase of thought, circumstances often appear to fall in with the tendency of his reflections. They flow like rivulets into the main stream of his impressions, adding to its steadfastness and volume, and hastening the inevitableness of its course. Even words spoken at random seem weighted with a premeditated meaning. They become oracular, part of the flux of a man's soul.

Despite a clear atmosphere and Jack Rickaby's distrust, the fine weather lasted, and Kate set her men to cut the grass in the great field north of the orchard. Jesse found himself left alone in the house, for Ann had put on a white sun-bonnet and gone down to help in the field. Jesse was not sure of himself in the open grassland, but he knew the orchard and its trees as well as a man knows the furniture of his bedroom in the dark. He made his way through the garden into the orchard, and set out to gain the north hedge where he could listen to the sound of the reaper and smell the scent of the hay. The apples and pears were knotty old trees, all of them leaning slightly towards the northwest, because of the prevalence of the southwest gales. Jesse knew nearly every tree, and could guide himself by the list of the lichened boles, and the way some of the stumps of the old boughs pointed. The orchard grass had not been cut, and rose high above his knees as he waded slowly from tree to tree, feeling for his landmarks with outstretched hands. A rabbit scuttled away from under his feet, its body cleaving a narrow lane between the crowded stems of the grasses.

Jesse reached the northern hedge where the old stewing-pear trailed its drooping branches. Close by stood an apple tree whose trunk forked close to the ground. The spread of the three main limbs made a kind of seat where Jesse had often sat with a gun and watched for blackbirds when the "summerlings" were ripe. He felt for the tree with his hands and lifted himself up into the fork.

The orchard hedge had not been cut for three years, and the hazel twigs hid Jesse from the workers in the hay field. It happened too that the ground on the other side of the hedge was too rough for the "reaper" to pass over it, and the grass there had to be cut by hand. Two men were scything along the hedge, taking swathe and swathe, one working some six paces ahead of the other.

Now these two men talked as men will when they have warmed to their work and taken several pulls at the beer jug. They were working within ten yards of Jesse, and he could hear every word they said.

"Never knew the master have weather like this 'ere."

"Not him! I tell yer, Tom, t'other farmers used to wait for Mister Jesse to start cutting. Then they'd leave their machines in the sheds and sit tight, knowing how there'd be wet weather."

There was the harsh purring of well-sharpened scythes.

"Terrible bad farmer he was. Let things go. Mrs. Falconer, she be the man to farm. Johnnie Rickaby's put her up to a thing or two."

"That he 'as. From what I 'ear, 'tain't all a question o' farming."

They laughed, and broke off to sharpen their scythes.

"Rickaby's a smart chap. He and the missus came out of the same bunch. Tell yer, George, there be a darned lot o' rotten muddlin' in this world. Why can't married folk be suffered to change round and round when things don't go easy? The missus and Jack Rickaby ud make a fine farming couple. And there's poor old Noddy Falconer poking about wid a stick, and getting a bit of a dog to take him out on a string. Why 't must be terrifying to a woman o' Mrs. Falconer's spirit. There ought to be a law that folk may try again when they've make a bad bargain."

So these men of the scythe gossiped, and Falconer listened, as a live soul in a dead body might listen to the voices of people who gathered round. Yet despite the inevitable bitterness that such words stirred in him, Jesse felt that there was much shrewd sense in what these men had said. He and his wife were incompatibles, and while he had become a helpless pensioner, Kate, strong, strenuous, and full of ambition, had her desires before her, and her work to do. Jesse felt no anger against his wife. The comradeship, or whatever he chose to call it, that had sprung up between her and Jack Rickaby, seemed to him legitimate and eminently sane. He saw that they had the same purpose in life, and that their strong sympathy for one another was inevitable and honest.

For three days Falconer let these thoughts and impressions simmer within him. He was very silent and self-absorbed, sitting in the summer house or the garden, with the set expression of an increasing purpose on his face. The more he brooded over

the matter, the more he craved for an absolute and final rendering of the truth. It would be for him like a sharp-angled obelisk cutting the vague and misty horizon of life. He desired to know; to grasp the ultimate act of this tragedy of discords. Until he had faced the truth Falconer felt that he would have no new thought to think, no purpose to follow.

He determined that he would speak out, and leave nothing lying between the fore-paws of suspicion. If Kate would only be honest with him Jesse felt that he could find a way to help her. It was better that they should understand each other as enemies, than live on under the shadow of an intrigue.

Jesse hardened himself and chose his time, the half-hour after supper when he sat at the open window and smoked his pipe, and Kate Falconer read the paper or her farming journal or jotted down notes and figures in her little day-book. Jesse's blindness helped him in this rough intrusion of his into the secret places of his wife's life. The darkness shut him up in a species of shadowy "confessional box." There was none of the inward shock that the soul receives when eye accuses eye. It was a question of voices speaking to one another through a darkness that gave the effect of distance.

"Kate."

He heard the rustling of the paper she was reading.

"What is going on between you and Jack Rickaby?"

The words sounded crude and harsh, but Falconer saw nothing of the effect they had upon his wife. She stiffened and sat staring at him, a hard pallor spreading across her face. But her rigidity was not the rigidity of one paralysed by shock. Her eyes showed how swiftly her thoughts were moving, setting themselves to deal with this surprise attack. Kate was not a woman who lost her grip upon her self-control. She had that kind of courage that reacts instantly when challenged.

Decision came to her very quickly.

"You have thrown the thing like a boot, Jesse. I will follow your example. I am in love with Jack Rickaby, and that's the truth."

She spoke quietly, without heat and without the aggressiveness of one who is conscious of being in the wrong. Folding up the paper that she had been reading, she turned squarely to Jesse with the air of meaning to go through to the bitter end.

Falconer showed no more emotion than his wife had done. His brain felt preternaturally clear.

"I am glad you have spoken out, Kate."

"It is better to have firm ground under one's feet."

"That is what I have felt. Perhaps I have known more than you intended me to

know. Now, I say it at once—and frankly—that I have been thinking this over, and I don't see how I can blame you. If I had loved you a little, it would have been different. You and Rickaby are cut out for one another. You don't care a jot for me. And I suppose I might say the same."

Kate looked at him steadily, and with some curiosity.

"That's very good of you, Jesse."

"I'm speaking the truth. It's a pity we don't have more of it in this world. It would help us. What is, must be. I take it at that."

Her brown eyes gave a gleam, and the colour came back into her face.

"You mean to say, Jesse, you're not going to get angry?"

"No, I'm not. What good would it do? One can't help these things happening, and we have been pretty miserable together these last few years. The fault's yours, and the fault's mine. It's the way we are made. Rickaby's got what you never found in me. I can see that clearly. I'm a bit of a woman."

His wife looked amazed. She had not thought that Jesse could hurt her, but self-love is a subtle instrument. And when its strings are strong, it vibrates the more forcibly.

"You take it coolly, Jesse."

Her pride was piqued, despite her lack of affection for this man.

"What else is there to do?"

"But—how——"

She paused, frowning hard, and biting her lower lip.

"But how can we better things?"

He asked the question for her.

"Better things?"

"Yes, for everybody's sake."

She burst out with sudden passion.

"Jesse, it's vile and beastly if we are sly over all this. We can't shove it away into a corner and pretend it isn't there. Three people can't live on such a secret; they're low beasts if they do. I won't slime things over."

He spoke as passionately as she had done.

"Did I ask you to think of it in that way? I'm not that sort of man. It shall be a clear and open road."

She stared.

"What do you mean?"

She was shocked by the thought that had seized her.

"You won't——"

“Shoot myself—or the like? No. I promise you that. Give me time to think it over. I tell you, Kate, I see that you have your life to live. Let’s be honest, and do the best we can.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

Falconer had not a friend to turn to in this crisis of his life, and for the first time he realised to the full the extent of his own loneliness. Moreover he was a man of sensitive reticences, not one who could babble to anyone who was but half a friend. The only heart that had felt pity for him was the heart of the girl Ann Wetherell. And it was impossible for him to turn to her for sympathy, even though she might know the truth.

Jesse set the plain facts of life in order before him.

Firstly, Kate was no longer his wife in any sacred sense. It did not concern Jesse what the "men in surplices" or the lawyers said upon the question of marriage. No past piece of formalism mattered. Jesse felt that Kate's liberty was due to her, and that he himself had a right to be free.

Secondly, the farm and house were no longer his, though the law was prepared to regard them as his if he chose to take certain steps and to fulfil certain conditions. He would have to pay up the mortgage money to his wife, or exert his right of changing his mortgagee, provided that he could find a person willing to pay off the debt. Obstinacy might have gone some way towards complicating the issue; he might put the farm up for sale, struggle maliciously for his so-called rights. But Falconer found that he had no desire to create any upheaval. He was too sad, too sick at heart, too much of a fatalist to strive against the drift of circumstances. Kate was making a success of the farm, and he had a feeling that it should belong to her. For he had not made her happy.

Thirdly, he was a blind and helpless man, incapable of earning his own living, not likely to last in the struggle of the survival of the fittest. He told himself that he could live no longer as a kind of pensioner at Fox Farm, now that all the intimate faith between him and his wife had vanished. The very thought of such a life had a gross and unpleasant flavour for him.

Lastly there was the one great bitter helpless fact of his love for Ann, a love that promised him nothing but silence and renunciation. How could he hope for anything from this girl? To dream of it was to dream of a thing that was dishonourable and abominably selfish. And here Jesse was strong with the strength of a man who crushes his own yearnings and desires. He realised that he must put Ann out of his life; that she could take no part in it; that she had already become to him as part of the past.

For a while he felt unable to feel things acutely. A kind of numbness came upon him, an apathy like the apathy of one who is ill. Yet though the sensitiveness of his

emotions seemed dulled, he could think clearly and with courage, and listen to the cold voice that reasoned with him as to the future. Even the memory of his dog's death stirred in Falconer nothing but a tacit and saddened acquiescence. Sometimes when a moment of supreme weariness came upon him, he felt that the dog had had the happier lot. He thought how good it would be to sink into the deep sleep of death, to escape from that miserable self-consciousness that haunts the man of today.

Yet a purpose matured in him, slowly, painfully, with a sense of infinite effort. He laboured to bring it forth almost as a woman labours to bring forth her child.

A week passed before Jesse spoke again to his wife. He was sitting in the chair by the window. His pipe had gone out, and his match-box was empty.

"Do you want a light, Jesse?"

He turned towards her.

"Thanks, Kate; I haven't a match left."

She put down the paper she was reading, and went to one of the cupboards beside the fireplace. For the last week they had held aloof from one another. When together they had been possessed by an alert restlessness, like people who wait and listen for the first sound of some tumult or storm.

"Thanks, Kate."

He relit his pipe, and she returned to her chair.

Kate had a feeling that he was about to speak to her again of this matter that concerned them both so deeply. She could not fix her mind upon the paper that she was trying to read. Her eyes and thoughts wandered continually towards Jesse.

Presently he said in a level and quiet voice:

"Kate, I want you to buy the furniture and the stock that belong to me."

He spoke as though he might be asking her to buy him an ounce of tobacco up at Ashhurst. She put her paper aside, and looked at him intently.

"Oh——"

"You can have everything for fifty pounds."

"What do you mean, Jesse?"

"I have been thinking it all out. The farm is yours to all intents and purposes. I want you to have it, and everything else. It will round things off—as it were."

"Do you mean——?"

"We ought to begin our lives afresh; that's what we need. Your life lies here; but mine is here no longer. I'm a burden, an incubus, a thing that's in the way. Don't say I'm not. I want us both to get at the grim truth."

They were silent awhile, so silent that they could hear each other breathing.

Kate's eyes had a glimmer of shame in them, but her mouth remained firm.

"You don't spare—either of us—Jesse."

"It is not a matter for make-believe. I'm going to start afresh, Kate, and leave you the life here. A farm's no use to me; it's all the use in the world to you. All this is the soundest sense, whatever other people may say."

She stared out of the window with bleak, set face. Her husband had put the truth before her, divested of all sentiment, and shorn of pity. He was telling her to do what she had so long desired to do, and now that the chance came to her she had to struggle against vague inward prejudices and compassions.

"But what will you do, Jesse?"

"Oh, drift along. I sometimes think I was made for a vagrant's life."

"It will kill you."

"Will it? I'm pretty tough. And if a man has a little money behind him, and can come by some sort of comrade, he can play the irresponsible wanderer for years."

"But you can't see."

"I have thought of that."

Twilight came, a dim, consenting dusk that made their faces pale and ghostly. The smoke from Jesse's pipe drifted in grey wisps through the open window. The evening was very still. Scents from the garden drifted in—old-world scents tangled up with the memories of youth and of home. The blue dusk smothered the distances, and away above the black holly hedge a great star shone.

Kate sat forward in her chair.

"Jesse you are being more than fair to me. I mean to be fair—back. The stuff here that belongs to you is worth much more than fifty pounds. I'll take it over from you at a valuation."

He turned his face to her in the dusk.

"Very good. We will have it all properly on paper. But I want you to pay me fifty pounds down."

"Why? Where's the hurry?"

"The mood for the road may take me."

"But you can't carry all this money——"

"No, I don't mean to. I shall put it in a bank in some good-sized town, say Winchester, or Reading, or even nearer home. Some of it can be earning interest. I can tramp that way when I want cash."

She thought a moment.

"But supposing you off soon——"

"I can write; or rather get a lawyer, or someone to write for the rest. You need

not be afraid that I shall come back and play the cadger.”

They heard Ann moving in the kitchen. Jesse stirred restlessly in his chair.

“This is grim earnest on my part, Kate; don’t doubt it.”

“I don’t,” she answered; “I can lay my hands on fifty pounds within a week. Mossop might do the valuing.”

“Yes, he’s a straight man. And get old Catlack to draw up some sort of agreement for us to sign. Mind, I renounce all claim to the farm.”

Their faces looked dim and strange in the dusk. Then Ann came in, bearing the lighted lamp.

CHAPTER XXV.

One July evening, Ann, coming into the kitchen with the milk-pails from which she had fed the calves, saw a man's figure half swallowed by the great cupboard opposite the baking oven, a cupboard whose black deeps were the haunts of spiders and of mystery. All manner of things were kept in it, pails, brooms, boots, blacking-brushes, a chair that had lost its back, candlesticks, empty tins and jam-pots, cracked crockery, and sundry tools. The man was making a respectable racket, groping about in the dim interior, and creating an immense disorder, to judge by the sounds that emerged out of the darkness.

He backed out of the cupboard as Ann entered the kitchen, and misjudging the height of the doorway, struck his head heavily against the oak lintel. Whatever humour there might have been in the incident was lost upon Ann when she saw this blind figure standing there with one hand to its head, the other hand holding a pair of heavy winter boots.

"Why, Mr. Jesse—didn't you ask me——"

He turned sharply, his right arm sinking to his side.

"Is that you, Ann?"

She was looking at the heavy boots that he had unearthed from the cupboard, and it occurred to her to wonder what Falconer wanted them for in the thick of an unusually dry summer.

"They're all covered with mould, Mr. Jesse."

"Are they?"

Either the blow had dazed Falconer a little or he was confused at Ann discovering him in such a quest, for he stood hesitatingly in the corner, his head within a foot of the whitewashed beams.

He turned the boots over, and felt the soles.

"I thought they might want a few nails."

"You won't be wanting them yet, Mr. Jesse."

"No—perhaps not. Have a look at them, Ann. Do they want any touching up?"

She took the boots, carried them to the window, and examined the soles. The hob-nails and heel plates were all red rust, and the leather covered with blue mould.

"They're stout enough, Mr. Jesse, but they want a clean—and some grease."

Jesse had an idea.

"It's damp in there."

"It must be, sir."

"Then put them up in my room, Ann. They'll keep better there for the winter."

Ann knew more than Falconer suspected, and this most trivial of incidents had a meaning for her that she could not ignore. Things had been happening in the old house. Mossop, the estate agent and auctioneer, had been poking about the place with a note-book and a pencil, and old Lawyer Catlack had been down with his clerk. And though no word may be spoken, it is possible for a woman who loves a man to feel the aura that flows from his moods and emotions. Unrest and sadness may spread themselves through a whole household. Our moods are like clouds, casting perceptible shadows over the little landscape of life about us.

Ann's eyes had a watchful look those days, and Falconer would have been astonished could he have seen what was passing in the girl's heart. She was in a state of great restlessness, thrilling to a word or gesture or to the significant thoughts that stirred in her. No one would have marked out Ann's as a personality that counted deeply in the life of the dim old house. She was so silent and unassertive, a figure that seemed to glide on the fringe of things, busied with the round of trifles that make up the cycle of such a life.

It had never crossed Kate Falconer's mind that the girl saw more than she seemed to see, or that she felt more than she might be expected to feel. Ann did her work and gave no trouble, and Kate was a woman who ignored any mechanism so long as it worked smoothly. The girl had proved very willing and useful, even to the point of patching Falconer's clothes.

Therefore Kate spoke to her husband like one who looks into the distance and misses the object at her feet.

"I haven't time to-day, Jesse. I must go up and see Catlack. The girl will take you round."

He had asked to be taken over the farm, for a desire had risen in him, urging him to stand in the old gateways and field corners that he had known these thirty years. Set in these old familiar places, Jesse could visualise the fields and woods that lay before him, and imagine the blue distances falling away between the gaps in the hedgerows, and the hills that cut the grey horizon.

Kate called Ann from the kitchen.

"Ann, I've to go up to Ashhurst, and Mr. Jesse wants to be taken round the farm."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Jim Purkiss is in the yard. Just run and tell him he can put the pony in the trap."

Falconer was sitting by the open window when Ann came in to him to serve as guide. A rose-pink sun-bonnet shaded the pale oval of her face with its large, intent, and serious eyes. The strings of the sun-bonnet fell down over her bosom.

“I’m ready, Mr. Jesse.”

He rose from his chair, and the shadow cast by his head covered her face.

“Here’s your hat, sir. Which way do you want to go?”

“I should like to go over the whole farm, Ann.”

She guided him out of the room by soft, swift touches of the hands.

“Let us take the path through the fir wood.”

“Then the orchard will be the nearest way.”

When they came through the gate that led into the fir wood, Falconer paused with head thrown back, and a strange and elusive smile playing about his mouth. The perfume of the place was sweet to the point of pain. He could hear all the vague, mysterious movements of the wind in the tree-tops, and picture to himself the straight trunks merging into the far deeps of the woodland gloom. Here and there the sunlight would strike through the green canopy overhead, and fall slantingly upon the brown fir needles, the thin grass, and the bracken.

Ann looked at Falconer, and the wonder of the woods was in her eyes. She understood what the man felt, and the things for which he yearned.

“It smells so sweet, Mr. Jesse.”

“Ah!”

“Can ye hear the wind in the tree-tops? And there’s a squirrel——!”

Falconer held out a big hand.

“Take me through, Ann.”

She took his hand and they walked on like a couple of children, faces upturned with a kind of listening awe.

“It’s like the sound of the sea at Lymnor, Mr. Jesse.”

He answered:

“It’s just this that made me a poor farmer.”

“Farming isn’t everything.”

“No. Though a man can dream too much. What a worry we make of life with our little money-gettings, our scratchings and grubblings, our bustlings to and fro. You know, Ann, I have often thought I shouldn’t mind being changed into one of these trees.”

“It would be sad in the winter to have the wind roaring so.”

A streak of sunlight touched Falconer’s face.

“Ann, I can smell the bracken. It’s funny to think of all those snaky fern-roots wriggling under the ground. I love these wild places.”

“I wish half the land was wild, Mr. Jesse. Think of it, just wandering and wandering, until you come to the setting sun.”

“Ah, the golden land beyond the hills—the land we never discover.”

They left the fir wood and went down over the shorn hay fields where the grass was beginning to bristle with new and vivid growth. Away northwards the grey-black towers of Pool Castle rose out of the smiling valley. Ann could just catch a half-moon gleam of the great moat.

“Yon’s the old castle, Mr. Jesse.”

He sighed.

“It’s too far for us to-day. They’re spoiling it, too, with those ‘brakes’ and bean-feasters from Lymnor. I hear old Stubbs has got a licence for the place.”

“Quite crowds go there, Mr. Jesse.”

“I know—flies to the beer! Boozy fools who lie on their backs with their hats over their faces; sodden things in their Sunday clothes. A pub, and a bit of grass to sprawl on, does for the beasts. It’s a sin to foul Pool Castle with such folk.”

He spoke with a curious burst of passion, and Ann felt the bitterness in his voice. She tried to lead his mood back to the beauty of the sunlight on the woods and meadows. But Jesse’s thoughts had been launched on the angry sea of old prejudices.

“I would rather be a beggar or a tramp than a so-called working-man.”

“Tramps are no good, Mr. Jesse.”

“They are more honest in their way. They don’t pretend to work, whereas most men pretend—and don’t. Work for most of them means lounging through the day, with something to carry now and again, something to open and shut, or something to mend, and they do it with an eye on a tip. They don’t work because work’s good. That’s why England’s going to the dogs.”

“Well, they’re only great boys, Mr. Jesse, most of them.”

“Are they, though! More money and less time, that’s the cry. The fools don’t realise that they aren’t worth more than they get. And most of them aren’t worth that. If pigs squealed because they weren’t treated like that gentleman the dog, would anyone think their squeals worth listening to? The trouble is that there are far too many pigs.”

Ann’s fingers tightened on his arm.

“Oh—look—what a lot of rabbits! There they go, scuttling into the wood.”

Her words pulled Falconer up as a rider pulls up a galloping horse. He turned his face to her and smiled.

“What fools we are when we run away from ourselves! What’s the British working-man to me! It is better to watch rabbits playing along the edge of a wood.”

They wandered on down hedgerows and across fields, skirted a wood, and

followed a path through standing corn. Ann went first in the narrow places, reaching back with her right arm, and leading Jesse by the hand. Sometimes he would ask her to stop and tell him where they were and what she could see.

“I see through your eyes,” he said when she had described the meadows and willows of Willow End lying below them in the sunlit, hazy valley.

Ann’s face flushed, and her eyes glimmered.

“They would always serve you, Mr. Jesse.”

And these words of hers threw him into a silent mood. The whole way home he appeared preoccupied and sorrowful, saying very little to Ann, and walking with head bowed down.

Ann’s eyes watched his lips and face. She believed that she knew what was passing in Falconer’s mind, and that this long ramble over the fields and through the woods was a leave-taking and a farewell.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Ann was restless that night in her little room under the red roof. She lay a-bed and saw a few faint stars shining in through the dormer window out of the soft blackness of a summer night. The shadow of a presentiment troubled her, and the whispering rumours of her unrest haunted her like the sound of wind in the trees.

Ann slept fitfully, and her last awakening came about the time of dawn. She started up, leaning upon one elbow, vaguely conscious that some sound had roused her out of sleep. It was one of those still, stealthy summer dawns, and the little attic was filling with greyish light. Ann heard the tentative twittering of a bird, but the house itself seemed silent and asleep.

She lay back, spreading out her arms, her hair making a black pattern on the pillow. Presently she heard starlings bustling and sliding between the lath and plaster and the roofing tiles, and the chirping of sparrows that grew busier as the light increased. Her eyes had an alert and watchful look. Now and again she fancied that she could hear someone stirring in the room below.

Suddenly she drew in her arms, pushed the clothes back from her bosom, and sat up in bed. Boards creaked in the room below. Then a door opened. Ann could not distinguish the sound of footsteps, but she heard the crackling of the stair treads under the weight of someone who descended.

Ann slipped out of bed and drew back the muslin curtains. It was a silent and splendid dawn, with haze on the hills, and quiet sunlight slanting upon dew-drenched grass. Not a leaf moved. The red roses in the garden were steady points of glowing colour.

Ann went to where her clothes lay and began to dress, her fingers trembling a little with impulsive haste. Now and again she stopped to listen for any sounds from the rooms below. She washed, piled up her hair hurriedly into a black mass, and pinned on a black straw hat. She was fastening her bodice when she heard the click of a turned lock, the dull rattle of the iron bar, and the sound of footsteps in the porch.

Ann ran to the window and leant out. She had a view of the garden path, and the gate that opened upon the road. Below her she saw Falconer standing like one who loiters for a moment before leaving some well-loved place. He had a sack over one shoulder, and his iron-tipped stick in his hand. Ann could see his brown beard under the brim of his soft felt hat.

As she watched him he moved slowly up the path and stopped near the rose-bush where Brick was buried. Ann saw him reach out, feel for a rose, pluck it, and

put it into the breast-pocket of his coat. Then he went on up the path, probing the air before him with his stick until he touched the pales of the gate. Falconer opened it and passed out, and Ann, leaning from the window, watched to see which way he would turn. For a moment he seemed to hesitate, before he turned northwards in the direction of Willow End.

Ann drew back from the window and finished dressing. Then she rummaged in her trunk, and packed a few things into an old cloth bag she had often used for shopping. The black purse with her savings was not forgotten. Then she passed out of the room with its little, tumbled bed, and the sunlight striking in at the dormer window and making patterns on the wall. Ann went barefooted down the steep stairs, holding her breath as she passed Kate Falconer's door.

She found that Jesse had made a meal before leaving Fox Farm. Half a loaf of bread and a plate with a pat of butter lay on the kitchen table. Ann cut herself a couple of thick slices, and wrapping up the rest of the loaf in some paper, she put it in her bag. The tick-tack of the old clock sounded through the house as she put on the stoutest pair of shoes she had, wondering, as she tied the laces, whither they would carry her that day. She took the old cloak that hung behind the door, and went down the stone-paved passage into the garden.

The day was full of a peaceful, glimmering splendour. No sorrow or shame might ever have touched the earth, to judge by the golden joy of the morning. Grass and hedgerows sparkled. Everything seemed sweet and pure. The mystery of youth lay in the soft outlines of the haze-pearled hills.

Ann's heart felt a great stirring of tenderness and pity. It seemed to her very sad that Jesse should go out as a wanderer on such a morning. And yet the sadness of the thing was neither sordid nor austere. It had warmth, colour, and that strangeness in reality that appeals to the heart. Ann clasped the sadness of life to her bosom. In it she held a secret and intimate joy, the love that a woman sometimes gives to a man.

She came to the Quarry cottage, and the windows blinked sleepily under the eaves of the thatch. No one stirred there, save the black retriever who came out from his barrel with a rattling of the chain. The dog gave one or two short, deep-chested barks as Ann went by. She looked at the old cottage with an emotion that mingled the suggestions of many memories, but the place had no power to turn her from the road that she had chosen, nor could it rouse in her any feeling of regret. The quarry with its tangle of wild growth touched her more. She turned aside to glance into it before passing on down the open road.

Ann had left the glittering aspens of Willow End behind her before she caught her first glimpse of Jesse Falconer. She had been so long in overtaking him that she had

begun to wonder whether he had left the highroad and turned down some side lane. She had reached the bottom of Hawthorn Hill when she saw Falconer's tall figure moving between the rocky banks that towered up on either side of the road. He was travelling at a steady pace, as though he desired to escape from a neighbourhood where he was known, before the country folk were up and about.

At the top of Hawthorn Hill the road cut sharply to the right round the base of a steep hill that carried a clump of towering firs. The trees were ancient trees, red-stemmed, storm-twisted, standing high against the heavens, and visible for many miles. Ann had come within a hundred yards of Jesse when he disappeared round the curve of the road where the tall firs threw their shadows across the highway.

Ann found the road deserted when she reached the top of the hill, though she could see for three hundred yards or more. Broad stretches of grass sloped from either side of the highway towards thickets of old thorns, and these hawthorn glades merged into the heavier shades of groves of oaks whose green domes curved against the blue.

Ann hesitated, went on for a few yards, and then paused with a quick half-turn of the body. About ten yards from the road she saw Falconer sitting on a bank under one of the thorn trees, his sack and stick lying on the grass beside him. He had heard footsteps and was listening.

Ann felt the sudden hurrying of her heart. She had climbed to the crisis of her life on this wild hill with its gnarled thorns. The woman in her trembled. She was conscious of a solemn feeling of suspense, of the finality of the words that were yet unspoken.

What should she say to Falconer?

The sunlight slanting between the foliage of two oak-trees fell upon her, a slight, tense figure poised on the crown of the empty highroad. She moved forward a few steps and reached the grass. Falconer's face looked alert, and a little puzzled. He sat listening, his hands upon his knees, his head turned slightly to one side.

Ann moved on over the grass. A great trembling came upon her. She felt that she must speak or faint.

"Mr. Jesse."

She saw the sharp uplift of his chin, and the blind and startled look that swept across his face. A moment's silence seemed heavier than the heavy shadows of the oaks. Ann felt that she could not bear the silence, that she must rush forward and tear it down as she would have torn down a curtain.

"Mr. Jesse——"

"Ann!"

She pressed one hand over her throat with a quaint, tragic gesture.

“I thought that you were going. I heard you—soon after daybreak.”

Falconer remained absolutely still. She saw his lips move, but it seemed a long while before the words came.

“Ann, what are you doing here?”

She was silent a moment, and the silence felt like a stifling hand over her mouth.

“Mr. Jesse, you are going away from us. I have felt it—so long—so surely.”

His hands gripped his knees.

“Yes, I am going away,” he said.

She had dropped her cloak and bag upon the grass, and her movement towards him was one of swift appeal.

“Mr. Jesse, you can’t go alone.”

“That’s how my mind is fixed.”

“You can’t go alone. It’s like stepping out into the dark of a winter night.”

“One soon gets used to the darkness, Ann. I don’t want people to gossip and chatter. When you go back, keep my secret.”

Her face was white and determined.

“I’m not going back, Mr. Jesse.”

“Child——”

“I’m not going back. I’m not going to let you go out alone in the world. You shall have my eyes to see for you.”

“Ann, you don’t know what you are saying!”

“I know every word of ’t.”

“I tell you——”

“Mr. Jesse, what poor fools we are if we’re afraid to do what’s best and bravest.”

She bent and touched his hands, but he thrust hers gently aside.

“I’ll not listen to you. Go back home.”

“I haven’t a home, Mr. Jesse.”

Falconer seemed caught by a sudden dread of her pleading. He groped for his sack and stick, and started up from under the boughs of the thorn tree.

“You don’t know what you are saying.”

“Mr. Jesse, it’s for you. I don’t care——”

He turned on her with a kind of fierceness.

“Care! What manner of man should I be not to care? Good God, do you think I am going to drag you along with me on the road? Go back home.”

He swung away and went striding over the grass, striking it with his stick till he

felt the road. Ann stood very still, watching with eyes that yearned and yet defied him.

“Mr. Jesse——”

He faltered a moment and then walked off along the road, swinging his sack up over his shoulder.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Falconer's figure was dropping away beyond the brow of the hill before Ann picked up her bag and cloak from the grass and followed him. In the few seconds that had passed since Jesse had turned his back on her, she had struggled through a little world of thoughts and emotions, asking herself and answering many questions. Like many slightly-built and sensitive women, Ann Wetherell had that courage that recovers itself with the swift spring back of an ash bough bent towards the ground. Sheer simplicity of purpose carried her along. Her following of Falconer was not the drifting of some fat, flabby, sentimental thing swept along by a flux of emotion. Her own will-power put her upon the road, and the act was a moral act, the resultant of her pity and her foreknowledge of what might follow.

The haze of the early morning had promised heat, white dust, and a glaring highway. The mists were out of the valleys before the cows were milked, nor did the dew glisten long upon the hedgerows and the grass. It was to be a day when flies make the cool gloom of the woodlands unendurable, and when cattle, after sheltering awhile under hedges and trees, go galloping round the fields to free themselves from the black swarms about their heads. There was not a cloud in the sky, and no wind moving.

The main road, when once it had topped Hawthorn Hill, followed the uplands in one long curve for fifteen miles. Northeast and southwest the shorn brown fields and heavy-foliaged woods fell away into a vast patchwork of greys and browns and greens. Wheatfields, "roots," and clover gave richer shades, and in the distance the northern chalk-hills rose like fog-banks into the stately glare of the sky. It was a heavy landscape, dusky and oppressive in spite of the sunlight. The glitter and glamour had passed with the early morning.

Ann had not gone two furlongs before she had found the space between her and Falconer increasing. He had topped the hill and swung down the slight slope beyond, keeping on the crown of the road and using his stick. Ann had had to bustle herself to keep him from walking right away from her, and this brisk prelude proved to be the measure of the day.

Falconer went straight ahead, up Windy Hill, through Dormer Street, a hamlet of ten straggling houses where the blinds were still down in the front windows, and away along Black Hurst Ridge. Nothing passed for an hour or more, save a swaying milk-cart carrying cans to Black Hurst Station. Ann saw that Falconer did not stop for the cart. He drew well to one side of the road and kept striking the grass edge with his stick. And though she walked her fastest, Falconer began to draw away

from her on the long rise up to Hamden's Corner, for Ann had come eight miles, and the heat began to tell. She had unbuttoned her blouse at the throat; her shoes and the lower part of her skirt were white with dust; and one heel began to feel the burn of a blister.

In half an hour Falconer was out of sight. Even on the long, straight stretch of road along Wanning Ridge Ann could not get a glimpse of him. And since the smart of her heel became more vehement, and a gush of tired tears came into her heart, she sat down on a turf bank under the thin shade of a tattered spruce. Not till her limbs were idle did Ann realise how tired she was. Falconer, in spite of his blindness, had covered four and a half miles in the hour, and Ann had not spared herself in overtaking him at Hawthorn Hill.

She was feeling desperate over it when the steady "clump-clump" of a horse's hoofs came westwards along the ridge. Ann saw a rough, dun-coloured, two-wheeled cart rolling along at the tail of a brown horse. The cart-wheels were very loose on the axle-trees, and wobbled perceptibly, and the brown horse went with his head down as though he were half asleep. In the cart sat an old farmer in a white linen hat and jacket, his body following the swayings of the cart. The reins rested slackly on the dashboard rail, and the old brown horse appeared to go as he pleased.

Ann went to the side of the road, and waited.

"Maybe, Master, you'll give me a lift?"

The farmer pulled up with a sleepy start. The fringe of sandy hair round his chin and cheeks looked as though it hung by its two ends from the brim of his white hat.

"Hallo—m' dear——!"

"Can ye give me a lift?"

"Well, I dunno. I'm going Bellhurst way."

"So am I. And I'm that tired——"

The farmer gave a jerk of the chin.

"Up with ye. Old Billy would rather have ye to pull than a calf. And it's a dung-heap of a day, all steam and flies."

Ann climbed in, the man reaching out a hand to her. The look in her eyes gave him sufficient thanks. He stared down at her with a sleepy and paternal twinkle as the cart went swaying down the dusty road. He was not a talkative mortal, but one of those big ruminant creatures who hang their heads over gates and meditate. Ann felt glad that he did not ask her any questions.

The brown horse covered five miles, and the white sign-post where the road branched to Bellhurst and Flamber stood out on its green strip of grass, before Ann

caught sight of Jesse Falconer. She had been watching for him at every turn of the road, her heart sinking a little each time she saw the white track empty. Falconer was sitting on the bluff black nose of the Bellhurst snow-plough where it lay under the shade of a wayside oak. His sack, coat, and hat lay on the grass at his feet, and he was making a meal of the bread and cheese he had brought from the Fox Farm kitchen.

Ann pressed her lips together and stared at the horizon, nor did Falconer lift his head as the cart went by. A swarm of flies had descended on him out of the foliage of the oak tree, and were pestering him as though he were an ox. They settled on his face and hands, and on the bread he was eating, though he kept brushing them aside with blind, irritable gestures.

The farmer glanced at him with drowsy curiosity.

“’Tain’t reasonable to sit under an oak when one’s a-sweatin’,” he said; “flies smell un out if they have a taste for ye.”

Ann said “yes.”

“Flies be rum insect’s. They’re partic’lar in their way. They don’t never worrit me; no—nor fleas, neither. Don’t know for why, sure.”

Ann asked to be set down by the sign-post.

“I’m going Flamber way,” she said.

The farmer drew up.

“It’s a mile or more to Flamber. Keep to the main road.”

“I can’t thank ye enough.”

“Lor, m’dear, don’t thank me. It’s old Billy as ’as had to draw ye.”

Ann went a few steps down the Flamber road, and waited till the brown cart with its white-coated driver had disappeared beyond the hedgerows. Then she turned, and taking to the grass, walked back slowly towards Falconer.

She stopped some ten yards from Jesse and stood watching him with a flare of pity shining in her eyes. For here was this great, girt man contemptibly tormented by swarming flies. They settled on the food he was eating, crawled into his eyes and ears, and buzzed pertinaciously about his head, a little cloud of black vibrating specks. Even a single persistent fly can make a philosopher look ridiculous, and Falconer’s fatalistic patience had given place to gusts of helpless irritation. He kept brushing at his face and head with petulant, quick gestures, while the black things alighted on his very hands when they ceased to beat the air.

Falconer had not heard the rustle of Ann’s feet in the grass, but when she moved to the hedge and broke off a piece of bracken, he heard the snapping of the stem, and stiffened into immobility, one hand over his eyes.

“Who’s there?”

Ann moved round him, sat down on the snow-plough, and began to switch away the flies.

“It’s only me, Mr. Jesse.”

He twisted round, showing a hot, grim face.

“Good God—you!”

“Won’t you come out into the open, Mr. Jesse. It’s better in the sun. The flies don’t bother one so.”

His face was towards her, but his hands reached down half furtively for his hat and coat.

“I told you to go back.”

“I can’t go back, Mr. Jesse.”

He felt the breath of the bracken plume waving about his head. And he put up a sudden hand, caught it, and then let go.

“Ah! These damnable flies!”

“You want me, Mr. Jesse.”

“What do you mean by following me like this?”

“You want me.”

“I? Did I ask you to come? You have a confounded amount of assurance.”

She regarded him with a kind of pitiful serenity.

“Mr. Jesse, I don’t believe——”

“What!”

She caught his arm.

“What are you doing, sending me away when I love you better than anything else in the world? No, no—don’t push me away—I——”

“Ann——”

“You want me, I know you want me. Oh, Mr. Jesse, what does anything else matter? It’s just you and me—and you’re blind. If I give you my eyes, will you throw them away!”

He got up, blundered to and fro, and then stood with clenched fists, his shoulders bowed, his face tragic.

“Don’t—don’t talk that nonsense. I’ve told you to go back. Do you think I’m going to take you—body and soul—and drown you in a ditch?”

She remained white-faced, earnest, obdurately tender.

“You look at the black side. Even if it were to be that, I shouldn’t care. I know you want me.”

Jesse turned slowly, and stood with the straining, inarticulate air of a man trying

to make himself speak in a foreign tongue.

“Well, I say I don’t want you. Go back.”

“I can’t go back, Mr. Jesse.”

“You must go back.”

“I can’t.”

He stood motionless a moment, and then groped for his hat and coat. The flies were about him again, as he picked up the sack that held his few odd trifles. His stick lay close to the snow-plough, and it took him a little while to find it. Ann watched him. She knew what he was going to do.

Jesse struck the grass, and made his way to the road.

“It’s no use your following me any further,” he said.

She nodded her head.

“It’s all the use in the world, Mr. Jesse.”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The glare and heat of the day passed into the cool blue gloom of one of those rare summer evenings when the dew falls heavily and refreshingly upon a jaded world. Dusk came with shades of purple and of grey, dimming the golden haze that lingered in the west. The solitary woods and fields were very still with the breathless stillness of ecstasy. Strange, moist perfume rose out of the grass slopes and hedgerows, and even the dust on the roads smelt fragrant. Trees, hills, and farm-buildings became sharp, black outlines, as though cut out of black marble. The sky sank into deeper shades of blue, and began to throb with stars.

Falconer, slouching along with the thought of a night's shelter before him, had been touched by the scent of newly-mown hay. By casting to and fro, and beating the ground with his stick he had come upon a rough track leading into a field, and after climbing the gate, had found the hay-stack close to the hedge that bounded the road. Moving round it, and following the grass wall with his hand, Falconer had caught the mellower scent of an older stack that had been cut into, but a great part of it left standing. He felt his way to it, and found a sheltered corner with loose hay to make a bed. The stacks appeared to stand at some distance from a farm, for in spite of the stillness of the evening Falconer had not heard the sound of voices or the noise of beasts. The place was very solitary, grey fields lying on the highroad under the dense blueness of a summer sky.

Falconer settled himself in the angle where the knife had left the brown walls firm and fragrant. He took off his heavy boots, drew his sack on to his knees, and felt in it for the loaf and a bottle of beer that he had bought at a neighbouring village. He had endured many things that day, labours of soul as well as labours of body, and in that silent and solitary place his weariness threw him into a gloomy reverie. His loneliness seemed to spread through space and to mark him off as a superfluous and trivial thing left on the edge of the dying day. The cool and silent dusk that had refreshed him on the road, brought by degrees a dreary sense of isolation. The man's heart failed in him a little. He felt far away from the world, and that no one cared.

This self-pity was false and he knew it, and the knowledge of its falseness took the hunger out of his mouth. He sat with the sack drawn across his knees, his face a patch of greyness in the dusk, his head and shoulders bent into a gloom of stooping thought.

It had grown dark, and the edge of the full moon was due to rise above the eastern hills when Falconer raised his head suddenly, and listened. Far off he had heard the scraping of a shoe upon the road. It had seemed a single, solitary sound

flung haphazard out of the night, and for a while nothing followed to give it certainty. Then the sound was repeated. Footsteps became distinguishable, the irregular, jerky footsteps of one who was very tired. Now and again there was the scraping of leather along the ground, a sound that betrays the clumsy walker, the drunkard, or someone utterly fatigued.

Falconer listened. The steps came slowly nearer and faltered by the gate, just as the moon came up as a silver dome. There was the brushing of feet through grass. The gate shook as though someone were climbing it or leaning against the bars. Then, out of the darkness, came a sound that sent a shiver of emotion through Falconer's body. It was the sound of spasmodic, helpless weeping, the weeping of one whose courage was out and whose heart broke into tears. Falconer's hands gripped strands of the loose hay. The conviction seized him that he knew who stood weeping by the gate. The tears were the tears of Ann who loved him—Ann whom he loved.

Jesse heard words come out of his own mouth. They seemed spoken by some other compelling self within him and against the whole obstinate and renunciatory spirit of the day.

“Who's there?”

The weeping ceased suddenly, and he heard the gate rattle. If it was Ann, he had betrayed himself, for she would know his voice.

He sat breathless, listening. Then he heard a movement nearer the stack.

“Mr. Jesse——”

“Ann.”

“Oh, I'm so tired—so tired.”

Her voice and presence seemed to float down on him like a sweet, sad, weary vapour. Blindly, with a sense of incredulity, he felt her sink beside him on the hay. Jesse shivered. A fatal helplessness possessed him, while out of it cried a strange, inexorable tenderness.

“Ann.”

She sighed, and he felt something touch his shoulder.

“I'm so tired. Don't send me away.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

On the chalk-hills north of Guildford town a man sat under the shade of a yew-tree, elbows on knees and chin on hands. Southwards the landscape fell away into blue-grey distances under the white cloud-masses of a summer sky. The slope of the hill where the man sat was dotted with junipers and yews whose shadows fell sharply on the short, brownish grass. Beside him lay a rough canvas satchel with shoulder straps, and some of its contents had been spread upon the grass. They included a little tin kettle, a couple of white mugs, a tin of sugar, a small jam-pot that held butter, a bottle of milk, two plates and half a loaf of bread. A cloth bag and a basket, a cloak, an umbrella, and an old wooden military water-bottle decorated the boughs of the yew.

In a beech wood higher up the hill a girl was gathering dead wood to make a fire. Her feet made a pleasant rustling among the crisp dead leaves as she moved to and fro humming a song. Sometimes her red mouth indulged itself in a mellow whistling that would have done credit to a boy. She wore no hat, and the pearly brown skin of her neck and hands was good to behold. As for her skirt, it showed her ankles and a neat new pair of stout shoes.

When she had gathered an armful of sticks, she passed out of the beech wood into the sunlight, her brown face aglow with something more than health. She went down the slope of the hill towards the man under the yew-tree, and her eyes glimmered as she looked at him. He, too, was bareheaded, tawny and brown, with the air of one who had lived in the open.

The girl moved very silently over the short, downland grass. The man did not hear her, for he remained motionless, sunk in thought, his face turned towards the south. A moment of sadness seemed upon him, the sadness stirred by an unanswered question that haunted him sometimes when he was alone. The attitude of melancholy abstraction appeared natural to the man's figure. He had one of those leonine and slightly drooping heads that look at sorrow afar off from under troubled brows.

The girl watched him and smiled. A wise light sparkled in her eyes. She had learnt many things that concern a woman and a man, especially when the man has a vein of dreamy weakness running through his character. But she did not blurt out on him. That is where she was so wise.

“Here's the wood. Now for a fire.”

The man raised his head and stirred himself with the air of one who was not sorry to be roused.

“Tea. That’s good. I’ve been thinking.”

She put the wood down, and pulled an old newspaper from the man’s pocket.

“You go off so—into dreams. It’s good to be able to think.”

He stretched himself.

“Grand—sometimes.”

“Not always?”

“Well—no. Some thoughts are like taxes. You can’t put ’em off. They turn up regularly.”

She had arranged the paper and was piling up the wood. The glances she threw at the man from time to time were sweet, shrewd, and full of understanding. A match spluttered, and the wood began to crackle.

“Here, you hold the kettle over it with the stick.”

“Right. I will.”

She arranged the kettle and stick for him, letting her hands touch his. He lifted his face to her.

“What a mate you are for a man.”

“Am I? That’s what you want, what you always wanted.”

The expression of questioning thought stole back into his face.

“That’s it. But there’s the beyond that bothers me. You don’t know what it means to have always had bad luck.”

She knelt and looked steadily at him for a moment. Then she smiled.

“I can guess at it. But I’ve broken it for you.”

“Ah——”

“Yes, I have.”

“That’s what troubles me. I can’t help thinking about it, Nan. Have you broken my bad luck, or is my bad luck going to break you?”

She went close, moving on her knees, put an arm round his neck, and pulled the lobe of his left ear.

“I know which. Don’t you go looking ahead for trouble.”

The kettle rocked ominously on the stick.

“Look out, Nan, you’ll make me spill the water.”

“Bo—you great thing!”

She kissed him and drew her arm away lingeringly. Jesse managed to hold the stick with one hand, and caught her wrist with the other. He bent his head and carried her brown hand to a passionate mouth.

“I just love you like that—through and through.”

She gave a soft, thrilling laugh.

“Go on doing it, and we shan’t come to no harm.”

They sat down side by side to their vagabond tea, Ann cutting thick slices of bread and butter, and also managing the kettle, which served as a tea-pot. She had the air of being confident and happy, and her sweet cheerfulness had had a remarkable effect on Jesse. In the years gone by he had forgotten how to laugh and to chuckle. Melancholy had meant the line of least resistance for him. He had had no good friend to pull him up by the coat collar and say: “Cheer up, man, cheer up; why make such a misery of the one life you’ve got?”

During the weeks that had passed Ann had been irresistible. Love had made her very happy, plumped out all her being, and brought new sparkles of fun into her eyes. Yet from the very first she had discovered magical insight, and a kind of intuitive knowledge of Jesse’s nature. He needed vitality. Ann had felt it, though she might not have been able to fit her feeling with words. Those tired, melancholy moods of his would descend on him like the cold dusk of a dreary evening in spring. He needed self-confidence, sympathy, a little tender teasing, and a vicarious obstinacy that refused to sit down and be crushed by the woe of the world. Ann had said it in her heart from the first: “I will make him happy. We are going to be happy. Let the silly old world say what it pleases.” And by reason of the sincerity, and the upbubbling spontaneity of her happiness, she had shaken in those few weeks the very foundations of Falconer’s pessimism.

Jesse never remembered having heard Ann laugh at Fox Farm. Her laughter had come as a new sound to him, and he was very dependent upon sounds. At first he had felt strangely astonished. He always thought of Ann as a pale-faced, red-lipped, dark-eyed, tragic slip of a woman who had come through a world of suffering and compassion. But this laughter of hers! Soft, merry, and suggestive, it had filled him with a sense of sweet, new intimacy. They could enjoy things together, and smile at the less pleasant incidents in this life of the road. Falconer found that Ann had a quick eye, and a demure and stealthy sense of fun. She would describe everything they met upon the road, and her vitality was like sea air, wind in the trees, the smell of a bean-field in bloom.

“Shall we go down to the town, or camp out here?”

She was refilling his mug with tea.

“I want to be in Guildford to-night.”

“’Tisn’t far, by the last sign-post.”

“I expect something’s waiting for me there, Nan.”

Her eyes gave a quick, fluttering gleam.

“From Ashhurst?”

He nodded, and was silent awhile, his face growing stern and thoughtful. He was thinking of that pre-arranged meeting of a month ago, that scene that had been half a tragedy, half a farce. Jesse remembered the musty scent of the sitting-room in a village inn, a room into which little sunlight ever came because of a great yew that grew in front of the window. He remembered how Kate, his wife, had come to him there, as it had been arranged between them by letter. They had talked quietly, almost like friends, till Jesse had refused to carry the conspiracy to the point of savage violence demanded by the law.

Kate had started up suddenly, oversetting her chair, and he could still hear her intense, suggestive whisper.

“Hit me, you fool, hit me! Don’t you understand?”

Then had come the opening of doors, the sound of inquisitive, shocked voices, a sense of stress and of indignation. Jesse remembered how Kate had broken out against him, how the other voices had joined in, and how someone had taken him roughly by the sleeve.

“Hit me, you fool, hit me!”

He knew that he had not obeyed that suggestive whisper, but he had thrust at something soft, and heard the sound of things falling. This little piece of melodrama had been contrived to serve its turn. Then Jesse had found himself blundering along a road, and Ann had come to him suddenly out of the darkness. She had taken his hand, and they had gone away in silence, neither of them venturing to speak of what had passed.

Yet all this seemed to have happened long ago as they dreamed together over the Surrey hills, living a happy, vagabond life, sleeping in barns and under haystacks, and watching the stars and the moon at night. The life cost them little in the matter of hard cash, and Falconer had enough money on him to last for a couple of years as things went.

The heat of the day had passed when they picked up their baggage, and tramped down hill to Guildford. This red, happy, lovable old town opens its heart pleasantly to those who travel, and tarry upon the way. Ann and Jesse descended the steep main street with its mellow and pleasant houses, its outjutting clock, its green glimpse of the hill beyond the river. Jesse felt the stones under his feet, and heard the stir of life about him. Ann led him by the hand, and the idly curious turned to stare after this vagabond, brown-faced couple; the man blind, with a pack strapped to his shoulders; the girl, neat and comely, leading him by the hand. From the yard entry of the Angel Hotel, a cheeky, snub-nosed youngster bobbed out with a grin and a quip.

“’Allo Samson! There’s ’air!”

And Falconer smiled, which showed that he was learning much.

They crossed the bridge over the river, and in a side street somewhere beyond it Ann stopped before a stiff, straight up-and-down old red house, that boasted a big bracket lamp over its front door. On the lamp in red letters were the words: “The Tennyson Temperance Hotel.” This was not the first time that Ann and Jesse had come through Guildford Town, and clean sheets and decent food were to be had in the red brick house. Moreover, picturesque people were not stared at dubiously by the fat woman who managed the establishment, and though her house was a Temperance house, she had few prejudices. All sorts of men and women tarried there and passed on, shop-assistants out on a cycle tour, travelling mountebanks, artisans, some of the lesser fry among commercial travellers. One had but to glance at the greasy visitors’ book in the coffee-room to get a glimpse of vulgar, cheery, bounding life.

There was something sordid about the gaiety of these people. It was all so cheap, so coarsely sentimental. It made one appreciate the mute look of an animal, the dignity of a dog. The entries were full of titters, giggles, stupid innuendoes. One saw the shop-bag in every line, the cheap spirit of a cheap age, the abominable folly of a little education. Sometimes we are compelled to recognise the necessity of scorn.

The fat woman smiled at Ann and Falconer. She smiled at everybody, and was never at a loss for a name.

“Oh, yes, I can give you a room. Lovely weather, ain’t it? There’s a letter been waiting for you, Mr. Falconer. It’s been here two days.”

She went smoothly and largely into a little side room, and returned with the letter.

“My, you do look brown, both of you! For myself, I shan’t mind when the autumn comes. I ain’t so slim as I used to be, and the kitchen fire and the summer heat fair make me sizzle.”

Their room at the Tennyson Temperance Hotel was a little back room looking out on a sort of mixed yard and garden. There was a fowl-house in one corner, and a rough woodshed in another. Numberless queer, irregular, red-tiled roofs sloped hither and thither, and nasturtiums climbed wherever a piece of paling was to be found. In the back yard a boy was whistling and cleaning boots, his head within six inches of a row of stockings that had been hung out on a line to dry.

Jesse could see nothing of all this, but Ann threw up the window and looked out, and appeared perfectly happy and at home. Things interested her, and she had no craving for smart and flashy surroundings. She helped Jesse off with his pack, and

put sundry articles away into a yellow-grained chest of drawers.

The fat woman's voice came up the stairs.

"Now, what would you like to eat, my dear? Tea and cold meat, now, or presently?"

Ann glanced at Jesse.

"I'm not hungry yet."

"No, let's go out for a while. I've got this letter to read."

Ann leant over the banisters, and explained their desires, and the fat woman said "right 'o."

A man who is truly wise might well exclaim: "I thank Fate that my birth was postponed until the land had been filled with old houses, memories, and ruins." To be modern is to be old, for we moderns have the treasure-chests and the books of the ages ready to our hands. It is we who are ancient, complex, classic, those few of us who are not ragmen and politicians. Much of the world is ripe for the lover of poetry. New stone and raw brick may have been as ugly in their youth as the stuff the barbarian builds with in unmentionable suburbs. Our inheritance has been the mellow colouring, the silver and gold of lichenous surfaces, the black oak, the worn ways.

Moreover, we moderns have many moods. We desire variety, a quick change of programme, and the world has come to that degree of complexity when it can provide us with swift and vivid contrasts. And it is better so. Your true, and selfish artist does not desire the millennium. Slums, and sorrow, and starvation would be a vast loss to the piquancy of life. At present everything is to hand. You walk out of a cathedral into a public-house, and turn from a paragraph on Ruskin to the account of the latest murder.

In a town such as Guildford you have half a dozen centuries at your elbow, and mountebanks and singers and barrel-organs to make a gay stir at night. Falconer and Ann Wetherell, passing out under the bracket-lamp of the Tennyson Temperance Hotel, crossed Elaine's river in a few seconds, and in a minute more were within the burial-ground of St. Mary's Church. A sweet, sad, sacred and diminutive place, this burial-ground, in the red heart of the old town. Sacred and sweet, too, the queer church with its floor at three different levels. Ann and Jesse, desiring to be alone, could have found no better place than this ancient church. The door was unlocked, the interior empty, silent, and streaked with sunlight. The hush was like a cool hand to a hot forehead. Ann and Jesse found a seat in a far-away corner, and Falconer gave her Kate Falconer's letter.

"Read it to me. Is there anything enclosed?"

She opened it and found a piece of coloured paper folded up within the letter.

“Here’s one of those things they take at banks.”

“A cheque. What’s on it?”

“Five hundred pounds.”

“Well, that’s what I expected.”

Ann looked awed.

“Does this little bit of paper mean——?”

“It means that I could change it for five hundred golden sovereigns. Read the letter.”

She read it to him in a soft, slow voice, her brows slightly knitted as though the mere deciphering of the words was not the only effort that it caused her. The old, sad, discordant life became audible, like the din of traffic heard in the quiet church. She felt for one of Jesse’s hands as she read, and held it firmly. Yet there was hope in this letter—a suggestion of a sharp and truthful disentangling of knots, a cutting asunder of absurd bonds. It was a document of liberty for four people, a promise of cleaner and sincerer lives.

They were silent awhile. Then Jesse said:

“She is a woman of her word. I always knew she had courage. She has treated me very fairly.”

Ann sighed contentedly.

“Isn’t it worlds better? Folk are so funny. They all seem afraid of each other, and just make believe, so that the others shan’t get talking. I’d rather have my house clean and empty than dirty under the carpets and full of folk I didn’t like.”

Jesse sat for some moments in a reverie.

“It’s the crowd,” he said; “one is expected to go with the crowd, or suffer.”

Next morning the manager of one of the local banks had two picturesque customers who smelt of the open road, passed on to him by an amused clerk. A blind man desired to open an account with the bank, to place £400 on deposit, and £120 as a current account. He presented a cheque for £500, and £20 in gold. The blind man had a girl with him, and the bank manager took them both into his private room. He was a discreet person, and had accumulated experience. The cut of the coat did not always mark the man of means. The proprietor of an itinerant steam round-about, cocoanut shies, and swings, paid his miscellaneous takings into this particular bank, and the manager knew that the figures ran into several hundreds yearly.

He asked a few questions, and went through certain formalities.

“I suppose the cheque is all right. You know the drawer?”

“Pretty well,” said Jesse; “I shall stay in Guildford till that cheque is honoured.”

Nor had he to wait long. Kate Falconer was a woman of her word.

CHAPTER XXX.

The September and October of that year were phenomenally dry and fine, the wind swinging between northeast and northwest, and the days beginning greyly with dense mists and heavy dews. By seven o'clock blue sky would be showing, with the sun breaking through into a world of strangeness and mystery. Tall bronzed oaks and glimmering firs glittered above wreaths of silver fogs. Great waves of vapour went dragging across the hills, trailing ragged edges away from the golden grasp of the sun. These mornings became peerless days, days of purple horizons and majestic skies. And as the autumn mellowed, the earth and sky became a study in blue and bronze.

To Falconer and Ann these weeks were the happiest weeks that either of them had ever lived. Out of the red town and along the Hog's Back ran the open road, with blue hills touching the horizon, and a sense of wonder in the air. All ways were open to these two, and no such thing as haste existed. In Guildford Falconer had bought a couple of camping sheets and light blankets which he carried in a roll under his pack. For ten nights together they did not sleep under a roof, but found some spot under a beech-tree or a yew where the dew did not penetrate and the ground was dry. Often they would gather leaves to make a bed and build a shelter of boughs when there was a wind. It was a primitive life, spacious and pleasant so long as the fine weather held.

From Farnham they went by way of Alton, and on over the hills to Winchester, descending by a steep and winding street into the heart of the old town. It was a Saturday morning, and the narrow ways were crowded with carts, motors, and carriages. Ann, leading Jesse along the pavement, was conscious of impatient, hurrying glances, rude stares, and curious smiles. Falconer was too big for the Winchester pavements, and since Ann had to walk beside him, other people were compelled to stand aside against shop windows or step into the roadway. It is an impatient age, and even such a town as Winchester catches the fever of the day.

The rattle of the traffic and the blare of motor-horns filled Falconer's dark world with clamour and unrest. "Get on, get on, get on!" said the voice of this provincial city and Jesse felt himself in the way. Modern he might be in some of his methods of thought, but in the main he was part of the old English country life, slow, sagacious, steadfast; hating hurry.

"Turn out of this, Nan."

She found a passage-way that led into a great green space, the close of the cathedral. The petty, commercial eagerness of the street changed to stateliness and

beautiful indifference. For the grey cathedral was as indifferent as Nature. Man brushed about its buttresses, imagined God hidden somewhere in the intricacies of its lights and shadows, and dowered it with all manner of complex hopes and emotions, but the silent stones did not heed the patter of passing feet.

Jesse felt Ann's hand tighten upon his arm.

"It's wonderful. You've seen it before, perhaps."

"Years ago."

"Let's go in. There won't be people in a hurry to buy butter and eggs and bacon."

Ann had never been in any building bigger than Ashhurst church, and here, her crude, innocent, sweet soul fluttered like a lost bird through the immensities of the place. She gazed, and wondered, and felt of no account. The cathedral awed her by its very silence. She did not hear one of its many, wistful, whispering voices, and to her its memories did not exist. She knew nothing of "styles," of the shadow-bands made by mouldings, of the difference between axe and chisel work, of the nature of old glass. To Ann it was a great, oppressive, incomprehensible place in which her ignorance crept like a mouse hunting for crumbs.

Jesse stood bare-headed, stooping slightly as though listening to music. The cool, sad silence of such a place drowned in him the thought of self. He became a part of other lives, other emotions, other doubts.

With Ann it was different. She could not give herself to this great grey grove of stone. It awed her, but without touching her sympathies. Jesse, whose hand held hers, felt a kind of striving of her consciousness against the vastness of the building, and the inadequacy of her own impressions.

"Big, isn't it?"

"It's too big; it swallows one up. And how do they keep it warm in the winter?"

Jesse smiled. This was the human Ann he knew. No affectations of wonder and admiration.

"Oh—furnaces. Does the place make you feel cold?"

She was frank.

"It makes me feel small, and wretched, and that we little folks don't matter. Let's go back into the sun."

It was Winchester city that gave the first rebuff to the complete joyousness of this vagabond life. The incident was trivial enough, but taken together with other impressions, it left a sore point in Ann's mind.

The trouble arose over the need of a lodging for the night and the originator of the offence was a stout, dumpy young person in black, with bare forearms, a big

bosom, and a golden head that shone reflected in the mirrors of a certain Winchester inn. Ann had hesitated under the great gilded sign-board, but Falconer was in the mood for calling his money as good as anyone else's. So Ann confronted the golden-haired young woman who looked at her with lethargic pertness from an enclosure that was half office and half bar.

The woman had one of those placidly insolent, flat faces that betray no emotion. She stared at Falconer and Ann, resumed the scribbling of a letter, and then stared again as though it was no business of hers to put an end to the silence.

Ann noticed that the girl had a double chin, hard eyes, and broad nostrils. The eyes seemed to grow harder and more staring when she asked for a room for the night.

"Sorry—can't take you."

Ann flushed. As a woman she felt very keenly what the other woman did not trouble to conceal.

"Are you sure?"

The flat white face under the intricate mass of golden hair remained insolently casual.

"Sorry, we haven't room."

It was the moment for Falconer to be inopportunistically blind.

"You might be able to manage something——"

The young woman caught him up.

"I think I said we haven't room."

Jesse felt Ann's hand on his arm. She said something in a low voice, and led him out into the street.

Falconer was doubly blind. He had seen nothing and divined nothing, not even from the yellow-headed woman's voice. There was no room for them in the inn, that was all, and they would have to go elsewhere. But Ann's face had a red blur on either cheek, and she avoided the eyes of the people who stared at her in the street. She had seen the other woman's eyes look her over, glance at her hands, and remain hard. A woman is quick at divining what another woman is thinking and saying behind the screen of her silence. Ann knew that she and Jesse had been turned away as undesirables, and that the woman with the flat white face had not troubled to cover her contempt. To be treated with suspicion by sordid people, is to come very near to feeling sordid, and Ann's face burnt.

Falconer guessed nothing of all this. He had grown so much happier of late that he had lost some of his cleverness for catching the gloomier means and motives of life. When a man is happy he is apt to grow stolid and unobservant. To feel and

appreciate the finer vibrations of life it is necessary to be a little sad.

“Try somewhere else, Nan.”

She concealed her humiliation from him.

“I want to be somewhere quiet, Jesse. I don’t like these flash places.”

“Was it flash? Then try something simpler.”

Winchester gave them a little back bedroom for the night, in a cottage that was one of a row. The old woman who kept a card in her window with “Furnished room to let” thereon, was sly, cynical, and servile. She called Ann “my dear,” slunk restlessly about the house like a lean cat, and filled the place with the smell of greens that she cooked in the kitchen. Ann had been bred to a rough life, but the old woman and her cottage inspired in her a nameless and instinctive disgust.

They left next morning, and tramped off through the autumn sunlight on the Romsey road. Jesse was in good spirits, but Ann inclined towards silence. She answered Falconer with few words, and her pale face with its dark eyes seemed to move through a mist of thought.

Ann had had one of those flashes of foreknowledge that come to one in life, and she was no longer ready to laugh carelessly over the vicissitudes of “tramping.” She had struck her foot against the flint of reality, and the pain had set her thinking. This life that they were leading had taken on a new significance. It was no longer a thing of perfect glamour, a path that went no one troubled whither so long as it sought the sunset. Other facts persisted in crowding upon Ann’s consciousness, such facts as the ways and means of life, bad weather, and sickness.

It struck her that life could not always be like this, and she was amazed at not having realised the truth before. Visions of a drenched landscape, muddy roads, hurrying skies, rose before her. Then, how long would that money of Jesse’s last? If either of them fell ill there would be no place that they could call “home.” People might turn them away as the yellow-haired woman had done. The thought rankled.

Later, she had a mind-picture of a little red cottage set well back in a garden, with a yew-tree shading the porch and the brick-paved path. There would be a snug kitchen within where one could draw up close to the fire, and sit with one’s feet on the fender. The wind would rattle the lattices, and roar in the chimneys, but that would not matter. And work? Ann felt a kind of sudden homesickness for work, a desire to use her hands, to bustle, to contrive, to clean and polish. How good it would be to do it all for Jesse.

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was mid-October when they came to the Forest, but the days were dry and sunny, and the nights none too cold. Ann had recovered her happy mood, and the reflections that the yellow-haired woman had roused became faint shadows that escaped notice.

Moreover, the Forest is a wizard's wilderness, casting a spell upon all those who have some of the wild blood left in their hearts. Primitively beautiful and strange, its very silence stands and calls from the infinitudes of its whispering gloom. Glades and open spaces dance with the sunlight. There are a hundred stillnesses, a hundred noises, the stillness of midnight, the hush of the dawn, the down-fluttering of leaves, dead wood breaking, the drip of rain, all manner of strange murmurings, bird notes, storm cries, the snorting of ponies, the tinkling of cow-bells. Mystery! Everything is mysterious with the mystery of unsolved silences and unseen depths. The old hollies shake black robes and mutter spells. The bracken hides secret lovers. Between the great trunks of the beeches and under their gorgeous colours wild men in skins chase laughing girls. Fir-woods sigh and muse and break into rhapsodies. Sunlight and shadow tangle each other. Streams wander where they will. Bog flowers and vivid mosses blaze in the moist places. Across the open spaces you should see forest knights go riding in green-painted armour, with great ladies in gold samite. Who should tell of the blackness of the night, the redness of the sunset, the purple of the heather, the green glimmer of leaves, the many fragrances, the rush of rain in June? One knows by instinct that many strange things have happened in the Forest. The Forest knows it also. Memories rustle like autumn leaves.

Though Falconer was blind, the spell of the place smote him, and stirred in him many emotions. Ann would tell him that the oaks and beeches were changing colour, and Jesse saw them with their incipient reds and golds. Poplars were a glitter of gold, the heather rusty, the bracken shades of saffron and of bronze. The smell of autumn was in the bosom of summer. Leaves rustled and fell. There were wayward gusts of wind that danced along the sandy roads.

At such a season and in such a place a woman's mouth may draw many kisses, and these two became primitive folk, couching amid the bracken, and catching each other with passionate hands. At night they lay close together under some yew or holly, and felt the vast silence of the moist, autumn darkness. Every sense seemed quickened, even Falconer's faculty for seeing things from within. He was in miraculous touch with his surroundings, and would point and say: "Look at the bracken yonder," and the bracken would be there in tawny waves. The Forest

absorbed all their vitality and yet quickened it. It demanded the whole consciousness, and would not let the imagination look beyond its borders. A day in the Forest was nothing but a day. It was the one day of all days. Neither the past nor the future had ever existed.

Moreover, Falconer and Ann struck up sundry quaint and passing friendships upon the Forest roads. Tramping from Lyndhurst towards Lymington they fell in with a battered old vagabond whose toes showed through his boots. He had a red squab of a face, a pudgy nose, a scattering of babyish curls under his felt hat, and a long mouth that writhed and twisted under the touch of an irrepressible sense of fun. He passed Ann and Falconer, who were sitting on a grass bank, turned, took a stumpy clay pipe from between his teeth, and saluted them.

“Salve, filia mea. Ah—ah—arma virumque cano. What price the weather?”

He sat down on the bank, introduced himself, and proceeded to make friends. There was a genial lilt about his flow of soul, and his eyes were full of twinkles.

People passed by, people in motors, people in traps, people on bicycles, people afoot. The tramp eyed them all with quizzical interest, and had something pithy to say of each.

“Know the tale of the two skunks, eh? No? What’s the use! When the motors passed! Smell! See——? Ah, good morning, Lord Ballyshannon. Oily Irish scoundrel that, in the flash dog-cart. D’you know how to be generous when you’re Oirish? No? Well, borrow a shilling, and then give it away as the last bit of silver you’ve got in the world. Sensation! Splendid fellow!”

They all laughed, and Jesse and the tramp began to talk, though the tramp did most of the talking.

“Name? My name! What d’you want to label me for? Call it Ulysses the Second. What—no adventures in these days, no one-eyed giants, and no Calypsos! Oh, bosh! Life’s full of adventures. A flea’s an adventure, a mighty hunting, the scratching of the bites—ecstasy! Now—now! Being kicked out of a barn’s an adventure. Being given a bath’s an adventure. What! There’s an old screw-face in that carriage. Nettlefold all over.”

He took off his disgraceful hat to the high-nosed, clay-coloured woman in a victoria. Her stare of surprise seemed to amuse the tramp.

“What a rum world! Supposing I was God Almighty in a pair o’ patched trousers and a seedy shirt? Wouldn’t she have caught it! Dirty vagabond. Oh—lor!”

He chuckled, and nodded his head. As for his vocabulary it was original and voluminous. Some day in the past he must have worn starched shirts, and belonged to a solid and self-conscious society. Now he sat on a grass bank, twitted the people

who went by, and tagged wonderful titles to them.

Two fat women and a very thin man in a cart he hailed as “881.” That was a great joke. He had to explain it to Jesse.

“They added up well, eh? 881! There must be bad luck in numbers. That thin chap will find himself squeezed into a fraction.”

A lean cleric who cycled by with head in air and pince-nez perched on the bridge of a ritualistic nose, was christened the “Rev. Slimy Wafer upon Wheels.”

A red-faced commercial traveller driving round in a wagonette drew sardonic scorn.

“Boiled beef. Vulgar stuff! Beg pardon, what were we saying? That Browning might just as well have been called Blacking. To hello ’o with Sordello. Poets, I can crack the lot! Of all the bacchibanalian bosh! You don’t grasp the cleverness of that, Miss Blackeyes. Yes, I’m a genius; look at my boots. I’ll say this to you. Keep healthy, keep laughing, don’t overfeed, and don’t drink too much like me. Then you won’t want to have to read good books.”

He accompanied them towards Lymington, walking with a sore-footed shuffle, but displaying immense cheerfulness and a vivid sense of humour. He appeared to be about the freest person on earth. No affectations of superiority on the part of society could abash him. He looked the respectable world in the face and laughed uproariously.

When they had gone a mile or so Ann saw him scuffle down suddenly into a ditch. He returned triumphantly with a pair of discarded boots. Dreary objects that they were, they appeared to be one degree less dilapidated than his own.

“Waal, boss, I guess my bare toes would tickle a respectable town to death.”

He sat down on the edge of the road, stripped off his own boots, transferred the bits of string that served as laces, and shod himself anew.

“Dinky, ain’t they? The chap who threw these beauties away was a fool, or a bloated plutocrat. I guess these old servants won’t find a new master. Booties, my dears—you shan’t die in a ditch. You shall be covered up by nice brown leaves,” and he shied them into a wood.

The last glimpse Ann had of him was in the main street of Lymington. He had taken leave of them with a wave of the hat, and then stooped to pick up a cigarette end that someone had thrown into the gutter.

Very different from this “cheerful failure” was the woman Ann met in the porch of Minstead church. Falconer and Ann had been camping in Canterton Glen, and since provisions had given out and Jesse had a racking headache, Ann had started off alone to walk to Lyndhurst. On the way back she was caught in a squall of wind and

rain, and being in Minstead village, she took refuge in the church.

This little church, dim, quaint, and full of mystery, is part of the very soul of the Forest, part of the Forest life. Steal into it when it is empty on some still day in June, and you will feel that vast and enchanted silence that lurks in the deeps of some great beechwood. And yet it is so human with its queer galleries, one above the other, its old timber, its two private chamber-pews. Life has flowed in and out of it for centuries, the simple, alluring life of the Forest. In the steep stairs that lead to the galleries hundreds of feet have trodden in the same places, hundreds of hands grasped and polished the wooden rail. The ancient timberwork, the worn stones, the queer, compact irregularity of it all! It is full of the shadows of the Forest folk who have worshipped and passed away, of the ringers who have stood under the belfry and rung the bells. Few churches are so romantic and so honest, so pure with a rough and beautiful purity. It is a simple place carved out of the heart-oak of the wilderness, utterly devoid of all gaudiness and affectation. Compare it with some suburban church and you have the whole difference between much that was old and much that is modern. Minstead breathes faith, wonder, the awe of unearthly things, the dim lore of the Forest. We moderns are wonderful mechanics, but our iron cleverness is too thin and stiff. Enchantment eludes us. We shall not leave to our children buildings that breathe mystery and awe.

Ann explored the church, climbed into the galleries, and sat herself with interested curiosity in a corner of the private pew that is unique because of its fireplace. Then the pulpit attracted her. She wanted to find out whether the parson could see anyone asleep in the private pews. So she ascended, and stood looking about her, till the sound of someone coughing in the church porch drove her out of the pulpit with extreme precipitation. She had left her basket in the porch, and the basket held food for two days.

Ann pulled open the heavy door and saw an oldish woman seated in the porch. It was still raining hard, and Ann stepped out to get a glimpse of the sky. The woman glanced up at her with dull, tired eyes. She was very thin, and shabby with the slovenly shabbiness of the tramp, and her skin was yellow and wrinkled, especially about the eyes and neck. Her lips were brown instead of red, her throat mere earthy, pendulous skin.

“You’d better stay inside. It won’t hold up yet awhile.”

Ann turned and glanced at the woman and thought she had never seen anyone look so repulsively ill.

“No, it looks pretty black. I came in here to shelter.”

She sat down beside her basket. The shabby woman had an old sack on her

knees. She groped in it, brought out a bit of crust, and then looked at Ann's basket.

"You 'aven't such a thing as a mouthful of food?"

The yellow face was famished and eager. Despite its ugliness it smote pity into Ann.

"Yes. Here's some fresh bread and an apple. I've got jam, but if I open the pot, it'll all spill. Perhaps you'd like a bit of cheese."

"No, bread'll do. Break me off a crust."

She began to eat, staring with glazed eyes at the opposite wall of the porch. Suddenly she looked at Ann.

"Live 'ere?"

"No."

The woman's face betrayed a flicker of curiosity.

"You ain't tramping—sure?"

"Yes."

"Y'don't look like it."

"Don't I?"

"No. P'raps you're fresh."

She ate very slowly, and was silent awhile. Then she stared fixedly at Ann.

"What are you doin' it for?"

"Because I wanted to."

"Well, drop it. Get back out of it. I ought to know."

There was a snarl of sincerity in her voice that told that she was speaking out of the bitter fulness of her experience. Ann sat alert yet meditative. The woman had reawakened the thoughts that Winchester had first roused in her.

"It's a rough life," she said presently.

"Rough!"

It was yellow and emaciated death looking up scornfully when youth repeats words whose significance it does not understand. "Rough! You wait awhile. You're young, and you may have a man with you. The rain and the dirt tell. Have you ever been left ill in a ditch on a winter night? Tramping! I needn't say I wasn't bred to it. I just fell out of the train, and when you're out 'tain't easy to get in again."

Ann's eyes were puzzled.

"Train——? Were you hurt?"

The woman gave her a queer look.

"I call it the train, what folks call the social scheme, rents, and work, and byelaws, and the price of things, and all that. You see, it's like this. Unless you've got some sort of solid seat under you, you don't count. You ain't rooted like, you just

drift and don't signify. You ain't got nothing to bargain with, and people who ain't got nothing to bargain with don't get into the train. How long did it take me to find that out? Not long. Just one filthy wet winter. You've got to have your own bed and your own back-garden to signify anything. Stray dog. People chuck stones. They don't want stray dogs about their blessed homes."

Ann watched her yellow hands breaking the bread.

"It doesn't sound very cheerful."

"Don't it! Ever been ill on the road?"

"No."

"You wait. That'll cure you."

Ann remained silent, with a shadow of thought between her brows. The rain had stopped, and the woman was rolling up her sack.

"Have you got far to go?" Ann asked her.

The tramp showed a few ugly teeth behind her brown lips.

"Far to go! How you talk! Why, we—never get anywhere. And I'm done for. If you like, I'll show you what's got me."

She made as though to open her frayed and soiled black bodice, but Ann's eyes said "don't."

"Squeamy? You'll have to get over that. Well, I'm an Essex woman, and it's in Essex I want to step off. 'Firmary bed, that's the end of it, if you don't go stiff in a ditch."

She got up, and gave Ann a sort of pitying and familiar nod.

"You get out of it. Get back among the people as 'as got places."

Ann watched her go down the churchyard path, and disappear towards Minstead village.

This old cancer-bitten tramp came with the breaking of the weather, and when the weather breaks in England after a fine spell God help those who cannot swear. The sky cleared to a thin blue over Minstead church, and when Ann reached their camping-ground in Canterton Glen, she found Jesse asleep in the little forest shelter they had built under an old stunted holly that grew in the shape of a great sentry box, hollow within, but dense and black without. Jesse had spread the mackintosh sheets over the roof of the shelter, and no rain had worked through.

That evening the sunset was treacherously splendid. Purple clouds with wet gold edges went trailing across the west. The air was clear, fresh, and still, and sounds carried a great distance. Ann, as she tended the fire that was to boil their kettle, felt that the last summer day had gone. Winter, and grey skies, wet winds and a dragged drift of mud and sodden leaves were upon her horizon. The long, sweet, careless

spell had gone.

As the dusk deepened a shiver of depression went through her. She glanced up at the sky, as though expecting cold, autumn rain. The smell of the Forest had changed. It was no longer crisp and vital, but sodden, and very sad. For the first time since she and Falconer had been together, Ann felt lonely, and vaguely afraid. The wood fire was the one warm red spot in the midst of the melancholy dusk. She stretched out her hands to it, and recalled what the old tramp had said in the porch of Minstead church.

A sudden passionate desire to be touched, and to be talked to, seized her.

“The fine weather’s breaking.”

She looked round at Jesse as she spoke. He was sitting in the shelter with his arms about his knees, and his face was placid, thought-wrapped, and far away.

“Is it?”

“Yes. You should have seen the sunset.”

She stared at the fire in silence as though she expected Falconer to make some mental move. He would have to adjust this life of theirs to new conditions. But Falconer was in one of those indolent musing moods. For the moment the more sensitive and outwardly conscious part of him was asleep.

Ann waited for him to say something, but nothing came. Her sense of loneliness increased. It was as sudden and sad as the falling of the autumn night.

“We shall have a lot of wet after all this fine weather.”

Jesse stirred slightly.

“November’s not a bad month.”

“Yes—some years.”

She stifled a sigh, and put more wood on the fire.

“Where do you think of turning next?”

“We might push on a bit further.”

“But it won’t do, in bad weather.”

“The weather hurts people much less than they think. We’re a tough lot in the country.”

Ann’s lips trembled a little. She looked at Jesse, and then away into the gathering darkness. A gust of wind went rustling about the holly, sending the flames slanting from the fire.

“You’ll have to have shelter sometimes, Jesse.”

“Don’t you worry about me. I shouldn’t mind a night in the workhouse now and again. Would you, Nan? It’s all experience. You have to bury your money before you go in.”

“I shouldn’t mind, so long as you didn’t.”

Her voice had a shade of dreariness, but Jesse did not notice it. He went on, as though talking to himself.

“We’ve got the money. Living like this costs next to nothing. And we’re free, we’re not tied up in a corner. You move on and on, and feel the new folk and the new places round you. I should like to go down to the sea some time and hear big waves breaking. You don’t get stuck with your feet in a ploughed field.”

He was talking against the whole current of Ann’s desires and yearnings, but she held the kettle over the fire, pressed her lips together, and smothered all that was in her heart. That cottage that she had thought of with its neat, firelit kitchen! Jesse’s mind seemed set against such things, and Ann shivered a little, and could not speak to him of all that she longed for and all that she feared. Contentment often brings denseness, and Jesse was very dense that autumn night. It is so easy to imagine that those whom we love will be happy in the life that we wish to live. Moreover Jesse was blind. Even his tenderness was likely to blunder along byeways, missing the straight road to a woman’s thoughts.

CHAPTER XXXII.

For the next few weeks Ann strove very hard to be cheerful and to hide from Jesse much that was passing in her heart. It became a point of honour with her not to let him suspect that she was beginning to hate this wandering life and to long for some corner in the world that they could call their own. Ann told herself that she had insisted on sharing Falconer's life, and she knew that during the months that were past she had made herself a hundred times more necessary to him than she had ever been at Fox Farm. So she made a brave bid for laughter and the *joie de vivre* and fought against the suggestion that she was in any way discouraged.

The weather was vile, vile even for England. A cold, wet blight came out of the north, and for days the world was wrapped in a grey drizzle. Matters were bearable till the summer-dried ground became water-logged. Then November was suddenly November with mud and slime and ugliness. A great hand seemed to have passed a wet sponge over the earth and wiped away all the beauty. Greyness and a fog of rain hung everywhere. The dank, autumn foliage dripped and dripped without cessation. Two or three glimpses of blue sky in as many weeks, that was all that Ann could remember. Men went to their work, dourly and sulkily, with sacks over their shoulders, or wrapped in monstrous old coats. In the dusk one heard the dull, dispirited crunching of their boots as they tramped home, sodden and silent. Yet the countryman wakes up to momentary cheerfulness when he meets a comrade, and can curse and grumble. The grey weather was pelted with red adjectives. Ten successive days of rain. Such weather fills a labourer's boots, but it does not fill his pocket.

Now Falconer's blindness seemed to render him less susceptible to the influence of bad weather. The days were still, though wet, and there was no virago of a wind to bluster and nag. Well-shod, and well-clothed, Jesse did not mind the rain upon his face, and being a man of the fields, mud troubled him very little. And with Ann making a spirited fight against depression, Falconer found the life very bearable for them both. The glamour of the late summer was still upon him, and the sunlight was in his blood. Moreover luck helped them at nights. They lay undisturbed in a succession of barns, outhouses, and stack-yards. His pipe and his meals, the sense of the open road, the touch of Ann's hands and the sound of her voice, filled Jesse's day for him. These things remained to him, nor did he see the grey sky and the dreary sodden roads.

Late in November they found themselves in East Sussex, tramping along the road that leads by Hurstmonceaux and Boreham Street to the old town of Battle. At

Battle it happened to be the day of the “cattle fair,” and on such a day the East Sussex town is in a primitive and bovine humour. Cattle and country-folk clog the main street, and the green by the Abbey Gate is turned into a fair ground with booths, cocoa-nut shies, a steam roundabout and the like. Voluble young Jews sell clothes by Dutch auction. There are swarthy, blue-chinned, gipsyish gentry who run ponies up and down the street, hang round the pubs, and punch each other on occasions. In the old days cattle lined the street from the church to the police station, and the dirt and disorder were magnificent. But the old fair has dwindled. Its dialect and its distinctiveness are on the wane.

Ann and Falconer entered the town by the North Trade road, and were swallowed up in the crowd of men and beasts. What with the shouts and the sticks of hairy-faced drovers and the eccentric impulses of the beasts that were driven, the main street had a certain feeling of unrest. It was a day when men drank fairly freely and drove fairly freely through the thick of the crowd. A few yells, and a cart rolling under the weight of three or four irresponsible gentlemen would charge along the crowded street. Luckily people came out in a good temper, expecting to be hustled and shoved.

Ann drew Jesse against the boarded window of a shop. The Jewish clothiers had spread their stuff in the road close to the pavement, and were selling at full shouting-pressure, swinging bargains from arm to arm, slapping them with dramatic emphasis as the price dropped by sixpences. The stolid Sussex folk watched them as though these Hebrews were the most comical fools in the whole world. Now and again a man would try on an overcoat, and turn round and round with sheepish solemnity for some domestic critic to give a verdict. There were gay scarves and handkerchiefs, umbrellas, and other sundries. The Hebrews “gagged” relentlessly, gesticulated, and sold overcoats with an air of desperation.

Farther on, near a sweet-stuff stall on the green Ann discovered a genius. The granite bulk of an old farmer served as a kind of breakwater to stem the restless spin of the crowd, and Ann took refuge there, holding Jesse’s arm. A glimmer of laughter had come into her eyes at her first glimpse of the genius’ face.

“Just listen——!”

“What is it?”

“A man that pulls out teeth.”

The itinerant dentist was thick-set, and swarthy, hairy about the jowl and throat, and rustily black as to overcoat and “billycock.” He stood on a big flat box, and his volubility and his assurance were amazing. Seen at a little distance he would have been taken for a ferocious “revivalist” shaking his fists in the face of sin, and hurling

furious great texts at the Devil and the local “pubs.”

A small, ginger-headed boy had been put forward as a victim, and the dentist rested a dirty hand on the crown of the boy’s head.

“Ladies and gen’lemen, it ain’t any use a man taking to a scientific callin’ if ’e ain’t got observation and nimble tips to ’is fingers. I can assure you, I’ve a wonderful touch, a wonderful touch. I could take a tooth out of a lady’s ’ead while she was asleep, and never wake her. What! The gen’leman there don’t believe me? Funnier things ’ave ’appened to sleepin’ women than that. Now, now,—what are you grinnin’ at? Sir, if you’ll lie down and go to sleep ’ere—by my box, I’ll stake three gold sovereigns. What—you won’t try it?”

The sceptic grinned, and looked sheepish. A friendly voice put in a remark.

“You wait till th’ evenin’, mister. Wait till ’es ’ad a mug or two.”

“Shut up, George!”

“’Tain’t everybody as’ll let folks take their boots off and stuff ’em wid cinders when they be asleep.”

The crowd laughed, and the extractor of teeth pounced on the boy, and the moment’s distraction. He put an arm round the child’s neck, forced his jaw down, and got to work. The boy would have yelled, had not the dentist contrived to jam the edge of his hand over the youngster’s larynx. He brandished the bloody tooth in the forceps.

“There you are, ladies and gen’lemen, easy as eating pie. This is a plucky lad, a plucky lad. I’m going to give him sixpence because ’e’s going to laugh. What! There! Didn’t I say so? ’Ere’s the tanner, my son. Didn’t ’urt, did it?”

“N—no,” said the boy. “I’ll give ye another at the same price.”

The dentist digressed into extolling a certain marvellous Neuralgic Powder of his own invention. His manner became more furious and impressive. He punched the air, and preached.

“Ladies and gen’lemen, this powder is the most wonderful powder that ever was. What’s it made of? Ah, wouldn’t you like to know! One of the leading doctors in London offered me fifty pounds. But no, I’m not saying anything against doctors. This powder cures neuralgia, tooth-ache, migraine, mal-a-la-tête, mal-de-mer, malakoff’s, and conjunctival lachrymosis. No—I didn’t say Lucky Moses. That gen’lemen’s over yonder selling togs. Now, I’ll tell you a tale about these powders. It happened just nine months ago when I was in Edinburgh. That’s in Scotland. No, sir, the powder doesn’t cure the hitch. Well, after I ’ad addressed a select audience up yonder, an English officer came to me, and asked for a dozen of these powders. A colonel ’e was, and ’e’d bin in India and suffered terribly with malaria. It ’ad gone

to 'is 'ead, and for years 'e 'd 'ad neuralgia tearing 'is face like the claws of a lot of crabs. Couldn't sleep! Thought of shooting 'imself, blowing 'is brains out. Ladies and gen'lemen, think of the awful state this poor gen'lemen 'ad come to. Well, I said to 'im, 'Sir, I'm a man of my word, and Blimber is my name. You take those powders. They've got the grace o' God in 'em.'

"Well, what d'you think? In two days' time that officer came to me, lookin' like a sinner who'd been let out of 'ell.

"'Mr. Blimber,' 'e said to me, 'God bless you. I've slept peaceful for the first time in three years.'

"There were tears in 'is eyes. 'E shook me by the 'and, and when 'e 'ad done shaking, I found a five-pound note in my fingers.

"'Mr. Blimber,' said 'e, 'you've saved my life. If ever you want a ten-pound note, you come along to me.'

"Yes, I can show any gen'lemen the officer's card. Colonel Stodge Boddington of the Indian army.

"Now, then—these wonderful powders at fourpence 'alfpenny the dozen. You'd better be quick. I was clean cleared out of 'em at Canterbury in thirty-three minutes. Six gross in thirty-three minutes. And each powder takes 'actly seven minutes to make. I'm a busy man, sir? You're right. Often I don't get to bed till three in the mornin'."

The roundabout blared, the Hebrew gentlemen bawled and declaimed, rifles cracked at the shooting-gallery, carts ploughed through the crowd, the public-houses hummed. The waning sunlight touched the bare elm trees and the turrets of the great grey gate. The old town sprawled, and chuckled, and rejoiced. Discreet people looked down from discreet upper windows.

Sussex folk have never been famous for good manners, and the Sussex small boy can exhibit himself on occasions as the most detestable of little beasts. Falconer and Ann loitered about Battle till the naphtha flares were lit, long enough, in fact, for a party of youngsters to mark Jesse down as something strange and singular. Singularity—to the Sussex mind—is a state that borders upon madness, and since the country-labourer's experience is not of the broadest, most strangers have for him the taint of absurdity.

When Falconer and Ann disentangled themselves from the crowd, they found that they had drawn with them an interested following of boys. To be blind, to be led by the hand, and to carry a pack, were likely to seem monstrous eccentricities. These Sussex children began to make a mob at Falconer's heels, scuffling round him, and trying to push each other against his legs.

“Owld Daddy Long-legs, owld Daddy Long-legs!”

“Boo—oo—oo——!”

“The camel ’as a ’ump on ’is back.”

They were ugly children, coarse children, children with hard and shiny faces. Ann led Jesse aside into Mount Street that runs northwards out of the town. The boys followed, becoming more officiously insolent and rough. Ann turned and warned them off.

“Mind, or I shall hit ye.”

They put out tongues, and jeered.

“Owld Daddy Long-legs!”

“Yah—yah—owld fool!”

How it was that one child came by a squashed orange, history does not say. But he flung hard and true, and caught Falconer upon the ear. The next instant Ann had caught him by the collar. The back of her hand across his mouth drew blood.

From somewhere—out of the darkness—waddled a slut of a woman, swollen, arrogant, with a broad and dirty face. She dragged the boy aside, and shot words from an ugly, slit-like mouth.

“‘Ittin’ my lad——! You beggar—you!”

Ann stood up to this slattern, stared her in the face, and then turned aside to Jesse.

“Let’s get out of the place,” he said to her.

The woman followed them, swearing.

“Dirty tramps! I’ve a good mind to fetch the perlice. Yah—sneak off, you pair of dirty dogs.”

Ann looked white and fierce. She held fast to Jesse’s arm.

“If that beast touches you,” he said, “I’ll kill her.”

But the woman was content to make use of a foul tongue. The boys scattered and fell off, and Ann and Jesse went on into the darkness.

They were both of them angry, but their anger differed in scope and in significance. Falconer was angry with the incident, Ann with the whole series of incidents that were leading up to her unhappiness. She was country-bred, and she understood by instinct the workings of the country mind. The distinction between the native and the stranger, the cottage-holder and the tramp was prejudiced and very real. She had never felt more lonely, more of an outcast than after this incident in a country town.

Weariness came upon her suddenly, that soul-weariness that is far more bitter than mere physical fatigue. Moreover, a woman suffers because of her womanhood,

more than the ordinary man ever dreams of. He wonders why she is silent and peevish, shrugs his shoulders, and mutters "whims." But the woman is nearer to Nature, and more the bond-servant of Nature than is the man. She has burdens and pains to bear that are part of the life of the world.

Ann said frankly, almost fiercely:

"I'm tired."

Jesse's sympathy was blind. He did not guess how near they were for the moment to the edge of passionate discords.

"We'll go back and get a room in the town."

"No, I won't go back into that place."

"Shall we try a cottage?"

"I don't want to be bothered with strange people."

Jesse's natural gentleness smothered a possible quarrel. He put an arm round her.

"I'm sorry, Nan. We've had a long day. We'll look out for something."

She softened instantly with that generous impulsiveness that has been fatal to the happiness of many women.

"I'm sorry I was cross, Jesse."

"Were you? You want a night's rest."

They were about a mile from Battle when Ann, who had begun to accumulate experience in the matter of procuring free lodging for the night, sighted a number of outbuildings huddled together at the top of a bank. Black roof ridges and gables showed against the sky, and the place seemed silent and deserted. Ann lit the toy candle-lantern that she and Jesse carried with them as part of their baggage. Steep steps led up through a high hedge to the outbuildings on the top of the bank. Ann climbed up to explore, and found herself amid a nest of queer, amateurish sheds that appeared to be shut in by a high fence made of ash and chestnut poles. In the corner of an open shanty she saw some sacks and a pile of straw. The shed had its back to the north wind, and Ann went back to lead Jesse up the steps, and through the rough rustic gate in the hedge. She blew out the lantern candle as soon as they had settled themselves on the straw.

Ann had overlooked the fact that there was a house within ten yards of the rough wooden palisade. It was a new house, and the sheds were the production of the amateur countryman to whom the house belonged. Ann had not noticed the house because of the high palisade, and because the only window that showed a light had been screened from the road by the bank and hedge.

She had taken off her hat, and was unfolding one of the blankets for Jesse when

the open front of the shed flashed into one white glare.

“Come out of that.”

The voice spoke from somewhere behind the brilliant core of this white blaze. It was a cultured voice, but sharp and irritable.

“Come out of that. Tumble up. We don’t want tramps here.”

Ann could see nothing but the white circle that spread its brilliant rays into the shed. She spoke to the voice behind the lamp.

“We aren’t doing any harm.”

“I don’t want to argue. Get out of it. No nonsense.”

Then Falconer spoke, blindly, and into the darkness:

“We’ll pay to stay here.”

The man who carried the acetylene “headlight” cleared his throat impatiently. He was a thin, fairish, irritable young man, wearing pince-nez, and a well-worn Norfolk jacket.

“Look here, I’m not taking any, see. Just you clear out, and be quick about it.”

Ann pinned on her hat and rolled up the blankets, the man keeping the motor-lamp turned full upon them. He watched Ann with an increasing curiosity, but his irritability was stronger than his interest.

“Hurry up; my supper’s getting cold.”

Ann rose and stretched out a hand to Jesse. Then she turned to the man with the lamp.

“Please, I can’t see.”

He swung the headlight round so that the rays fell on the gate in the hedge and the steps. Ann went first, leading Jesse by the hand, and telling him where the steps began.

They were half way down the bank before the man with the lamp realised that Falconer was blind. He made a vacillating movement towards the gate, hesitated, and then turned back.

“Poor devils!”

The man with the lamp knew that an irritable temper is responsible for much of the roughness of life. He criticised himself freely as he went back to resume his supper, for he was a self-conscious young man, and benignant when he was not bothered. But self-criticism generally ends in theorising and the contemplation of abstract evils. The householder rebuked himself for feeling any regret.

“Don’t be an idiot. The beggars had no right there. Hurt the girl’s feelings? Rot! Such people don’t feel much. They get too well tanned. She was just a bit pretty, rather provocative. Great Scott, what an ass you are!”

Falconer and Ann went on down the road, and in Ann's eyes were hot and bitter tears. The words of the old tramp in the porch of Minstead Church recurred to her and she knew that they were true. To have no home and no abiding-place was to be an outcast and a wastrel. Voices became rough and threatening, even kindly faces dour and suspicious. Ann felt humiliated and very tired. She longed with her whole heart for some corner that she could call her own.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Falconer could not see that Ann was growing thin and that she showed little shadow lines of strain about the mouth and eyes. That indefinable, soft bloom that she had possessed in her pale, dark-eyed way, had begun to fade. Her features grew sharper, and her whole face looked smaller and less round, while her lips lost their vividness, and her hair its gloss.

Falconer had never felt in finer health. The long tramps, the sense of comradeship, the day's healthy hunger had put him in good condition. He seemed to absorb a careless cheerfulness from the life, and its casual and irresponsible moods suited his whole temperament. Nor did he feel—as he might have done—the unhappiness that had gripped Ann's heart, for the girl kept a cheerful surface, and her tenderness to him was greater than before. She felt at war with the life they were leading, not with Jesse. Her own incipient unhappiness made her hunger more for the man's love. And as so often happens in life, the man blundered blindly over the woman's ideals, while she—made miserable—clung to him the more closely.

It was as though the two had changed temperaments, Jesse taking the girl's will to live, she his prophetic melancholy. More than once Ann had spoken to him of the future, but she had learnt unselfishness in her early years, and her very unselfishness weakened her cause. She was not outspoken enough, too much tied by the thought that the life was her own choice. One of the lessons that a generous woman had to learn is that she must bargain with the man, hold herself aloof at times, persist in emphasising her own personality. A man's love is often a blundering, preoccupied thing, tender enough in moments of sentiment, but pathetically blind to the dead level of a woman's day. He may tread his own chosen road, sweeping his mate along with a confident benevolence, talking of his own affairs, and often not waiting to hear her answers. Woman was the shadow that followed, and mimicked the gestures of the man. But all this was doomed to change. The first glimmer of progress forecasted it. Yet the average man—by hereditary habit—still absorbs the woman's love into himself. He has not learnt to look on her as a soul apart, as the true comrade, as a friend who has the rights and liberties of a friend. The two shall be one flesh. That was the old saying. We put less store upon the flesh now, and think more of the comradeship of souls. Woman is no longer the mere bed-fellow or the mere shadow of the man.

In his attitude towards the future Falconer was vague and cheerful. He acted as though there was no need for them to come to immediate grips with it. They could wander about the country as they pleased, helping out their money with occasional

jobs such as wood-sawing on Jesse's part, fruit and hop-picking and the like on Ann's. This vagabond life cost them little beyond their food and the price of shoe-leather. Jesse had not learnt to yearn yet for his own ingle-nook, and the warmth of his own fire.

Ann had talked of the future, and had had material visions of their sinking some of their capital in a little shop. And Jesse had laughed at her with a lover's good humour.

"What sort of shop, Nan?"

She had not laughed with him at her own vision.

"A village shop."

"Yes; and what sort of experience have we for that? Besides, everything would fall on you."

She had sat musing, her face grave and troubled. How many things there were that even the best of men failed to foresee and to understand.

"I might work up a little laundry business."

"Well, I could turn the wringer and the mangle, and draw water. There's something in that."

"Don't laugh at me, Jesse."

"I'm not laughing, Nan. But aren't we getting along very well as we are?"

The inertia of his contentment was more baffling than any selfishness, for his happiness was not a selfish thing, seeing that it believed Ann to be happy. Those autumn weeks had found her full of a tender, laughing joy in life, and she had hidden from Jesse the change that had come since then. She had tried to hint at the truth without hurting him, but Jesse had not understood. Coarser and more selfish women would have blurted out hard facts, and gained their ends by a show of ill temper, or perhaps by emotionalism and tears. Ann was too patient, too deeply in love with the man. She set herself to endure for a while the life he had chosen, knowing that some inevitable and natural crisis would arise, a crisis that would give him understanding.

From Battle they tramped to Rye, and from Rye westwards again towards Lewes. The weather had improved for a while, but in the "down country" they came upon stagnant, misty days that were full of melancholy and dejection. The great grey hills looming against the greyer sky oppressed Ann with their emptiness and their desolation. The vast, unchanging apathy of the downs wearied her. She longed for the wooded country, even for the wet, leaf-clogged valleys where the hedgerows shut one in, and miles of smooth, melancholy hills were not for ever drifting into dreary distances.

Some miles beyond Lewes, Ann lost her way on a downland by-road just as the

winter dusk was falling. Rain was coming up from the south-west, wiping out a wet and streaming sunset. Darkness falls very swiftly on such an evening, darkness that is impenetrable and ghostly. The by-road was as deserted as a track in some new and spacious land, and not a light blinked through the murk of the wet night.

Low grass banks edged the road, and here and there grew a stunted thorn. There seemed nothing left for Ann and Jesse but a night under the shelter of one of these trees. In the dusk Ann chose a thorn that looked larger and denser than its fellows. They spread their sheets on the bank, and made a silent and listless meal.

Jesse had caught some of Ann's despondency. When they settled themselves for the night he tried to persuade her to take both blankets. Ann would not hear of it, and made him keep his own.

"I shall be all right, Jesse."

He was troubled on her account, and felt her dress, and the place that she had chosen.

"Sure, Nan?"

"Quite sure."

"Is the rain coming through on you?"

"No."

"Put the other blanket over your head."

"I shan't. You keep it."

The night was miserable enough, but Falconer fell asleep. He did not know that Ann had given him the best place, and that she was lying where the rain came mizzling through the branches of the thorn. Nor did Ann sleep that night. She sat up, and covered herself with the waterproof sheet, stretching out a hand from time to time to touch Jesse and feel whether the rain was soaking through on him.

By midnight she felt the raw air in her very bones. A great chill had struck her, and she was cold to the heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Ann was astir with the first glimmer of the dawn when the hills loomed huge and dim through a grey twilight. She had a feeling as of some fatal thing having happened to her during the night, as though her body had been touched by death and still shuddered with the fear of what might follow. The drizzling rain had ceased, and there were patches of blue in the brightening sky. Ann was so cold and so stiff that she warmed herself by running up and down the muddy road and beating her arms across her bosom.

Falconer still slept, and Ann looked at him with a kind of forlorn wistfulness. She had brought back some warmth to her body, and as the light increased she saw a beech-hanger in a hollow in the hillside above the road. Armed against her dejection and her forebodings came the thought that she might find sticks up yonder for a fire, and that it would be better to do something rather than loiter in the raw morning air.

A warm flush came to her after a brisk scramble up the hillside, and she found dead wood in the beech-hanger, and returned with an armful to the thorn-tree by the road. To attempt to make a fire with damp wood on wet grass sounds to the town-dweller like a mere foolish test of a mortal's patience, but an old labourer will make a fire with a few green sticks, and have his black pot boiling in the thick of a shower of rain. Ann had the fire-maker's art, the trick of adding stick by stick, and of never being in a hurry. She found dry matches and an old newspaper in Jesse's pack, and when Falconer awoke there was a good fire burning. Ann had slung the kettle on a tripod of sticks, and the flames were licking its black bottom.

"Hallo, Nan, you've been busy."

He had smelt the smell of burning wood, and heard the spitting of the flames. As for Ann, the fire had cheered and warmed her, and she answered him calmly as she knelt and fed the fire. Falconer had wakened to a sense of well-being. It did not occur to him for the moment to think how Ann had passed the night or to suspect that she had been miserable and chilled to the heart. And Ann confessed nothing. She tended the fire with the preoccupied look of a woman whom Nature has touched upon the shoulder and uttered significant words.

"The rain has stopped, hasn't it?"

"Yes, the weather looks much better."

"Where did you get the wood?"

"Up in a beech wood yonder."

"What a mate you are, Nan! And I'm a great helpless clog."

She looked round at him with a sad, meditative smile.

“I like doing it, Jesse.”

“You’re just wonderful.”

“No, I’m not wonderful at all. This sort of life is just day by day. Now and again you get a glimpse o’ the distance.”

Falconer seemed to hang over her words.

“What do you mean, Nan?”

“Mean? Nothing.”

She shivered slightly, and reached for the tea-leaves that she had measured out into a tin mug.

For the next two days they wandered northwards, leaving the down country and striking across the Weald. Once more they were in wooded lands, though all the leaves had fallen save on some of the oaks and upon the hornbeam and beech bushes in the hedges. The wind worked towards the north, and a hard blue sky presaged a sharp frost. Lights gleamed brightly when night came, and there was more sparkle in the air.

On the third day they turned eastwards, and Ann started the morning with bright eyes and a flushed face. Waves of heat and little ripples of cold ran through her with queer tinglings of the skin. Her head ached, and felt dull and turgid, and she noticed that she was short of breath. There was no pain in her chest as she walked, but something seemed to be stifling within it, and struggling to get air.

Ann had been reticent about herself since that night on the downs, and Jesse, suspecting nothing, cheerfully welcomed the colder weather and the clean, clear smell of the frost.

“It’s good to feel the roads getting dry and hard.”

“Yes.”

“We must pick up lodging to-night, unless we are lucky in the matter of stacks. After all, a good frost is the finest physic in the world.”

It was not till they made a halt about noon that Ann began to cough. It was a sharp, dry cough, short and significant. With it came a queer pain in the side, as though someone had run a needle into the skin, thrust it through, and drawn the thread after it with a rough jerk of the hand.

“Hallo, Nan, what’s the matter? Swallowed some crumbs?”

The tragic humour of the thing was lost on her. Her face was watchful and bleak with the expectation of pain.

“I’ve caught a bit of a cold, Jesse.”

“Have you?”

He was silent a moment, his face turned towards her.

“When did you start it, Nan?”

“It must have been that night on the downs.”

“We oughtn’t to be sitting about then; you’ll get a worse chill. Let’s move on. What place did that chap in the cart say we could reach to-night?”

“Crowborough.”

“We’ll stop there and get a room.”

If Falconer could have seen the dazed, far-away look in Ann’s eyes, he would never have talked of tramping half across Ashdown Forest. She was drifting into that feverish state when life becomes strange and unreal, and full of painful and grotesque illusions. Jesse’s voice seemed to come from a great distance, the words distinct yet without any meaning. The fumes of the fever were rising to her brain, making her consciousness a shimmering, vapoury atmosphere that distorted all impressions. The one thought that held was the thought that she must hold out until they reached the next town or village, or until someone came along with a cart and gave them a lift.

“Let’s start again, Jesse. Hold my hand.”

It lay hot and moist in his big palm.

“Nan——”

“Yes——”

“You’re feverish.”

The bowing forward of his head and the stooping of his shoulders gave his figure a sudden anxious attitude.

“I may be. Let’s get on.”

“But can you manage it?”

“Yes. I must.”

Her sanity was making a brave effort to rise above the bizarre and fantastic jumble of things that her own hot blood had bred. Jesse’s hand gripped hers, and she held fast to him in turn like one making ready to bear some spasm of pain.

They were within the bounds of Ashdown Forest, a region of wild uplands and wooded valleys, where the wind blows over gorse and heather, and roars through fir-woods with the roar of a stormy sea. Nor were they in luck that day, for Ann had chosen one of the loneliest of roads, and nothing in the way of a cart overtook them between noon and dusk, save a governess-cart driven by an elderly woman who whipped up her pony when Ann beckoned her to stop. Ann felt a feverish despair closing in on her like the despair of an evil dream. The landscape began to play fantastic tricks with her, the tall woods towering higher and higher, the dead bracken burning a fulvid feverish bronze. Jesse’s voice had become a vague, impersonal, and distant whisper, though her ears began to thrill to strange bursts of sound. There

seemed to be water running near the road, running and running till it fell with a roar into a deep chasm. The sounds kept up a monotonous repetition. Sometimes there would be the booming of bells. Then voices would cry out, abrupt, clamouring voices that quarrelled, and chattered, and filled her head with feverish tumult. She would try to steady herself, and to thrust these mad things off. Her grip of Jesse's hand seemed the one bond between her sanity and the steady, reasonable world.

It was towards dusk that her courage surrendered with a kind of despairing cry.

"It's no use, it's no use."

Falconer's blind face had grown more anxious and afraid. The dread had come to him as the dusk had come to the world.

"Nan——"

"Jesse, I'm going to be ill——"

She coughed and the pain of it went through her, and through Jesse also when he felt the spasmodic tightening of her hand on his.

"Jesse, I can't go any farther."

He put an arm round her, and felt her forehead with his other hand.

"Nan, what is it? Why didn't you say——"

"It came so sudden like. I can't—can't get any farther."

He was bewildered, even in his tenderness, and stood there holding her to him, a great blind helpless man conscious of some invisible peril.

"We'll stop here. Someone must come along. Bear up, my heart——Where are we?"

She put a hand to her head, and looked right and left.

"There's a fir wood by the road. And a lot of brambles and bits of grass."

"This way?"

"Yes."

She half led and was half carried by Jesse to a stretch of short and wiry grass under the outstretched branches of the firs. Jesse fumbled with the straps of his pack, swung it off, and began to unroll the sheets and blankets. He knelt down, felt about him, and then made her a bed.

"Come—Nan——"

She laid herself down, and he covered her with the blankets, and taking off his overcoat, rolled it up and put it under her head. She felt the trembling of his great hands, and a sudden yearning of her whole soul leapt to him out of the pitiful chaos of her consciousness. She felt herself sinking into a dark sea out of which no love and life might ever emerge.

"Jesse—kiss me—kiss me."

He bent over her and lifted her head with both his hands. And in that moment his mouth tasted a passionate and bitter dread.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Ann, wrapped up in the blankets, lay under the fir boughs as the dusk deepened, while on the grass between her and the road sat Jesse, alert with anxiety, and asking himself questions. For the moment he felt that he could not speak to Ann. His voice would have been none too steady, and that kiss of hers had come like the kiss of one who is snatched away and hurried towards some tragic death. When he had steadied himself somewhat, he realised that Ann might fall asleep if he did not disturb her. So he held his tongue and kept quiet.

Ashdown Forest is one of those primitive regions where the dusk comes as it comes nowhere else. For this Sussex Forest can be very silent and very sullen, and the stillness of its twilight is but the darkened stillness of its day. Ashdown is still primitive in many places despite sundry fever-spots of modernity. Dusk may come to it with a hurrying gloom of clouds galloping over the hills, or with pine-spears pricking black against a bloody west. On autumn and winter evenings strange mists come stealing over the land like a vapour of ghostly multitudes, gliding, hesitating, sweeping aside. In the taking of ten steps you may walk out of the full moonlight into thick white fog. And when the wind is loose the sounds are eerie and multitudinous. There are whisperings, frightened voices in the gorse-bushes and in the bracken and heather, and the wrath of giants in the midnight firs.

The forest had one of its still and ghostly moods that night. Mists rose, dimming the stars like the diaphanous robes of the mighty dead. The stillness was heavier than any mass of sound, though ever and again the fir-trees fell a-murmuring as though evil dreams troubled them in their sleep. The vague, starlit wastes were hidden from Jesse's eyes. He could not see the melancholy shadowland before him, or the faint outlines of the distant downs above the mists. Yet he felt much of it, in spite of his blindness. The dusk chilled him, and filled him with a sense of infinite desolation.

The sound that separated itself from the silence was the sound of Ann's hard, quick breathing. Each intake of air sounded like a gasp, and the sound dominated Jesse's consciousness and frightened him. Yet for a while he smothered his anxiety, trying to make himself believe that this breathing meant that she was asleep.

Presently she began to talk to herself in the darkness and Jesse, not realising that it was the delirium of fever, tried to make some meaning of the words that she uttered.

"What is it, Nan?"

She was silent a moment. Then the monologue recommenced.

"What's the blue door for? It won't open, the rain won't drive in—Sticks. There

are ants in the sticks. Brush them away. It's no use. Walk any longer? I didn't say I'd lie down."

Jesse listened with the air of a man who is afraid of his own fear. The voice was a soft, busy murmur that went on and on, uttering queer, pathetic absurdities. Jesse turned slowly on his hands and knees, crawled towards Ann and touched her.

"Nan——?"

"What's the use. I want to look in the oven. No—no—don't terrify like that! Dad says—dad says—climb up and stick God with a knife. Because he's mean——Rosie, you've lost your garter;—no, it isn't——I wish I could lie down. Rain——. If you look inside you'll find it all hot and tired. Jesse'll kill me. Oh—no—no——no! I say it's only three miles."

Falconer withdrew his hand, and moved away slowly, almost furtively. It was the delirium of fever, a murmur of meaningless words like the murmuring of the fir-boughs overhead. For a while Jesse remained absolutely motionless, dazed by his own bewilderment and his utter helplessness.

Then he sat up, gripped his knees, and faced the darkness and Ann's fever. That darkness! What a damned blank wall it was! What could he do? Pray? It was a blind, backward impulse, but he had nothing to pray to, and believed in no one who would hear. He felt like a man locked up in a cellar while someone who was very dear to him lay alone and dying in a room above. What could he do? Sit and listen? Shout? Who the devil would hear him in such a place? It was his old bad luck back again. It had dogged him along the roads, biding its time and waiting for some solitary and murderous spot where it could make its spring.

Jesse had no idea how long he sat there listening to Ann's mutterings, and cursing like a man who had been fool enough to let himself be marooned. Fate could not have chosen a more solitary spot in the whole country. To Jesse it might have been the bottom of a half-dug well.

There were lights moving in the valley below him, twin, round, yellow eyes, the side-lamps of a cart. They were approaching the fir-crowned ridge, blinking and disappearing occasionally behind banks of gorse, and growing dim and blurred where the mist hung in the hollows. The beat of the horse's hoofs on the pulp of the sandy road was as yet inaudible to Jesse.

The man who was driving the dog-cart heard the sound of someone shouting as his horse topped the hill where the fir-wood shut out the northern sky. A few seconds later his carriage lamps showed him a tall figure waving its arms in the middle of the road, and calling to him to stop. The driver's forehead puckered itself momentarily into an aggressive frown. He took the whip out of the whip-socket,

being by no means sure whether he might not have to use it. But he was a youngster with a cool head and plenty of self-restraint. Doctors come by these qualities early, if they are to come by them at all.

“Hallo. What do you want?”

“Someone ill,” said the voice.

“Where?”

“By the roadside. I’m blind, that’s the bother. I’ll give you a pound to let me use your cart.”

The doctor was one of those keen swarthy youngsters, sharp as a good knife, all nerve and sinew. He had come by the knack of weighing circumstances swiftly, and the man in the road struck him as genuine. There was no foot-pad trickery about the affair. He drew his horse to one side of the road, and jumped out of the trap with the reins in his hand.

“Come here and hold my horse.”

“I can’t see you.”

“This way—straight on.”

He had no doubts now about Jesse’s blindness.

“Here you are. Hold the nag’s head. Got him? Now, what’s the matter? I’m a doctor, I’m in a hurry.”

“My wife’s ill.”

“Where?”

“Just yonder—by the fir trees. She must have caught a chill, but she kept it quiet. Now, she’s in a fever. I did what I could, but when you’re blind and on a strange road, you aren’t much use. I just had to sit and wait.”

The doctor looked steadily into Jesse’s face. He was summing the man up, and seeking professionally for the cause of his blindness. He began to take off his gloves.

“Lost your sight by accident?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That why you’re tramping?”

“Not altogether.”

“You don’t look the part.”

“It isn’t a matter of necessity. I chose the life.”

“I see. Hold the horse. I’ll go and have a look at your wife.”

He took one of the carriage lamps, and skirting the grass at the edge of the road, soon found Ann lying under the shadow of the firs. In the restlessness of her delirium she had thrown off the blankets and the lamplight fell upon the slim figure in its black dress, the hot flushed face, and the tangle of black hair.

The doctor held the lamp close to her, and his eyes saw much that they had expected to see, for he had heard Ann cough as he crossed the grass from the road. The flushed face, the bright, delirious eyes, the quick, troubled breathing filled up the picture. The trained intellect absorbs observations as the ordinary consciousness absorbs impressions. He knelt down and felt her pulse at the wrist, the line of his mouth growing harder as he gauged the rate at which the heart was galloping.

“Rotten! Delirium isn’t usual. But nothing ever is usual, except in the text books.”

He bent over her, and laid an ear to her chest, his listening profile outlined against the black bodice as he held the lamp away from him with his left hand.

“Not much doubt about that! Seems likely that this blind chap will be a widower.”

In another minute he was with Jesse, an incisive young man who was not afraid of being brutally frank.

“You’ve been sleeping out, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

“Got pretty wet a day or two ago?”

“There was some rain—the end of last week. What d’you think, sir——?”

“Think! I think you’re a born fool to drag a slip of a girl about the country at this time of year.”

Jesse’s blind face flinched as though the words were blows. This young man had not learnt that tolerance that comes from long contact with the complexities of life. He was a raw product, keen and biting. A year passed as House Surgeon in a large General Hospital had given him a decisive and half-bantering roughness that time and the temper of the public would smooth away.

“Come along. We must get her into my trap. Lead the horse this way. Oh—I’d forgotten. You’re blind. Hang on to my arm.”

They moved up the dark road, Jesse walking mechanically with a feeling of vile emptiness at the heart. He was trying to ask the hard young man something, but the words would not come.

He found his voice as the horse and trap stopped.

“Is there much wrong?”

“Everything’s wrong. She’ll be dead in twenty-four hours if we don’t get to work pretty sharp.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It was Jesse who lifted Ann in his arms and carried her from the fir-wood to the trap, the doctor guiding him with a hand on his shoulder. To Falconer it was a moment of supreme anguish and distress. The truth had been told him with rough abruptness, and the frail, fluttering, feverish body that he carried stirred in him a rush of infinite tenderness and fear.

The doctor had picked up Jesse's baggage, the blankets, and Ann's little basket. He let down the tail-board and pushed them under the seat.

"Hold on a moment. I'll climb in first."

He climbed into the trap and bent towards Jesse.

"A bit nearer. That's it. Now give me one of those blankets I shoved under the seat."

The doctor lowered Ann into the bottom of the trap so that she was half-sitting and half-lying, with her head against the seat. Jesse handed him a blanket, and he wrapped it round the girl, and folded the carriage rug under her head. Then he settled himself, gathered the reins, and set his knee against Ann's right shoulder to steady her.

"I say—you there—this trap isn't built for a chap of your size on the back seat. Hang on to the tail-board. Can you run?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. Ready?"

Jesse was groping for the chains of the tail-board. He found them, and said "ready." The horse went off with a spurt, jerking him forward by the arms.

It was a strange journey for Falconer, this blundering along behind the hammering hoofs of the horse, with the wheels grinding on either side of him, and the chains of the tail-board ice-cold in his hands. It was blind anguish stumbling at the heels of death and life, anguish that had broken into sudden passionate self-reproaches. For as he jogged along behind the cart, huge, shaggy, tragically clumsy, Falconer was enduring the exquisite torture of a man who had awakened to the fact that he had brought one who was very dear to him into danger of death. Fool! The lash of the young man's words had stung him into understanding. And the understanding that had seized on him was pitiless in its fierce sincerity. He saw things as he had never seen them before, heard a different cry in the voice of his own memories. The weeks that had passed took a new and bitterer meaning. He remembered now little things that Ann had said, silences that had become eloquent. She had foreseen what might happen, and he had blundered on over her attempts to

show him the truth. Perhaps she had been suffering and hiding her sufferings because of her love for him. What a damned, selfish fool he had been, piling his own whims upon her shoulders, and letting her struggle to live the life that he had chosen.

This love of hers, he had exposed it upon the mountains, let it lie in a ditch, treated it as an accepted commonplace of the day. He had let her live his life without asking himself whether she was fit for it, or whether she was happy. He had taken too much for granted, and his own apathy struck him now as something that had been stupendously blind and brutal. Bad luck, indeed! All his life he had been exclaiming against his bad luck. The fatal drift of circumstances had been his own affair. He beheld his own ghastly inefficiency, his incapability of cherishing and preserving the most sacred thing that the world had to give.

“Light ’o.”

Falconer became conscious of the fact that the dog-cart had stopped, for he was thrown against the tail-board.

“You—there——?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have a shot and see if anything can be done here. Come forward and hold the horse.”

They had stopped outside a low white fence that glimmered in the light of the carriage lamps. Behind the fence stood a Sussex farm-house, long and compact, red brick below, red weather-tiling above. A ground-floor window, half hidden by a ragged cypress, showed a light behind a white blind. Beyond the house were crowded the farm buildings, and somewhere a dog barked and rattled his chain.

The doctor passed through a gate in the white fence, and knocked at the front door. A shadow moved across the blind. There was some delay before a slip of glass above the door showed the gleam of candlelight. The doctor tapped his heels on the doorstep with the habitual restlessness of intellect in a hurry.

“Ah—is that you—Mrs. Bodle?”

“Who is’t?”

“You ought to know me by this time.”

“Sure, Dr. Tuke! Why, we ain’t been sending for you to the farm.”

“No—you thank your stars for that! I’m wondering whether you can manage to do me a favour.”

The woman was a little, stoutish person with a hard, round, sallow face. Her thin hair and her black dress were scrupulously neat. Yet she had a habit of being prim and coarse by turns, and her narrow mouth was always putting itself in order.

“I’ve got a girl in my trap; she’s about as ill as she can be. I picked her and her

husband up on the road.”

“Eh!”

“The man’s blind. They’ve been tramping, though they’ve been doing it for choice. The girl caught a chill. She’s jolly bad.”

“Eh! Sure!”

“I’m wondering whether you’d lend them a bed for a night or two.”

The woman’s face remained blank and hard. She held the candle very steadily and very straight, and stared stolidly over the doctor’s shoulder.

“Don’t see how I can do it, doctor.”

“The girl’s awfully bad——”

“Is she now! You couldn’t get her to Forest Row or East Grinstead, could you? Sorry I can’t see my way to doing anything.”

Tuke had gained some insight into the ways of the Sussex folk. In this case stolid distrust and the dislike of trouble were uppermost. He saw an implacable refusal behind the woman’s obstinate face. Argument would be fatal. She had set herself to say “no,” and no it would be.

“Well, no harm in asking. It’s a serious case—life and death—but a bed’s a serious thing.”

Jesse’s voice broke in.

“I’ll pay well if the woman will only take her in.”

That settled the matter. The “woman’s” face became a shade more stubborn.

“Can’t do’t. Besides, how’d I know. People off the road, too——”

“I’ve got the money in my pocket.”

“Sure! That may be. I say I can’t do it. And if I say I can’t—I can’t.”

The doctor turned to the gate.

“Of course. I quite understand that. Sorry to have disturbed you, Mrs. Bodle. Good-night.”

Falconer’s thoughts were more bitter as he hung on again to the chains of the tail-board. A slow fierceness awoke in him. He could have gone back and battered in that farm-house door, and shaken the stolid woman into cowed consent. But then—! He was only realising the lot of the vagrant, testing the attitude of the dog in the kennel towards the dog that has no kennel. He was up against order, civilisation, human nature. It was his own accursed folly that had brought him kicking at closed doors.

The doctor drove on for another half mile before he drew up his horse at a spot where a rutty track diverged from the road. A dark smother of wooded hills towered up on either side, and there was the noise of a stream running across a shallow,

pebbly ford. A light showed about fifty yards away. It came from a cottage at the top of a bank, a cottage surrounded by old apple trees, its porch shaped out of the clipped masses of two old yews.

The doctor hesitated a moment, doubting whether it was worth his while to try the cottage on the bank. Then he jumped out of the cart and told Jesse to hold the horse's head.

"And don't you put in any shouting this time," he said; "you leave it to me."

Young Tuke took one of the lamps and picked his way along the rutty track. He climbed the slanting path to the garden at the top of the bank, walked up a brick-paved path and knocked at the door under the yews.

"I say—Mr. Venner—Mr. Venner."

"Sir!"

"Can I speak to you a moment?"

The door opened, and the stooping figure of an old man showed in the lamplight. He was a thin, shrunken man with the face of a melancholy old ape, and a sprinkling of grey hair over his head and chin. The little blue eyes were set in a mass of wrinkles, eyes that were full of a watery shrewdness. He stooped so much that his figure resembled the upper part of the letter C.

"What, be'ut you, doctor?"

"Yes. I've got something to show you."

"Somethin' to show me!"

"Yes, I've picked up a slip of a girl on the road who's half dead with pneumonia. Her husband, who is with her, is blind—and just let her lie on the grass. They are not regular tramps. If I can't get her a bed pretty quickly, I might as well leave her by the roadside. Just you come and look."

Old Venner stared past the doctor into the night. He blinked his eyes, and said nothing for a moment. Then he went into the kitchen and put on the muddy boots he had used that day. The doctor returned with him to the trap.

He held up the lamp so that the light fell upon Ann.

"See?"

The old man leant against the shaft and peered into the trap. And for half a minute he neither moved nor spoke, but stared at the frail black figure with its flushed face and disordered hair and swiftly labouring breath.

"Sure—poor thing——!"

He nodded his head.

"You'll find the lane terrible muddy, doctor. You give me the lamp. I know where the ruts lie."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Peter Venner, or "Old Venom," as his enemies called him, was a woodman and wood-seller, a little, brown old man in a great green valley. He lived quite alone in the solitary cottage on the bank, cooking his own food, hanging his own washing on the line in the little orchard, and scrubbing his own floors. At the foot of the bank lay the wood-yard with its stacks of faggots and of cord-wood, its bavin shed, and its piles of ash, chestnut, and larch poles that looked like Indian wigwams. Here, too, was the open wagon-shed with its huge posts, its timber-tub, and its wood-cart. Beside it stood the stable where Peter's old horse grunted and nibbled his manger, a stable whose thatch was green with grass and moss.

Peter Venner was a man of means, and out of the fact rose the saying, "Mean as Old Venner." No doubt the old man loved money, and that when he sold wood, he meant to be paid for it. In this way he had gathered a goodly share of unpopularity. Thriftless people agreed that Old Venner ought to provide them with wood, but that, being the well-to-do old fellow he was, he ought not to bother about payment. But Peter Venner did bother, and bothered very viciously. He was a shrewd old man who had summed up society, as he knew it, and who had no pity for the grumbling poor. A work-house boy, Old Venner had hewed his own way with axe and bill.

"Only fools grumble at not having money," he would say, "wise folk get it. I ain't a believer in lame dogs. They're best left lame."

Not a soul in those parts could understand what made "Old Venom" take a sick tramp-woman into his cottage. It was against all precedent, and some people accepted it as the first symptom of senility. Others said that the tramp-woman's man must have offered Peter good money. A few of the younger women set it down to the doctor. He had such a way with him, especially when there were babies about.

Peter Venner was a widower, and the only man in the neighbourhood who remembered Peter Venner's wife and the way of her dying, was old Tom Potts, the bavin-cutter. Tom had worked for Peter Venner for thirty years, and he still remembered that November night when little Ruth Venner had been brought home in Farmer Lavender's gig. She had been knocked down in the dusk on the Maresfield road by two drunken gipsies who were driving as only gipsies drive. Ruth Venner was still alive when Farmer Lavender brought her home, and old Tom remembered the look on Peter Venner's face when he lifted her out of the trap. Ruth had died that night, and Peter had gone out into the woods, and not a soul had seen him for two whole days. If he had been asked, Tom Potts would have said that no man had ever been fonder of his wife, and that Peter's nature had hardened after Ruth's death. He

was one of those quiet men, sulky on the surface, who had hidden something that was sacred under a grim reserve. The surliest citizens are often the best husbands, and a man who is a tough customer in the rough-and-tumble of life may be the greatest sentimentalist at home.

It may have been that this coincidence touched the wound of thirty years ago, and roused something that was sacred in Old Venner's heart. The facts stood for what they were worth. Ann lay abed in a little, whitewashed upper room whose window looked into a tangle of apple-boughs. Five days she had lain there, dying yet not dying, watched over and nursed in that selfsame room where Ruth Venner had died with one last little sighing breath. And Falconer sat before Old Venner's fire in the room below, a man whose courage and whose fortitude were in shreds; a man who listened and could not sleep, and would not have eaten but for Old Venner's orders.

Dr. Tuke came and went. He was an indefatigable and utterly tactless young man who yet contrived to get his own way in everything. The very first night Falconer had taken out his purse and handed it over to the doctor.

"Get anything that can help."

Tuke said "right 'o," and appeared next morning with a trained nurse in his trap. The nurse got to work, while Tuke explained blandly to Old Venner that the lady in uniform would have to have a bed made up for her in the cottage.

Peter Venner looked at the young man and grinned.

"You're piling up the faggots, doctor."

"That's it. Let 'em all come. I say, though—you're a bit of a brick."

Peter went to his linen-chest and made up a bed for the nurse in the back room.

At his next coming Tuke brought cylinders of oxygen in the bottom of the trap. In the little whitewashed room everything was in fighting trim, from the hypodermic syringe and strychnine tablets on the dressing-table to the carefully written card of directions pinned upon the wall. Tuke was a "sporting" doctor. He did not believe that he had a chance of winning, but he meant to play the game to the very last minute.

Each morning he exclaimed to the nurse:

"What, still alive? Well, I'm jiggered!"

He was the most unprofessional young man in his manners; but, after all, manners do not defeat death.

To Falconer these five days were days of uttermost anguish. All the courage in him had collapsed, and his suspense was the mere agony of waiting for the end. He had no faith in the vague chance of Ann's recovery, so he sat and cursed himself,

heaping contempt upon his blindness, and putting all hope away.

Already—in imagination—he saw Ann lying dead, and he knew that her death would be more disastrous to him than even his loss of sight had been. Jesse did not see how he could go on living any longer. Ann had become life, heart, eyes, the whole world to him. The thought of being left alone in the darkness frightened him as it might have frightened a child.

Again and again he said to himself that he had killed Ann. Nothing could drive this conviction out of his head, and he was so hopeless as to the future that he never asked the doctor how things went. To the anguish of Falconer's despair the words would have sounded farcical. He withdrew into the gloom of his fatalism, and sat for hours before the fire.

Old Venner appeared to understand what was passing in the heart of this blind and shrinking man. Falconer was sick with suffering, and Peter Venner had not forgotten the one great tragedy of his own narrow life. He would sit by the fire at night, smoking his pipe, and watching Jesse with his shrewd and watery eyes. The strange thing was that Old Venner did not resent all that was happening in his cottage. It did not even strike him as absurd that he should be put to all this trouble by having these two people thrust on him out of the unknown. Perhaps there was an inevitableness about it that was justified by the memories of thirty years ago.

It was Old Venner who told Jesse that there was a chance that Ann might live.

"The doctor says there be a sort of a crisis. That's what he called it—crisis. Like a break in the weather, so fur as I can gather."

Jesse did not believe him, and Peter Venner always insisted on being believed.

"Tell you 'tis so. The doctor knows what he's saying."

This was at noon, and Tuke, coming down stairs after his mid-day visit, threw further news at Jesse, who was sitting by the fire.

"We've got a fighting chance. So—buck up, my hearty."

Falconer put his face in his hands and shuddered, and Tuke stared at him with semi-cynical sympathy. The blind man's consciousness was like so much raw, quivering flesh. It was hardly capable of registering impressions.

Tuke went out and found Old Venner in the woodyard.

"I say, Mr. Peter, that chap in there will go off his nut if we aren't careful. Can't you find him something to do?"

Old Venner scratched his chin.

"Sure! I might try him at sawin' wood."

"That's an idea. He's like a bit of jelly, all of a wobble if you so much as touch the plate."

Peter Venner went into the cottage, his watery blue eyes blinking a little.

“I’ve got a job for you, young man.”

Jesse turned a dazed and bewildered face.

“Come on, now; ’tain’t no use you roastin’ yourself afore the fire. Don’t help nobody. We’re well-nigh out o’ logs, too. I reckon you might handle a saw.”

He took Falconer by the arm and led him out of the cottage and along the sloping path that slanted down the bank into the woodyard. There was a big shed where Old Venner kept much of his oak stuff that was sawn into logs for sale in the towns. Sometimes the “steam saw” would come on its rounds and cut hundreds of logs a day. Sometimes Tom Potts took a turn at the sawing-horse. The floor of the shed was littered with sawdust, bits of bark, chips and twigs. Close to the sawing-horse lay a pile of cord wood that Old Venner wanted cut up for his own use.

“Can ye use a saw?”

“Yes.”

“Here y’are, then. She’s set wide and runs easy, and I’ll give her a grease.”

He took a saw down from a nail, jabbed his thumb into a pot of grease that stood on a rough shelf, and anointed the saw.

“The wood’s just by ye. Feel it? And the horse——?”

Falconer felt with his hands.

“Yes.”

“Cut ’em about a foot long.”

“Yes, about a foot.”

“And just you rip away here till tea-time. I’ve bin through ’t myself. I’ve sawed wood all night by the light of a lantern—because I couldn’t sleep with grievin’ over what couldn’t be mended.”

So the winter day went, and the dusk came on, the stealthy beginnings of a fateful night. Falconer had worked for five hours at the sawing-horse, but he had neither tired his body nor dulled his mind. When Old Venner came to lead him back to the cottage, suspense gripped him as eagerly as ever. He hardly noticed the old man’s remarks on the pile of logs he had left beside the sawing-horse.

At nine Dr. Tuke let himself in with that utter lack of ceremony that was part of his cheerful coarseness. He blew on his hands, declared that it was “damned cold,” and then went softly up the stairs, guided by the light that the nurse showed him from above. Falconer sat and listened. He heard them moving to and fro in the room, the creaking of woodwork, and a broken murmur of voices. Only a few minutes seemed to have passed before the doctor came down again, and picked up a glass of hot toddy that Peter Venner had mixed for him.

Old Venner's eyes asked a question. The doctor answered it with a snap of the thumb and middle finger, and a dubious grimace.

"Touch and go," he said in an undertone, when Venner followed him out into the porch. "She'll settle it for us one way or other—this blessed night."

Falconer, with his acute sense of hearing, caught what the young man said.

Old Venner returned, locking and bolting the door with troubled deliberation. He loitered about the room before he pulled a chair up before the fire, his eyes full of a shrewd and perturbed pity. His hands went mechanically into his coat pockets for tobacco tin and pipe. But when he had filled the pipe he put it aside on the high mantel-shelf, and stared at the fire.

"Get a bit of sleep to-night, won't ye?"

Jesse rocked his body to and fro with his elbows resting on his knees.

"Sleep! Good Lord——!"

Old Venner nodded his head, and wiped his mouth and chin with a red cotton handkerchief.

"I reckon I'll be getting off—myself."

"We're giving you no end of trouble."

"Bah, I could have kicked ye out if I hadn't wanted it."

He took a paper spill and lit his candle with it from the fire. Jesse heard the creaking of the stairs as he climbed to the narrow back-room where he slept.

Falconer was left alone with a dying fire at his feet, and a dying woman in the room above. He would not believe that there was any hope, seeing that the bitterest thing that could happen to him was that Ann should die. Tuke had forbidden him to see her. The delirium had left Ann, but Jesse had not heard her voice, for the simple reason that she was not allowed to speak. It was a question of staying-power, and every needless nerve-thrill or the quivering of a muscle was so much strength wasted in the grapple between life and death. Falconer had made both nurse and doctor promise that he should be given the last moments when all hope had passed. And so he sat there waiting for the woman to come and call him to the farewell.

For a while he listened to the sounds from above, the gliding footsteps over the floor, the occasional murmur of a voice, the clink of glass against glass. The beams creaked in Old Venner's room. Presently silence fell, silence that was utter and complete. The wood-fire on the hearth went out and ceased to give so much as a crackle. There was no wind moving, and the night was frosty and very still.

During the first hour of his vigil the silence was nothing but silence to Jesse. Some time elapsed before suspense and the strained membranes of his ear-drums began to create all manner of imaginary sounds. The darkness about him palpitated

like the blood in a great heart. He was conscious of the throbbing of the arteries at his temples, and of the buzzing of the blood within his brain. More than once he fancied that he heard footsteps on the stairs; and again, that someone had called to him from Ann's room. He stood up, and listened, suspense and the midnight cold making him shiver. The sounds were of his own creating, and the utter silence of the cottage contrasted with the shuffling of his feet over the bricks as he felt his way to the bottom of the stairs.

He groped his way back to the chair, only to be attacked by a new dread. Supposing the nurse had fallen asleep, and that Ann was dying while the woman slept? This new dread set Falconer shaking like a tremulous old man. He felt that he could remain alone no longer in the tense silence of the cottage, that he must blunder up the narrow stairs, and discover what was happening in the room above.

A sudden creaking of boards, and the sound of someone moving saved him from blind panic. The dread went out of his heart for the moment, only to return with more poignant significance. The woman was coming to call him. Ann was dying. He was about to grasp his love's hands and feel them grow limp and cold.

The footsteps continued to go to and fro, softly, patiently, the footsteps of one who fought against sleep. Jesse's imagination followed them to and fro across the floor, much as a sick man's eyes follow the moving shadow-patterns of sunlight upon a wall. He became mesmerised by the ebbing and flowing of the sound above. The rhythm of these footsteps played upon his brain, until, without realising what was happening, he fell asleep, sitting upright in the chair.

The dawn was at hand when Falconer awoke to the sound of an opening door. He started up, shaking at the knees, guilty as a man who had slept at his post. The pain of consciousness returned. And in the stillness he heard the sound of someone breathing.

"Who's there?"

He heard the rustling of a skirt.

"Is that you, Mr. Falconer?"

Jesse caught his breath and held it. She had come to take him to say good-bye.

"Yes; I'm ready."

"Ssh!"

"Yes, I'll come quietly. I'm ready."

The voice whispered to him out of the darkness.

"It's not that. She's asleep. We've won. She's going to live."

Falconer stood swaying. He groped with his hands, and then fell full length, without uttering a sound.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

There was a cautious colloquy upon the stairs. Nurse Bisset had crept up to Old Venner's room and met him coming out, candle in hand.

"Oh, Mr. Venner, the man's gone down in a dead faint."

"Hey!"

"I had just told him——"

"Ah—sure! Now, what is it you just told him? Life or death——?"

He had dropped his voice to a whisper that echoed hers, and his watery eyes peered anxiously into her face. The candle shook a little. Behind his grim brevity Old Venner sometimes hid unexpected emotion.

"I don't think there's much wrong with the man, Mr. Venner. I only told him ——"

"Man! God jigger the man! 'Tain't him I'm thinking of."

The nurse whispered excitedly. Her cap was awry, and her emotions were inclined to take a holiday.

"Didn't I tell you? There—how one's head goes to a jelly after a tussle like this! She's sleeping; she's going to live!"

"Sleeping?"

His voice became absurdly cautious. He stretched out a hand and squeezed the nurse's arm.

"Sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Going to live! And in that room, too!"

His face blazed into sudden grotesque delight, grotesque because of the working of the muscles about his mouth. He blinked his eyes very rapidly, pinched the nurse's arm, and gave way to whispering exultation.

"Going to live! Good girl. You've done it. And that great chap flat on the floor! Well—well! He fell pretty soft, didn't he——?"

He followed the nurse down the stairs, talking to himself in a whisper, and making faces at the candle.

They found Falconer kneeling in the kitchen and holding his head between his hands. He looked bewildered and shaken, a man gathering his wits together after the shock of a heavy fall. He dropped his hands when he heard Peter and the nurse enter the kitchen, and the blind face he turned to them was intensely troubled. It was as though he had been told some wonderful piece of news, and had lost it again in the fog of his unconsciousness.

Old Venner sniffed and rubbed his chin.

“God drat the man! Don’t he understand?”

He went up to Jesse.

“It’s all right, man, it’s all right. You needn’t say your prayers.”

Falconer stretched out a blind arm and knocked the candlestick out of Old Venner’s hand.

“Josephat! Drat my eyes! What’ll the chap do next?”

The nurse went to the window and drew back the curtains, and through the casement showed the purple and orange of a winter dawn. The bare apple-trees were bleak, and black, and strange, the grass silvered over with hoar frost. And down the brick path a robin went twittering.

They heard a voice saying:

“Is it true—is it true?”

Old Venner grimaced as he picked up the candlestick.

“She’s asleep; don’t you grip it? We don’t want no noise.”

In the dusk of the room a big figure blundered up, groped gently, found a chair, and sat down before the dead fire. Peter Venner had put the candlestick on the mantel-shelf, and the nurse was still at the window watching the dawn. Suddenly they turned and stared at one another, standing in the stiff and constrained attitudes of people caught in the self-conscious realisation of overwhelming emotion. The blind man in the chair was weeping with the self-abandonment of a child.

Old Venner jerked his head like a puppet and walked stiffly towards the door. He unlocked it, drew back the bolts, and went out and stood on the brick path under the apple trees. The keen air of the winter dawn entered his nostrils. He drew a deep breath, stretched out his lean neck, and swore very softly, and with an air of infinite relief and relish.

Now in one corner of the woodyard where nothing but docks and nettles grew, lay a pile of rotten, broken-banded faggots, hedge-cuttings, and mildewed bracken. Peter Venner appeared drawn to that particular corner of the woodyard. His hand went tentatively into the side pocket of his coat and fingered a box of matches with cautious enthusiasm.

“Odd rabbit it—let’s have a bit of a blaze!”

A trugful of shavings and half a bottle of paraffin were eager accessories. And Tuke, wheeling his bicycle up the muddy lane, had a vision of a great red flaring bonfire and the figure of an old man flourishing a pitchfork with true Catholic energy.

During the two days that followed, Jesse Falconer spent most of the time before the fire in Peter Venner’s kitchen, listening for the sound of Ann’s voice in the room

above. Tuke had forbidden him to see her as yet, and she was so weak that she was not allowed to speak. Yet to Jesse the silence was not the long, crushing silence of suspense. He was content to sit there, listening and waiting, and imagining that moment when he should once more hold Ann's hands in his. He would throw the old life at her feet, and ask her—of her love—to forgive him his blind selfishness.

It was late on the afternoon of the third day that Jesse first heard the sound of Ann's voice. Dusk was filling the cottage and fighting with the firelight. A wind moaned fitfully in the chimney, and in one of the silences between these moanings Jesse heard the voice for which he had listened so dearly. A smiling, listening radiance swept over his face as he leant forward slightly, his hands resting on the arms of the Windsor chair.

Ann was asking Nurse Bisset for news.

"Where's Jesse?"

"Your husband's all right."

Ann lay quiet a moment, her eyes staring up at the ceiling.

"When can I see him?"

"Oh, we'll see about that presently."

"I've been very ill, haven't I?"

"Ill! Good gracious! Well, you needn't worry about that—now."

It is an open question as to who suffers most on such occasions, the woman who is ill or the man who waits and watches and whose heart is haunted by helpless dread. Moreover, a severe illness is a state that comprises all manner of tyrannies and privileges. Strangers enter the house with authority, and create new laws and methods. They contrive things between themselves, decide as to what shall be and shall not be legal, and even arrange little human tragi-comedies for the edification of those whose authority they have seized.

Thus these two autocrats, Dr. Tuke and Nurse Bisset, chose to talk in undertones at the top of Peter Venner's steep and wainscoted stairs.

"Well—I think he might. Just for a minute. But you keep an eye on them."

"Oh—yes, doctor. I'm sure——"

"Now don't get sentimental. The chap's a fool. I'm going to tell him so—later on."

Tuke descended kitchenwards where Falconer waited with the air of a chained dog. The doctor seemed amused. His thin and cynical young face had a wicked benevolence that gleamed about mouth and eyes.

"Hallo—still toasting yourself! Things are going on as well as can be expected."

Jesse showed great restlessness.

“No danger—now?”

“Danger! I wouldn’t say that—you know. Now I suppose—that if the girl gets perfectly well—you will be wanting to drag her in and out of barns and workhouses and ditches!”

Jesse flushed.

“I’ve thought all about that.”

“Don’t be touchy, my good sir. We all do these silly sort of things, without thinking. Why, I took my best girl for a sail at Ramsgate, absolutely dragged her on to it. Well, we don’t always grasp the nastiness of some sorts of life.”

He turned to the door.

“Do you think, doctor, I might——?”

“In a week, yes—in a week.”

The door closed rather noisily, and Falconer sank back in his chair. But Tuke was playing one of his little comedies. He waited a moment under the yews before he opened the door again, and called to Jesse.

“I say—I’ve been thinking. I might allow you just a minute upstairs.”

“Now?”

“If you like.”

Nurse Bisset, standing in Ann’s doorway, heard blundering steps upon the stairs. Jesse had groped his way out of the kitchen, and she waited long enough to lay a hand upon his arm.

“Now, Mr. Falconer——”

He was breathing fast, and the muscles of his mouth were twitching.

“I’ll be very careful. I won’t do any harm. I’ll——”

“There, there, just you go in.”

She slipped away rather hurriedly, and leaning her hands on the sill of the little landing-window, looked at the landscape through moist eyes.

Jesse was in the whitewashed room, feeling the air about him with his hands.

“Ann!”

“Jesse!”

“Where are you?”

“Here. Oh—my dear lad——”

He found the bed, and her hands, and going on his knees he hid his face in the coverlet.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

To say that a woman can do what she pleases with a man is an unsympathetic way of stating a half-truth. The complete vulgarity that characterizes the sex relationships of the average lower-class man and woman is full of significance to those who live for something better. No man lusts after his own wife when he loves her with a love that lasts. In those happy marriages that are lived out above the cynical animalism of the comic press, there is no tyranny, no vulgar self-assertion, none of that sexual cunning that deals in all the little petty jokes and nastinesses so dear to the ordinary bourgeois mind. What is a pleasure to the one becomes a pleasure to the other, either to give or to surrender.

Here and there, in the coarse brown earth of "labour" you find the streak of gold, and it is found in strange places. In Ann Wetherell you touched it, child of a loafing, boozing bully. In Falconer, too, man of the soil, the gold vein ran into fine and delicate threads. It was drawn into wires that vibrated and made that music that we call "soul."

Jesse began to make new plans from the very hour that Ann's life was given back to him. By New Year's day they were sitting hand-in-hand, like a couple of young lovers, before Peter Venner's fire, and debating a hundred and one ways of living and of earning money, and the one way in particular where Jesse might be able to use his strength. At times they were apt to be sad and a little thoughtful over the limitations that hemmed them in. There were so few things a blind man could do, beyond sawing wood and turning the handle of a barrel organ.

But Falconer had had his lesson. The thought of the old vagabond life not only filled him with passionate dread, but drove him fiercely towards the future. A home with Ann! The picture came to him, all firelight and soft shadows, with the desolate wind of yesterday howling helplessly in outer darkness. How was it that he had never seen this vivid picture before? How was it he had never heard the intimate busy sounds of a home, the humming of the kettle, the steady "stitch-stitch" of Ann's needle, the contented sighing of her breath at night? Life had had to bring him to the brink of a precipice to show him this. He was learning what the words wife, and home, and fireside meant.

At night, when Ann had gone to bed, Falconer and Old Venner would sit, smoking and talking, before the fire. It was not long before Peter heard all that Jesse had to tell. Old Venner was a philosopher, to judge by the remarks he made upon this most human of all tales.

"Marrying's like buying an 'oss," he said, "you're liable to be taken in when

you're young. Some lads have the instinct, others haven't. You get took in by a few flashy points, and you don't gather what you've got till you've had the beast at home a month in the stable. Some men can ride a tricky horse, others can't. And I reckon that a vicious, lusty mare don't care for too timid a chap on her back."

When Falconer talked to the old man about the future, Peter Venner bit his pipe-stem hard and was cautious.

"You've got a little money, have ye?"

"Yes."

"Well, you be very careful how you part with it, that's all!"

This was shrewd and decisive enough, but the advice led nowhere, like the advice of most old men; old age being a state of clinging to things, of a cautious hoarding of the treasure that has been won in a man's prime.

"I know all about that," said Jesse; "but I've got to get some sort of work, and a home. It's for her. And I tell you I'd put on harness and draw a cart for her sake."

Peter eyed him interestedly over the bowl of his pipe.

"Oh, you would, would you?"

"Yes, I would. She tried to live my life, and it nearly killed her. Now I'm going to live the life she's longing for."

Old Venner nodded.

"'Xactly. And that's what fools call being managed by a woman!"

"But it isn't."

"Of course it ain't. The best part o' living is when you're giving up. Though I ain't done much o' that m'self these thirty years. But I might have done—I might have done. When once you've had a good partner, young man—and lost her—'tain't so easy to find a second. It makes you so darned partic'lar. I tell you it makes most wenches look a lot of tawdry, good-for-nothing sluts."

When Ann was able to get out of doors one mild and sunny morning, Peter Venner took her over the garden and the woodyard. His pale blue eyes were full of twinkles as he watched the eager flushing of her face.

"It's just lovely, Mr. Venner," she said to him; "it's just like the place I'm dreaming of for Jesse. Isn't it funny, now? I always wanted yew trees just like that, and a brick path, and a garden at the top of a bank. Jesse and I are making plans. You've been so kind to us—and we shan't be bothering you much longer."

Old Venner rubbed his chin.

"Don't you be in no kind of a hurry," he said. "It don't signify to me."

But it did signify very much to this old man, for it was a fact that Ann resembled the poor Ruth Venner of thirty years ago, and that she had come into his life as Ruth

had come back to her death.

Without realising the insidious nature of the feeling, Old Venner had begun to take a pleasure in seeing Ann about the cottage. As her strength returned, she glided gradually into the life of Old Venner's home, cooked the meals, cleaned his pots and pans, darned his socks, and chattered over the table. He no longer came back to lonely improvised meals, and to dull, drowsy evenings over the fire. Someone put his slippers to warm, saw that the buttons were on his clothes, and that there was dry wood ready for the morning fire. It was all done so simply, and so unostentatiously, without any suggestion of "getting round the old fool," that Peter Venner found the habits of thirty years crumbling away into grievous ruin.

It came upon him suddenly that he had been a lonely old man, and for the first time in a great number of years he was the victim of self-pity. A new sociability had been awakened in him. He found it pleasant to be cared for, to come home and find a happy-faced young woman busy in the kitchen. He remembered how he had kicked off his muddy boots in the back kitchen, night after night, for a monotonous number of years, cooked up some mess of food, smoked a pipe, totted up figures on the back of an envelope or an old bill, and then crawled off to bed. That had been all very well in its way, but he had tasted something better. Ann could cook, and her voice was a pleasant sound in the cottage.

Moreover, he had not been put out of pocket by the girl's illness. Falconer had paid the old man good money, otherwise even Ann's likeness to his dead wife might soon have squandered much of its inspiration.

During those January days Falconer fell into moods of immense energy. He would make Ann lead him down to the sawing-lodge, and the purr of the saw would go on hour by hour. Old Venner would come and look at the mountain of logs that Jesse had cut, rub his chin, and meditate.

Then old Tom Potts, the bavin-cutter and odd man about the yard, went down with bronchitis, and was listed on his "club." Tom was not likely to do much more work in this world, so the doctor said.

"Better get a young man in, Mr. Venner."

But Peter loathed young men.

"More money and less time—that's their tune in these days. I'll have none of 'em."

Which meant that he was faced with possible problems.

Lying in one corner of the woodyard was the limb of an oak tree, with the bark rotting off it, and the wood turning to white pulp. The thing had lain there for years, because of its weight, and because Old Venner had not bothered. But being a man

of foresight and understanding, he took Falconer to where the oak limb lay and asked him if he could lift it.

Jesse put his hands to the slippery, woodlice-ridden mass, felt it as a wrestler feels his adversary, got a grip and a heave, tilted the thing on end, stooped, set his teeth, and had the limb on one shoulder.

“Where d’you want it?”

“In the sawing-lodge.”

“All right—give me the lead.”

And the oak limb went down with a crash on the chips and dust of the sawing-lodge floor.

Old Venner blinked his eyes. That great log of oak had banged down the balance of his indecision. He rubbed his chin, and looked at Jesse with approval and satisfaction.

When he left the yard about dusk, after loading up his wagon with faggots for a journey on the morrow, he entered the cottage by the side door that led into the little back kitchen. Sitting down on a stool by the copper, he began to unlace his boots, while the voices of the two who were talking before the fire came to him from the front kitchen. Neither Jesse nor Ann had heard the lifting of the latch, and since one of Peter’s laces had worked itself into a knot, he was excused for hearing all that was said.

“I’m strong enough now, Jesse. I could walk twenty miles—sure.”

“I’m not going to drag you about the roads, Nan.”

“Well, there’s the railway. Though we don’t want to waste any money now, do we. Still, we’ve got to look about us. I suppose you’ll want to be going Guildford way?”

Jesse’s “I guess so” was thoughtful and rather sad.

His voice brightened up the next moment.

“We shall come out all right, Nan. We’ll find a quiet corner somewhere. I’ve set my heart on getting a home.”

Old Venner concluded from the sounds that he heard that Ann went over and kissed Jesse.

Peter kicked his boots rather noisily across the brick floor, groped for his slippers, and shuffled into the kitchen. He had a glimpse of Ann’s startled face and the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

“Why, Uncle Venner——!”

She had thrust the pleasant intimacy of this title upon him of late.

“Why, Uncle Venner!”

He mocked her with a dry twinkle.

“I didn’t know you had come home.”

“Didn’t you, now! My boot-laces were contrary. They like to get in a tangle and make an old man swear.”

Ann looked meaningly at Jesse, and held her breath.

“We—we were talking over things, Uncle Venner. You’ve been very kind to us. But we’ve got to make a corner for ourselves.”

“Sure! So you’re thinking of moving, are you? I’ve been doing a bit of thinking—myself.”

He paused, cocked an eye, sat down, pulled out his pipe, blew through it, and then rapped it on the fender.

“I’ve been thinking——”

Ann’s eyes were perfectly innocent.

“What about, Uncle Venner?”

He looked up at her with the firelight on one-half of his face.

“About a partner. I’m an old man. I shan’t do much more heavy work. But look at him—yonder. Can’t he saw wood? Can’t he carry half a tree on his back? Couldn’t he load up faggots and cord-wood and poles? Ain’t he got a bit of money?”

A number of emotions passed over Ann’s face. She opened her mouth, but remained mute, while Falconer turned towards Old Venner’s voice.

“Do you mean it?”

“Sure. It’s a business that pays. It might pay better if there were a man to bother. More money makes more money. We could hire a respectable chap to take Tom’s place. And there’s no knowing—Why, God bless me, child, you ain’t no fool. You see?”

Ann’s knees were trembling under her. Words came somehow—quick, impulsive, eager words.

“But where’d we live——?”

“Aren’t you living here, already! ’Tain’t a bad little place. And there’s room, even f’ children.”

Ann gave a sharp cry.

“Oh—Uncle Venner——”

She ran and kissed him, and the old man caught her and kissed her back.

“There, there, my girl. Go and give him one, too, or he’ll be fractious. Darn them bootlaces of mine—they would listen. Well, well—let’s have a bit of a smoke. What, want to shake hands, Jesse? All right, sure; give the lass a hug. What—! Where’s

my damned pipe got to——?”

Somebody had wet eyes. And that was the beginning of a bargain.

CHAPTER XL.

To go down into the deep woods on a spring morning is to descend into a place where the hush of mystery hangs like the hush in some great temple whose pillars stand black against the dawn.

Peter Venner had said at breakfast:

“There be them faggots to fetch up out of Bolden Wood, Jesse. The ground’s hardened a bit. ’Tain’t so mucky as it was last week.”

“Two loads—aren’t there?”

“Sure. Nan, my girl, would you like a jaunt in the wagon? Lock the door and put the key in your pocket.”

“Then you’ll have a cold dinner, uncle.”

“Well, I’ve put up with a number of cold dinners in my time.”

Billy, the horse, was harnessed to the light wagon, Ann and Jesse doing the work between them, while Peter looked on and finished the plug of shag in his pipe. All three of them mounted into the wagon, Ann glancing up at the bloom on the apple boughs and at the clumps of daffodils in the grass. She had begun to love the place as her very own; and each new flower and shred of colour that the spring brought with it filled her with a new wonder and joy.

Peter took the reins, balancing himself on the broad gunwale of the wagon. They had brought a stool for Ann so that she rode like a queen in a village triumph.

Bolden Wood was a green abyss into which a woodland track wound like a mule-path down a mountain. The wheel ruts were half a foot deep in places, and where the ground was rotten and boggy faggots had been thrown down and crushed into the clay. The wagon rolled like a ship at sea, and Old Venner had climbed down to walk at Billy’s head. Ann left her stool, and went and sat by Jesse on the broad rail. The wooded slopes towered up against the sky, and though a strong wind was blowing, in Bolden Wood everything was very still. The tops of the highest trees swayed but a little, though white clouds were racing across the blue. The sunlight came down in great streams, striking on the green moss that covered the pedestals of the oaks, shimmering upon the hollies, and making the shadows that lurked about the hazel-stubs very black and sharp.

The underwood had been cleared that winter, and Bolden was a splendour of flowers. Above the brown carpet of dead leaves, in mossy places, among the tufts of coarse grass, on lichened banks, they covered the ground with colour. Primroses lay in yellow sheets, wild hyacinths in masses of mysterious blue. A scattering of anemones still kept up the imagery of snowflakes flecking the ground. Lord and

ladies in glabrous green made a pastoral idyll with the milkmaid in her mauve-white smock. Above—the golden leaf-buds of the oaks glimmered beside the black buds of the ash. As for celandines, you found them like drops of gold in moist places, with ferns sprouting out of hazel-stubs, and mosses richer than any velvet.

Bluebells grew thickly where the faggots were stacked in an open space beside the “ride.” Ann cried out with the joy of a child, jumping down to gather a handful, while Old Venner trampled them under foot.

She ran back to the wagon and thrust the flowers into Jesse’s face.

“Smell!”

“They’re rich.”

“Thick as corn, Jesse. And the primroses——!”

“I can smell the primroses. I can smell the whole wood—and the spring.”

He climbed out of the wagon.

“Shall I carry, Uncle?”

“Aye, lad. I’ll take and load ’em. Nan will give you the lead.”

Ann took Jesse’s hand, and he paced the ground from the tail of the wagon to the faggots, counting every stride.

“That’s the number, Nan. Now I shall know where I am. I’ll throw you a faggot down to sit on. Are they piled high?”

“No, laid one against the other.”

“Call out if you see me going wrong.”

He took a faggot in each hand, gripping them by the bands, and paced his strides back to the wagon. His sense of direction and of his surroundings had become wonderfully acute, and the ends of the faggots brushed the tail of the wagon before he had taken his sixth stride. Peter Venner was standing up above to take the faggots from Falconer and pile them into a load.

“Let me try the whole job, Uncle.”

“Sure! Why shouldn’t you? That’s enterprise! I’ll stand on the shaft and tell you if you’re wrong.”

Jesse went to and fro, trampling the bluebells, lifting faggots into the wagon and then climbing in after them to load them one by one. Old Venner watched him narrowly, for there is an art in loading a wagon, and much can be done by the mere feel of things. The faggots had to be packed closely and firmly, yet not so roughly as to break the bands. And a faggot, especially when it has oak or birch twigs in it, can be as tenacious and cussed as a loose length of barbed wire.

Jesse was very patient and very methodical. More than once he was switched across the face, but he took the cuts philosophically. Peter Venner had an occasional

suggestion to make, and sometimes he turned to Ann and smiled at her with an air of comprehensive satisfaction.

“We’ll make it three easy loads, Jesse. Billy’ll have enough to do up the slope. Better three journeys than getting stuck with an overload.”

When Peter was satisfied, they roped their load and started for home. Ann took Jesse’s hand, while Old Venner led the horse through this world of flowers and of perfect colour. It was easy going in the wood bottom, but when the winding road began, old Billy took to blowing and to straining at the traces. Peter gave him a rest.

“There’s a soft spot ahead, Jesse.”

“Let me get at the back, and shove.”

They started again, Jesse putting his weight against the tail of the wagon. He looked big and strong enough to thrust the thing up hill alone, and Ann watched him with a woman’s pride. The wagon sailed triumphantly out of Bolden Wood, Billy plodding along with the satisfied air of a horse who had nothing to grumble at, and whose pulling powers were more than equal to the load at his heels.

Peter was cheerful and jocular.

“There’s somewhat in being strong. The Lord may not glory in the muscles of a man’s back, but I tell ye they’re darned useful.”

So they fetched the faggots out of Bolden Wood, and Jesse proved that a blind man can train himself to be of use.

One of these spring days Falconer had a letter forwarded to him from the Temperance Hotel at Guildford, and Ann read it to him on the seat under one of the apple trees in the orchard. It was a letter that ran to no more than six lines, six poignant, hateful, yet prophetic lines so far as Ann was concerned. She drew breath at the end thereof, like one who has come through a crisis, and sat for a while in silence, holding Jesse’s hand.

“When was it, Nan? When does she say?”

“Last December.”

Ann started to her feet, suddenly broke away from Jesse, and ran towards the cottage. Her face looked happier and calmer when she returned.

“I’ve burnt it, Jesse.”

“Burnt it?”

“Yes. There’s nothing more to hurt us, is there? It’s all done with. It’s just you and me—now. Oh—dear lad—dear lad! Kiss me.”

CHAPTER XLI.

Peter Venner had an old man's love for the strip of garden in front of the cottage. It consisted of two broad borders flanking the brick-paved path from the gate to the yew porch, trimly edged with box, and backed on either side by grass and fruit-trees. In summer these two borders were piled high with colour, rich, riotous colour in rare contrast to the straight red path and the straight green edges. Flowers seemed to grow much as they pleased, and there was something for most months of the year, snowdrops, crocuses, a *Daphne mezereum*, polyanthus, black velvet and old gold, daffodils, tulips, columbines, pansies, peonies, Solomon's seal, monkshood, roses, delphiniums, white lilies, torch lilies, pinks, snapdragons, phloxes, perennial sunflowers, Michaelmas daisies, a root or two of chrysanthemums, and a clump of Christmas roses. The borders were so crowded that you could hardly see a square inch of soil, and yet everything flourished in a way that would have made a professional painter of herbaceous borders look down his nose with envy.

Old Venner was pottering up and down the brick path, stooping now and again to pull up a weed and throw it into the long grass at the back of the borders. The prevailing colours were the massed blues and whites of delphiniums and Madonna lilies, though a few oriental poppies struck notes of discord where the rose bushes nearer the cottage were smothered in bloom. The slanting of the evening sunlight upon the borders webbed them in a net of gold. A few bees were still at work, their humming being the only sound to break the silence.

The old man looked round the valley, up at the summer woods with their domes gleaming against the west, and along the grassland, rich and deep where the stream went lazily. Leaning over the white gate, Peter Venner could see the woodyard spread out below him with its brown faggots, its sheds with their mossy thatch, its banks of nettles, sheep's parsley, and ragged-robin. The lodges and piles of poles threw sharp, black shadows. Even the most neglected corners were wild and beautiful, a-wash with the green foam of summer.

Peter pulled out his big silver watch.

"They ought t' have topped the hill."

As he stood and listened, a slow and expectant smile spread itself over his face. He heard the sound of a horse trotting, the hills above giving back a faint echo. It was the lazy, slip-shod trotting of an old horse, and some minutes passed before Peter could catch the grinding of the wheels upon the road.

"That's old Johnson's horse—sure!"

The cart turned from the main road into the lane, the horse's hoofs making a dull

plodding sound on the softer surface. The crown of a man's hat came into view, followed by his brown and bearded face. But Peter's eyes were watching for red roses in a black straw hat, and for a girl's face that was looking up radiantly towards the garden and the cottage.

Old Venner went down the sloping path and met Ann halfway between the lane and the garden gate. She flushed quickly on seeing him, and her eyes had the slightest glimmer of shyness. Peter put his hands upon her shoulders and kissed her.

"Well, well, it's all right, isn't it——?"

"Yes, Uncle Venner.

"That's a good girl. Bless me, but I've been lonely. Fancy Old Venner—lonely! I have, sure."

"Have you?"

"I oughtn't to have told you so, though, ought I? You'll go and put more roses in your hat."

Ann went back to Jesse who was carrying a light tin box by one handle. The path up the bank always puzzled Falconer, although Peter had fixed up posts and a handrail. Jesse could never be sure of striking the place where the path began, and more than once he had walked into the ditch.

Ann took him by the hand and led him up the bank. Their faces caught the evening sunlight as they passed through the gate into the garden. Jesse felt Ann's fingers tighten on his.

"Just stop a moment, lad."

She was looking at the banks of flowers, the green lines of box edging, the straight red path, the clipped yews, and the long, low cottage with its blinking casements and warm roof. A thin column of blue smoke rose against the background of the wooded hill. Nothing could have been more clean and peaceful than this cottage and these flowers.

"It's just perfect, Jesse."

Old Venner caught the words as he reappeared from somewhere with a bunch of roses.

"What's that—what's that—Nan?"

"I was saying it's just perfect, Uncle Peter."

His old face wrinkled itself into one broad smile. He had noticed that Ann was unconsciously feeling something upon the third finger of her left hand.

"Well, you've seen it in winter; that's the test of a place such as this. Jesse, my man, I'm glad to have ye back."

"I'm glad to be back."

“Ah, you’re a lucky man——”

“I am.”

Ann laughed softly, and Jesse’s arm went round her, while Old Verner disappeared between the yews into the cottage.

“Isn’t it queer how things happen, Jesse? I don’t want to boast, lad, but I believe I’ve broken your bad luck.”

“It wasn’t all bad luck, Nan. I was a bit of a fool——”

“Now, Jesse! But things do seem to come true sometimes, when one wants them very badly.”

“Yes. The great mistake in life is to give up wanting anything.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

On the very first page of text, *Maister Jesse* was spelt without the trailing *e*. As it was the only instance, it was changed to be the same as all others.

The contractions in the dialect is strange at times, but has been left unchanged.

[The end of *The Eyes of Love: A Novel* by Warwick (George) Deeping]