

**CHRONICLES OF
MELHAMPTON
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM**



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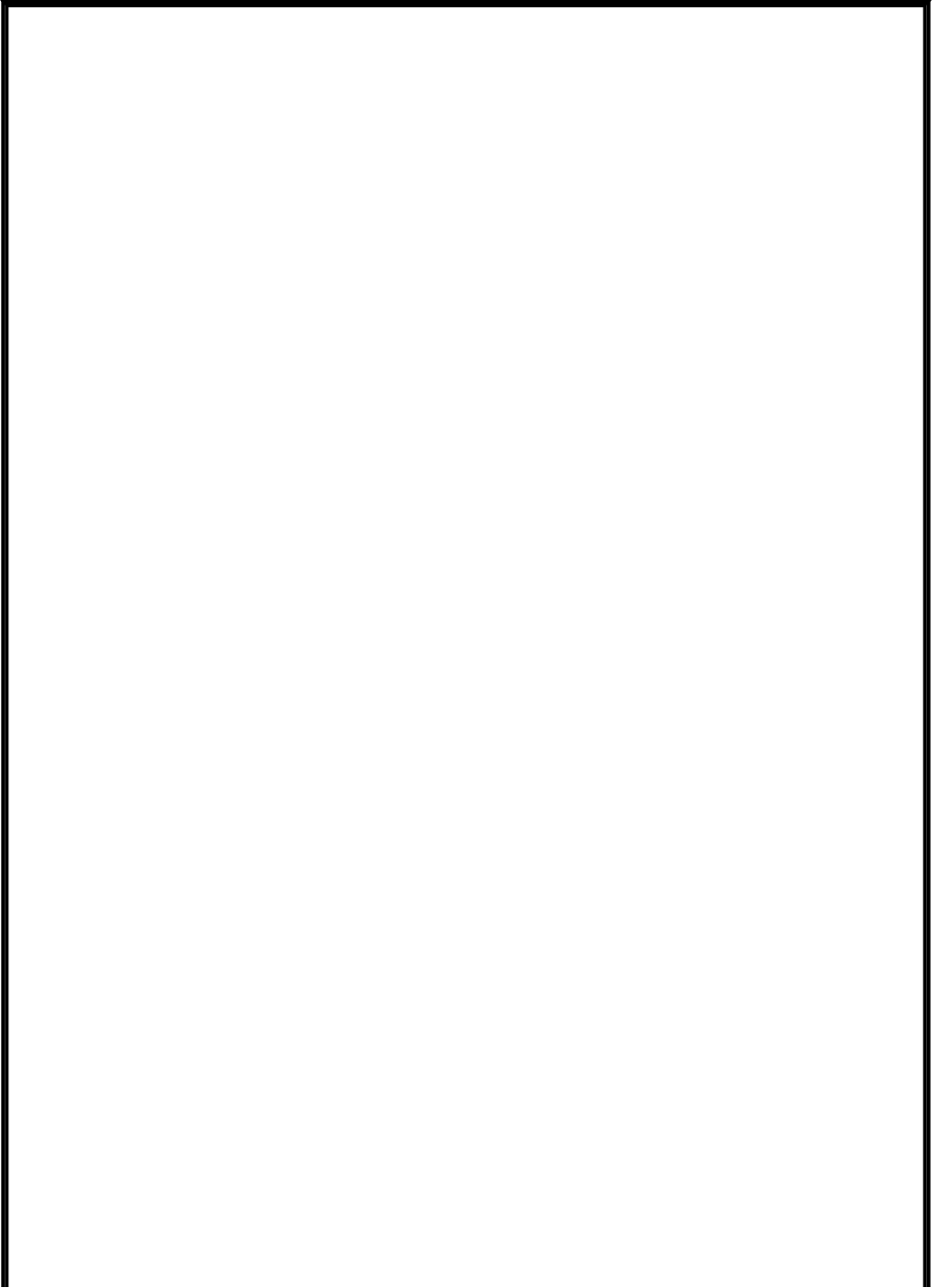
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BY
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I <u>THE SMALL TRAGEDY OF MR. TIDD</u>	7
II <u>MRS. DOWDSWELL'S PROD ALONG</u>	41
III <u>A MINOR HERO</u>	68
IV <u>MR. MEEKES' BOMBSHELL</u>	101
V <u>THE INCOMPARABLE MR. TRIGG</u>	134
VI <u>A MAN MUST HOLD HIS WIFE</u>	174
VII <u>HONEYDEW AND KISSES</u>	203
VIII <u>A THIEF BY NIGHT</u>	240
IX <u>THE REMARKABLE ASTUTENESS OF POLICE- CONSTABLE CHOPPING</u>	264
X <u>THE ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OF MR. TIDD</u>	285

I

THE SMALL TRAGEDY OF MR. TIDD

The Devil, if he had taken a stroll through the streets of the old-fashioned town of Melhampton, would never have selected Mr. Henry Tidd as a likely disciple. There was not the slightest suggestion of an evil life or of a criminal turn of mind in the physiognomy or general deportment of the genial and popular bank manager. His features, if somewhat insignificant, were of an inoffensive type. His eyes, partially concealed behind gold-rimmed spectacles, were weak but kindly, his mouth sensitive and gentle, his manner urbane, only slightly touched with that slur of officialdom which his position had developed. In all respects he walked as custom demanded, and in the manner of his predecessors before him. He was vicar's church-warden, and took a leading part in the various schemes for the restoration of a very fine old parish church. He was secretary of the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club and on the committee of the cricket club. He had personally convened a meeting amongst the smaller gentry and his kindred professional men, to consider the advisability of starting a golf club, and had himself initiated negotiations with a neighbouring landowner for the lease of some land. On the vexed question of the inclusion of the tradespeople of the town in the list of prospective members, he had shown himself thoroughly sound, pointing out that in these days a man was to be reckoned for what he was, and insisting that he personally would at any time be glad to play a round of golf or join in any manly sport, say with Mr. James Scroggins, the local butcher, whose dealings with the bank, as it happened,

were considerably larger than those of the entire professional element of the place. He possessed a bicycle on which he occasionally rode into the country. He had been for years one of the quartet who played auction bridge once a week, generally at the doctor's house, on which occasion he donned a dinner-coat and presented the appearance of having dined. On market days and on one other day in the week he invariably visited before luncheon-time the bar parlour of the 'Melhampton Arms,' where he unbent sufficiently to shake hands with Mrs.

9

Dowdswell, the widowed landlady whose balance fully justified such a proceeding, and to drink one glass of sherry. In no respect did he fail to uphold the dignity and honour of his position as manager of the local branch of the great banking firm of Netley. His life was apparently an open book to the street loungee, the gossip and the tradesman of Melhampton. Yet Mr. Henry Tidd in due course became a criminal.

It had all come about in a very commonplace way. Amongst Mr. Tidd's customers, or rather the customers of the bank, was a certain Percy Shields, a veterinary surgeon with a small but fairly prosperous connection, from which he derived an income very little larger than the bank manager's own salary. About a year previous to these happenings, however, things began to go differently for Mr. Shields. He first of all drew a cheque—the largest he had ever drawn—in favour of a certain firm of stockbrokers, a proceeding which Mr. Tidd noticed with grave concern. From that time on, however, the veterinary surgeon's position steadily improved. Three times he came cheerfully into the bank and depleted a swollen bank balance in favour of a five-hundred-pound War Bond, thereby moving Mr. Tidd to the deepest envy. He himself, alas! was unable to save a penny, although his family consisted only of one adored

10

daughter, on whose education the small hoardings of his lifetime had been spent. Beyond his salary he was almost penniless, a poorer man by far even than those smaller tradespeople who addressed him so respectfully and looked up to him as the representative of the great banking house of Netley. He suffered from the usual curse of the smaller professional classes—he was forced to keep up an appearance which precluded any chance of saving. Sometimes in the silent hours of the night the sweat had broken out on Mr. Tidd's forehead at the thought of illness. His life insurance premium was dealt with each year after months of almost pitiful scraping. The clothes in which he presented so impressive an appearance were ironed and pressed and brushed with his own hands in the secrecy of his apartment. No wonder that the voice of Percy Shields on that memorable August afternoon nearly twelve months ago was the voice of the Tempter.

“Ever do anything on the Stock Exchange yourself, Mr. Tidd?” the veterinary surgeon inquired casually as he filled in the papers entitling him to the possession of a third five-hundred-pound War Loan. 11

“Never,” was the prompt and official reply. “My position here would render such a proceeding inadvisable.”

“Seems a pity,” Shields observed, fingering the stiff parchment document lovingly. “A man with a head for figures like yours ought to do well. One needs to add a little to one's income these hard times.”

Mr. Tidd kept a stiff upper lip. His smile indicated a full amount of sympathy for those whose inclinations ran that way, but

refused more than a general toleration of his client's point of view. Nevertheless, possibly for the sake of showing his friendly interest, he asked a question.

“You seem to have been very fortunate, I am glad to notice, Mr. Shields. If it is not an indiscreet question, were your dealings confined to any particular share?”

“Amalgamated Linoleums,” was the prompt response. “Finest industrial concern going. They've doubled their capital in the last five years. I've carried 'em now for twelve months, and, except on one or two occasions, I've drawn every settlement day. . . . It's Thursday, Mr. Tidd, and five minutes to one. Will you do me the honour of drinking a glass of sherry with me?”

12

Mr. Tidd acquiesced, but the wine did him little good. At luncheon that day—they called it luncheon at Bank House, but it was in reality the one meal of the day—his daughter Sylvia rallied him on his low spirits.

“Dad, I don't believe your glass of sherry with Mr. Shields agreed with you—or did you have two?” she laughed. “I believe you are bilious. Never mind, old dear, the tennis this afternoon will put you all right.”

Mr. Tidd coughed.

“I have not quite made up my mind whether I shall play tennis this afternoon,” he confessed after a moment's hesitation.

Sylvia stared across at him, with her beautiful eyes wide open and her pretty lips parted. She knew how much, in his quiet way,

her father enjoyed his half-day's recreation.

“Not play tennis, dad?” she exclaimed. “But why on earth not?”

Mr. Tidd was almost embarrassed. Even in his very limited family circle he maintained enough of his official dignity to render the explanation difficult.

“The fact of it is,” he admitted, trying to speak lightly, “my flannel trousers have been washed a good many times, and on this last occasion they seem to have shrunk more than usual. I tried them on this morning, and I am not quite sure that any violent exercise in them would be—er—advisable.”

13

Sylvia was a sensible girl, and she saw through the officialdom. She heard, too, the slight quiver in her father's tone. She left her place, came over and flung her arms around his neck. She went straight to the heart of the matter.

“Dad, are we so very poor?” she asked.

Mr. Tidd, purely from habit, glanced around the room to make sure that they were alone. Then he emerged from behind the disguise of his gold-rimmed spectacles, his carefully acquired manners—a mixture of suave condescension and the genial dignity of an assured position—he cast aside his eternal prescience that in his person was represented the great House of Netley, and he spoke words of naked truth.

“My dear,” he told her bitterly, “we are amongst the martyrs of the earth. We are genteel paupers, shivering all the time on the verge of insolvency. My salary is two hundred and sixty pounds a year and this house, which maintains the dignity

14

of the bank but is absurdly large for us. We have to keep a maid, employ a gardener once a week, pay for coal and gas, our food and clothes, and keep up a decent appearance in the town. It is very difficult. I am obliged to pose as almost an abstainer, because I cannot offer my friends a glass of wine in my own house. I gave up smoking years ago, although it was a great solace to me. I dare not attempt to entertain, so I have to avoid accepting hospitality as far as possible. I take the utmost care of my clothes, but I have had nothing new for many years, and it is hard to present a respectable appearance for all occasions. My dinner-coat, for instance, has now failed me, and I have been compelled, on the plea of sleeplessness, to introduce Mr. Shields to make up the doctor's weekly rubber in my place. The fear of the dentist or of the doctor has, I confess, been a constant anxiety to me."

Sylvia, fresh from an expensive boarding school, was horrified.

"But my school bills, dad!"

"They are all paid, dear," he assured her; "paid with the savings of fifteen years. It was your mother's wish that the money should be spent in that way."

15

Sylvia dashed the tears from her eyes.

"Well, that's that!" she exclaimed cheerfully. "You shall just see now how I can economise. I shan't want any clothes for years. And, dad, what about your grey flannel trousers? Mr. Pleydell was wearing a pair just like them last week, and I'm sure, with your blue serge coat and that nice tie, you'll look topping. Come on, I'll dress you."

Mr. Tidd played tennis in his grey trousers—with suitable accompaniments—and betrayed no sign of inward perturbation. He cracked a joke with Shields, whose recent investments entitled him to such a distinction, discussed War Loan with Miss Holywell, who had a small sum lying on deposit, which she could never make up her mind how to invest, and preserved his dignity to the full with Mr. Pleydell, the retired Civil Service official, whose balance was perilously near the borderline. And he played tennis precisely and extremely well.

Nevertheless, that was the day upon which the mischief was sown. Mr. Tidd dreamed all night of Amalgamated Linoleums, and in the morning, over their frugal breakfast, Sylvia put the finishing touches to a half-formed resolution.

16

“Dad,” she confided, “I have an idea. I wonder we didn’t think of it before.”

“What is it, my dear?” he inquired indulgently.

“Everyone is saying,” she continued, “that Mr. Shields has made quite a great deal of money buying and selling shares. It sounds so simple. He buys them when they are low, as soon as they go up he sells them, and of course he makes the difference. Now you are ever so much cleverer than Mr. Shields, dad. Why don’t you do something of the sort?”

Mr. Tidd sighed, but there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes.

“It is not considered altogether the correct thing, my dear,” he explained, “for a bank manager to deal in stocks and shares.”

“Then if the bank don’t like you to do that they ought to pay you

more,” she declared.

Mr. Tidd smiled a little cryptically, but when he entered the bank five minutes before his accustomed hour he opened *The Times* and turned to the financial column. The date of the paper was the twelfth of August. Now, on the twenty-first of June, more than ten months afterwards, Mr. Tidd was a criminal. The facts were few but painful. Locked in his drawer were stockbrokers’ receipts, showing that Mr. Tidd had paid up adverse balances amounting to nine hundred and forty-five pounds, fifteen shillings, and the funds of the bank committed to his keeping were short exactly that amount. On the thirtieth all balances would be struck. After that date concealment would be impossible, for on the second day of July Mr. Nevinson, the travelling inspector, would be round, and—but Mr. Tidd’s imagination failed to carry him farther than that. Farther, that is to say, than the inauguration of disaster. That he saw, as he sat looking over the wire blind into the street, with hideous preciseness. At about a quarter to ten the inspector would drive up in a Ford car, driven by a chauffeur in semi-private livery. The inspector—rather a replica of Mr. Tidd himself, except that he wore horn instead of gold-rimmed spectacles—would descend, shake hands with Mr. Tidd a little stiffly, as became his position, and after leaving his hat and coat in the private office, would at once plunge into the books. In a general way his task would be over at about half-past one, when he would close the ledger with a slam, wipe his spectacles, smile benignly on Mr. Tidd with the air of one relieved of a grim cloud of apprehension, and invite him to luncheon at the ‘Melhampton Arms.’ His little cut-and-dried speech was always the same.

17

18

“I find your books quite in order, Mr. Tidd—quite as I expected. Give me the pleasure of your company to luncheon at the inn. I have apprised the landlady of our coming, so that she is doubtless prepared.”

But on this forthcoming occasion the programme would be varied. It would take the inspector, Mr. Tidd decided, about half an hour to come to the first inaccuracy. And after that—well, that was where Mr. Tidd’s imagination failed him.

The pleasant street into which he looked while conjuring up these dismal prognostications suddenly received an access of interest. Sylvia, with her tennis racquet in her hand, had issued from the front door of the house and was slowly crossing the road. Almost at the same time a young man, driving a two-seated car with a ridiculously elongated bonnet, came round the corner a little recklessly and headed straight for the sauntering girl. Sylvia, a tantalisingly beautiful vision in white skirt and pink jumper, leaped lightly on to the pavement and glanced disapprovingly at the young man. The latter jammed down his brake with such force as to skid right round in the street, from which position, at right angles to the pavement, he raised his cap and evidently attempted some form of apology. Sylvia, behaving entirely in the spirit of her upbringing, bowed a little stiffly and, without glancing behind, vanished through a wooden gate let into the grey stone wall, on which was painted in white letters:

19

MELHAMPTON LAWN TENNIS CLUB

This, if the young man had been an ordinary sort of young man, should have ended the matter. As it happened, however, Mr.

Jeremiah H. Preedy, having been brought up with the idea that his slightest whim was only conceived to be gratified, and feeling a distinct inclination to see the young lady again, showed not the slightest signs of behaving like an ordinary mortal. After a few moments' contemplation of the closed gate, he backed his car to the side of the pavement, descended, and entered the nearest shop, which happened to be a tobacconist's. 20

From this he emerged in about five minutes' time smoking a cigarette, but still without any immediate indications of continuing his journey. He strolled along the pavement and examined the mystic letters on the door through which Sylvia had vanished. Then, gazing around once more, as though in search of further inspiration, he was suddenly made aware, by means of the lettering upon the window and also the imposing brass plate, of the existence of a branch of Netley's Bank. He hastily dived into the breast-pocket of his coat, consulted a thin book and crossed the street. A moment later he pushed open the swing door and approached the bank counter, having, as Mr. Tidd was pleased to see, thrown away his cigarette. Mr. Tidd arose from the nightmare of his reflections and presented himself on the other side of the counter. There was nothing whatever in his gentle, inquiring demeanour to suggest the anguish-racked criminal.

"I guess this is a branch of Netley's Bank?" the new-comer remarked pleasantly.

"It is," Mr. Tidd acquiesced.

"Say, I'd like some money, if we can fix it up," the young man continued, drawing the thin morocco book from his pocket. "I've a letter of credit here which seems payable at any 21

of your branches. Jeremiah H. Preedy, my name is.”

Mr. Tidd examined the document in his best official manner. He succeeded in concealing his surprise when he saw that in clear and unmistakable phraseology it eagerly invoked all correspondents of the great House of Netley to provide Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy, of Fifth Avenue, New York, with such financial accommodation as he might require up to the sum of five thousand pounds.

“Have you any proof,” Mr. Tidd inquired guardedly, “that you are the person referred to in this document?”

“I should say so,” the young man replied. “There’s my driver’s licence outside in the pocket of the car, issued yesterday morning at Plymouth, and here’s a handful of mail addressed to me as you can see,” he added, producing some letters.

Mr. Tidd examined the superscription of the envelopes, turned back to the letter of credit, and nodded slowly.

“This appears to be in order,” he pronounced. “How much money would you like?”

Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy leaned against the counter in friendly fashion. He was over six feet tall and of most engaging appearance.

22

“Well, I don’t know,” he confessed, a little doubtfully. “I’m just kind of wandering round in the car. Only landed at Plymouth yesterday morning. We had a bully trip from New York.”

“Indeed?” Mr. Tidd remarked, somewhat vaguely.

“I’m doing what I always planned to do,” the young man confided, making himself a little more comfortable, “having a look at some of these quieter corners of England. Say, this is a real old-fashioned place, isn’t it!”

“It is a town of some antiquity,” Mr. Tidd informed him. “There are Roman remains in the neighbourhood which are referred to in all guide books of Devon.”

“Is that so!” the young man exclaimed, with marked interest. “How far out might they be?”

“Scarcely more than a mile,” was the encouraging reply. “There is also an excellent trout stream.”

“Any sort of way of getting a little exercise?” Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy inquired, casting a longing glance across the way.

23

Mr. Tidd referred once more to the name upon the letter of credit, which was a great one in American finance.

“There is a tennis club,” he said, “which exists chiefly for the use of the residents. We are none of us brilliant performers. If, however, you should decide to stay in the neighbourhood for a day or two, it would give me much pleasure, as secretary, to offer you its hospitality.”

“That’s bully,” the young man declared heartily. “I guess there’s an inn of some sort?”

“The ‘Melhampton Arms’ is just across the way, a little lower down on the left,” Mr. Tidd replied. “Travellers visiting the

neighbourhood speak very well of it.”

“I’ll go right down and get a room,” the visitor announced.
“What about the tennis, sir?”

Mr. Tidd glanced at the clock.

“It is one of the afternoons upon which I usually play a few sets myself after closing hours,” he said. “If you care to call here for me in three-quarters of an hour, I will take you there myself.”

“Great!” the young man assented, preparing to depart.

24

“Concerning this little financial matter,” Mr. Tidd reminded him, tapping the letter of credit.

“Sure! I’d like to have some money,” was the prompt avowal.
“What about a hundred pounds?”

Mr. Tidd counted out a hundred pounds in fives and tens, and pushed them across the counter. Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy scrawled his name in the place appointed, thrust the money into his pocket-book, which already, as the bank manager could not fail to notice, contained a considerable number of notes, and took his breezy departure. Mr. Tidd watched him start up his car, turn around and drive under the covered archway of the ‘Melhampton Arms.’ Then he looked at the little morocco-bound book which his visitor had left upon the counter. He opened it. The young man had scrawled his name opposite the first blank space—and that was all. He had not even troubled to fill in the amount. Mr. Tidd locked the book away in his private drawer, closed the front door of the bank, and hurried upstairs to change into his tennis clothes. He was surprised to find that,

although the afternoon was cool, his forehead was damp with perspiration. . . .

Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy of New York scored a great social success in the little Devonshire town that afternoon. From the vicar's mother, who came in a bath-chair, to the doctor's youngest child, who was allowed to field the balls, everyone voted him delightful. His tennis, although he carefully adapted his game, so far as he could, to the capacity of the other players, was a revelation to them all, and in the end he was forced to admit that he was a prospective contestant at Wimbledon and Prince's. He played cheerfully, however, with the most indifferent performers, and he undertook in the most unselfish manner to improve Sylvia's game by fifty per cent, if she would practise for an hour or two every morning with him.

"Every morning?" she repeated, looking at him with wide-open eyes. "How long are you going to stay here, then?"

"That depends," he answered, dropping his voice. "I'm in no particular hurry to get anywhere. I meant to take a month's vacation, and it seems to me this is about as attractive a place as I am likely to find."

She laughed incredulously.

"Why, it's one of the dullest little towns in Devonshire," she declared.

"I guess I'm willing to put up with that for a time, anyway," he assured her.

"But what made you stay here at all?" she persisted.

“I was just motoring through,” he explained innocently, “and the place seemed attractive.”

She laughed up at him.

“But how did you get to know dad?”

“I saw a bank,” he replied, “and I went in to get some money. By the by,” he went on, turning to Mr. Tidd, who had just strolled up to them, “I’d like terribly to spend some of that money, if I could. I wonder whether you and your daughter, sir, would care to come down and dine with me at the hotel tonight? It would be doing me a real kindness if you would. I’ve personal letters to the head of your firm—Lord Netley,” he added craftily. “I guess my dad looked after the old boy pretty well when he was over in the States last.”

Mr. Tidd knew then without a doubt that this young man actually belonged to the world-famed firm of Preedy, and he realised, with a little aching of the heart, the immense satisfaction with which, in his daily report to headquarters, he could have casually referred to his entertainment by so distinguished a correspondent of the firm. These things, however, meant but little now. He accepted the invitation graciously, nevertheless, and as they bade one another “au revoir” he forced himself to discard a terribly haunting thought.

27

“By the by, Mr. Preedy,” he said, “you left your letter of credit on the bank counter. I will bring it down when we come.”

“Don’t do that,” the young man begged. “Just lock it up for me till I go, will you? I’m such a careless chap, I’ll only lose it. . . . I shall have the pleasure of seeing you later, Miss Tidd.” . . .

The resources of the ‘Melhampton Arms’ had never been more lavishly drawn upon, but a chill sat in the bank manager’s heart which no champagne had power to remove. He drank probably more wine than he had ever drunk before in his life, but without at any time becoming subject to its cheering influence. As a matter of fact, however, although his host never failed in his respectful attentions, Mr. Tidd was very much the third party at the feast. The freemasonry of youth asserted itself with effortless triumph. Strangers to one another’s country, habits, and without common acquaintances, the two young people, before the evening was over, had established an intimacy which might have been of years’ standing. Mr. Tidd was vaguely puzzled, but then he was a person removed from the actual throb of life. It was the evening of the twenty-first of June, and life for him extended no farther than the second of July. He was just conscious that there was even more respect than usual in Mrs. Dowdswell’s friendly “good night” as they left the inn, and he was conscious, too, of Sylvia’s warm happiness as she took her leave of him for the night. Afterwards, he had to lie for hours on his plain wooden bedstead, shrinking from the ghosts that crowded to his side. They were all ugly. Ugliest of all was Mr. Nevinson, opening and shutting a ledger before his victim’s face.

28

The young man had, without doubt, good manners. After the tennis practice the next morning he presented himself most apologetically before the bank counter and begged for permission to take Miss Sylvia for a short motor ride. Mr. Tidd consented on consideration that she was back by one o’clock. The young man promised and departed in search of his car.

At the moment of the actual catastrophe, Mr. Tidd was

29

engaged with a small client who was endeavouring to arrange an overdraft of ten pounds. Sylvia's shrieks, however, and the sound of a commotion in the street, brought him hastily out to the front steps of the bank. What had happened was soon made clear. Melhampton was laid out, as many other Devonshire towns, on the up and down principle; that is to say that the two or three main roads, instead of converging in decent horizontal fashion into the heart of the town, descended from the range of hills which surrounded it with an abruptness familiar to Devonians but exceedingly disconcerting to travellers from more normal counties. An army wagon with an indifferent brake came down the steep incline into the main street just as Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy was bringing his eighty horse-power car with a graceful sweep, from the hotel archway, to his destination. Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy was carried into the spare room at Bank House, suffering from mild concussion of the brain. In lucid intervals, however, the young man was most reassuring.

"You don't need to worry about me," he declared, the second day after this sad happening, turning over on his side and addressing Mr. Tidd, who had come to pay him a visit.

30

"Our college doctor once told me, after a football match, that if a New York and Pennsylvania locomotive went over my head, it would only get derailed. I just hope I'm not inconveniencing you, but if I can lie here quietly for a day or two, and Miss Sylvia can read to me now and then, when she's got a minute or two to spare, I'll be all right in no time. Gee, but it was a smash, though! Is there anything left of my old bus?"

"Your automobile is in the hands of the local repairer," Mr. Tidd replied. "He assures me that the damage is but trifling. We shall

consider it a privilege to have you remain with us until you are fully recovered.”

Mr. Tidd took his departure and the invalid turned to Sylvia.

“Say, Miss Sylvia,” he confided, “your dad’s some talker! Why, the manager of our central branch in New York hasn’t got the style and manner he has! Kind of wasted down in this little town, isn’t he?”

Sylvia flushed with pleasure.

“Dad hasn’t had any luck,” she sighed. “All the same, I think in a way he’s quite happy.”

“You wouldn’t care about settling down here all the rest of your life yourself, would you?” the young man asked anxiously. “What I mean to say is, you’re not kind of wedded to the place?”

31

“The doctor says you are not to talk,” was the demure reply. . . .

The accident to Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy happened on June the twenty-second. On June the twenty-ninth he sat up in his room. On July the first he took a stroll, leaning on Sylvia’s arm, and on July the second, at a quarter past nine, at Mr. Tidd’s earnest solicitation, he descended into the bank parlour for an interview. Mr. Tidd sat where his eyes could command the road, down which before long he expected to see the approach of the Ford car.

“Mr. Tidd,” the young man began as he entered the parlour, “you say you want to have a few words with me, but I guess I’ve got

something to say to you which had better come first.”

The flat of Mr. Tidd’s hand struck the table in front of him gently but firmly. Then for the first time the young man noticed that his strange little host had changed during the last ten days, more even than he, the presumed invalid. Mr. Tidd was looking worn and shrunken. The genial pomposity of his manner had vanished. He was like a man who had spoken with death. 32

“What I have to say to you, Mr. Preedy, must be said without delay. With your larger transatlantic notions, you will find it a little difficult to understand, yet please listen carefully and do not interrupt.”

Mr. Tidd told his drab story, and he told it as only a man who had passed through the anguish of hell could have told it. Before him, the young man sat paralysed with the horror of the slowly unfolded drama. He himself lived through the agony of those cold days and sleepless nights. He had been told not to interrupt. Interruption would have been impossible. His tongue seemed dry and there was a lump in his throat.

“Now I come,” Mr. Tidd wound up, and his tone seemed to have a hard rasp in it, “to the day when you arrived, drew a hundred pounds without filling in the amount, and, believing me, as everyone else does, to be an honest man, left your letter of credit on my counter. I tried to give it back to you that night. You begged me to take care of it. I have taken care of it. I have filled in the amount you drew from me for a thousand pounds instead of a hundred. I have straightened my books so that the inspector, who will be here in about ten minutes from now, will find nothing wrong. I am a thief, you understand. If you lean 33

out of the window, you will see a little cloud of dust at the top of the hill there. That is Mr. Nevinson, my inspector, coming. There is your letter of credit. You will see how cleverly I have dealt with it. You have only to make your complaint to the inspector. I shall deny nothing.”

Then Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy found his tongue. Before Mr. Tidd knew exactly what was happening, he felt his right hand grasped in a huge palm, and the young man’s other around his shoulders. The latter’s words were as forceful as his actions.

“If you call yourself a thief again,” he shouted, “I’ll stuff the words down your throat. Gee, but you’re the greatest man that ever lived! Don’t you realise that you’ve got the bulliest, most wonderful daughter that ever breathed? Why, there never was such a girl in the world! And there never was such a father, pinching and saving up for fifteen years to pay for her schooling! Why, man, sit up and take notice. You don’t owe anyone a cent. Open a credit account for yourself with that five thousand, 34 if you need it, and draw what you want, right away. I know what salary you’ve been getting. You wait till I get hold of my friend Bill Netley! Sylvia’s going to marry me, do you hear? Money isn’t worth a snap of the fingers beside a girl like that! And don’t you think I’m trying to talk money to you, but just get this into your head. There isn’t going to be another moment of your life when you need think about what you’re spending. I guess I’m talking nonsense, but I want to get this matter square. You’re all right, sir. Just shake hands and tell me I may have Sylvia——Say, who’s this?”

Unheard and unnoticed, the car had arrived, and Mr. Nevinson had made his stately way into the inner office. He looked at the

unfamiliar little scene disapprovingly.

“I trust that I am not intruding, Mr. Tidd?” he said formally. “You will forgive me if I leave my hat and coat here before commencing my work?”

Mr. Jeremiah Preedy faced the new-comer deferentially.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Tidd,” he said. “I guess I was a little carried away. Won’t you introduce me to this gentleman?”

“This,” the bank manager announced, rising to his feet, “is Mr. Jeremiah H. Preedy of New York—Mr. Nevinson, our chief inspector for this district.”

35

“Any relation of Preedy the banker?” Mr. Nevinson inquired, holding out his hand.

“Well, I’m Jacob Preedy’s son,” was the pleasant reply, “and a partner in the business. I’ve got letters of introduction to your folk in town, and I rather guess Lord Netley was expecting me to spend this week-end with him. I’ve been laid up here, though, by a slight motor accident, and Mr. Tidd has been good enough to look after me.”

“I am proud to meet you, sir,” Mr. Nevinson declared, with the air of one who has intruded upon royalty. “It is a great privilege to meet anyone connected with your firm.”

The young man smiled his acknowledgments.

“See here,” he said, “you and I understand one another, Mr. Tidd, I think. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll get over to the tennis

courts with Sylvia for an hour. When you two have got through juggling with those figures, I'd like to have you both come and take luncheon with me at the 'Melhampton Arms.'"

"It will be a great honour," Mr. Nevinson assented, in an awed tone.

36

Mr. Tidd said nothing, but it was perhaps just as well that his spectacles were a little cloudy. . . .

At ten minutes past one, the district inspector closed the ledger. He smiled amiably across at the branch manager.

"I find your books quite in order, Mr. Tidd," he pronounced, "quite as I expected. I may add that I think the time has arrived when I must append to my note of general approval a certain recommendation which I imagine will produce results not altogether displeasing to you. I will now fetch my coat and hat. We must not keep young Mr. Preedy waiting. It is a great privilege to meet a member of that illustrious firm."

The beneficent words rang in Mr. Tidd's ears. He picked up his own hat with trembling fingers. He looked over the wire blind, and he saw the fading away of his nightmares. . . . By Mr. Nevinson's side he walked primly down the street, very much like a man in a dream. He nodded in friendly fashion to Percy Shields; he bowed with dignity to the Squire's lady, who was motoring through; he took condescending but gracious notice of Mr. Pleydell, whose account with the bank was standing a little better. But when he walked into the coffee-room at the 'Melhampton Arms,' and found Sylvia holding out a glass towards him which Mr. Jeremiah Preedy—who seemed

37

miraculously to have become Jere—was filling with amber-coloured liquid from a silver receptacle, he felt a sudden spasm of gratitude.

“Drink it down, dad,” Sylvia enjoined him, looking curiously into his face. “We’ve been half an hour making it, and it tastes like nectar.”

Mr. Tidd drank it down, and the world began afresh.

* * * * *

Never in Mr. Tidd’s wildest imaginings—and there had been times in his younger days when he had permitted his thoughts to stray outside the confines of Melhampton—had he dreamed of occupying such a position as was thrust upon him during the next few weeks. He was entertained by, and exchanged conversation apparently on equal terms with, the head of the great firm of Netley, a Peer of the Realm, a being whose movements Mr. Tidd had followed reverently in the newspapers but with whom he had never dared to imagine himself in personal converse. In friendly conversation with his prospective son-in-law, he was actually offered a position in their head bank at New York and a salary of four thousand pounds a year. Perhaps the most wonderful thing of all, however, was his appearance at St. George’s, Hanover Square. For many years he had cultivated the walk with which, after having tested the charity of the Melhampton congregation, he had made his dignified progress up the aisle to the altar of the parish church. He had flattered himself that that walk contained all the essentials of distinction, reverence and personality. In clothes concerning which he had no qualm, and with Sylvia upon his arm, he felt, however, that

he had left all previous records behind him. It was a moment of intoxication, the culmination of weeks of happiness. It was not even marred by the first words of commendation upon his deportment which he received—a slap on the back from his son-in-law, ten minutes after the ceremony was concluded, and one of those remarkably pungent sentences by means of which the young man occasionally betrayed his transatlantic birth.

“Say, the old man did look the goods, didn’t he, Sylvia!”

39

It was crude praise, perhaps, but heartfelt, just as much so as the parting words which his son-in-law whispered in his ear a few minutes before his departure with Sylvia for the Continent, whence they were to return direct to New York.

“Father-in-law,” he said, “you’re a brick. I’ll look after Sylvia all right, don’t you worry, and we’ll be over again in the spring for that tour through Devonshire. I’m sorry you can’t make up your mind to pull up stakes and come over to New York, but so long as you’ve made up your mind to spend the rest of your days at Melhampton, just put this envelope in your pocket. It’s a present from Sylvia and me.”

The wonderful day ended in a tangle of misty but pleasant recollections, but before he went to bed Mr. Tidd unfastened the envelope and found himself the proud possessor of five thousand pounds’ worth of Bearer War Bonds.

Almost the first client to present himself in the bank on the morning of the manager’s return, was Mr. Percy Shields. Notwithstanding the great change in Mr. Tidd’s circumstances, his manner remained affable, even gracious.

“I am very glad to see you this morning, Mr. Shields,” he said, after the first amenities had been exchanged. “We are recommencing our bridge *séances* this evening. The doctor and the others are dining with me at half-past seven. A little celebration—er—of my daughter’s wedding and my return. It will give me great pleasure if you will join us.”

“I shall be delighted,” was the murmured response.

“And now what can I do for you in the way of business?” Mr. Tidd inquired, in his best professional tone.

Mr. Shields made a grimace.

“Things haven’t been going quite as they should with my last little gamble,” he confessed. “I want you to sell one of my War Bonds for me and put the amount to my credit.”

Mr. Tidd frowned slightly. It was his business to frown when a client lost money instead of making it. He produced the necessary papers, however, and handed the pen across the counter.

“You know my opinion, Mr. Shields,” he said gravely. “In the long run a man does best to stick to his calling. Speculation does not pay.”

“I believe you are right,” the veterinary surgeon acknowledged humbly.

II

MRS. DOWDSWELL'S PROD ALONG

Mr. Percy Shields, for a man in love, presented a somewhat low-spirited appearance. He stood under the archway of the 'Melhampton Arms,' tapping his leggings occasionally with his riding whip and gazing vacantly across the street. There was nothing about his appearance to indicate the fact that he had just consumed a couple of whiskies and sodas, prepared by the deft hand of the young lady who had so completely ensnared his affections. Unable, as it seemed, to escape unaided from a web of doubt and conjecture, he at last decided to seek the common resource of all weak-minded men—the advice of a friend. He crossed the road, and, pushing open the swing doors, entered the bank. Mr. Tidd, the manager, abandoned some task in the background with apparent reluctance, and came to the counter.

“Have you a moment to spare, Mr. Tidd?” his caller inquired.

42

“On the business of the bank?” the other asked formally.

“Private,” was the somewhat nervous reply.

Mr. Tidd glanced at the clock.

“We shall be closing in five minutes,” he said. “If you will step into my private room and wait there, I will join you then.”

Mr. Percy Shields did as he was bidden. In precisely five

minutes' time the outside door of the bank was pushed to and fastened by the lanky youth who comprised Mr. Tidd's staff. The brown holland blinds were drawn down. One of the afternoon events of Melhampton had taken place. The bank was closed. . . . Mr. Tidd entered the parlour airily. He had cast off the financial responsibilities of the town from his shoulders.

"Come into the house, Mr. Shields," he invited. "I have just a quarter of an hour to spare. Afterwards I am going to bicycle out to the Hall for some tennis."

Mr. Shields, with the slightly added respect entailed by this last announcement, followed his friend into a comfortably furnished little sitting-room in Bank House, an apartment decorated by many photographs of Mr. Tidd's married daughter in America, her country home, her town residence, her husband driving a four-in-hand, herself driving a two-seated car of the latest pattern. The veterinary surgeon accepted the easy chair pointed out to him, and commenced at once to unburden himself.

43

"I have come to you, Mr. Tidd," he said, "as a friend, if you will allow me to call myself so, and also because you are a man of the world, with connections and interests outside this place."

Mr. Tidd, who had adopted an easy, judicial attitude, with the tips of his fingers balanced lightly against one another, inclined his head gravely. He recognised the truth of his visitor's words.

"No use beating about the bush," Mr. Shields continued. "I've been thinking for some time of marrying and settling down, but I've never come across the right girl. Miss Stanbury, at the 'Melhampton Arms,' has taken my fancy. I'd marry her to-

morrow but for one thing. You can guess what that thing is, Mr. Tidd.”

“I should prefer to hear it from you,” was the considered reply.

“Rose Stanbury,” Mr. Shields declared, sitting up in his chair, “is a good girl and a lady-like girl, and there’s no one in a position to deny it, but there she is behind the bar at the ‘Melhampton Arms,’ and serving in the smoke-room afternoons and three evenings a week. If anyone feels inclined to use the term, they can call her a barmaid, and they’re telling the truth. Mr. Tidd, you know how I stand in this town and neighbourhood. Can I marry a barmaid?”

44

“This,” Mr. Tidd pronounced, “is a problem.”

Mr. Percy Shields breathed the sigh of relief of one who has got a weight off his mind.

“It’s a problem that’s fairly got me cornered,” he confessed, “given me what you might call the hump. Miss Stanbury’s people are all right. Her father’s a farmer and fairly well-to-do. If I’d gone out there to visit her, and married her from home, there’s no one could have had a word to say. But as a matter of fact I’ve never been there. Mr. Stanbury has always sent for old Mr. Hobson, of Oakleigh, when he’s had anything wrong with his cattle. I saw the girl for the first time behind the bar at the ‘Melhampton Arms.’”

“There are many points involved in the consideration of this matter,” Mr. Tidd said.

45

“Just so,” his visitor agreed eagerly. “You see, Mr. Tidd, my

position as veterinary surgeon is equivalent to living in what you might call a sort of no man's land. If I were a doctor of human beings, I couldn't possibly think of marrying Rose Stanbury. I should lose my patients and deserve to."

"Quite so," his counsellor assented. "That is quite clear."

"On the other hand," Mr. Shields continued, "if I were a horse-breaker and dealer, I could marry the girl to-morrow and everyone would call it a suitable match. But there am I, stuck as it were between the two, and never knowing exactly where I am. Owing a great deal to your kindness, Mr. Tidd, I have been invited to play bridge at the houses of those whom you might describe as the gentry of the neighbourhood. At the same time, I often go in to supper on a Sunday evening with Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, and occasionally with Mrs. Dowdswell who, by the by, is Miss Stanbury's aunt. Where do I stand, Mr. Tidd? Can you tell me that? And can you tell me what would happen to me as regards the gentry of the place if I were to marry Rose Stanbury?"

46

Mr. Tidd cleared his throat.

"Shields," he said, "it is unfortunate, in a certain way, that you have not put this question to a man who has feminine belongings. It is a very nice and delicate matter. So far as you and I are concerned, men of the world, and with a broader outlook than our womenkind could be expected to have, we should at once say, as I say to you now, if the girl is a lady-like person and pleases you, she is fit to go anywhere. But the laws of society are curiously framed. I appreciate your predicament, Mr. Shields. I should like to consider the matter."

“In bald English,” Mr. Shields persisted, “would, say, Doctor Spendlove continue to invite me to his house to play bridge if I married Rose Stanbury?”

“I will be entirely frank with you,” Mr. Tidd replied. “He could not unless his wife had called upon your wife.”

Mr. Shields pressed the matter gallantly home.

“Would she do that?” he asked.

Mr. Tidd took off his gold-rimmed spectacles and wiped them.

“Shields,” he pronounced, “you have brought the matter down to a definite issue. Upon the answer to your question everything depends. Mrs. Spendlove is a broad-minded woman, but this is a small neighbourhood. Whatever her inclinations may be, she may feel herself compelled to draw the line when it comes definitely to placing a new-comer upon her visiting list. This is a small and exclusive neighbourhood, Mr. Shields. You either call or you don’t.”

47

“Take your own case?” Mr. Shields persisted.

“My own case is rather outside the question,” the bank manager pointed out, “for, as you are aware, there is no feminine element in my household. However, since you have asked the question, I will reply to it. You being a valued client of mine, I should without doubt pay my respects to Mrs. Shields, and if invited to your house for supper or any other meal, I should certainly accept. Unfortunately, my attitude would have no social significance, for the reason that I have stated.”

“It’s a damned muddle, isn’t it?” Mr. Shields declared.

His adviser frowned slightly. He had a well-known objection to bad language. He also glanced at the clock.

48

“With your permission, Mr. Shields,” he said, “I will withhold my further advice for the moment. Frankly, if I followed my impulse as a man of the world, I should say at once, ‘marry the young lady.’ Realising, however, that the rest of your life will probably be lived out in this vicinity, and realising also the grave problems which might have to be faced, I prefer to give the matter more serious consideration. You will excuse me, Mr. Shields. I have barely a quarter of an hour in which to change my clothes and reach the Hall.”

Mr. Shields left his friend without any particular elucidation of the vexed subject. He mounted his pony and rode out to prescribe for a sick cow in the neighbourhood, and was met on his return with the gratifying intelligence that his services were required at the Hall, where Lady Stourton’s favourite carriage horse, aged seventeen, was reported to be coughing. His respect for Mr. Tidd was vastly increased by seeing him through the trees engaged in a game of lawn tennis with certain members of the household. As he cantered down the drive he met Sir William, who stopped him.

49

“Anything wrong in the menagerie?” the Squire demanded, having a light regard for some of his wife’s pets.

“The old bay mare is coughing,” Mr. Shields explained. “I’ve given her a dose and I think she’ll be all right.”

“I wish you’d give her a dose that would put her out of her

misery,” the Squire grumbled. “She’s twenty years old if she’s a day. Why don’t you tell her ladyship to turn her out and let her have a rest?”

Mr. Shields temporised.

“Her ladyship only gives the mare very light work, sir,” he said. “She seems to have a sentimental interest in the animal.”

“Sentimental fiddlesticks!” Sir William grunted. “Well, good day, Shields.”

Mr. Percy Shields rode slowly homewards. The one great problem was still exercising his mind. The Squire had called him “Shields.” Was that friendliness, meant to insinuate a certain measure of social equality, or was it spoken after the fashion in which Sir William would have addressed his head groom or gardener? Such problems had never worried him before. Now they seemed to be confronting him at every turn.

50

“What the devil am I,” he asked himself as he gave his pony a savage little flick with the whip, “a gentleman or a veterinary surgeon?”

* * * * *

In the bar parlour of the ‘Melhampton Arms’ Mrs. Dowdswell was engaged in the supererogatory task of polishing some already shining glasses, whilst she talked at the same time to her niece and assistant, a quiet-looking, handsome girl of about twenty-five years.

“What I say is that a nice-looking girl like you will be finding a man of her own before we know where we are,” she declared.

“No signs at present,” the young lady replied, glancing at her hair in the mirror over the chimney-piece.

“There’s Harry Foulds, now——”

“I wouldn’t have anything to say to him, anyhow,” her niece interrupted. “He’d had as much drink as was good for him last Saturday, and that’s a thing I can’t abide. I hate to see them come in the place when they’ve been filling up elsewhere and every glass they take is doing them harm.”

51

“We must all live,” Mrs. Dowdswell philosophised. “A strong chap like Harry Foulds can stand a lot of liquor. Still, if you don’t fancy him, what about Mr. Percy Shields? I haven’t seen him for the last two days, by the by.”

“He was in the smoke-room this morning,” Miss Stanbury replied.

“The smoke-room! Sakes alive, what was he doing in there?” her aunt exclaimed.

“I didn’t ask him,” was the equable answer. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t see him to speak to.”

“You haven’t quarrelled, have you, or anything of that sort?” Mrs. Dowdswell asked bluntly.

The girl bit lip and remained silent for a moment. Her aunt hastened to change the conversation.

“Which reminds me,” she continued, “that it was only the other day Mr. Shields was asking for some Irish whisky. Just see that I order some, Rose, dear. And,” she went on, turning round and patting the girl on the shoulder, “never you mind if he is all up and down, so to speak. He’s making up his mind, that’s what he is, and when they’re in that state they’re as troublesome as can be.”

52

“I think he’s made up his mind,” Rose Stanbury said dolefully. “He hasn’t been near me for three days.”

Mrs. Dowdswell departed, muttering something about letting some unknown person have a bit of her mind, and the young lady turned to the window. Presently Mr. Percy Shields came along the street, his head downcast, his crop under his arm and his hands behind his back. He passed the inn without even glancing around, and vanished in the direction of the station. Miss Stanbury turned back to her seat with a little pain at her heart. This, she was convinced, was the end of everything.

Over supper that night Mrs. Dowdswell found it an easy task to gain her niece’s confidence. Rose, in fact, was just in that frame of mind when it was absolutely necessary for her to talk to someone.

“What’s come to Percy—to Mr. Shields, I mean—I can’t imagine,” she declared, wiping her eyes a little. “I’ve been out with him a good many times, as you know, aunt, and he’s always spoken as though he meant some day to do the gentlemanly thing. I told him I didn’t hold with walking out regularly with any gentleman, especially in a small place like this, unless something was meant on both sides, and he quite

53

agreed with me. I'm sure I've seen the words on his lips more than once, as you might say, and I'd quite made up my mind next time he asked me to go out to give him just a tactful hint that people were beginning to make remarks. Then about a fortnight ago he began to act queer. He was always talking about going in to the doctor's to play bridge, and what a great thing it was, in a small place like this, to mix with the nicest people. It just looks to me, aunt, as though he's sat down and made up his mind that after all I wasn't good enough for him."

Mrs. Dowdswell was very angry. At such times the colour mounted into her cheeks and her spectacles descended a little lower on her nose. She was gifted with eloquence.

"The little snapper jack!" she exclaimed hotly. "There was I brought up with his father, and his father only too glad to marry a niece of old Sam Payne, the fishmonger. Gentry, indeed! His old dad didn't go hankering after things that didn't belong to him. Every night of his life he sat in the bar parlour with Jim Scroggins's father and William Mace, the maltster, and old man Dumbell, the baker, uncle to the present man. Gentry, indeed! He used to flop over here in his carpet slippers, and his coat all over snuff, and I often had to give him a brush myself before he was fit to sit in company. They make me tired, these people do, always trying to poke their noses where they don't belong. You leave Mr. Percy Shields to me, my dear. I'll twist his little neck if he gets fancying that a daughter of Jane Stanbury, and a connection by marriage of my own, as it were, isn't good enough for the likes of him."

54

Rose dabbed her eyes. Nevertheless, Mrs. Dowdswell's words were words of comfort.

“You won’t go frightening him, aunt?” she begged timidly.

“I doubt whether I’ll demean myself by speaking to him myself,” was the consoling reply. “I must just think things out a bit. You go on just as you are doing, my dear, and if he comes in here treat him haughty. A smile or two at Harry Foulds wouldn’t do any harm either. Harry Foulds is a man, if he does take a glass or two.”

55

“He’s not the man I want,” Rose declared tremulously.

“The man you want you shall have,” Mrs. Dowdswell promised, which was a rash thing to do, but she kept her word.

* * * * *

Mrs. Dowdswell was very well known amongst the inhabitants of Melhampton and the neighbourhood, and deservedly esteemed. When, on the following afternoon, she put on her best bonnet, ordered out the pony carriage and called at the doctor’s house, the clergyman’s, and at the Hall, she had not the slightest difficulty in obtaining an interview with the ladies belonging to each of these establishments. As she proudly reflected upon her return, there was not a single instance in which she had not been asked to remain to tea, although at the Hall there was town company, and titles were as plentiful as blackberries. Well satisfied with her afternoon’s work, however, she kept her own counsel, and a few days later, having definitely established the fact that Mr. Shields was at home, sent a boy round with an urgent message, desiring to see him. Mr. Shields, with a little grimace, decided to face the music. When he arrived, however, he found none to face.

56

“I’m almost ashamed of having troubled you, Mr. Shields,” Mrs. Dowdswell confessed graciously, “but the fact of it is that I’ve just had a bottle of that Irish whisky you were asking about sent me on approval, and before ordering any I thought I’d like you to try it.”

“Very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Dowdswell, I’m sure,” Mr. Shields replied. “It’s the right hour of the day for a glass, and I’ll soon tell you what I think of it.”

The bottle was produced and approved of. Mr. Shields was easily persuaded to take a second glass and an easy chair. He looked around a little diffidently.

“Where’s Miss Stanbury this afternoon?” he inquired, trying to make his tone as casual as possible.

Mrs. Dowdswell sighed.

“The doctor’s lady has just sent down to ask her to go up there to tea,” she replied. “She’s a dear girl, but I do wish the folk round here weren’t so fond of her. At my time of life a body doesn’t care to be doing the work herself when she pays someone else to look after it, even though it may be a relative.”

57

“The doctor’s lady?” Mr. Shields repeated. “I didn’t know Miss Stanbury was acquainted with her.”

“Bless you, yes!” was the somewhat irritated reply. “Mrs. Spendlove thinks a lot of her. She’s always sending down for her to go and play cards or something up there. The worst of it is it isn’t only Mrs. Spendlove. There’s the vicar’s wife I came

across a few days ago when I was out driving, wanting to know how Miss Stanbury was and when I could spare her to come and have tea with the children and a chat with the vicar. Mind you, Mr. Shields,” Mrs. Dowdswell went on confidentially, “I’m not grumbling about the girl. She’s a good girl, although I say it, her being my own niece, as it were. But I do sometimes wish that she hadn’t got the knack of making herself quite so attractive to the gentry, and such-like. They seem to reckon her as one of themselves all the time, and to forget that she’s here to help me. I suppose it was her education, and then that poor Jane Stanbury, her mother, was always a lady-like person, her having been a schoolmistress, so to speak, in her younger days.”

58

Mr. Shields, with his hostess’s permission, lit a cigar. It was a very comfortable room, and he had missed his pleasant half-hours there.

“What time do you expect Miss Rose home?” he asked as casually as possible.

“Well, I hope she won’t be long, and that’s the truth,” her aunt declared; “but that Harry Foulds was in asking after her half an hour ago, and, like a fool, I told him where she’d gone. He’s as like as not hanging about to walk home with her, and I suppose they ain’t likely to hurry. However, she’s a good girl. . . . What happened to Farmer Crocombe’s brindle cow, Mr. Shields?”

“Dead,” was the curt reply. “I’ll be going. Nothing,” the veterinary surgeon added, looking back from the door, “could have saved that cow. It had three legs in the grave when I was called in.”

Mr. Shields, on leaving the ‘Melhampton Arms,’ chose to take a stroll towards the upper part of the town. As he passed the trim privet hedge which protected the doctor’s garden from the vulgar gaze, he caught sight of light frocks upon the lawn, and he distinctly heard Rose’s laugh. He walked slowly onward, 59 deep in thought. He himself had never passed up the beflagged way and rung the front-door bell of the doctor’s residence without a certain feeling of awe. He had never even been invited into the garden, where, to judge from his momentary glimpse and what he could hear, Rose was very much at home. Near the top of the hill he passed Harry Foulds, with a muttered greeting which was more of a scowl. A hundred yards or so farther on he paused and looked around, meaning to retrace his steps. Almost as Harry Foulds passed the doctor’s gate, however, Rose issued from it. The horse dealer raised his hat gallantly and the two walked down the street together. Mr. Percy Shields swore. . . .

The next morning, at his usual time, he was back in the bar parlour of the ‘Melhampton Arms.’ Rose was there, and greeted him very much as usual. She did not even make a remark as to his prolonged absence. In a minute or two, however, she left the room, and although Mr. Shields waited for a quarter of an hour there was no sign of her return. On this occasion, perhaps, he allowed his feelings to outrun his discretion.

“Mrs. Dowdswell,” he said, “I was sorry to see Rose with that fellow Foulds last night.” 60

“And why, pray?” her aunt asked coldly.

“He’s not good enough for her.”

“There ain’t many young men who are, to my way of thinking,” was the curt reply. “That’s not my business, though. Or yours, if you’ll excuse me saying so, Mr. Shields. A girl chooses for herself nowadays, and Rose isn’t an easy sort to move. If she means having Harry Foulds, she’ll have him, and, after all, she might do worse. He’s got a tidy bit of money, and he only wants looking after.”

The bar was invaded at that moment by Mr. Meekes, the local draper, and a commercial traveller who had just secured a good order and was loudly demanding the wine list. Miss Rose presently returned, but as there seemed no chance of speaking to her alone, her recalcitrant suitor soon took his departure. He spent several exceedingly uncomfortable days, paying many visits to the ‘Melhampton Arms,’ but at no time being able to obtain more than a few moments’ unsatisfactory interview with Rose. On the fourth afternoon he was passing the inn with the firm intention of not glancing in, when he heard a knock at the window. He hastened into the parlour to find, to his discomfiture, that the summons had proceeded from Mrs. Dowdswell.

61

“Mr. Shields,” she said, “you’ll forgive my calling you in, but I’ve lost my temper, and that’s a fact, and when I’m in a temper I must talk to someone or there’s trouble.”

The veterinary surgeon, noticing the angle of the spectacles and Mrs. Dowdswell’s high colour, edged a little towards the door.

“I’m in rather a hurry this afternoon,” he began.

“Just you let your hurry take care of itself for a time and listen to

me,” Mrs. Dowdswell insisted. “You know very well that I’m not an unreasonable woman, and you were kind of friendly yourself with Rose once. I just put the matter to you. Do I pay her twenty shillings a week and her keep to go out taking tea with all the gentry in the place, while I stay here doing her work? Do I or do I not?”

Mr. Shields murmured words of sympathetic negation, whereupon Mrs. Dowdswell produced a letter from her pocket and thrust it into his hand.

“Read this, will you?” she enjoined.

Mr. Shields accepted with reverent fingers the sheet of note-paper with its familiar coat of arms, and read the few lines thereon:

62

*Melhampton Hall,
Tuesday.*

Dear Mrs. Dowdswell,

Could you be so kind as to spare Miss Stanbury for an hour or two this afternoon, and let her come out to tea? My niece was so charmed with her the other day, and is anxious to improve her acquaintance.

Sincerely yours,

Florence Stourton.

“Well, I’m dashed!” he muttered.

“I put it to you, Mr. Shields,” Mrs. Dowdswell continued, her

voice still raised, “do I pay Rose for this sort of thing? I told her what I thought about it and she simply laughed at me. I’ve had enough of it. The moment she gets back here, there’s a month’s notice waiting for her. She can go and live with her fine friends if she wants to. She belongs to the gentry, and a girl that belongs to the gentry is no use to me.”

“At the same time,” Mr. Shields ventured to remark, “it must be very gratifying——”

“Stuff and nonsense!” Mrs. Dowdswell interrupted. “Stuff and nonsense I say, Mr. Shields! The girl’s got her living to earn. She won’t marry a respectable young man who’s head over heels in love with her——”

63

“Do you mean Harry Foulds?” the veterinary surgeon interrupted eagerly.

“I do,” Mrs. Dowdswell admitted, “and if he does take a glass or two, there’s many others of us have the same failing, and if none of us had, what’d become of my business, I’d like to know? The girl had better have gone for a governess to start with. She’s no manner of use here.”

Mr. Percy Shields left the inn and mounted the hill out of the town, fired with a great resolution. Arrived at a certain position, from which he commanded the entrance to the Hall, he climbed a gate, lit a pipe, and with an air of dogged determination settled down to wait. An hour passed—two hours. It was close upon six when a familiar figure came out of the lodge gates and turned towards the town. Mr. Shields knocked the ashes from his pipe, took a short cut across a field and made a rather abrupt

appearance in front of Rose. She started a little, but apparently recognised him with relief.

“Why, if it isn’t Mr. Shields!” she exclaimed.

“Hope I didn’t startle you?” he asked anxiously. “I—I happened to be up at Farmer Crocombe’s and saw you coming.”

64

“Not at all,” she replied, “only for a moment I was rather afraid it was someone else, someone I didn’t particularly want to see.”

Mr. Shields stroked his moustache. It was an excellent start.

“I’d like the privilege of walking home with you, Miss Stanbury,” he said.

“Granted,” the young lady acquiesced politely.

“I’ve in a sort of way some news for you,” Mr. Shields continued. “Mrs. Dowdswell called me in this afternoon, and between you and me she was in a rare old temper.”

“I’m not surprised,” Rose confessed. “I’m afraid I am rather a trial to her.”

“She’s complaining of your getting so many invitations,” her companion confided.

Rose sighed.

“I suppose I’m in the wrong,” she admitted, “but as a matter of fact, Mr. Shields, I don’t think I was cut out to help in an hotel.

It's all very well when gentlemen like you or Mr. Pleydell or Mr. Tidd come in. I'm sure it's always a pleasure to hand you a glass of wine or a whisky and soda. It's the others I can't bear, and if there's anything in life that upsets me, it's when a gentleman doesn't know when he's had enough. The beer, too, on market days!" she went on with a little pathetic sigh. "I can assure you, Mr. Shields, it makes me feel quite ill. The very smell of it upsets me, and the language some of those cattle men use when they think I'm not listening! No, the life doesn't suit me, and it's no use pretending it does."

65

"The fact of it is you're too much of a lady," her admirer declared.

"I wouldn't say that," she replied modestly. "Simply my tastes lead me in other directions. There are a good many of us at home, but we're not obliged to go out unless we want to. I've made up my mind——"

"Not so quick about making up your mind, please," Mr. Shields interrupted. "Now I want to prepare you for something. When you go back, Mrs. Dowdswell is going to give you notice."

"I don't wonder at it," the girl replied. "However, I couldn't have stayed, anyway. I have made up my mind to try and get a post as governess."

Mr. Shields felt for her hand and secured it. He had manoeuvred to bring the conversation to this pitch at a particular spot in the road where it was impossible to be overlooked.

66

"You're going to do nothing of the sort," he declared firmly.

“You’re going to be my wife.”

“Mr. Shields!”

“Percy!” he insisted.

“Well, Percy, then—you mustn’t!”

Mr. Shields glanced round and congratulated himself on his topographical knowledge.

“We’ll see about that,” he answered, in the best buccaneering spirit.

* * * * *

Talking it over, late that evening, Rose was momentarily uneasy.

“You know, aunt,” she confided, “I can’t help feeling rather like a conspirator.”

“What’s that?” her aunt demanded.

“A conspirator? Oh, a person who kind of arranges things.”

“Well, my dear, if that’s all,” Mrs. Dowdswell replied, “then I’m the conspirator. I went and saw ’em all, didn’t I, and explained the matter, and there wasn’t one of them hesitated for a moment. Only you should have heard Lady Stourton laugh!”

“She was the kindest of them all,” Rose declared, “and Sir William was delightful.”

“My dear,” her aunt expounded, “the higher up the gentry folk are the nicer they can be. I don’t blame Percy Shields for wanting to get his foot amongst them, and if anyone can do it for him, his wife will. And as to what you call conspiring, what’s the man got to grumble at? They asked you to their houses of their own free will, and they’re all coming to see you when you get married.”

“I’m so thankful to you,” Rose murmured, her eyes filling with tears. “You know I’m fond of Percy, and I mean to make him as good a wife as a man could possibly have.”

Mrs. Dowdswell smiled at her.

“My dear,” she said, “you don’t need to be thankful to me. All that you need to be thankful for is that I’ve lived amongst these folk for wellnigh sixty years, and I know their ways. I’ve seen plenty of courtships and marryings in my days, and many a courtship that’s gone wrong just because there’s no one around to give it a prod along when it was needed. That’s all you’ve got to be grateful for, my dear—that I was here to give it a prod along just when it was needed.”

III

A MINOR HERO

Granfer Crocombe leaned upon his stick and gazed disapprovingly into the small shop window of Melhampton's latest enterprise. Owen Tonkin, the proprietor, a good-looking but somewhat depressed youth, addressed him from the entrance.

"Nothing I can do for you to-day, Mr. Crocombe?"

The loiterer shook his head.

"Us don't hold with this sort of thing," he commented, waving his gnarled brown hand towards the shop window.

"What sort of thing?" the young man demanded.

"I do reckon that what I says is plain enough," Granfer Crocombe declared. "All these bits of cardboard with marked-down prices don't go with us. Us don't like the cost of everything thrust down our throat. One and sixpence halfpenny!—two and fourpence halfpenny!—ninepence halfpenny! Why, young man, it's like a draper's shop or the stores—places that ain't fit for nobbut women-folk."

69

Owen Tonkin smiled pleasantly.

"I don't see much wrong with the stores myself," he said, "and as for those labels, there's a reason for them. My prices are just

a little lower than anyone else's. That's the way I look to get business."

"Don't you reckon upon it, me lad," the other enjoined earnestly—"don't you reckon upon it. There's mostly trickiness about goods what has to have big black labels for to tell us their prices. Us is satisfied with Richard Sams and his physics—a good-hearted sort of man and one much respected, although he do sit in the 'Swan' evenings, which is a house I never favoured."

"I don't wish any harm to Mr. Sams," the young man declared. "It seemed to me, however, that in this place there was room for both of us, and as to marking my goods in plain figures, Mr. Crocombe—well, after all, there's nothing wrong about that, is there? I want people to know that I am willing to sell a little cheaper than anyone else."

"That's as may be," Granfer Crocombe grunted unbelievably.

"Let me prove it. Now, you use Harrison's Balsam Oil, I know, for the rheumatism in your knee."

70

"Powerful good stuff it be, too!"

"You pay three and threepence a bottle for it at Mr. Sam's, and there it is in the window—the same size, you see—at two and elevenpence halfpenny."

Granfer Crocombe was distinctly shaken.

"I doan't hold with this cutting of prices," he insisted, "but thruppence halfpenny is thruppence halfpenny these days."

“It is the price,” the young chemist reminded him cunningly, “of a pint of beer. Let me wrap a bottle up for you. You can pay me for it any time. I shall be proud to have your name upon my books.”

Granfer Crocombe produced a greasy and well-worn leather purse and slowly counted out the money.

“Was you at college, young man?” he asked. “You do speak powerful eddicated like.”

“I was at a very good school,” the other replied. “You wish to pay for the balsam, then, sir?”

“Us isn’t folks for running into debt hereabouts,” Mr. Crocombe confided. “You’ll make very few bad debts here, young man, unless you have truck with the dissenters and gipsies and such-like. I wish ’e good evening. How I’ll be looking Richard Sams in the face I doan’t rightly know, but thruppence halfpenny is thruppence halfpenny these days.”

71

“Anything else you’re wanting at any time will be at the same scale of reductions,” the young man declared as he handed over his neatly tied up parcel.

“I’m not one for physic as a rule,” his customer confided, “but I’ll be wanting a new tooth-brush come Christmas, and I’ll give ’e a thought, young man. It’s a cruel business for Richard Sams, though, this price-cutting!”

“Mr. Sams has had thirty years of it all his own way,” Owen Tonkin remarked with a smile. “He ought to have been able to put a bit by.”

Granfer Crocombe shook his head doubtfully.

“He be a poor saver, be Richard,” he remarked. “They be men who do touch a bit of money, them who sits at the ‘Swan’ come evenings, but it mostly melts away. I should doubt his being a warm man, though he has sold us physic for thirty-one years come Michaelmas. His darter have cost him something, too.”

The young man’s interest was suddenly almost intense.

72

“Miss Sams is a very beautiful young lady,” he said reverently.

“It doan’t take a young man from Lunnon to find that out,” Granfer Crocombe declared. “There bean’t one of the young chaps round here that she couldn’t have if she wur willing. They do all complain of her, though, that she be difficult. That, in my mind, is the fault of too much schooling. If Richard Sams did sit in the ‘Melhampton Arms’ evenings ’stead of the ‘Swan’ I’d have give him my views about too much eddication, and maybe she’d have been a married woman and him a grandfather before now. Here she do come a-walking down the street. Now, I ask you, young man, will you see a sight like that on any Lunnon street? It’s a shame that she should be a maid.”

Owen Tonkin joined his customer in the doorway, the latter making spasmodic efforts to conceal the fact that he was carrying a parcel. He managed to get his hand underneath his coat, but he fancied that there was a shade of reproach in the girl’s eyes as she glanced at him.

“Good morning, Granfer Crocombe,” she greeted him pleasantly.

“Good morning, Miss Mary,” he replied. “You’re acquainted, maybe, with Mr. Tonkin?”

The smile left the girl’s face. She looked the young man in the eyes.

“I don’t think we have met,” she said. “How do you do?”

He held out his hand, which, after a moment’s hesitation, she accepted.

“I don’t feel very friendly towards you, Mr. Tonkin,” she confessed frankly. “Dad complains that you are taking a great deal of his trade away.”

“I’m very sorry,” the young man stammered. “There ought to be room for both of us.”

“There doesn’t appear to be,” she replied coldly, glancing into the shop window. “I suppose,” she went on, with a little wave of her hand, “this is the sort of thing that attracts custom nowadays. We shall have the stores setting up a branch here before long.”

“Not in my lifetime,” Granfer Crocombe declared, grasping his stick tightly. “Us’d smash the windows in.”

“But surely,” Owen Tonkin ventured, “it is better for everyone to buy at the lowest prices. They have more money to spend on other things.”

“I bean’t an argifier,” Granfer Crocombe asserted, “and I’ve naught to say to you, young man, but this: us in

Melhampton loikes things our own ways, and we doan't want to have any truck with new-fangled ideas."

"Then, if you had a chance of saving a pint of beer by buying a bottle of medicine a little cheaper——"

"I'm not an argifier," Granfer Crocombe interrupted hastily. "If so be that you're willing, Miss Mary, I'd be glad of your company as far as the 'Melhampton Arms.' A cruel thing it is that your father he do be so fond of that 'Swan.' Poor liquor and poor company, and that you can tell him from I."

She turned to walk down the street with him. Her nod to the young man was, to say the least of it, perfunctory. Nevertheless, his eyes followed her with admiration. She was slim and tall. She walked with the freedom of the country and the grace of the town. Her eyes were of a dark shade of blue, and her complexion, save for a slight duskiness, which many thought an improvement, was typically Devonian. The young man turned back to his shop with a little groan.

"Sits and soaks all day and then complains because I'm spoiling his business!" he muttered.

75

* * * * *

There were times when Mr. Tidd, most genial of bank managers, could be very official indeed. The first part of his conversation with Mr. Sams, conducted in his bank parlour a few mornings later, was distinctly in this strain.

"So you understand, Mr. Sams," he wound up, looking across the table at his disturbed client, "that this is the last addition to

your overdraft which I shall recommend or even put forward to the head office. That is clearly understood between us, I hope.”

“I reckon so,” the other admitted, a little sulkily, preparing to take his leave.

Mr. Tidd waved him back to his place.

“A word or two with you now as a friend, if you please, Mr. Sams,” he proposed.

The chemist resumed his seat.

“You are getting behind in your business,” Mr. Tidd began. “You have told me officially that it is owing to the competition of this new man, Tonkin.”

“Selling things at near upon cost price,” Mr. Sams exclaimed angrily.

“Stop!” the other enjoined. “Listen to me for a moment. Please do not be offended; it is for your good. I have studied your account and I do not consider that it is Mr. Tonkin’s competition which accounts for your position. Your receipts are very nearly as large as ever they were. On the other hand, you draw out almost double as much. It is not my business as a bank manager to ask you how you spend your money; as a friend, Mr. Sams, as a fellow-townsmen, I am going to point out to you, at the risk of giving offence, that you draw out a great deal more in proportion than anyone else in this town for personal and domestic expenditure.”

Mr. Sams was thunderstruck. The worst of it was that this being

one of his sober moments he knew that he was listening to the truth.

“You need not be afraid,” Mr. Tidd continued, “that information which comes before me in my official capacity would ever be spoken of outside this office, but as you pay by cheque I am in a position to know that you have lost something like four hundred pounds this year by horse-racing alone. This is in addition to the very large weekly sums which you disburse, presumably in entertaining your friends and in those little expeditions to Exeter. Your business will not stand it, Mr. Sams. It is not Tonkin’s competition which is hitting you; it is your own extravagance.”

77

“Here! I say!” Richard Sams began.

“If you take offence you are a foolish man,” Mr. Tidd assured him gently. “I wish to be your friend. I have a great admiration for your daughter, and I should not feel that I were doing my duty if I did not speak plainly. It is not too late. You have a pleasant home, a daughter who is one of the most popular young women in the neighbourhood, and a good business. Don’t fritter them all away. Get a grip on yourself. Cut out the ‘Swan’ in the afternoons and business hours. Come to the bowling club oftener and cricket ground in the evenings, and treat the hotel smoke-room as it should be treated—as a place for occasional relaxation. You’ll pull yourself together in no time, Mr. Sams. Try it.”

Richard Sams rose to his feet.

“You’ve spoken plain words, Mr. Tidd,” he observed gloomily.

“They are for your good,” the bank manager concluded kindly.
“Think over them.” . . .

It was striking one o’clock when Mr. Sams left the bank. If he had followed his usual custom he would have returned home to the midday meal. His interview with Mr. Tidd, however, had upset him. He found his condition of mind an excellent excuse for crossing the road and establishing himself in the bar parlour of the ‘Swan.’ It was half-past two before he left it, and he was not altogether clear as to whether he had partaken of his dinner or not. He walked slowly and with exaggerated solemnity up the steep hill until he reached the shop of his rival. Here he paused and, gripping the angle of the window for support, studied the wares displayed. Even to his fuddled senses the interior of the shop into which he glanced, and the arrangement of the drugs, patent medicines and fancy articles, were amazingly neat and well ordered. He thought of his own dark, untidy shop in which everything was out of place, his stock of drugs uncatalogued and uncounted, his lack of novelties, the coating of dust in odd corners, his mangy collection of toilet articles, and, curiously enough, in those few moments he realised the truth; curiously enough, too, the truth brought with it no sense of shame, no better resolutions, nothing but a sense of positive anger amounting almost to hatred against this young man who, as he put it to himself pathetically, was driving him out of his native town. A dimly conceived purpose of ringing the shop bell—it was early-closing day and the door was locked—and telling this intruder exactly what he thought of him, was forming itself in his confused brain. Just then the door was opened from inside, and Tonkin, dressed in flannels and carrying a cricket bag, appeared.

“Mr. Sams, isn’t it?” the latter exclaimed as soon as he had got over his first surprise. “Were you looking for me? Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Nothing at all, young man,” was the slowly spoken response —“nothing at all. What are you doing—with that bag?”

“It’s early-closing day,” was the somewhat surprised answer. “I’m going to the cricket ground.”

“Early-closing day—of course it’s early-closing day! Did you think I didn’t know that?” Mr. Sams rejoined. “But what are you doing in that rig-out? I never heard of a chemist playing cricket.”

Tonkin laughed cheerfully. He had realised by this time the other’s condition.

“Well, I’m one of the exceptions,” he declared. “I’ve played quite a great deal in my time. Are you coming up to the ground?”

80

“You’re not playing against Barnstaple?”

“I am.”

“What—the great match—Melhampton against Barnstaple? Nonsense! You can’t be playing. I should have heard of it. The team’s up in the ‘Swan.’”

“They asked me last night at the nets,” Tonkin assured his questioner. “I—they found out I’ve played a bit.”

“I’ll come up to the ground with you,” Mr. Sams announced. “I’d like to see a chemist playing cricket. Besides, Mary’s there. Do you know my daughter—Miss Mary?”

“I met her this morning,” Tonkin admitted as they moved off together. “If you will allow me to say so, I thought her a very charming young lady.”

“No business to say such a thing,” her father declared, frowning—“no business at all. What’s it matter to you whether she’s charming or not?”

“I didn’t mean to take a liberty, sir,” the young man apologised good-naturedly. “We’ll have to hurry along or I shall be late.”

“I can walk as fast as you,” was the truculent rejoinder, as Mr. Sams saved himself with an elaborate effort from falling over the kerb-stone—“walk as fast as you, or run either.”

81

“Come along, then,” Tonkin urged him. “Some day, when we’ve more time, I’d like to have a talk to you about business.”

“On the subject o’ business,” Mr. Sams announced, trying to light the burnt-out cigar which he had suddenly discovered in his fingers, “I have a few words to say to you.”

“Perhaps you’d allow me to call,” Tonkin suggested hopefully.

Mr. Sams was not to be caught.

“I might and again I might not,” he said cautiously. “I must refer that matter to my daughter. And there she is! You must excuse me. And—I say!”

“Yes, sir,” Tonkin replied, lingering for a moment.

“You’re the first chemist I ever knew who tried to play cricket.”

The young man, ignoring his companion’s speech, cast one glance over his shoulder at the very fascinating apparition which suddenly bore down upon them. In her blue linen frock, hat with pink roses, and a very dainty little parasol, Miss Mary was certainly a most attractive sight. The welcoming smile died away from her face at once, however, as she realised her father’s condition. She turned her back deliberately upon Tonkin and led him away to a retired part of the field. . . .

82

County cricket was unknown in Melhampton, and a Test Match aroused only a very limited sense of interest, as of some happening outside the direct ken of the neighbourhood. Cricket to them meant the two annual matches between Melhampton and Barnstaple, and the doings of a two hundred miles distant Hobbs were as nothing compared to the never-to-be-forgotten century which young George Melhampton had once scored in the yearly contest. But, alas, on this occasion there was no George Melhampton, nor did Melhampton possess a bowler to compare with Lampon, the Barnstaple lawyer’s son, who had bowled in the ’Varsity match and been chosen for the Gentlemen.

“Bit of a picnic for Barnstaple this time, I’m afraid,” the Melhampton captain, George Foulds, Harry Foulds’s cousin, remarked as the second ball of the match sent young Baker’s stumps flying. “You know you’re next, Tonkin?”

The young man nodded. He was engaged at the moment in

83

tightening the strap of his pad.

“I’ll do my best,” he promised. “That last ball was pretty hot stuff.”

He walked across the ground amidst a little buzz of interested murmurs. Sams clutched at his daughter’s arm.

“Is that young Tonkin, Mary?” he demanded. “My eyesight—I seem wobbly this afternoon——”

“It is young Tonkin,” she interrupted coldly. “Going in first wicket down, too.”

“That’s done it,” Sams declared in sudden and overmastering dejection. “Selling everything twenty per cent cheaper, everything finicky and shiny about his shop, now calling himself a cricketer. We’re ruined, Mary.”

Afterwards Mary, who was really a nice girl, could never understand what possessed her. The young man already taking his place at the wicket looked so-self-assured, so thoroughly master of the situation, that a sense of helplessness turned to anger and from anger to malice. They were seated, apart from the rest of the spectators, a few yards wide of the white board and the fast bowler was bowling from their end. Just as he commenced his run she rose to her feet and with the utmost deliberation walked across the screen. Lampon, with his thirty-yard run, came to the crease like a tornado. Tonkin, who had taken up his position with confidence, suddenly hesitated; he half drew back, then attempted to shape at the ball—a second too late. His off stump flew into the air and there was a murmur of dismay from the crowd. The umpire looked

over his shoulder and understood at once the cause of Tonkin's hesitation. Tonkin himself seemed about to make some protest. Then he recognised the blue linen frock and the waving parasol, and with a little shrug of the shoulders turned towards the pavilion. There was nothing for him to do but to accept his ignominy. There was scarcely a soul at the far end of the field to which Mary had of design conducted her parent, and probably not half a dozen people on the ground had noticed her movement.

* * * * *

There were glum faces in the pavilion after the tea interval. Mr. Haselton came up to hear the whole dire story from George Foulds.

“Out for eighteen, Mr. Haselton, the lot on us. And they made a hundred and forty-six. There's a good three hours' more cricket, and if us chaps play like we did the first innings we'll be out in half an hour.”

85

“It seems scarcely fair,” Mr. Haselton said consolingly, “to bring a bowler of Lampon's class down here.”

“We'd do the same if we'd the chance,” Foulds confessed.

The bell rang. The Barnstaple fieldsmen strolled out on to the ground. Owen Tonkin took his courage into his own hands.

“I wonder if I might suggest something,” he said, approaching Foulds.

“Of course. Ask away.”

“Let me go in first with Baker.”

The captain stared. It was true that Tonkin had redeemed himself to some extent in the field, and, being put on to bowl as a last resort, had actually taken three wickets at a moderate cost, but to those who had not noticed the incident of the screen, concerning which he had made no complaint, his début at the wickets had certainly been ignominious. Nevertheless it was a day of desperate chances, and so, somewhat to the surprise of the spectators, young Tom Baker, who was noted as a sticker, was accompanied to the wicket by Tonkin. It was the latter who received the first ball, and Lampon bowled it. This time Tonkin had the air of a man who was taking no chances. He looked around him with the utmost care and took guard grimly. The little company round the ground almost held their breaths for that first ball—it seemed indeed almost an anti-climax when it was played, confidently and without effort, but safely along the ground to long-on. They studied the batsman more closely. A few who understood became hopeful; those who did not joined in the rapturous applause when they saw the next one driven out of the ground for six. The following ball was watched feverishly; its predecessor might have been the result of a lucky swipe. The manner in which Owen Tonkin dealt with it, however, established for ever in Melhampton his reputation as a batsman. Pitched just a trifle too far, he stepped forward like lightning and hit it out of the ground to square leg. There was scarcely a man, woman or child upon the field, except Mary Sams, who did not stand up to clap. . . .

86

After half a dozen overs Lampon retired, knocked completely off his length, and suffering from the humiliating experience of having been hit to every angle of the field by a village

87

batsman. From anticipations of a crushing defeat, the hopes of the townspeople passed to the almost unimaginable—a possible victory! True, Tom Baker's middle stump had been sent flying in the fast bowler's third over, and two other batsmen had subsequently joined him in the pavilion, but the score on the board was already eighty, of which Tonkin's contribution was sixty-four. Lampon, put on again and starting with an excellent length, was treated with a certain amount of respect by Tonkin, but with the other bowling he indulged in an orgy of hurricane hitting such as had never before been seen on the ground. The eighth wicket fell when his score stood at ninety-six. The interest had become so intense when Lampon started his over that people were standing up in every direction, and the silence was almost breathless. The first ball, almost a wide, Tonkin left severely alone, never even moving from his place; the second, a perfect half-volley, he drove clean over the pavilion, beyond the six boundary mark. The spectators gave way to a sort of frenzy. They stood up in all corners of the field, shouting and whistling and clapping. Twice Tonkin had to touch his cap before the game could proceed. Then he continued to deal with the bowling with grim determination, watching the score and glancing occasionally at the sun, hitting at everything which might possibly produce a boundary, striving by every means in his power to give his side a chance of victory. Presently George Foulds descended from the pavilion and hesitated by the gate. It seemed wicked to end the greatest treat the cricketing public of Melhampton had ever enjoyed, but Tonkin waved his bat at once. At the end of the over Melhampton declared their innings, Barnstaple having an hour to bat and eighty-six runs to make to avoid defeat. It was a triumph all the greater because so utterly unexpected.

The return of Owen Tonkin to the pavilion was marked by scenes of enthusiasm such as had never been witnessed on the ground before. The spectators positively mobbed him during the last few yards, and it became absolutely impossible for him to answer the fire of questions or respond to the many congratulations he was offered. When at last he escaped he caught sight of Mary Sams, waiting by the steps of the dressing-room. Instinctively he paused. She looked at him with a little flush on her face.

“I think I’d like to say I’m sorry, please,” she murmured under her breath.

89

He had only time to stammer some incoherent words before she was gone. The incident, however, set its seal upon his afternoon’s happiness.

Foulds and Tonkin left the pavilion together after the shortest possible interval.

“One of my suggestions came off,” the latter observed. “I wonder whether you would care to consider another.”

“Tonkin,” was the cordial reply, “I’d stand on my head if you told me to.”

“They’re a good batting side, and in the ordinary way five or six wickets is as much as we can hope for by seven-thirty. I can keep the runs down later if necessary. To start with, will you let me try a little theory of my own, and place my own field?”

“Well, why not?” was the hearty response. “Take the ball, my lad, and do what you will with us. Young Tom Baker will bowl

from the other end.”

Tonkin’s setting of the field was sufficiently puzzling. There were three men in the neighbourhood of short leg, a deep square leg, an extra slip and scarcely a man on the off side. The first two batsmen gazed at the field in amazement, especially as Owen Tonkin’s essay at bowling in the first innings had been medium pace, very good length balls without a great deal of swerve and, although good enough stuff, scarcely remarkable. This time he approached the crease with hardly any run at all, tossed the ball high, apparently with so simple and easy an action that the out two fielders braced themselves for an effort. The batsman squared his shoulders, stepped forward and swiped the air. The ball, which pitched about a foot and a half on the leg side, broke nearly wide of the wicket on the off. The batsman went out and patted the crease, returning to his place with a marked diminution of confidence. Again the little toss into the air, seemingly much farther up than it really was, another terrific swipe to leg, and the ball descended harmlessly in long slip’s hands amidst a roar of applause. The batsman paused to speak to his successor.

90

“He’s breaking ’em two feet and a half,” he declared. “Get in front of your wicket and poke at ’em for a bit.”

It was perhaps good advice but, like his predecessor, the newcomer was deceived. He went out to hit what seemed as though it must be a full toss, realised that he couldn’t reach it, scurried back and found his stumps down whilst he was still a yard out of his place. At ten minutes to seven the last Barnstaple wicket was down for thirty-nine. Melhampton had won by thirty-eight runs and Tonkin had added to his batting

91

triumphs by taking seven wickets for fifteen.

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Trade competition in Melhampton was a thing almost unknown. No venturesome person, for instance, had ever dared to attack the supremacy of Meeke's drapery stores. In ironmongery, Tom Baker remained supreme. There was a second butcher, it is true, but nothing in the shape of competition existed between the two. Mr. Scroggins supplied the gentry; Mr. Podmore the poorer folk and many of the farmers around. The establishment of Tonkin's Chemist Stores within a few yards of Mr. Sams's shop was the first real example of a trade fight which Melhampton had ever known. Selling for the most part standardised goods both firms appealed to the same class of customer. Probably young Tonkin would soon have dropped behind, if his great exploit on the cricket field had not brought him a clientele and patronage which his lower prices could never have done. As it was, however, the struggle, commenced in a half-hearted way, soon became a real one. Sams, incited thereto by his daughter, who was now helping him in the shop, made the effort of his life. For days he forbore to cross the threshold of the 'Swan' and was to be found hour after hour behind his counter. There were lapses, but only temporary ones, and they became rarer after one occasion upon which Mary Sams had braved the little company in the 'Swan' bar parlour and boldly fetched her father out to attend to an important customer. She herself, a young woman of character and determination, was grimly and wholeheartedly absorbed in the contest. Her momentary kindness for Owen Tonkin seemed to have entirely disappeared. With their rival houses barely fifty yards apart, he was obliged to content himself with fugitive glimpses of his enchantress, whose

uncompromising attitude towards him he was beginning sadly to realise. More than once he half made up his mind to abandon the struggle. It was a certain vein of obstinacy which induced him to continue, even more than the fact that he was slowly but surely gaining ground. It took a minor tragedy to end the affair.

The tranquillity, half stolid, half dignified, of the bar parlour at the 'Melhampton Arms' was, for the first time since the night of the cricket match, disturbed. There was a buzz of eager conversation. Mr. Scroggins, arriving late from an outlying farm and demanding the news, was assailed by statements from every side.

93

"It's John Craske, the postman's child, poisoned by Owen Tonkin and like to die!"

"It sure is an awful death. They do say that the young man's carrying on like a lunatic."

"Him what was reckoned to be so careful, too!"

Mr. Scroggins looked around him, bewildered. Tom Baker rapped with his knuckles upon the table to obtain a hearing.

"'Tis a simple happening, Mr. Scroggins," he explained, "but a rare unfortunate one. It seems that one of the Craske children was sent to Owen Tonkin's store for some sort of teething powder for that two-year-old baby of theirs. What he brought back is not known for sure, but poison of some sort it was, and it's most certain the child will die."

Mr. Scroggins, who had been one of Owen Tonkin's warm supporters, gave a little exclamation of dismay as he sank into a

chair.

“Well, that do sound terrible,” he admitted.

94

“The young man seems to have done all he could to make up for his mistake,” Baker continued. “The doctor was away, so they sent for him, and he’s been with the child for hours, but the last report we heard was that it was nigh all over.”

“The doctor’s car passed me just as I drove into the town,” Mr. Scroggins declared.

“There should be more news, then, in a while,” the ironmonger reflected.

Mr. Tidd, the bank manager, who had honoured the company with a brief visit, sighed as he sipped his whisky and soda.

“Even if they manage to save the child’s life,” he said, “I am afraid it’s all up with poor Tonkin.”

There was a little murmur of sympathy.

“Us has to be careful where us sends for physic,” Mr. Scroggins admitted. “It doan’t do for chemists and them as handles dangerous stuff to be careless.”

“They say the young man’s been kind of absent-like lately,” Tom Baker observed. “There’s no doubt but that he’s had a pretty hard struggle what with old man Sams turning sober and his daughter there in the shop to look after him.”

“Darter’s away for a few days,” Granfer Crocombe

95

confided. “Us guessed that when us seed the old man coming out of the ‘Swan.’ She’d most got him broke from that.”

Word came from John Craske’s presently that the child was alive but still dangerously ill. With the aid of a strong emetic, Owen Tonkin had succeeded in dispersing the poison before the doctor arrived, and the child was fighting now for life.

This was the last bulletin of the night and the company presently broke up.

* * * * *

Owen Tonkin, notwithstanding the absence of customers, was standing behind the counter of his shop on the following morning when Police-Constable Chopping, redder of face and more portentous of presence than ever, entered.

“Morning, Mr. Tonkin,” he greeted him.

“Good morning, constable.”

“A bad business, this!”

“A very unfortunate one!”

“Mistakes is mistakes,” the constable continued, “but when they cost a person his life they become in the eyes of the law a misdemeanour.”

“Are you going to arrest me?” Owen Tonkin demanded.

“Not at the moment,” was the cautious reply. “My instructions

are to keep my eye upon you. If so be that the child should die—well, summat might happen.”

“I understand,” the young man observed. “Unless your duty necessitates it, do you mind not staying any longer? You see, the people are gathering outside to see you march me to the police station.”

“That same will be an unwelcome task, Mr. Tonkin, if so be that at any time it should happen,” P.C. Chopping declared as he took his dignified departure.

The day dragged on, a weary succession of hours, during which scarcely a single customer crossed the threshold of the little shop. Towards evening came better news of the child, and on the following morning it was pronounced out of danger. The end of the week drew near and Owen Tonkin realised that he was fighting a losing battle. There was a cheery nod of sympathy for him in the street, but still an entire absence of customers. Upon the sixth day he commenced to pack up. He was on his knees upon the floor, filling a case with sawdust, when the door was pushed open. He looked around. It was Mary Sams who had descended the single step, and was standing within a few feet of him. He gazed at her, absolutely helpless. He forgot to rise to his feet, forgot to move his hands from the sawdust.

97

“Miss Mary!” he gasped.

“I have come to have a few words with you,” she announced.

“May I sit down?”

Without waiting for an invitation, she seated herself upon a stool. Owen Tonkin rose slowly to his feet. He suddenly

remembered that he had not shaved for two days, that he had flung his clothes on without thought. Perhaps that accounted for the pity which certainly softened her face and shone out of her eyes.

“Mr. Tonkin,” she said, “I have just discovered the truth.”

He was proof against further shocks. He simply listened.

“My father is very ill,” she went on. “As you may have heard, he has been drinking ever since. They fetched me home to look after him and last night he told me the truth. It was to him the child came—not to your shop at all. Father had been in the ‘Swan’ all the afternoon and he admits that even now he doesn’t remember out of which bottle he took the powder. It was my father who made this terrible mistake, Mr. Tonkin, and not you. As a matter of fact, you saved the child’s life.”

98

Like all young men of a certain type convicted of an heroic action, Owen Tonkin looked for a few seconds a perfect fool.

“It’s too late now to make a fuss about it,” he said, at last. “I knew that your father had had too much to drink that afternoon, and when it got about that it was from me the messenger had received the powder, I thought I’d better let it go at that. If either of us had to make a fresh start, it was easier for me, as the younger man.”

There was a dangerous mistiness in her eyes and for a moment or two she avoided looking at him.

“What are you doing there?” she said.

“Packing.”

“Then you had better unpack.”

He shook his head.

“Not a customer has passed through these doors for three days,” he confided bitterly. “Some of them might have trusted me just a little. Even if I had really made the mistake the doctor is telling everyone that I saved the child’s life.”

“They’ll be sorry enough,” she assured him, “when they know the truth.”

99

“Who’s going to tell them?” he demanded.

“I am,” she answered simply. “In fact I have begun already. I called in at the ‘Melhampton Arms’ on my way down. I was going to tell Granfer Crocombe and let him spread it about, but there was quite a crowd of them there, so I told them all.”

“You told them?” he gasped.

She nodded.

“My father wished it,” she said. “It is he who is going to retire, Mr. Tonkin, and not you. I have come to tell you this. I have come to thank you for your wonderful silence.”

She gave him her hand. Some of her confidence seemed to be slipping away as she realised the atmosphere of passion by which she was surrounded.

“Father wants to give up,” she explained rapidly. “I suppose his stock and goodwill and everything is worth something. We wondered—I wondered, whether you would take the business over with yours and allow him a trifle so long as he lives. It ought to pay very well indeed,” she went on. “Father’s been extravagant, and he’s lost a lot of money betting on horses, but he doesn’t owe very much and I have enough to pay that.”

100

“It all sounds like a dream!” he said, drawing a little closer.

“You agree?”

“I——”

There was a moment’s silence. She slipped from the stool into his arms. Owen Tonkin walked reverently in paradise.

* * * * *

“What I do say, and all you’m folk will agree with me, is that it do be a right proper and sensible ending to a troublesome affair,” Granfer Crocombe pronounced that night in the bar parlour of the ‘Melhampton Arms.’

101

IV

MR. MEEKES' BOMBSHELL

It was obvious, from the moment that Mr. Haselton, the vicar, Doctor Spendlove and Mr. Tidd, the bank manager, walked together to a distant part of the courts and held converse there, that something had happened. It was not until later in the afternoon, however, that the news spread as to the exact nature of the bombshell which had been exploded amongst the committee of the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club. Mr. Meekes, the draper of High Street, had written a polite letter to the secretary, intimating his desire and the desire of his family to join the club.

The position, as Mr. Tidd, the secretary of the club, aptly remarked to Mrs. Spendlove, in the course of the subsequent discussion, bristled with difficulties. There was nothing whatever against Mr. Meekes. As the custodian of his financial reputation, Mr. Tidd felt bound to be emphatic on that point. He was a pushing, well-behaved and successful little man, who had brought up a family of two daughters and one son in the best possible manner, and who had just signalled the advance in his fortunes by taking the Manor House, a pleasant residence some time ago vacated by the declining family of Pleydells. The girls were just home from boarding-school, and it was in their interests, no doubt, that Mr. Meekes had taken the momentous course of writing to the committee of the tennis club. There was nothing against the Misses Meekes. They were good-looking, better dressed than any other young women in the place;

they had been expensively educated, and though there were rumours of occasional cigarette smoking and a somewhat lavish use of her vanity case by Miss Ella, it could not be argued that there was anything in their personalities which made them undesirable companions for the remainder of the youth of Melhampton. But facts were facts—this elucidating phrase also emanated from Mr. Tidd—and hitherto the counter had been the dividing line in the election of members to the club. If Mr. Meekes was eligible, so also was Mr. Scroggins the butcher, Mr. Giles the grocer, and so on.

“It’s a stupid and very annoying business,” the doctor declared, a little pettishly. “If we three men comprised the committee of the club, I think we should soon deal with the matter, but of course, when it comes to the vote, there is a majority of ladies associated with us, and one knows, before breathing a word to them, exactly what their attitude will be.”

103

The vicar caressed his rather long brown moustache. He was a ruddy-complexioned, stalwart divine who, one learned, always with a certain feeling of surprise, was connected with one of the great families of the county.

“It would be perhaps advisable,” he remarked, “if someone could see Mr. Meekes and induce him, under the circumstances, to withdraw his letter.”

“So long as the task does not devolve upon me,” Mr. Tidd interposed hastily, “I quite approve. My business connections with Mr. Meekes complicate the matter immensely so far as I am concerned.”

“Quite so,” Doctor Spendlove mused. “We mustn’t get Tidd into trouble. At the same time, I have to remember that Meekes is a very valuable patient of mine. We all must live, you know.”

“It is borne in upon me,” the vicar said thoughtfully, “that 104 Mr. Meekes has promised a handsome donation to the Organ Fund, and with the exception of the Squire is our largest contributor to the expenses of the church. His last Easter offering,” he added, with a little cough, “with its—er—personal note, was a deeply gratifying one.”

It was Doctor Spendlove who first saw light.

“Look here,” he pointed out, “we three men are all agreed. We’d let the Meekes family in like a shot so far as we are concerned. If the women want to keep them out, they must take the brunt of it. I propose that Mr. Meekes’ letter comes up before the committee in the ordinary way, that we three vote for his election and that, if he is turned down, the women who do it must take the blame. We can all,” he added, with a sly wink at Mr. Tidd, “take an opportunity of explaining our own share in the matter.”

Whereupon the discussion was abandoned, and the business of the afternoon, which was tennis and tea, proceeded with. . . .

When the matter was informally mentioned amongst the ladies, the worst prognostications of the three men were more than verified. Mrs. Spendlove, who had two plain but 105 marriageable daughters, was horrified at the idea. Miss Tichbourne, an old maid, niece of a baronet and sister of a solicitor in Exeter, considered that Mr. Tidd should have at once

torn up Mr. Meekes' letter without further reference to the subject. Miss Holywell had very little to say, but hoped that every woman there present who was upon the committee knew how to do her duty. The vicar's wife, who was an earnest Christian, declared that she had never blackballed anybody and never would, but she should certainly withdraw her name from the list of ladies willing to give tea once a season, if Mr. Meekes and his family should be elected. Mrs. Pleydell, who was the fifth lady upon the committee, said grimly that there was not the slightest fear of that.

“And there you are, you see,” Doctor Spendlove remarked, as he and Mr. Tidd strolled out of the pavilion to recommence their pastime. “Five women on the committee, and us three men. Mrs. Haselton won't vote, but the other four are only itching to get their fingers on the little black ball. Seems to me Mr. Meekes has just about as much chance of getting in here as into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“And the people who are keeping him out,” his companion remarked a little dolefully, “are just the people who've nothing to gain or lose either way. . . . Here comes her ladyship. I wonder what she'll have to say about it.”

106

Lady Stourton, chief patroness of the club and wife of the Squire, who made a point of looking in for a short time on most of the tennis afternoons, shook hands pleasantly with Mr. Tidd, who as secretary always went forward to receive her, and shrieked with laughter when she heard of the dilemma into which Mr. Meekes' letter had thrown the members of the club.

“Why, my dears,” she exclaimed as she sat in the centre of a

little group of the ladies, “I think it’s the funniest thing I ever knew! To see that dapper little man chasing a tennis ball in new white flannels and new shoes, and smiling that irresistible smile of his after he’d hit it, would be simply priceless. As a matter of fact, I rather like Mr. Meekes. I should elect him, by all means.”

It was apparent to the feminine community of the club that their patroness was not taking this matter seriously.

“It is all very well for you, Lady Stourton,” Miss Tichbourne pointed out. “You have your own friends outside Melhampton, and you only look in and see us now and then, out of kindness. This is our one summer rendezvous, where we meet one another on familiar terms, make up a rubber of bridge and keep in touch with what’s going on. You don’t realise what the intrusion of these people would mean. Mrs. Meekes is, to all appearance, a very vulgar person, and although I wish to say nothing against them, the girls do not seem to be of the class with whom Mrs. Spendlove, for instance, would like her own daughters to associate. As for Mr. Meekes, are we to be asked to shake hands in the afternoon with a man from whom we buy calico in the morning?”

“Oh, I don’t know!” her ladyship observed, storing up mental notes of the discussion for the amusement of her lord and master later on. “These are terribly Radical times, you know.”

“There is Radicalism—and Bolshevism,” Miss Tichbourne declared awesomely.

* * * * *

The reverse side of the picture was presented when Mr.

Meekes, at the family breakfast table, received an official communication from the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club which, after a hurried reading, he would have thrust under his plate but for the notice of his family.

“Come on, dad, out with it!” Ella, his elder daughter, exclaimed. “I saw the ‘M.T.C.’ on the back of the envelope. Don’t they want us?”

“Three to one we’re pilled,” Cynthia, her sister, remarked, with her mouth full of toast and butter and marmalade.

Mr. Meekes adjusted his pince-nez and read the letter without comment:

Dear Mr. Meekes,

I have laid your letter before the committee of the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club, who have duly considered the matter therein referred to. They desire me to say, however, with much regret, that our numbers are at present quite full. Should any vacancy occur, they will, without doubt, let you know.

Faithfully yours,

*Henry Tidd
(Secretary).*

“Well, if that isn’t too bad!” Mrs. Meekes declared, with a sigh of disappointment. “I just did fancy myself sitting in those seats in front of the pavilion, along of Mrs. Spendlove and Mrs. Haselton.”

“Don’t you worry, mummy,” Ella enjoined, patting her mother on the shoulder, as she brought her replenished plate from the sideboard. “I rather fancy that we ought to be able to get some fun out of this. What do you say, Cynthia?”

“Fun?” their father observed doubtfully.

“Heaps of it, dad,” she continued. “All that you’ve got to do is to tell Haines to get another man and put the court into really good condition. Next week Jack Spendlove is coming down for his holidays and bringing a Mr. Bruce with him—you know, Cynthia, the young man you danced with. I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if they didn’t prefer our court to the club’s—some of the time, at any rate.”

Cynthia’s blue eyes gleamed.

“What a rag!” she exclaimed. “Of course, we’ll ask the Spendlove girls and Maggie Haselton to come and play, and they won’t be able to because of this. Do you know, dad, I believe they’ll find before the end of the season that the tennis club isn’t quite so crowded as they feared.”

110

Mr. Meekes, who was a very quiet man, said little. As he kissed his daughters good-bye, however, before going into the garden to interview Haines, the gardener, he alluded once more to the vexed subject.

“Anyone you girls like to ask here for tennis,” he said, “will be very welcome, and I think we can give them something a little better than the club weak tea. I have an idea of my own, too. However, we’ll see how that works out.”

The days when Mr. Meekes, in the phraseology of Miss Tichbourne, measured out calico from behind the counter were past. The greater part of his mornings was now spent in a plainly-furnished, business-like office, approached by a separate entrance from the street, and disconnected so far as possible from what Mr. Meekes was pleased to call his retail establishment. Into this office, about a week later, was shown the Reverend Stanley Haselton. Mr. Meekes, who was dictating letters to a stenographer, nodded pleasantly but in an abstracted manner, and waved his visitor to a seat. 111

“One moment,” he begged, and continued his task for at least five minutes. He then dismissed the stenographer, swung round in his chair and faced his visitor.

“Sorry to keep you, Mr. Haselton,” he apologised. “The morning is always my busiest time, you know. What can I do for you?”

Mr. Haselton was not his usual calm self. He appeared to have been hurrying, for there were little beads of perspiration upon his forehead. An alarmist might have gathered from his manner that some strange and new terror was threatening the ancient township of Melhampton.

“I came to see you, Mr. Meekes,” he began, “about the permission which you are said to have granted to some so-called Revivalists, to encamp and hold meetings on Feldon’s Meadow.”

Mr. Meekes nodded.

“Queer lot they seem, too,” he remarked benignly. “Young fellow named Glosson seems to be at the head of it—the Reverend Peter Glosson. Have you called on him yet?”

“Have I what?” the vicar gasped.

112

“Called on him—been to see him?” Mr. Meekes replied. “Quite an establishment, his caravan—little study, with any quantity of books—charming young woman, too, his wife.”

Mr. Haselton, being debarred from strong language, blew his nose vigorously.

“As a Churchman, Mr. Meekes,” he said, “I fear that you do not quite appreciate the position.”

“As my vicar, then,” the other rejoined, “explain it to me.”

Mr. Haselton prepared for action. He drew his chair a little closer to the table, clenched his fists, and punctuated his remarks with manual exercises.

“These people,” he expounded—“‘Little Brethren,’ I believe they call themselves—are a sect outside any of the religious denominations. They are not even dissenters. They admit that they are free thinkers. Their coming into the midst of our peaceful and reputable community is nothing less than a catastrophe. They must be got rid of, and got rid of at once.”

“Dear me!” Mr. Meekes exclaimed. “Are they likely to do any harm?”

“Harm?” his caller repeated, in a tone of hurt amazement.

113

“They are outside the Church, Mr. Meekes. They have no doctrines, no recognised form of worship. They advocate the playing of games on Sunday. They propose to have out-of-door services, advertised by small handbills and accompanied by strident music. Last night they held what they are pleased to call a musical thanksgiving service. We were compelled to vacate the tennis courts an hour before our usual time, to escape from the uproar.”

Mr. Meekes removed his spectacles and bent a little forward whilst engaged in the task of polishing them.

“That seems a pity,” he murmured under his breath.

“I have called upon you, Mr. Meekes,” the vicar continued with dignity, “to beg you to at once rescind your permission to these people to encamp upon the meadow. Their presence here is wholly undesired and unwelcome in Melhampton, besides being in some respects an insult to the Church, which I am proud to think, notwithstanding the various dissenting conventicles, has succeeded in becoming the centre of all local religious sentiment.”

Mr. Meekes coughed.

114

“I am bound to confess, Vicar,” he said, “that I scarcely see eye to eye with you in this matter. I was in the meadow last night, and I listened to the man Glosson’s address. Thoroughly good stuff, I called it, although not in the least doctrinal. His wife talked to the girls who were there, too, very sensibly.”

“Are you not of opinion, Mr. Meekes,” the vicar demanded, “that such spiritual guidance as the inhabitants of Melhampton

require can be obtained by them at their parish church at the hands of their appointed pastor?"

Mr. Meekes scratched his chin.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "there were a good many in the meadow last night whom I have never seen in church. That, to my mind, is where some of these outside religious forces may do good. They may reach the people whom the Church does not attract. There is, after all, a species of dogmatism about any established religion, which tends to keep it within narrow lines."

"I am very distressed to hear such sentiments from you, Mr. Meekes," the vicar pronounced severely. "You cannot possibly believe, in your heart, that the visit of these people is for the good of Melhampton." 115

"Why not?" Mr. Meekes queried. "Melhampton is just the sort of place where a certain leaven of narrow-mindedness is apt to creep in unless contact with the outside world is kept and established. We are all too much inclined to move in a groove, Vicar, in our own little cycle, as it were. We are not quite so broad-minded as we might be. Our little personal prejudices become large and important things."

"The man Glosson is a socialist!" the vicar exclaimed.

Mr. Meekes nodded.

"There was a Greater before him," he said, "and, after all, tolerant and broad-minded socialism is perhaps better for the people than a blind staggering along the narrow ways of class

prejudices.”

The vicar rose to his feet.

“I am disappointed in my visit, Mr. Meekes,” he declared stiffly.

“I am sorry,” was the equable reply; “but so far as these people are concerned, unless they make themselves more objectionable than they have done yet, I feel that I am scarcely justified in disturbing them. Religious sentiment which receives fuel from only one direction is apt to lose vitality. I have come to that conclusion during the last few weeks. I have decided that we must all spread ourselves more, as it were. For that reason I am thinking of distributing the sum that I give away annually to charity and the support of religion in a broader fashion.”

116

The vicar picked up his hat.

“I am obliged for the hint, Mr. Meekes,” he said as he took his leave.

* * * * *

On his way back to the vicarage Mr. Haselton found himself confronted by two very charming young girls of most attractive appearance. For a moment, as he stood hat in hand, he was a little at a loss.

“You’ve forgotten us altogether, Mr. Haselton!” Cynthia exclaimed.

“You don’t even remember me!” Ella put in reprovingly.

“Miss Ella Meekes, of course,” the vicar declared, “and Miss Cynthia. My dear young ladies, you have grown so much. You must forgive my momentary aberration.”

“Of course!” Cynthia cooed. “And besides, we never came home at all for last Christmas holidays. We went straight to Switzerland, you know. And the summer before you were away on your vacation the few weeks that we were here, so we really haven’t met for quite a long time, have we?”

117

“We couldn’t help stopping you,” Ella confided, “because we thought we saw you coming out of dad’s office. Do tell us, have you been to see him about those dreadful Revivalists?”

The word was balm to Mr. Haselton. He assented with grave dignity.

“I have just paid a visit of expostulation to your father,” he announced, “I regret to say without effect.”

“Dad is so obstinate sometimes,” Cynthia sighed.

“You’ve no idea how trying he can be,” Ella echoed.

“The noise those people make is awful,” Cynthia declared.

“As though anyone wanted rowdiness like that when we have such a beautiful parish church!” Ella murmured.

The vicar beamed upon them both.

“I am very glad to find, young ladies,” he said, “that you, at any rate, are better advised than your father in this

118

unfortunate matter. I trust that you will use your influence with him in the home circle.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Cynthia promised hopefully.

“Dad’s liver is a little out of order,” Ella explained.

“Makes him so crotchety,” her sister confided. “We’ll get round him the first day he feels himself again.”

Mr. Haselton smiled.

“It is very pleasant, young ladies,” he acknowledged, “to renew our acquaintance in so satisfactory a fashion.”

“I hope that Mrs. Haselton is quite well?” Ella inquired politely. “We met Aubrey once or twice in town.”

“Indeed?” the vicar replied with interest, for Aubrey was very much his favourite son. “How was he, and, if I might ask the question, where did you come across him?”

“He came to the Glendons’, where we have been staying, once or twice for tennis,” Cynthia told him.

“The Glendons’?” the vicar asked with a surprise which he was not capable of concealing. “Lady Glendon’s?”

119

“Lily was at school with us, you see,” Cynthia explained. “She’s coming down to stay with us next week.”

“To stay with you?” the vicar repeated.

Ella nodded. There was a twinkle in her eye.

“Lady Glendon knows all about the shop, Mr. Haselton,” she assured him.

“My dear young ladies,” the vicar expostulated in a shocked tone, “I hope that you did not imagine——”

“Of course not!” they both interrupted.

“That is just what I love about the country,” Cynthia went on. “People are never snobs down here. But seriously, Mr. Haselton,” she went on, looking up at him in very engaging fashion, “did dad absolutely refuse to send those Revivalists away?”

“Absolutely!” he assured them.

“Don’t be cross with him,” Ella begged. “I am sure it’s his liver. You leave it to us, Mr. Haselton.”

“We’ll get rid of them,” Cynthia promised. “Good-bye.”

The vicar walked homeward with his sense of values curiously mixed.

“Well?” Mrs. Haselton asked him on his return.

120

“Meekes has gone off his head,” was the doleful reply. “He declines to interfere.”

“Incredible!” the vicaress gasped.

“On my way back,” her husband continued, “I received a considerable surprise. I encountered the two Misses Meekes—most charming and attractive young women.”

“H’m!” Mrs. Haselton ejaculated.

“I am quite sure that Cynthia darkens her eyebrows,” Maggie murmured from the background.

“My dear,” the vicar remonstrated severely, “I beg that you will not make such uncharitable aspersions. The young ladies are well conducted and well mannered. Furthermore, you may be surprised to hear that they have been staying with Lady Glendon at Woking, and have met Aubrey there several times.”

“What on earth are we coming to?” Mrs. Haselton groaned.

“I hope Aubrey will forget them when he comes down here,” Maggie muttered spitefully.

The glimmerings of an unwelcome light shone in upon Mr. Haselton’s confused brain. He feared to trust himself to speech. He left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

121

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The following Thursday afternoon was to have been a noteworthy one in the annals of the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club. It was Mrs. Haselton’s turn to provide tea, and although that lady was not of an extravagant turn of mind, she usually felt it incumbent upon her to supplement the customary fare of bread and butter and currant bun by some little trifles from London which might indicate connections and tastes not entirely local.

The fact that four young men were to be present, too, imparted a distinct fillip to the proceedings so far as the two Miss Spendloves, Miss Tichbourne's niece from Exeter, and Maggie Haselton were concerned. The four young men were all, in their way, desirables. There was Aubrey Haselton, who had only left college two years but was already doing well in a solicitor's office in London; his friend, Philip Marston, a junior partner in the firm to which Aubrey was articled; Jack Spendlove, the doctor's son, who was working at a hospital in London; and his friend, Donovan Bruce, a college acquaintance, whose father was an M.P. and a wealthy North of England man. No wonder the occasion was one for which white skirts were earnestly inspected, new jumpers surreptitiously brought out, and the usual somewhat unbecoming headgear of the more athletic young women exchanged for garden-party hats. The weather was favourably disposed towards the occasion. The sun shone, but a pleasant west wind tempered the extreme heat. The Revivalists for once were having a quiet afternoon, the Rev. Peter Glosson being away on his motor-bicycle searching for his next camping ground. Everything, Mr. Tidd thought as he walked over the courts with the groundman, examined the marking and tested the height of the nets, pointed to a delightful afternoon. Only the vicar, who was amongst the earliest arrivals, seemed a little anxious and distrait. He drew Mr. Tidd on one side and engaged him for a few minutes in private conversation.

“Mr. Tidd,” he acknowledged, “I have had some qualms in my mind with respect to our decision not to admit Mr. Meekes and his family into the tennis club.”

“The decision of the committee of the tennis club, if you

please,” Mr. Tidd corrected. “I should not like to associate myself personally with the matter.”

123

Mr. Haselton accepted the correction.

“I came across the two daughters the other day,” he continued. “I am bound to admit that I found them most attractive and well-brought-up young women. Their social connections, too, owing to their father’s liberality in the matter of education, seem to be excellent.”

“Personally,” Mr. Tidd said, “it would give me great pleasure to meet Mr. Meekes in a social way. I think in a small community like ours it is as well to unbend. Unfortunately, Vicar, as you very well know, the trouble is with the ladies.”

Mr. Haselton sighed.

“I am afraid,” he confided, “that Mr. Meekes takes the matter seriously. He was absent from church last Sunday, although I was glad to see that his daughters were present. When I paid my visit of protest with regard to his permission to these Revivalists to encamp on Feldon’s Meadow, I was at once aware that his manner had altogether changed. He spoke with sympathy of a wider and more tolerant religion. He ignored my request to send these terrible people about their business, and he gave me plainly to understand that a portion of the money he had been accustomed to give towards the Church would probably be diverted towards other purposes. The Church cannot well spare such supporters as Mr. Meekes.”

124

Mr. Tidd’s manner betrayed some signs of uneasiness. He had just remembered Mr. Meekes’ balance, and the rumours that a

rival banking establishment was about to open premises in Melhampton.

“It would be a disaster for Melhampton,” he acknowledged, “if Mr. Meekes were to practically resent the attitude of the club. The unfortunate part of the matter, too, as far as I am concerned,” he added a little dolefully, “is that as secretary I was compelled to sign the letter.”

“We must at all costs,” the vicar declared, “preserve our dignity. If Mr. Meekes should choose to forget that he is an official of the Church and support these undesirable Revivalists, if he should move his banking account——”

“Don’t!” Mr. Tidd groaned.

“And call in Dr. Smith from Oakleigh,” the vicar continued, “then there would be nothing for it but for us to maintain our present attitude unflinchingly. Under other circumstances, however, I suggest, Mr. Tidd, that you have a little conversation with our lady members of the committee and endeavour to induce them to modify their attitude. You can put it that I, in my position here, feel that to show kindness to everybody should be one of my chief duties. We should hurt no one’s feelings. The young ladies are unexceptionable. Mr. Meekes himself, during the last few years, has gained a great deal through association with those who chance to hold a different social position. Mrs. Meekes is a worthy soul. We lose nothing, Mr. Tidd, by being kind to those who have not the same——er——social status as ourselves. I make myself clear, I trust?”

“Certainly,” was the gloomy reply. “You will remember, will

you not, that Mrs. Haselton was an unqualified opponent of Mr. Meekes' election?"

The vicar sighed.

"My own household, I admit," he said, "is obdurate in the matter. I shall do my best, however, Mr. Tidd. I shall certainly do my best."

* * * * *

Soon after this, the tragedy of the afternoon began to take shape. The elders, with a view to the imminent arrival of the young men, had arranged a set amongst themselves. The young ladies were dotted about in picturesque attitudes, or showing a pleasant domestic interest in the preparation of the tea. Every now and then surreptitious glances were directed towards the wooden door in the wall, which remained obstinately closed. Mrs. Haselton summoned her husband to her side.

126

"Surely Aubrey and Mr. Marston were ready to start when we left?" she inquired. "What can have become of them?"

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear," Mr. Haselton replied in a puzzled tone.

"They left before us," Maggie intervened. "I saw them go down the street and turn into the tobacconist's shop."

Mrs. Spendlove strolled up to them.

"Where on earth are our young men?" she asked. "Jack and Mr.

Bruce started before we did.”

The door in the wall was pushed open, and a small boy, the youngest of the Spendlove family, entered, carrying a racquet in his hand almost as big as himself. He hurried up with all the eager joy of a harbinger of woe. 127

“Mummy,” he cried out as soon as he reached the group, “do you know where Jack and Bruce are?”

“Where?” Mrs. Spendlove gasped.

The small boy dallied with his triumph.

“There’s Aubrey Haselton and the gentleman he brought with him from London, too,” he declared. “They’re playing tennis with Cynthia and Ella Meekes on Mr. Meekes’ lawn. I saw them through the hedge.”

There was a dead silence for several moments. The blow was received in different fashion by the various members of the little group. Mrs. Haselton strode away towards the court where her husband was engaged, displaying in her gait and the set lines of her face all the noblest attributes of the Roman matron. Mrs. Spendlove went off to confide in Miss Tichbourne, who was attending to the irregularities of one of the tea-urns. The eldest Miss Spendlove, in whom nature had implanted a certain sense of humour, rose to her feet with a little laugh, which was not, however, altogether natural.

“Come on, girls,” she exclaimed, “let’s play a set quickly. I’m tired of sitting here like an idiot.” 128

The afternoon was a failure. The defection of the young men was severely commented upon by everyone, but it was noticeable that Mr. Haselton, Mr. Tidd and Doctor Spendlove had very little to say about the matter. Tea was served at the usual hour, but although Mr. Tidd exerted himself to cheer the drooping spirits of the community, it was disposed of for the greater part in gloomy silence. Towards six o'clock, however, a welcome surprise befell. The door in the wall was opened and the four young men appeared. They were apparently in the highest spirits and began to strip for action at once. In reply to an invitation to tea, tendered in tones of guarded hospitality, they all frankly admitted that they had partaken of the meal.

“We’ve been having a few sets up with Cynthia and Ella Meekes,” Aubrey Haselton announced. “Lily Glendon is staying there.”

“It would have been better,” Mrs. Haselton said icily, “if you had told us of your intention.”

“As a matter of fact,” Jack Spendlove explained, “we only went up to call for them. We hadn’t the slightest idea but that they’d be coming here for tennis. When they told us that they didn’t belong, we stayed and had a few sets with them there. Jolly good lawn, old Meekes’s.”

129

“Ripping hock cup,” Mr. Bruce remarked appreciatively.

“Come on, let’s make up a couple of sets,” Aubrey Haselton suggested. “You and my sister, Bruce, and Nora Spendlove and I. Then you have just four left. How will that do? By the by, dad,” he added, turning round to his father, “why on earth don’t

the Meekeses belong here?”

“Didn’t they tell you?” Mr. Haselton inquired.

“No, they none of them said a word,” the young man replied. “Said the club was very nice and they would have to see about it, or something of that sort.”

“Did Meekes tell you that himself?” Mr. Tidd persisted.

“Yes. Awfully decent chap he is,” Aubrey went on, as he rolled up his sleeves. “He turned us out when we mentioned that it was the tennis afternoon here—wouldn’t let us play even another set. Come on.”

Doctor Spendlove, Mr. Haselton and Mr. Tidd were left standing together. The latter cleared his throat.

130

“I should feel inclined to describe Mr. Meekes as a sportsman,” he observed.

The doctor assented heartily.

“Look here,” he said, “we’ve been led by the nose by the women in this matter. I tell you frankly I should feel quite uncomfortable if I had to tell Jack that in a small neighbourhood like this we’d turned the Meekeses down. Let’s call a committee meeting.”

The thing was done and Mr. Haselton spoke urbane words. Mrs. Pleydell and Miss Tichbourne remained obdurate. Miss Holywell was half convinced.

“Of course,” Mrs. Haselton pointed out dubiously, “we cannot ignore the fact that the two girls have established for themselves some sort of a social position by having visited at the house of Lady Glendon.”

“Did Lady Glendon know that their father was a draper?” Miss Tichbourne inquired significantly.

“She not only knew it,” Mr. Haselton replied, dropping his final bombshell, “but Miss Glendon is staying in the house at the present moment.”

Miss Holywell came to a decision.

“Under the circumstances,” she declared, “I withdraw my opposition.”

131

“I think in a small neighbourhood like ours,” Mrs. Haselton ventured, “one must be more than ever careful not to hurt anyone’s feelings.”

“Who is Lady Glendon?” Miss Tichbourne demanded pertinently. “She may be only the wife or widow of a knight.”

“Lady Glendon was the daughter of Lord Cronleys, an Irish peer,” Mrs. Haselton announced. “She married Sir John Glendon, of Glendon Place, eleventh baronet.”

“I move that the Meekes family be granted a family ticket,” Miss Holywell said, speaking slowly and distinctly.

“I second the motion,” Mr. Haselton agreed benignly. “Apart from the purely social point of view, I think, as my wife has

justly observed, that in a small neighbourhood like this we should try to rid ourselves as far as possible of all class prejudices.”

“I shall blackball them,” Miss Tichbourne pronounced. “I decline to sit down with a draper.”

“It takes two blackballs to exclude,” Mr. Tidd reminded her, “and I gather that all others present are in favour of Mr. Meekes’ election.”

“Then I resign from the committee,” the lady threatened, rising to her feet.

132

“Good afternoon, Miss Tichbourne,” the vicar said in valedictory fashion.

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Mr. Meekes adjusted his pince-nez and read out the letter at the breakfast table on the following morning. It was dated from the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club.

Dear Mr. Meekes,

I have much pleasure in informing you that a vacancy has now occurred, in the above club, and the committee desire me to say that if you still wish to take up the membership, they will be happy to send you a family ticket on receipt of your cheque for three guineas.

The next social afternoon will be held on Thursday next, when tea will be provided by Mrs. Spendlove. It is hoped

that you and your daughters, and any guests you may have, will be able to be present.

Sincerely yours,

*Henry Tidd
(Secretary).*

“We’ll have no trouble about getting our noses into Buckingham Palace now!” Cynthia declared triumphantly.

133

“You’ll have to put M.T.C. on your visiting cards, dad!” Ella enjoined with twinkling eyes.

“Well, I never!” Mrs. Meekes exclaimed, in a state of high gratification. “I hope they’ll let me give the tea soon. I’ll show them something!”

Mr. Meekes called at Feldon’s Meadow on his way to the town.

“I can’t keep you here any later than Saturday, Mr. Glosson,” he told the Revivalist.

“Church influence,” the latter muttered bitterly.

“Not in the least,” Mr. Meekes replied as he turned away.

“You’re trampling down the grass.”

134

V

THE INCOMPARABLE MR. TRIGG

Mr. Tidd came from behind the counter of the bank, opened the door of his small office and invited his visitor to enter. In a moment or two he followed, carefully closing the door behind him. He indicated the hard leather chair reserved for impecunious clients, and seated himself on the other side of the table with all the measured dignity which became the local manager of the great banking house of Netley. He did not keep his client long in suspense.

“I am sorry to tell you, Mr. Baker,” he said, “that the report which I have received from our official stockbrokers on the Finden Copper Mine is exceedingly unsatisfactory. You had better read the letter for yourself.”

Mr. Tidd withdrew a sheet of paper from underneath a clip, and handed it over to his client. Mr. Baker, who was a large man, with a black beard plentifully besprinkled with grey, adjusted a pair of spectacles upon the bridge of his pudgy nose, and read the few lines with sinking heart. The communication came from a firm of stockbrokers of world-wide repute, and was written from their head office in Lothbury:

135

Dear Sir,

With reference to your inquiry as to the Finden Copper Mine, we have to inform you that the shares of this

undertaking are no longer quoted upon this or any other market, and are, in fact, quite unsaleable. Our personal opinion of the mine is exceedingly unfavourable, and we do not think that there is the faintest chance of any recovery in the value of the shares. As security, therefore, we should consider them absolutely valueless.

*Faithfully yours,
Bland, Carryer, Harrison & Co.*

Mr. Baker returned the letter, replaced his spectacles in the case and the case in his pocket.

“My Jim don’t write that way,” he remarked.

Mr. Tidd indulged in a slight cough.

“I fear that your son has fallen in with indifferent advisers out in Cape Town. He himself of course has no knowledge of mining, and he can only believe or disbelieve what he is told.

136

However, Mr. Baker, we need not go into that. You will understand, I am sure, that in the face of that letter it would be useless for me to propose to head-quarters the extension of the overdraft you require.”

Mr. Baker’s tired eyes looked around the room, as though in search of some object from which they could derive inspiration.

“I don’t see how I’m to raise the money I want for next fourth, then,” he said at last.

It was an ill confession for a bank manager to hear. Mr. Tidd frowned.

“Can you not make a special effort to get your accounts in?” he asked.

“I’ve had most of what’s owing,” was the dreary reply.

Mr. Tidd scented a bad debt, a contingency from which his whole being recoiled in horror.

“I trust, Mr. Baker,” he said, “that if you find yourself in difficulties you will remember your moral as well as your financial indebtedness to the bank. I have perhaps indiscreetly allowed you to sell nearly the whole of your securities whilst leaving your overdraft untouched.”

“The whole of the money’s gone out to Jim,” the ironmonger declared. “The business has never made a loss.”

137

“Do I need to point out to you,” Mr. Tidd said stiffly, “that to withdraw most of the capital from your business to finance your son’s speculations, is not honest to your trade creditors or your bank? I consider your son’s conduct most reprehensible.”

“Jim always believed I’d be able to raise the money on this share of the mine,” Mr. Baker sighed, looking at the document which Mr. Tidd had pushed across the table to him. “However, that’s neither here nor there. You can’t do anything for me, Mr. Tidd?”

“In the way of a further advance, certainly not,” was the firm reply. “On the contrary, head-quarters insist that your overdraft is at once reduced from the seventeen hundred and sixty pounds it stands at to-day, to the five hundred pounds originally

arranged.”

“I can’t do it, Mr. Tidd,” the ironmonger confessed. “There’s nothing but a miracle’ll see me through next fourth, without any question of reducing the overdraft.”

“The long and short of it is,” Mr. Tidd wound up, with as much anger in his tone as he ever permitted himself to show, “that you have parted with the capital in your business to assist your son’s ill-advised speculations.”

138

“You can put it that way if you like,” Mr. Baker replied, rising heavily to his feet. “You see—you haven’t got a son.”

Mr. Baker left the bank with scant leave-takings, and walked slowly down the principal street of Melhampton. Most people had a word to say to him, but he answered few greetings. His mind was in a state of confusion. He could barely realise the morass into which he had slipped. He was fifty-nine years of age, and for thirty years he had conducted a small but successful business in the heart of the town—thirty years of hard but pleasant work, spent in close association with the neighbours with whom he had grown up, and with whom, in the course of the years, he had drifted into a familiarity which passed the bounds of ordinary friendship. He was “Tom” to everybody—“Have-a-drink Tom,” as some wag had once christened him, owing to his well-known proclivity for being the first to offer hospitality on suitable occasions. His seat in the bar parlour of the ‘Melhampton Arms’ was sacred, as indeed it might be, considering that he had occupied it for a small portion of nearly every day for thirty years. The history of the town had

139

apartment. Men had been envied for their good fortune, blamed for their shortcomings, discussed in every possible manner. For, in a small town, local news is the very salt of life. The world outside rolls on through unreal spaces. It was hard for the simple Melhampton tradespeople to believe that whatever might happen outside would make very much difference to their daily lives. So their heroes were set up from amongst their own number. There was Mr. Meekes, the wealthy draper, Chairman of the Parish Council, yet seldom absent from his seat in the corner of the settle on Friday evenings; Jim Goldworthy, the saddler, whose cricket made him a sort of mild hero in the place, and who everyone was convinced would have played for England against Australia but for his invincible modesty and his strong objection to travelling more than a dozen miles from his native town. Then there was Mr. Tidd, the bank manager, whose knowledge and handling of figures was spoken of with universal awe, and who everyone was convinced would have been able to re-establish the exchange of the world if the Chancellor of the Exchequer had only taken him into his confidence and allowed him a free hand for a matter of three months. Mr. Haselton, the vicar, was scarcely so universally popular, but his relationship to the great Devonshire family of Haseltons conferred upon him a sort of secondary lustre which seemed to justify his position in the town. And as for fashion, Melhampton would have found it difficult to believe that Lady Stourton, whose name they sometimes saw in the London papers, and whose photograph had once appeared in a group in the *Tatler*, was not one of the leaders of London society. The doings of her children who left Melhampton were followed with a mild toleration by those who were wise enough to remain where they were, but that very toleration was mingled with a certain pity. There lurked a clear conviction amongst the elders of the

neighbourhood, that whoever left Melhampton for any other place was a trifle soft. Thus, when Aubrey Haselton, the vicar's son, made a century for the "Butterflies" against the M.C.C., Melhampton was mildly interested, but could not help feeling how much more wonderful such an exploit as the compiling of a hundred runs would have been if the young man had stayed at home and played for Melhampton against Barnstaple.

Mr. Baker made his way, more from custom than from any conscious inclination, under the broad archway of the 'Melhampton Arms,' turned to the right along the flagged passage, passed the curtained window and opened the door of the bar parlour. Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, who had been impinging slightly upon his customary seat, moved hastily up to make room for the new-comer. There was a little chorus of welcome from the assembled company, amongst whom Mr. Baker noticed, with a cold shiver, Fred Pollett, the representative of the Exeter Agricultural Implements Manufacturers, Limited, who were, next to the bank, his largest creditors. The latter welcomed him jovially.

141

"Now what was I saying, chaps?" he exclaimed; "why need I go out and look for business when here comes Tom Baker with an order for another of those reaping machines in his pocket for me. You'll have one with me, Tom? Pint of bitter for Mr. Baker, miss. Now what about that order, Tom?"

"Bribery and corruption," Mr. Scroggins declared, emptying his own mug. "It's agin the law nowadays, Mr. Pollett. You can't ask a man to have a drink before you've booked his order."

"I'm ready to book it before they're served, anyhow," the

142

traveller observed. "What do you say, Mr. Baker? Three hundred and forty pounds ten apiece, they are, and I'll take a ha'penny off for luck."

Mr. Baker had settled himself wearily in his place. He took little notice of the sallies which were being exchanged around him. Whilst he was being served by Mrs. Dowdswell, the widowed landlady, herself, there happened a thing, once of rare occurrence, now common enough. A stranger pushed open the door of the bar parlour and made his entrance.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said, with great civility. "Good morning, madam," he added, removing his hat to Mrs. Dowdswell. "Can I have a whisky and soda?"

"Certainly, sir," was the prompt reply.

The stranger seated himself in a vacant chair. The company took note and approved of him. He was dressed in the fashion of a tourist, in tweed clothes and knickerbockers. His eyes, in which there lurked a perpetual twinkle, seemed exceedingly blue against the tan of his skin. He was apparently of between forty and fifty years of age, and from the first Melhampton became aware of the fact that he was one of those who liked the sound of his own voice.

143

"Old place seems just about the same," he remarked as he accepted the whisky and soda from Mrs. Dowdswell. "A good many years since I was here last."

"Is that so, sir?" the landlady answered.

"Came to see my brother," the stranger went on, "and he must

have been dead pretty well a score of years. Ebenezer Trigg, his name was. I expect some of you remember him.”

“Eb Trigg, the tailor?” Mr. Scroggins exclaimed. “He had the little shop next door but one to mine.”

“I’ve got a pair of breeches now that he made for me,” the veterinary surgeon, who had just strolled in, remarked. “First I ever had, and not the worst, either.”

“I’m afraid he couldn’t have been much of a tailor,” the new-comer declared with a twinkle in his eyes. “Anyway, he never made much money at it.”

“He was a comfortable man,” old Granfer Crocombe, a retired dealer in cattle spices, remarked. “Comfortable well off he was, as I mind him. Owned his own little bit of property, and a horse and cart, before he died.”

The younger Mr. Trigg smiled.

144

“I guess he was easily satisfied,” he observed. “Still, I’m glad he managed to jog along. He was the only relative I had, and if he were alive now things would be better for him than they ever have been before.”

Melhampton made a point of never appearing inquisitive, and though the new-comer’s remark might seem to have invited comment, it was followed by a brief silence. Mr. Trigg presently continued.

“Madam,” he begged, addressing the land-lady, “will you fill up all glasses, please? I haven’t the good luck, gentlemen, to be a

native of Melhampton, but Ebenezer, whenever he wrote me, spoke of the place as though it were the hub of the universe. I have come to revisit it on his account. Put up a bit of a memorial in the church, very likely.”

The various glasses were refilled. Civilities were exchanged.

“You’ve been abroad, sir?” Mr. Cummings ventured.

“You’re right,” the other replied. “I’ve been twenty-nine years in the United States of America—quite long enough, I can assure you all, to welcome the quiet and peace of a place like this. I’ve come back home to end my days in the old country, anyway.”

145

“Any family?” Mr. Scroggins asked politely.

“Not a sign of it,” was the frank reply. “I’m a single man, and, as far as I know, Ebenezer was my only relative. Seems kind of hard,” he went on reflectively, “when you’ve spent your life abroad and done pretty well for yourself, to come back home and have nothing but a brother’s tombstone to visit.”

Mrs. Dowdswell sighed. She was of a sentimental turn of mind. Her young lady assistant also looked with interest upon the younger Mr. Trigg, who, notwithstanding his middle age, was still a personable man.

“Ebenezer never spoke of his folk,” Granfer Crocombe observed. “He was always a lonely kind of body.”

“Came from Suffolk, we did,” Mr. Trigg continued. “We were the only children, and father and mother died about the time

Ebenezer went into business. I'm going to motor through Suffolk in a month or two, and see if I can't unearth a relative or two, however distant they may be. I'm a man that's used to company, madam," he went on. "I'm all for friendliness amongst one another for the short time we're on the earth."

Mr. Trigg was now established. Very soon he could have stood an examination upon the past history and future prospects of Melhampton. Mr. Baker alone remained silent. The new-comer, who had looked at him once or twice curiously, edged a little closer to him.

"You're Tom Baker, surely?" he observed.

"That's my name," the ironmonger admitted. "I can't say as I remember you, Mr. Trigg."

"Maybe not," the other replied good-humouredly. "I wasn't here for long, and I was a scrap of a fellow those days. Most of what I know about Melhampton came to me in Ebenezer's letters. You had a son, surely, a good-looking youngster?"

Mr. Baker nodded.

"He's out in South Africa."

"Doing well, I hope?"

"Middling," was the terse reply. "I'd sooner he'd have stayed at home and worked at a regular job."

"The young ones are like that sometimes," Mr. Trigg remarked, "and you can't stop 'em. The old place ain't good enough for

them and they spread their wings. They mostly come back, though, sometime or another. You'll be making the firm 'Baker & Son,' I expect, before you're through," he added cheerfully. . . . "That's an American automobile I've brought with me out in the yard. Looks all right, eh?"

"A very handsome car indeed," the veterinary surgeon remarked, looking it over with the air of a connoisseur. "Are you travelling far to-day, sir?"

"Not a yard farther than this place, if our good landlady can put me up. Can I have a bedroom, ma'am?"

"And welcome," Mrs. Dowdswell replied briskly. "I'll just be telling the maids."

"And I'll let my chauffeur know that I shan't be going any farther," Mr. Trigg remarked. "Hope I'll see some of you later on, gentlemen."

There was a little chorus of polite reply as Mr. Trigg left the room and strolled out into the yard. The butcher looked after him thoughtfully.

"I can't mind him at all," he confessed. "He seems a real pleasant body."

"Your memory's failing you, Scroggins," Granfer Crocombe, who was an octogenarian, remarked with a chuckle. "I mind him well. I mind him coming here for a few days, though it was over a score of years ago. I mind Ebenezer speaking of him. According to Ebenezer, he was a money-maker, too."

“I bet he’s tidy well off,” Mr. Scroggins admitted, looking out at the car. “You know a bit about automobiles, Tom. I shouldn’t say that one would be bought for much less than a thousand pounds.”

Mr. Baker gazed listlessly out of the window.

“Maybe you’re right,” he assented. “She’s a big horse-power, anyway.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” Granfer Crocombe went on, “if that man Ebenezer Trigg’s brother weren’t worth a matter of twenty thousand pounds or more. They do make money that fast in the United States of America.”

Mr. Baker rose to his feet. The thought of such wealth just then hurt him.

“Good morning, all,” he said. “I must look in at the shop before I go up to dinner.”

Pollett followed him out.

“I’m going your way, Mr. Baker,” he announced. “What about another of those machines, sir? It couldn’t do you any harm, and our people would give you easy terms.”

Mr. Baker shook his head.

149

“I owe your folk enough already, Pollett,” he declared. “Besides, I don’t know where to place one just for the moment.”

“Ned Crocombe, over at One Tree Farm, was talking about one,” the traveller went on confidentially. “I tell you he only

wants a word or two spoken at the right time, and you could book the order. We're pretty slow at deliveries just now, worse luck. It would be November when you got it if you placed the order at this moment."

Mr. Baker showed no signs of yielding.

"I'll talk to Ned about it," he promised. "I can't say any more at present."

"If you'll book the order," the traveller persisted, "I'll promise to sell the machine for you myself before the spring, if Ned Crocombe doesn't take it. There's none too many coming along, and I'd like it booked on my ground."

Mr. Baker shook his head once more.

"I'm no buyer this morning, Pollett," he said simply. "Business is surely bad, and Ned Crocombe is not a man I'd sell to on long credit. Good morning."

The ironmonger turned into his emporium at a few minutes to one o'clock, exchanged a few words with some customers, and watched the closing of the place for the customary dinner hour. He remained alone on the premises for some little time after it was deserted by his assistants, wandering through the main shop and out into the warehouse beyond, with its miscellaneous collection of gardening tools, farm implements, wire-netting and garden chairs. He even went upstairs into the room given over to sporting goods, knocked absently with his knuckles against the filled box of cartridges, took note of the stock of tennis balls, sighed over an accumulation of croquet sets, idly tried a cast with a trout

fishing-rod which somebody had put together and forgotten to take to pieces again. Everywhere was a familiar odour, a mixture of tar and oils, and the slightly earthy smell of iron goods. It was a very ordinary place, very ordinary sort of premises, yet here he had made his steady and comfortable living for many years. Here, and in the little counting-house into which he presently passed, had come to him most of the joys and sorrows of life—the thrill of profitable sales, the gloom of non-success, disquieting rumours of unfair competition. Here had been born the various schemes which he had launched for the increase of his business, notably the substantially built garage, with its many signs to attract the passing motorist. There was not a traveller who had not been glad of his business. Thomas Baker had paid his way with the best—until from his boy had come these constant and pathetic appeals for help. Now he was a ruined man. A matter of ten shillings in the pound for his creditors, perhaps. For himself, what? He glanced into the recesses of the warehouse, where the barrels of oil were stored. A hook from the ceiling, a rope and a noose. Why not? In his small way he was a proud man, and even the shadow of forthcoming disgrace came near to breaking his heart.

151

He walked up the hill to the red-brick villa which had once been his pride. He scarcely glanced at the trim little maid-servant who answered the door to him, nodded to his stout but still comely wife, exchanged a word of greeting with young Tom, his other son, and took his place absently at the head of the table. The ordinary remarks were exchanged, he ate and drank in the usual way, even asked questions about the business of the morning. But the shadow of unreality was already resting even upon these everyday happenings. All these things belonged to a world that had been. Somehow or other, he

152

seemed plagued all the time by the memory of that dark shed with its smell of oils, its stout beam set amongst the sombre shadows, and the coil of rope. Many years ago Amos Tricket, the postman, charged after forty years of honourable service with the theft of a registered packet, confessed his guilt and hanged himself. He found himself wondering in morbid fashion just what the man's feelings had been during that drop into space; whether he had really known or felt anything of what was coming. . . .

Then Tom junior, who had been waiting for a favourable opportunity, came out with his news.

“Dad,” he announced, “Mr. Crocombe of One Tree Farm was in this morning.”

“What did he want?” his father asked listlessly.

“He paid his account—forty-nine pounds seventeen—for one thing.”

Mr. Baker showed a spark of interest.

“That's good,” he said. “Did he want anything?”

“He placed an order with me for one of the Exeter reaping machines—wants to take delivery right away. I saw Mr. Pollett go down the street this morning. You'll get hold of him before he leaves, won't you, dad?”

Mr. Baker forced himself into a show of interest. The transaction was a profitable one. At another time he would have patted his son on the back and sent him up to the cricket nets half

an hour earlier. As it was, the idea of placing an order with Mr. Pollett was like a nightmare to him.

“I’ll see about it,” he promised a little shortly. “I’m not sure that I can get hold of one for immediate delivery.”

“You’ll try, dad, won’t you?” his son ventured. “I worked out the commission before I came up. It’s fifty-four pounds for us.”

“A very good morning’s work,” Mr. Baker declared.

“He’s got his father’s head, Tom has,” his mother murmured placidly.

The head of the household shivered.

“Someone walking across my grave,” he explained hastily.

* * * * *

Rather to the mild surprise of everybody, the brother of Ebenezer Trigg—Mr. Laurence Trigg, as he announced himself—prolonged his stay at Melhampton in altogether indefinite fashion. He visited the grave of his brother and ordered a new tombstone, called upon the vicar, and put his name down for a hundred pounds upon the subscription list towards the restoration of the church. He excused himself from accepting an invitation to dine at the vicarage, confessing frankly that he was a working man who had made money, and that he had neither the clothes nor the manners for such a function. He astonished Mr. Tidd by strolling in one morning and opening an account with a draft on a well-known London bank for a thousand pounds. He made short motoring tours in the

neighbourhood, and made a point of taking out with him the older and poorer people of the place. In the bar parlour at the ‘Melhampton Arms’ he became an exceedingly popular figure. He was at his best, indeed, between six and seven o’clock, when, with a little flush upon his good-natured face—he never drank to excess, but only, as he put it, to enjoy himself—he expanded fully and was always ready with an invitation to anyone who cared to stay and have supper with him in the snug little coffee-room. He paid for everything wherever he went with open hands. Without undue ostentation, he suffered it to be known that he enjoyed spending and that he had the wherewithal to do it.

“I tell you what it is,” he declared one evening when the bar parlour was more than usually crowded, “this part of the country suits me. I don’t wonder at Ebenezer settling down here. I’ve half a mind to do the same thing myself.”

“You’ll have to find a wife,” Mr. Scroggins insisted jocosely. “No bachelors allowed in Melhampton.”

“I shall apply to Mrs. Dowdswell,” was the prompt reply. “What do you say, ma’am? Can you find me a wife if I decide to settle down here?”

“Bless the man!” Mrs. Dowdswell exclaimed. “There’s plenty of women about all the world over.”

“And good-looking ones, too, round these parts,” Granfer Crocombe chuckled. “I could give ’e the names of half a dozen, Mr. Trigg—real proper bodies, with a trifle of cash of their own along, too.”

Mr. Trigg shook his head.

“I’m not particular about the cash,” he replied. “What I shall want is a cheerful disposition, a trim figure and good looks.”

156

“Why, he’s describing Miss Alice exactly,” Harry Foulds declared, indicating the young lady who assisted Mrs. Dowdswell. “Shall us all clear out, my dear, and give Mr. Trigg time to propose?”

There was a roar of laughter, in the midst of which Tom Baker made one of his rare appearances. Amongst a chorus who invited him to have a drink, Mr. Trigg was easily first.

“It’s good to see you again, Mr. Baker,” Mrs. Dowdswell remarked as she served him. “What’s come to you lately?”

“Busy,” Mr. Baker replied. “We haven’t finished our stocktaking yet.”

“It’s been a proper year for trade,” Granfer Crocombe remarked. “If I were a young man, I’d like well enough to be your partner, Tom.”

“I don’t know as you would,” was the somewhat heavily-spoken reply. “Everything’s so mortal dear to buy and difficult to get hold of. I haven’t got my season’s supply of cartridges yet. The Squire was in this morning, grumbling like a bear with a sore head.”

Conversation rippled on along the usual channels, with an occasional staccato-like burst of laughter. Mr. Laurence

157

Trigg, however, was not the only one who noticed that the ironmonger's mirth was a trifle forced. There were whispers in various parts of the room.

"Old man Baker ain't going to break up at his time of life, surely?" Mr. Scroggins murmured sympathetically to his neighbour, Granfer Crocombe.

"'Tain't his 'ealth," the latter replied, shaking his head sagely. "He do be worrying about that son of his in Africa. A bright young lad he seemed when here, but he's been nowt but a worry to his parents since he went to furrin parts. Look at Tom walk out now. He do have the appearance of a man foredoomed to trouble."

The ironmonger took his leave amidst a little chorus of farewells. As soon as he had turned homewards, the slight exhilaration of the extra drinks he had taken passed away. He was almost haggard as he climbed the hill which led to his home. He was within a few days now of the crisis. It was the second of August. On the third he had bills of exchange to advise for something like two thousand pounds. At the bank his overdraft stood where it did. There was not a penny to be hoped for in that direction. The small sums which he might expect to receive would amount at the most to barely two hundred pounds. The situation was hopeless. Mr. Baker's conscience, too, was not of the elastic order, and the fact that he had sold and received the money for the machines represented by the claim of the Exeter Agricultural Implement Company, seemed to him nothing less than sheer dishonesty. As he reached his gate, his knees began to tremble. The horror of it all swept through his mind. The black spectre of disgrace had linked arms

with him. An ugly voice seemed whispering in his ear—"Better go back to the shop now, to the dark shed with its familiar smell of oil and ironwork! Better end it!"

A cheerful call from the road made him start like a thief. He looked around guiltily. The large American car glided to his side.

"Come for half an hour's spin before supper, Mr. Baker," its occupant invited good-humouredly. "We'll go up to the top of Lamater Ridge and have a look at the view."

Anything to escape from his trim sitting-room, his cheerful wife, his well-behaved, dutiful son, who would ply him with questions about that machine which he had never ordered. He climbed into the seat by Mr. Trigg's side, and the car glided off. Mr. Trigg did not drive so quickly as usual.

159

"Seems to me you're looking a bit out of sorts, Mr. Baker," he remarked.

Then like a flash there came to the harassed man an idea. To no Melhampton man could he have confided his trouble. This good-natured stranger was a different matter. With a groan he yielded to the inspiration.

"I'm in trouble, Mr. Trigg," he confessed. "I've taken the money that belongs to my business to help my lad out in Africa, and he's done no good with it. I can't meet my bills this fourth, not by a long way. I'm a ruined man."

"Come, come," Mr. Trigg expostulated sympathetically, "it's not so bad as that, I hope."

“It’s hopeless,” the ironmonger groaned.

Mr. Trigg drove to the summit of the hill and brought the car to a standstill.

“Now, Mr. Baker,” he said, “I don’t like to hear a man talk like you. Let’s get to the truth of this matter. How much money did you send your lad?”

“Nigh upon four thousand pounds,” was the dreary reply. “I was a madman, of course, but the boy wrote so hopefully that I was fairly carried away.”

160

“What did he do with it?”

“He put it into a mine.”

Mr. Trigg made a wry face.

“I don’t like mines,” he confessed. “Was this four thousand pounds the whole of your capital?”

“In a way of speaking, it was,” Mr. Baker confessed, “and some of my creditors’ money as well.”

“What do the bills amount to that are due this fourth?”

“Nigh upon two thousand pounds.”

“Are there any other claims pressing?” Mr. Trigg inquired.

“I owe the bank seventeen hundred pounds. They’re acting awkward, too.”

Mr. Trigg lit a cigar, having first passed his case in vain to his companion.

“Seems to me,” he reflected, “that a matter of three thousand five hundred pounds would see you through this.”

“It would see me through, all right,” Mr. Baker admitted with a groan, “but where’s it coming from?”

Mr. Trigg turned and faced his companion.

“Look here, Baker,” he said deliberately, “I’m a man that’s moderately well off, and when I see a chance of helping a fellow-creature without it costing me too much, I like to do it. Would this three thousand five hundred pounds make you solvent?”

161

“It would leave me a thousand pounds to the good,” Mr. Baker declared, “taking stock at bottom figures.”

Mr. Trigg took off his hat and let the breeze sweep through his hair.

“Have you got anything at all you could sell?” he asked. “Your house, for instance?”

“Mortgaged to the bank,” was the gloomy reply. “Besides, it isn’t worth a penny more than a thousand.”

Mr. Trigg scratched his chin.

“Look here,” he continued, “I’ve been against lending money all my life. My old dad made me promise that when I was a

youngster. His idea was that the surest way to lose a friend was to lend him money! All the same, I'm going to see you through this difficulty."

Mr. Baker clutched at the sides of the car. His eyes were fixed upon the blue horizon. He suddenly felt near Heaven.

"I don't want to put the thing as a loan," Mr. Trigg went on thoughtfully. "I was hoping your house might have been free. Have you any other plot of land, or any shares, or any worthless thing that I can buy from you?"

162

"There's the tenth share in that mine I was telling you about," Mr. Baker ventured, "the Finden Copper Mine."

His prospective benefactor made another wry face.

"Your boy ought to have known better than to have been taken in by that old swindle," he said sternly. "However, if that's all you've got, we'll make it do," he added kindly, as he saw the other man flinch. "Is there a lawyer in the place?"

"There's Mr. Bendall comes here at twelve o'clock to-morrow morning," was the hopeful reply. "He takes a room at the 'Melhampton Arms' once a week."

Mr. Trigg nodded.

"You meet me there at twelve o'clock, then," he directed. "I will buy your share in the Finden Mine for three thousand five hundred pounds, and you will sign a document promising that if I should require the money at any time within the next ten years, you will repay me in exchange for the share."

Mr. Baker leaned over and grasped his companion's hand. The latter patted him on the back and thrust the cigar which he had previously refused into his mouth.

163

“That's all right, Baker,” he said, pressing down the self-starter of his car. “You go home with a light heart. I'm glad to be able to help you. Light your cigar, man, and look at that wonderful view.”

Mr. Baker blinked.

“I can't see the damned view!” he gulped.

* * * * *

A very different Tom Baker strolled through the town at a little before twelve on the following day towards the bank. He carried himself erect, and he answered the greetings of acquaintances in his old fashion. Perhaps the most surprised person of all was Mr. Tidd, who behind his starched manner and his official disapproval of his customer's reckless support of a prodigal son, was really looking forward to the unfortunate crisis in his affairs with the utmost sympathy. He came from behind the bank counter with a grave expression, but his tone was meant to be kindly. Mr. Baker, however, wrung his hand warmly. He had not in the least the air of a man unable to meet his engagements.

164

“I've just looked in for a minute or two,” he announced joyfully, “to bring you a bit of good news.”

“I'm delighted to hear it,” Mr. Tidd declared. “To tell you the truth, I was rather dreading seeing you this morning.”

“And I was dreading coming,” Mr. Baker confessed. “That’s all over now, though. I’ve met with a friend in need, Mr. Tidd, and God bless him! I’ve sold my share in the Finden Mine for three thousand five hundred pounds.”

“But the mine is valueless!” Mr. Tidd exclaimed. “Who on earth has given you such a ridiculous price?”

“Mr. Trigg—Ebenezer Trigg’s brother—him that’s staying down at the ‘Melhampton Arms,’” the ironmonger pressed on, regardless of grammar. “He was going to lend me the money, but he’s under a promise not to make loans, so he asked me if I’d any old thing I could sell. He wanted the house, only as you know there’s a mortgage on it. I’m selling him my tenth share of the mine, and he’s going to give me as long as I like to repay the money.”

“God bless my soul!” the bank manager exclaimed.

“You’re quite sure—you’ll forgive me, Mr. Baker—you’re quite sure he understands that the mine’s valueless?”

165

“I told him so myself,” Tom Baker replied, “but he knew it already. That don’t matter, though. He’d have taken the house, though it only cost five hundred. It just had to be some sort of consideration as a matter of form.”

“When do you get the money?” Mr. Tidd inquired. “Remember the bills have to be advised to-day.”

“I’ve brought you the advice note,” the ironmonger answered, depositing the strip of paper upon the counter, “and my passbook. I’m meeting Mr. Trigg in Mr. Bendall’s room at the ‘Melhampton Arms’ at twelve o’clock, and I shall be in here

with the money before lunch.”

Mr. Tidd held out his hand across the counter. There was a suspicion of moisture to which he would not for the world have confessed, behind his gold-rimmed spectacles.

“My heartiest congratulations, Tom!” he said. “I’m glad, of course, for the bank’s sake, but, believe me, I am more glad for your own.”

The two men parted almost abruptly, words at the moment being a little troublesome. Mr. Tidd proceeded methodically with his work for the next half-hour, until he was called to the telephone to answer a trunk call in his private office. When he emerged, it was perhaps as well that there were no customers in the bank. Hatless, and without pausing to take breath, only shouting as he passed to his junior clerk to take charge, Mr. Tidd sprang through the swing doors, down the steps, and, with one hand holding his glasses firmly on his nose, sprinted down the broad street with his coat tails flying behind him, an amazing and never altogether forgotten sight by such of the townspeople of Melhampton who happened to be about at the time.

* * * * *

In the upstairs coffee-room of the ‘Melhampton Arms,’ a room used sometimes for farmers’ meetings, and at any time to be secured for private functions, the business between Mr. Tom Baker and his benefactor had proceeded smoothly to its appointed end. The cheque for three thousand five hundred pounds was already in the ironmonger’s fingers. The lawyer,

who had scarcely concealed his surprise at the whole transaction, sat back in his chair. His client conveyed the cheque to his waistcoat pocket with trembling fingers.

167

“I’ll just step up to the bank with this, Mr. Trigg,” he said, “and I’ll be back right along. We’ll drink a bottle of wine together. You’ll wait and join us, Mr. Bendall?”

“I shall be delighted,” the lawyer acquiesced.

“I’ll stop and have a glass of wine with you, with pleasure,” Mr. Trigg agreed genially, “but I’m off to London for a couple of days immediately afterwards. There are one or two investments I have had offered me, that want looking into. In the meantime _____”

At that moment Mr. Tidd entered the room. To say that he entered it is to describe his progress in mild terms. The door was thrown open as though a tornado had struck it, and he made his appearance very much like the wire-sprung hero of a Punch and Judy show.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Don’t sign anything, Mr. Baker!”

Two of the three men looked at him with frankly open-mouthed astonishment. Mr. Trigg’s good-humoured face, however, was singularly disfigured by what seemed to be a scowl. The hand which held the recently-signed document stole behind his back.

“Just had—telephone from London,” Mr. Tidd gasped —“trunk call from head office—cables everywhere in London—the Finden Copper Mine . . .”

168

“What about it?” Mr. Baker demanded, as the bank manager paused for breath.

“Huge find of copper,” Mr. Tidd continued, gradually recovering himself. “The shares that were unsaleable yesterday are in enormous demand. They’re being quoted between three and four pounds. Your tenth share of the mine, Mr. Baker, is worth a fortune.”

Mr. Trigg laughed. It was a hard, unmusical laugh. His expression seemed to have become magically changed.

“I’m in luck, it seems,” he declared a little defiantly.

“Excuse me, gentlemen!”

They all looked around. Mr. Tidd, in his hurried entry, had left the door open, and Mrs. Dowdswell had followed him in. She held in her hand a letter. They all gazed at her. Two of them, at least, were beyond the power of speech.

“Mr. Baker, sir,” she said, “you’re an old friend, and what’s right’s right. I’ve never been accused of prying, and if I’ve done what I shouldn’t, well, I’ve done it, and that’s all there is to say about it. Ellen found this letter in Mr. Trigg’s portmanteau when she was taking out a suit of clothes to brush, and being as it was addressed to you, Mr. Baker, and in your own son’s handwriting, and me hearing that you were here with Mr. Bendall, the lawyer, and Mr. Trigg, and seeing Mr. Tidd come upstairs three steps at a time, and without his hat, well, I’ve brought the letter, and what I’ve done I done for the best,” she concluded defiantly.

Mr. Baker took the letter from her hand, tore it open and stared at it.

“From Jim!” he muttered, and began to read aloud. Mr. Trigg took a step towards the door, but the bank manager stood in the way, frowning fiercely.

My dear Dad (Mr. Baker read out),

This is to bring you great news, which I ought to have cabled, but we want badly to keep the thing dark for a week or so. All that I told you about the mine is justified. The ten thousand shares I sent you could be sold here to-day for twenty thousand pounds, and by the time you get this will be worth a great deal more. I am coming home by the next steamer, and I am sending you this letter by Mr. Laurence, who is a friend of mine I met in Cape Town. He knows all about the matter, as he has a few shares himself.

170

I do hope that you have not been inconvenienced by sending me so much money, and that it hasn't put your business about. You need never do another stroke of work unless you want to. Mother can have her automobile, and young Tom can go to college if he still has a mind to. I expect to land in England about August 7th and shall come straight to Melhampton.

Your affectionate son,

Jim.

P.S.—Do what you can for Mr. Laurence. He seems very interested in Devonshire, and he knows all about your

goodness to me. I haven't known him long, but he seems a decent chap.

The ironmonger finished his reading, and, pushing his spectacles a little farther down on his nose, looked across at the pseudo Mr. Trigg, who showed himself to be possessed of at least one admirable quality. He accepted defeat without comment, almost nonchalantly. His hand came from behind his back, and he laid upon the table both the agreement which had just been signed and the bundle of share certificates. Simultaneously Mr. Baker tore the cheque into small pieces.

171

“The deal, I imagine, is off,” Mr. Trigg remarked with an attempt at facetiousness in his tone.

Tom Baker gently inclined his head towards the door, and Mr. Trigg took up his hat and moved towards it. On the threshold he turned around and faced them.

“Melhampton,” he said in valedictory fashion, “is a quaint little place and you are all quaint people. If you understood anything about business you would know that this was just an ordinary sort of deal which didn't happen to come off. Every word of what your son writes is true, Mr. Baker. I offer you my heartiest congratulations.”

Mr. Tidd spoke for the purity of Melhampton commercial life.

“Such deals as the one in which you were engaged,” he rejoined sternly, “may be common enough in the business circles in which you move. In Melhampton we should call them swindles.”

They heard the echoes of Mr. Trigg's laughter as he descended the stairs.

"I hope I did right, gentlemen?" Mrs. Dowdswell asked. "It's not my custom to go prying into other people's affairs."

"If I may be allowed to say so," the lawyer pronounced, "your intervention, Mrs. Dowdswell, was providential. The gentleman who has just departed was certainly guilty of sharp practice, but from a legal point of view the cancellation of his purchase of Mr. Baker's shares would have presented certain difficulties. He would at any rate have had time to dispose of them before a judgment could have been given. The letter which he failed to deliver, however, rendered his subsequent dealings with Mr. Baker nothing more nor less than a conspiracy."

"Madam," Mr. Tidd interposed, having now fully recovered his breath, "you did excellently, and you will do better still if you will send Ellen down to the cellar for a bottle of the old Veuve Clicquot. After lunch will do for your business at the bank, Mr. Baker," he added, holding out his hand. "I'll see those bills are advised all right."

The two men shook hands solemnly. Conversation was perhaps a little incoherent until the return of Mrs. Dowdswell, preceded by Ellen. On the tray which the latter was carrying was a dusty bottle of champagne with a familiar orange-coloured top, four glasses, a plateful of biscuits, and some thin strips of cheese. The glasses were filled. It was a wonderful moment in Mr. Baker's life. As he watched the refilling of his glass, however, he was for a moment thoughtful.

“What made you bring me the letter direct, Mrs. Dowdswell, instead of handing it to Mr. Trigg?” he asked.

The landlady smiled.

“I’ll tell ’e, Tom,” she answered, watching the bubbles rising in her own glass. “There was just one reason why I never could quite believe in that there man, gentlemanly-spoken though he was.”

“And what was it?” Mr. Tidd inquired.

“Just this,” Mrs. Dowdswell confided: “that Ebenezer Trigg, he never had no brother.”

VI

A MAN MUST HOLD HIS WIFE

Police-Constable Chopping pushed open the door of the bar parlour at the ‘Melhampton Arms’ and insinuated about a third of his capacious person through the aperture. He raised his hand to the peak of his flat cap in a ponderous salute.

“Good morning, Mrs. Dowdswell. Good morning, all,” he said.

The greeting was properly returned by Granfer Crocombe, Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, Mr. Henry Foulds, the horse dealer, Mr. Tom Baker, the ironmonger, and Mrs. Dowdswell, the widowed landlady herself. The latter, who was wiping some glasses, beamed hospitably upon her august visitor.

“You’ll step in, Mr. Chopping?” she invited.

The police-constable shook his head.

“I just looked in to bring you a bit of news, Mrs. Dowdswell,” he announced. “Ned the Gipsy is back. He be up on No Man’s Patch at the present moment, making them baskets of his’n.”

175

There was a little murmur of interest. It was information, this, which had its dramatic background.

“Farmer Craske see him coming along through Woolworthy Town,” the constable continued. “He’s got his caravan back, fire

burning inside, clean curtains, and all ship-shape. Muster Craske said he seemed a bit thinner but otherwise no different.”

“Three months’ jail aren’t enough to hurt a man of Ned’s build,” Mr. Scroggins declared. “They do say that he’s as hard as nails and tough as a bit of whipcord.”

“You’ll take a seat and have a glass of whisky, Mr. Chopping?” Mrs. Dowdswell begged. “We’ll not press you to stay, knowing how busy you must be. I’ve a drop of your favourite Irish here.”

The constable shook his head.

“Not this morning, Mrs. Dowdswell,” he replied, a little reprovingly. “I’m on duty at the present moment—in fact I only just looked in to be sure that you weren’t behindhand with the news. Good morning, all.”

The constable withdrew, closing the door behind him.
Mr. Scroggins grinned.

176

“I bet he’s none too pleased to hear of Ned being around and about,” he declared. “He’s a big man, but he’s a man for peace, is Chopping. He’d be like a bit of putty in Ned’s hands. Neither he nor that young Hawkins could stand up to a proper fighting man for half a round.”

“I wonder why such weedy youths as Edward Hawkins go into the Force at all,” Harry Foulds observed. “Why, there’s no self-respecting wrongdoer would ever suffer the like to lay hands on him.”

“It looks as though they might have to tackle Ned, anyway,” Tom

Baker remarked, “and if they do, God help ’em!”

“We’d better all on us apply to be made special constables,” Granfer Crocombe chuckled.

“Some on us’d have a poor time,” the butcher grunted.

“However, as for me, I doan’t move from now on without my steel.”

“A lot of use that would be to you if Ned the Gipsy came into your shop quarrelsome-like,” Harry Foulds jeered. “If he wanted a sirloin of beef he’d have it.”

“I wonder,” Mrs. Dowdswell reflected, “whether William Shales knows yet.”

“I see him coming out of the post office two hours ago, looking main serious,” Tom Baker remarked. “That may have been something to do with the affair.”

177

“If he’s a wise man he’ll send Bella away,” Mrs. Dowdswell declared. “I’ve heard more tales about Ned the Gipsy than I’ve been able to take heed on, but he’s a man I’d be mortal afeard of if I were a weakly man with a wife like Bella.”

“This three months in jail may have sobered him a bit,” Harry Foulds remarked.

“All the same,” Tom Baker pronounced, “I’m rarely concerned for that poor fellow William Shales. I’m wondering whether there’s anything we could do to help him.”

There was a somewhat awkward pause. The door had been

opened hesitatingly, and a small man in a dark-grey suit of clothes, wearing a bowler hat a size too large for him, made a dubious entrance. He had weak blue eyes, a straggling fair moustache, and his physique was negligible. His one redeeming feature was his chin, which was square and dogged.

“Good morning, all,” he said, making for a vacant seat. “A glass of bitter, please, Mrs. Dowdswell.”

“With me,” Tom Baker interposed hurriedly. “What’s this we’re hearing about Ned the Gipsy being back again, William?”

178

“He’s up on No Man’s Patch,” the tailor replied. “I heard on him early this morning.”

“Pity they ever let a troublesome fellow like that out of jail,” Mr. Harry Foulds remarked, tapping his boot with his riding-whip.

“An expense to the country, that sort are,” the butcher agreed. “I’ll bet old Chopping’ll be glad to see the back of him.”

“And so shall I,” William Shales agreed; “and so,” he added deliberately, “will my wife.”

“It’s a fair shame,” Mrs. Dowdswell declared as she passed his tankard to her newly-arrived customer, “that a respectable body should be so plagued.”

The tailor accepted his beer, drank a portion of it and cleared his throat.

“There be gossip here and gossip there,” he said, “and it wouldn’t be like them that loves a bit of mischief if they didn’t now and then suggest that my Bella had sometime encouraged the fellow. But this is God’s truth, and a very suitable place to say it in, with you gentlemen here to listen. She did no more than smile pleasantly at him in Okehampton Market the day she bought a broom, and since then he never left her alone.”

179

“There’s no one has ever said different, I’m sure,” Mrs. Dowdswell murmured soothingly.

“I do admit,” the tailor continued as he looked into the bottom of his tankard, “that he did handle me cruel in the yard of the ‘Blue Lion’ that afternoon, but I was never made for a fighting man, though I sought to do my best, as any man should, to stand up by the side of his wedded wife. One kiss he did have of her, and against that she struggled, though there are those who love mischief who would say that she didn’t. And for that, and what he did to me, he’s been in prison this three months. He was let out from Exeter Jail last week. Were any of you in court when he was sentenced, gentlemen?”

They shook their heads.

“It was all in the paper,” Mrs. Dowdswell observed. “The shameless vagabond, I call him!”

“He turned and he laughed and he kissed his hand at Bella,” William Shales said solemnly. “‘I’ll see you when I’m free, dear beauty,’ he called out, and Bella went that pale I thought she’d have fainted in my arms. She be mortal

180

afraid of the man, is my wife.”

“I don’t wonder,” Mr. Tom Baker declared heartily. “See here, William, Chopping’s got his eye on this little affair, as we well know; but if you’d feel more comfortable to have some of us, your fellow-townfolk, come up, as it were, for an hour each _____”

William Shales held out his hand.

“Thank ’e kindly, Mr. Baker,” he interrupted; “thank ’e all, gentlemen. It’s up to me and the law to protect my wife, and I reckon we’ll do it. I’m obliged for your kindly feeling, and I’d ask this much of you. If you find any gossiper as would say that my wife Bella did owt to encourage this man—that she so much as held out her little finger to beckon him hither from Exeter Jail—why, I’d be obliged if you’d give ’em the lie. That’s what I’d ask for friendship’s sake, and no more.”

“And welcome, William,” Tom Baker promised heartily. “It’s clear to everybody that the man’s infatuation was never encouraged by Mrs. Shales.”

The tailor rose to his feet, having refused several offers of further refreshment.

“Good morning to ’e, gentlemen,” he said. “Good morning, all.”

William Shales climbed the steep hill of the town and turned to the left, where he proceeded along a pleasant side street until he presently reached his modest abode. He pushed open the gate, on which a small brass plate indicated his name and calling,

opened the door of the homely, creeper-covered cottage, looked into the front room, where bales of cloth, a counter and several stools were disposed of in somewhat untidy fashion, and finally, after a moment's hesitation, entered the back room, where a table was laid for the midday meal. A tall, fresh-complexioned woman, with masses of rich brown hair and bright blue eyes, turned hastily around at his coming. In her eyes there was a strange expression—it might have been of fear.

“William! How you startled me!” she exclaimed. “Don't move about—like that!”

“You've naught to be frightened of,” he answered quietly.

She set down the dish which she had been carrying, and faced him—a splendid woman of the country, with a clear Devon complexion, and limbs which seemed to defy the concealment of her flimsy summer dress. The two looked at one another for a moment in silence. There was something in their gaze which scarcely lent itself to analysis. The man's voice, when he spoke, had in it a curious note of sadness.

182

“I never ought to have married a fine woman like you, Bella,” he said.

“Don't talk such nonsense,” she answered sharply. “I'm satisfied. Let that be enough for you.”

“But are you satisfied?” he demanded.

Her eyes flashed. She seemed for a moment to lose her temper. Was it anger or fear? he wondered.

“Sit down while the dinner’s hot,” she ordered. “You’re my man and I’ve wanted no other. Let that be enough for you.”

No word passed between them concerning the gipsy who had arrived at No Man’s Patch.

* * * * *

That afternoon, the Reverend Stanley Haselton was disturbed in his post-luncheon meditations by the announcement that a woman of the town desired an audience. He made his dignified way to the study, where Mrs. Shales awaited him. She rose to her feet at his entrance. The room was a beautiful one, furnished with taste, lined with cases of books, and with great vases of flowers distributed wherever space could be found. French-windows stood open just far enough to admit the pleasant sounds of the languorous summer afternoon. The appearance of the woman—as though she herself had gained something of dignity and elegance from her unaccustomed surroundings—amazed the man whom she had come to visit.

183

“It is William Shales’ wife, is it not?” he inquired. “Pray sit down.”

“I’m that nervous I’d rather stand up, sir, and thank you,” the woman replied. “I’ve been a poor attendant at church, sir, but William’s one of your sidesmen and I’ve come to ask for help.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Shales,” the vicar acquiesced, sinking into his easy chair and balancing the tips of his fingers against each other. “Now sit down and make yourself comfortable, there’s a good woman. What can I do for you?”

She took no notice of his renewed invitation. She stood in the subdued circle of light which filtered its way through the window, and Mr. Haselton, who had some glimmerings of artistic perception, marvelled at the splendid grace of this tortured woman.

“Sir,” she began, “I need help, if ever a woman did, for there is a call for sin ringing in my ears and pounding in my heart every living minute of the day and every dead moment of the night. Will you go to him for me, sir—go to him this afternoon?”

184

The recollection of the woman’s story came dimly into the vicar’s mind. He was still, however, puzzled.

“Are you speaking of the man who insulted you, Mrs. Shales,” he asked, “this man who I hear has come back to the neighbourhood?”

“I am speaking of Ned the Gipsy,” she assented. “He’s calling to me up from the hill there, and although I’m a good woman, sir, or always thought I was, the will of me’s gone to pulp, and there’s something inside of me that was only born that day at Okehampton, something of sin and terror and wonder. I’m a lost woman, sir, unless you’ll go to him and get him to go away.”

Mr. Haselton sat in his chair and reflected. He was a narrow man only by circumstance, and because such a frame of mind enabled him to perform his duties in better fashion. This was one of his rare moments of greatness.

“Bella Shales,” he said, “you are one of those unhappy women at whose door sin has knocked. I will help you,

185

but there is a Greater on Whom you must call. Pray with me here, and afterwards I will go to see Ned the Gipsy. But first, down on your knees by my side and ask for such help as I cannot give you.”

The woman sank on to the hearth-rug with a little sob. The vicar held her hand. Never before, in the course of his smug services in his respectably filled church, had his voice carried so near to Heaven. When they had risen, the woman was calmer. He took her to the front door himself.

“In five minutes,” he promised, “I shall start to see that man.”

* * * * *

Ned the Gipsy sat on the steps of his caravan, plaiting a wicker basket. He was a man who might have been of any age between thirty and forty, the type of the true gipsy, with a dash of the Semitic. His cheekbones were a little high, his skin was tanned a deep shade of brown, his dark eyes possessed all the fire of youth, the lines of his mouth curved curiously upwards. He wore brown corduroy clothes, and a red handkerchief knotted round his throat. Every now and then he glanced across towards where he had set a snare in the undergrowth close at hand. His interests in life seemed entirely bounded by the work upon which he was engaged and the advent of his expected rabbit. He was camped on a semicircle of greensward bordering the road, with a background of trees which formed the outskirts of Stourton Park. Below him, and up the hill, were the red-tiled roofs of Melhampton, and beyond, the spreading moor. Ned the Gipsy, however, did not once glance up at this pleasing prospect, nor even behind along the strip of white, dusty road,

the road which dipped and climbed across great stretches of moorland, through villages hidden in clefts of the hill, between tall hedges, through the rich farmland, and so on to the red plains of the south.

Police-Constable Chopping was his first visitor. He came plodding along the road, perspiring from his exertions, and apparently glad enough to reach his destination. Yet his footsteps lagged as he turned on to the turf and approached the gipsy. He was doing what his sturdy sense of duty had bidden him do, but there was something about the atmosphere surrounding that caravan which chilled him.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

187

Ned the Gipsy looked up. He had been perfectly aware for some time of his visitor’s proximity.

“Good afternoon,” he answered.

“I be come to have a word with you, Ned,” the constable continued. “It’s a word which, if you’re a wise man, you’ll take as a word of warning.”

The gipsy had recommenced his task. He made no comment.

“There’s a feeling down yonder,” Chopping continued, jerking with his thumb towards Melhampton, “that you’d better have chosen another pitch. Your camping here may be accidental-like—or it may not—but I want to tell you, Ned, that you’ll do yourself no good by it, if you’ve any idea of stealing William Shales’s wife away from him.”

The gipsy's fingers stopped in their deft manipulation of a strip of willow. He looked up, and though not a muscle of his face moved, it seemed as though he were laughing inside.

“I stole a kiss once,” he said, “no more. This time I shall not steal. What comes to a man he is free to accept. What is given to a man is his if he can hold it.”

The constable felt that there was an excellent reply to this somewhere, but for the moment it eluded him.

188

“William Shales bean't a fighting man, and that you know,” he declared. “The law, however, will protect him.”

The gipsy laid down the basket upon which he was working, and rose to his feet. A little ostentatiously he stretched out his long, lithe arms, displaying for a moment the muscles of his lean chest. Then he turned and mounted the steps which led into his caravan, disappeared and closed the door. Police-Constable Chopping went round to the open window.

“Understand, Ned,” he concluded, in the sternest voice he could command, “if thee makes the slightest attempt to molest William Shales or his wife, you'll find yourself in jail again. You hear that?”

The gipsy turned his head and smiled.

“I know the law,” he said. “I shall not break it.”

Police-Constable Chopping moved away and set his face towards Melhampton. He had gone barely fifty yards before the sound for which the gipsy had been waiting—the squeal of a

trapped rabbit—broke the stillness of the summer afternoon. He paused and listened for a moment before retracing his steps. Like a streak of lightning, the gipsy bent double, ran to the edge of the wood, pressed his foot upon the snare, broke the animal's neck and threw it into the undergrowth. When the constable came puffing back, he was seated once more on the steps of his caravan, working at his basket.

“What sound was that I heard?” the constable asked, glancing around suspiciously.

The gipsy looked up from his task.

“Who knows?” he answered.

Next came Mr. Haselton. He rode his pony up the hill, and had the advantage of arriving in good condition. The gipsy watched him approach without moving from his seat, although again he presented the appearance of one indulging in inward laughter.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. Haselton.

“Good afternoon,” the gipsy replied.

Mr. Haselton delivered a frontal attack.

“I have come to protest against your presence in this neighbourhood,” he began.

“It is common land,” was the indifferent declaration.

“Whether your temporary resting-place be common land or not is a small matter,” the clergyman continued. “The law

may decide that. I am here to warn you as to the sin and danger of interfering between a man and his wife. Bella Shales was lawfully wedded to her husband in the church of which I am a priest, and when you come here to tempt her to break her marriage vows, you are doing a sinful thing.”

The gipsy looked up lazily.

“You speak a language which I do not understand,” he droned. “I am on my rounds through the country. I make baskets and I sell them. As to women, it is they who trouble me, not I them.”

“That is not true,” the vicar remonstrated. “What about that affair for which you have just been to prison, when you took a kiss from William Shales’s wife and beat him cruelly?”

This time the gipsy laughed openly.

“Is that sin?” he asked. “Then I am a sinner. The woman who is for me is mine.”

“Ned,” the clergyman said earnestly, “this woman loves her husband and would be happy with no one else. If you should tempt her away, you would destroy her body and soul. Women are weak, even the best. Choose a woman of your own manner of life for your companion.”

“What would you have me do?” the gipsy demanded.

191

“Put your horse in the shafts and turn your caravan away,” the clergyman replied. “You may not believe it, Ned the Gipsy, but there is a God Who takes account of evil deeds, a God Whom you will feel near you when you die. You may seek round then

for the memory of one good action. Now is your chance. Let me help you harness your mare. Take the road across Dunworthy Moor to the villages beyond.”

“To-morrow, perhaps, or the next day,” the other yawned. “I make no promises so I break none. I make no vows so I am never perjured. And as to your God,” he went on, “what you ask is that I should bribe Him.”

From the distance, where he had set a further snare, came the squeal of another trapped rabbit. The gipsy smiled.

“You had better go,” he enjoined. “You cannot break into my life, because your threats do not terrify me nor do I seek your good-will. As for the woman, that is as it may be.”

The gipsy plunged into the wood. The clergyman presently turned away and descended the hill.

* * * * *

First of all the haze of sunlight left the air, then the sun itself went down, a ball of fire, behind the line of the western moor, blue through the summer day, black now against the crystalline sky. One by one, the stars showed themselves overhead, a pale moon gained colour, a little more blue smoke curled upwards from Melhampton, the birds in the wood ceased to sing. The gipsy, who had skinned his rabbit, cooked it and ate. Then he lit his pipe and sat on the steps of his caravan. His eyes wandered round the landscape lazily, and he began to sing to himself almost under his breath, a disconnected, almost tuneless medley of words, with every now and then a low, haunting refrain. Pedestrians were few, but an automobile or

two flashed by. Then there was silence. The man's chin sank on to his breast. The owls came out and hooted. Darkness obliterated the landscape. The gipsy opened the door of his caravan and disappeared.

* * * * *

With the first pearly streaks of dawn, the lonely caravaner was up and about. He washed in the stream and brought water for his tea, examined the snares for his rabbits and set fresh ones. Afterwards he carried out a great bundle of osier twigs and sat making baskets. Sometimes he answered the greetings of the country folk who passed, sometimes he maintained a grim silence. The head keeper from the Hall paid him a visit of suspicion. The gipsy laughed in his face.

193

“You should catch your rabbits and keep them in cages,” he advised, “else how can I help it if they come and visit me? All wild things come to wild people—the birds, if I call, or the deer. If the rabbits come, if they jump into my pot and I am hungry, then there must be rabbit stew.”

“The rabbits don't jump into your pot with their skins off,” the keeper grunted.

The gipsy laughed.

“You are a clever man,” he answered, “a very clever man. Let the poor gipsy alone. He will not trouble your game, and the rabbits are no man's property.”

The keeper trudged off, and Ned the Gipsy ate his midday meal in peace. Then, towards four o'clock, after he had closed the

bank and donned his tennis flannels, Mr. Tidd came bicycling up the hill. He leaned his machine against the grey stone wall opposite, and crossed the patch of greensward towards the caravan. It was the tennis afternoon at the Melhampton Lawn Tennis Club, and the bank manager was losing at least one set by this errand of mercy. But people were talking in Melhampton, and Mr. Tidd's sympathies had been engaged. Notwithstanding his grim appearance, his gold-rimmed spectacles and his precise ways, Mr. Tidd had a warm heart.

194

“Good afternoon,” he greeted the gipsy.

The latter glanced up from his work, looked Mr. Tidd over from head to foot, and recommenced his task.

“I have come,” the visitor explained, “to have a word with you about William Shales’ wife.”

“What do I know,” the gipsy rejoined, “of William Shales’ wife?”

“You know this much, at any rate,” was the prompt reply, “that you have just spent three months in prison for insulting her and for knocking her husband about.”

The gipsy raised his eyes.

“William Shales is not the only small man whom I have knocked about,” he said deliberately. “There will be others before I die. What are you—a doctor or a lawyer?”

“I am a banker,” Mr. Tidd announced; “that is to say, a bank manager.”

195

The gipsy laid down his basket and looked at him.

“Do you carry much money about with you?” he inquired.

“Not as a rule,” was the unperturbed reply. “To-day I have brought more than usual because I intend to offer it to you.”

“A gift?” the gipsy sneered.

“No, a bribe. I will give you five pounds to move on this afternoon to some other place, to turn your back on Melhampton without passing through it.”

Ned the Gipsy laughed—a queer, not unmusical, yet not very mirthful laugh.

“Has William Shales sent you?” he asked.

“William Shales knows nothing of my visit,” Mr. Tidd replied. “I have come because I sympathise with him, and because when I see trouble looming I like to try to avert it for the sake of those who may suffer.”

“You can keep your five pounds, unless I choose to take it from you,” the gipsy answered insolently. “I may do that if the humour seizes me. I shall remain here so long as I choose. And as for William Shales’ wife, the heart of the woman is as free as the song of a bird. He sings when he must, a woman comes when she wills. If she comes, I am here.”

Mr. Tidd argued, but he spoke to deaf ears. The gipsy twisted his osier twigs with deft fingers, but he answered never a word. Only at last, when his visitor paused for breath, he looked up

from his work.

“You are tiring me,” he complained, “and you stand in the light. Soon I shall take that five pounds from you.”

“Then you will go to prison,” Mr. Tidd answered boldly. “Perhaps it would be the best place for you.”

The gipsy rose lazily to his feet. Before Mr. Tidd knew exactly what was happening, he found himself raised in the air and carried to where his bicycle was resting. His captor set him down very gently.

“I have a hard fist,” he said, “and one blow from me may disfigure a man for life. I do not want your five pounds, but go.”

Mr. Tidd mounted his bicycle and rode down the hill.

* * * * *

As night came on, some part of his stoicism seemed to leave the gipsy. He walked up and down, muttering to himself. Once he stood out on the road and looked down at Melhampton, and there was fire in his eyes. The stars slipped into their places, yellow light filled the silver crescent of the moon, a breeze sprang up after the breathless day, and the tops of the trees in the wood creaked and whispered and made light music beneath its touch. The watcher sat on his steps and his face was aglow. Sometimes he muttered to himself, but no man save one of his own kind could have told what he said. . . .

It was about ten o'clock when she came, bare-headed, as she might have hurried from the house. She plodded along the road

with the sad, hopeless tread of the somnambulist. As she approached the caravan she paused. The gipsy rose to his feet.

“So you have come at last, my golden-headed woman,” he cried. “If you had not come to-night, I should have fetched you.”

There on the edge of the sward she fell on her knees.

“Leave me alone and go,” she implored. “I came not because I willed it, but because you have put a spell around my spirit. Cords have brought me here, and not my will. As God is in heaven, I love my husband and I hate you.”

198

The gipsy laughed as he moved a step forward. “You have never been loved by a man,” he answered, leaning back to throw open the door of the caravan. “Come, Beauty, we will make for Dunworthy Moor before the moon is up, for if any man seeks to come between us to-night I shall kill him.”

He took one more step forward, and then—a sudden leap into the air. The stillness of the night was broken by the report of a rifle fired at close quarters. The bullet whistled past the gipsy’s ear. From all around them came the echoes. William Shales stepped from behind the grey wall on the opposite side of the way, and stood in the middle of the road. He was wearing his usual dark-grey suit and the black bowler hat a little too large for him. Around his waist was a cartridge belt. Even as the two, the man and the woman, stood there petrified, they heard him refill the magazine and close it with a sharp snap. The gipsy’s face seemed to have grown pale beneath its tan.

“Put down your rifle,” he shouted. “If you have anything to say, come here and talk to me as man to man.”

199

William Shales laughed.

“I shall talk to you from where I be as man to man,” he answered. “Last time, in the yard of the ‘Blue Lion,’ you chose the manner of our talk. To-night be my turn. It is not my fault that nature has given me weak arms and has given you the limbs of a prize-fighter. Now see how much that makes you the better man to-night. There is death here waiting for you, death at the quiver of my finger. A blow of your fist and the kick of your feet could do no more than deal out death and deal it out clumsily. See! You are proud of the window of your cursed home, and its scarlet flower. Watch!”

Once more there was the crisp report of a rifle shot, followed this time by the sound of splintering glass. The gipsy cursed and swore. William Shales laughed again. He lowered his rifle for a moment.

“The God that gave me weak arms,” he said, “gave me a good eye and steady hands. I was chosen to shoot at Bisley, Ned the Gipsy, though I won no prize but a trifle of money. Where would you like to die? Or how? Will you have a bullet in your heart, or crashing through your forehead, or shall I lame you for life with a shattered knee?”

200

“William! William!” the woman called out joyfully. “Don’t let him take me away! Kill him first—kill him and kill me!”

The gipsy changed his tactics. He had slipped a little way back. His eyes were looking all around like a ferret’s. He knew how strong he was, how far he could spring, how his fingers could choke if he could get round to the back of the man. He glided a

yard or so on one side. Then he leaped once more into the air with a curse. He clapped his hand to his cheek. There was blood there where the bullet had grazed it. He swore loudly enough, but there was a tremble in his tone. The woman had risen to her feet. He felt a strange thing in his own heart. He was afraid, and the woman was slipping away from him.

“I have come out here to kill you, Ned the Gipsy, if needs be,” William Shales cried, “and kill you I shall if you try your monkey tricks. Harness your horse, turn your back on Melhampton and cross Dunworthy Moor to-night. It is true that I am small and weak, true that with my fingers I stitch clothes for other men to wear, but to-night I am top dog, and there is death for you here if you defy me.”

201

The woman laughed, almost naturally. There was joy in her mirth. Something seemed to snap between her and the cowering man.

“Hurry up with them straps,” William Shales ordered, and his voice was the voice of a conqueror.

* * * * *

Down the hill in the moonlight, like lovers, walked man and wife. Every now and then she stopped and held him to her passionately. William Shales, with his rifle over his left shoulder, marched to martial music. He remembered the time when he had picked up a dead man's weapon and fought at Ypres. To the woman by his side he was for the first time a hero. Police-Constable Chopping, hurrying up the hill-side, asked a breathless question:

“There’s no harm done, William?”

“I’ve frightened him away,” was the proud reply.

The woman’s arm was around her husband’s neck. The police-constable looked the other way and passed on. . . .

Over Dunworthy Moor, a lone object on the top of the
great plateau, a tired horse dragged a heavy caravan. Ned
the Gipsy, with folded arms and chin upon his chest, sat on the
shafts and smoked sullenly. Not once did he look behind him.
He only spoke to urge the horse on. In his ears there seemed to
echo still the horrid sound of those flying messages of death.

202

203

VII

HONEYDEW AND KISSES

Harry Foulds, the horse dealer and breaker, chancing to intervene in that first moment of small but grim tragedy, became their first confidant. His pipe had gone out on his way along the main street of Melhampton, he had felt in his pocket in vain for matches, and had turned in at the small tobacconist's shop, reopened to-day for the first time for some months.

“Box of matches, please, miss,” he demanded.

The two young people behind the counter turned and stared at him. The man was obviously delicate, ridiculously young, with hollow cheeks and thin, weedy frame. The girl, too, was pale, but pretty in a townish sort of way. Just now, however, her eyes were filled with terror.

“Anything wrong?” the prospective purchaser inquired curiously.

By this time the two had recovered some measure of self-possession. The girl felt about for a moment underneath the counter and produced a cardboard receptacle full of boxes of matches. She passed one across and received the money with a murmured word of thanks. It was obvious, however, that she was still half dazed. The little smile which one guessed was a habit with her was frozen at its birth. Harry Foulds, pocketing the matches, repeated his question.

“Anything wrong?” he asked. “You’ve only opened this morning, have you?”

The young man drew a little breath. When he spoke it was in a shrill Cockney voice.

“I should say there was something very much wrong,” he replied. “You’re clever folk down in Melhampton, I reckon, and we’re just babes from the City.”

“Well, what is it?” Harry Foulds persisted, stretching his burly frame as he struck a match and lit his pipe.

“We’ve been had, that’s all,” was the bitter reply. “Just taken in like a couple of innocents. I bought the goodwill of this little business and the stock. The stock was valued at a hundred and thirty-eight pounds, but so far as we’ve been able to discover there isn’t the odd eight pounds’ worth here. All these,” he added, touching a row of cardboard cigarette boxes, “are dummies.”

205

“Do you mean to say that you bought on Sammy Boulger’s word?” the horse dealer asked incredulously.

The girl intervened, as though anxious to take her share of the blame.

“The doctor said that Lenny—my husband, I mean—must get away from London or he’d be ill all the winter. That is why we were in such a great hurry. We advertised, and Mr. Boulger came to see us at the little shop we had in the Commercial Road. He had the stock sheets and everything with him, and he was sailing for Canada to-day. He offered us everything for half

price if we'd pay down on the nail, and we did it."

"A hundred and thirty-eight pounds for the stock," the young man put in, "and sixty-two for the remainder of the lease and the goodwill. Two hundred pounds I gave him—pretty well every penny I've got in the world."

"Sammy Boulger wouldn't have tried that trick on anybody nearer home," the horse dealer declared. "It was time he cleared out of here, and he knew it. A real wrong 'un was Sammy."

206

The girl began to tremble. The horror of it all was coming back again.

"But we are ruined!" she exclaimed.

Harry Foulds was a good-natured man, although he had the name of taking a little more to drink than was good for him. He had also a weakness for the other sex, and it was beginning to dawn upon him that under normal conditions this young woman would be very pretty indeed. He adopted an encouraging tone.

"Perhaps it isn't so bad, after all," he said. "Let's just have a look round. Some of these boxes may have something in."

"I've tried most of them," the young man answered fretfully.

Harry Foulds, with his superior height, pulled down a few from the top shelves. There was little of consolation, however, to be derived from an inspection of their contents.

"Did Sammy sign anything?" he asked. "Have you got the stock

sheets?”

The young man shook his head.

“I don’t know why we fools in London,” he said bitterly, “believe that everyone with a country accent must be honest. However, there it is. He took the stock sheets away with him—wanted to make a copy, he said—promised we should have them by post yesterday—and all he signed was a receipt for the two hundred pounds I gave him for the stock and the goodwill of the business.”

207

“He’s done you brown,” Harry Foulds pronounced.

“He’s a brute,” the girl sobbed. . . .

The horse dealer departed upon his daily business, which appeared to consist chiefly of a disparaging examination of various quadrupeds offered him for sale, and a similar belaudation of others which he had for disposal, the programme varied by occasional drinks. He returned to Melhampton towards evening, richer in pocket and only slightly unsteady. Attracted by the single gas-jet burning in the little tobacconist’s shop, he paused and thrust in his head and shoulders.

“Well, how are the babes in the wood?” he asked cheerfully.

The young woman, who had recovered some part of her spirits, made a grimace at him.

“Great run on the stock—almost cleared out,” she declared. “You’re just in time to buy four ounces of stale honeydew, or a silver-mounted pipe, a little tarnished,

208

with a chip in the bowl.”

Harry Foulds stepped into the shop with his hands in his pockets.

“Come on,” he said, “I’ve had a good day. Let’s see what you’ve got to sell.”

Both he and the girl were soon in their element, the latter flirting wordily, the horse dealer, in his clumsy fashion, not slow to respond. Presently the newly-established tobacconist, who, with frequent ill-tempered exclamations, had been looking through some dusty papers at the other end of the counter, left them and made his way into the little room behind.

“Is he jealous?” Harry Foulds asked, moving his head in the direction of the closed door.

The young woman shook her head.

“He’d better not try to be,” she replied. “Besides, with me he knows it’s all jollying,” she added, glancing up at her prospective customer. “One has to make sales somehow or other.”

“You’ve got to treat me different from the others,” Harry Foulds insisted.

“And why?” she demanded pertly.

“Well, I was your first customer, for one thing,” he reminded her.

“A box of matches! Pooh!” she scoffed.

“And for another,” he went on, “because I’m coming in to buy something every day.”

“A box of matches a day will be sixpence a week,” she said.

“Why, our fortune’s made! We’ll be getting a motor-car before the month’s out!”

He laid down a crumpled note upon the counter.

“I’ll take the big pipe with the bit of tin round it,” he decided.

“I’m buying it, though you can’t kid me that it’s silver. And four ounces of your best honeydew.”

She weighed it out quickly and rubbed the pipe for a moment on her black silk apron.

“Eleven and six the pipe and two shillings the tobacco—six and sixpence change,” she reckoned. “You’re the best customer we’ve had to-day.”

“And what do I get for that?” he asked.

She looked at him intently, her very bright eyes filled with gentle and tantalising inquiry.

“If a boy in the Commercial Road had got fresh enough to ask me that,” she remarked, “I should know what to expect, but here, down in Devonshire——”

He leaned across the counter, but she eluded him with a nervous glance at the closed door.

“You’ll have Lenny after you,” she warned him.

“It’d be worth it,” he grinned.

“You’ll be in to-morrow?” she asked.

“Plumb certain,” he promised.

* * * * *

That was the beginning of a flirtation which excited some mild comment in the old-fashioned town. The elders of the place discussed it now and then at their daily meeting-place—the bar parlour of the ‘Melhampton Arms.’

“I’m thinking,” Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, declared, “that Harry’ll have to be careful what he’s up to. Them Londoners knows all the tricks.”

“It’ll maybe cost Harry a pretty penny,” old Granfer Crocombe, the octogenarian and retired dealer in cattle spices, surmised. “He bean’t a fighting man, that tobacconist—he ain’t even got the fighting spirit like William Shales, the tailor—but from what I’ve seen of ’e I should call ’un cunning. There’s such things as divorce cases, as Harry’ll find out if he bean’t careful.”

“Come, come,” Mrs. Dowdswell, the widowed landlady, intervened. “It’s likely no but a bit of chaff between Harry and the little body. Them Londoners is freer with their tongues and their manners than we country-folk. The young woman very like means no harm, nor Harry either.”

“They do say,” Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, declared, “that this

Leonard Clift was treated rare and badly by that scamp Sammy Boulger. Two hundred pounds he did pay for the stock and goodwill of the shop.”

“And the stock,” Tom Baker, the ironmonger, remarked, removing his pipe for a moment from his mouth, “consisted of one silver-mounted pipe, which Harry bought the first night they opened, and a few ounces of mouldy tobacco.”

“It seems queer for Londoners to be so took in,” Mrs. Dowdswell observed.

“Clift is a simple fellow, I’m thinking,” Granfer Crocombe propounded. “He looks like a proper loon when he do walk out in the evenings.”

“The poor fellow’s weakly,” Mrs. Dowdswell declared.

“It was for his health he did come to these parts.”

212

“It will have lightened his pocket, anyway,” Mr. Scroggins chuckled.

“From what I hear tell,” Mr. Baker said, “it is no joking matter for them. There’ll never be a living for the two, with that small shop and no stock and no capital.”

“Harry will have to look out,” Granfer Crocombe wheezed. “They’ll be wanting a loan before the month’s out. I see him stretched more than half-way across the counter this afternoon, and her laughing up at him like the tantalising little hussy that she is. We did know how to treat that sort when I was a young man.”

There was a warning gesture from Mrs. Dowdswell. A moment later the door of the bar parlour was pushed open, and Harry Foulds, followed by the young man who had been under discussion, entered.

“Good evening, Mrs. Dowdswell. Good evening, all,” the former said, removing his pipe from his mouth. “This is a friend of mine come to live in Melhampton, ma’am, Mr. Leonard Clift by name,” he added, turning to the landlady. “I’ve just brought him in to have a sociable glass.”

“Glad to see you here, I’m sure,” Mrs. Dowdswell declared hospitably. “What shall it be, Mr. Foulds?”

213

“A glass of beer for me. What’s yours, Clift?”

Half a stout and bitter mixed was Mr. Clift’s choice, after which various introductions were effected and the new-comer was accommodated with a seat on the long settle. Granfer Crocombe leaned a little forward.

“They tell me you didn’t make as good a bargain as you’d ought with Sammy Boulger,” he began agreeably.

“I was swindled,” was the somewhat peevish retort.

Granfer Crocombe grinned broadly.

“He were a downy bird, were Sammy! Took us all in, he did. Owes me half a crown at this blessed moment. I suppose he diddled the stock a bit, Mr. Clift, eh?”

“He diddled it pretty considerably,” the young man

acknowledged shortly. "I was badly had, and that's all there is to say about it, but seeing as I've come in for a moment's respite, as it were, from brooding over the rotten business, I'd be glad not to have it mentioned any more than's necessary. As to stock, there wasn't any, but I've got a few ounces of tobacco or a packet or two of cigarettes for any of you gentlemen who might happen to drop in as you're passing."

"We'll see what you've got, surely," Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, promised. "Allus patronise a new-comer when we can."

"Unless he sells meat, eh?" Granfer Crocombe gurgled mirthfully.

"I'm not afeard of competition in my line," Mr. Scroggins retorted. "Them as can get the joints as I do, and the beasts for killing, are welcome to come and pitch their stand right opposite mine if they've a mind. 'Tain't so easy to start in the butchering line, Granfer."

"There was Ned Craske's cousin, for instance," Tom Baker remarked reminiscently. "He had kind of a connection, as you might say, and a bit of brass, too, but he soon pulled up stumps."

"Along of that New Zealand stuff that he tried to foist on the Melhampton folk," Mr. Scroggins reminded them. "Devon meat for Devon men, I say, and them as deals with me gets it."

"I've tasted some pretty fair foreign stuff," Mr. Clift ventured tentatively.

The remark was coldly received.

“You’ve been lucky, then,” Tom Baker declared. “For my part, I can’t abide the stuff. Like mixing your best bird’s-eye with sawdust, Mr. Clift.”

215

“There’s no tobacco in my place gets mixed with anything,” the young man assured them all. “I’m dead against fake in any shape or form. Even my snuff’s just as it comes to me.”

Conversation soon became general, and Mr. Clift might be said to have been launched in Melhampton society. It must at once be confessed that he was not an unqualified success. His high voice and Cockney accent, his somewhat dogmatic manner and peevish air in talking of his misfortune were not prepossessing. Mr. Scroggins expressed the general opinion when he and his cicerone departed a little before nine o’clock.

“I reckon that it’s the other side of the family that Harry’s took up with,” he observed. “I can’t fancy Harry or anyone else making a pal of that young man.”

“It’s as I was saying, for sure,” Granfer Crocombe assented. “Harry’s looking for trouble, and if I know anything of the wenches he’ll find it. That little Mrs. Clift, she’s got the devil’s dance in her eyes that I used to look for mysen when I was a young man amongst the maidens.”

216

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Granfer,” Mrs. Dowdswell said with mock severity.

The old man chuckled.

“Too late for me to turn over a new leaf, ma’am,” he declared, “unless you’re willing to turn it over with me.”

“A proposal!” Tom Baker exclaimed. “We’re all witnesses.”

“Lord love ’e,” Granfer Crocombe proclaimed, “I’ve proposed to Mrs. Dowdswell regular once a week—generally on a market day—for the last four years.”

“I’ll take ’e at your word some day,” she threatened, straightening her hair.

“And when you do, I invite you all to the wedding,” her elderly suitor declared. “Ay, and to the breakfast afterwards, too! We’ll have it up in the old coffee-room upstairs, eh, ma?”

“Drat the man! He’s getting familiar already,” Mrs. Dowdswell complained.

“He’ll be claiming privileges soon,” Mr. Scroggins warned her.

The butcher’s sally was greeted with a roar of laughter, under cover of which Mrs. Dowdswell retired to take supper, her place being filled by her assistant. There was a general exodus soon after, Mr. Scroggins and Tom Baker walking up the street together. As they passed the tobacconist’s shop they saw Harry Foulds leaning across the counter. Mrs. Clift, who was wearing a blouse a little in advance of Melhampton ideas, looking very smart and distinctly attractive, was laughing up into her visitor’s face.

“H’m!” Mr. Scroggins ejaculated thoughtfully. “I shouldn’t wonder if old Granfer weren’t right for once. A countryman got the better of them pair, but if Harry don’t take care they’ll have it back out of him.”

The new-comers did not become entirely popular in Melhampton. The young tobacconist's Cockney swagger, his high-pitched voice, so different from the soft Devonshire burr of the natives, his natural assurance, which speedily returned, notwithstanding the humiliating circumstances connected with his arrival in the place, were none of them attributes which appealed either to his fellow-tradesmen or to the general inhabitants of Melhampton. As regards Mabel Clift, there was a curious unanimity of opinion amongst the feminine population of the little town—a unanimity which existed practically in the same degree, but from a reverse point of view, amongst the other sex. The women condemned her as with one voice. Her skirts were too short, her silk stockings too showy, her clothes altogether too daring, and her use of cosmetics at once too skilful and too patent. The men, however, were very knowing upon the subject. But for Harry Foulds' devotion and his inches it is probable that she would have been the imaginary heroine of many a little romance. As it was, there was seldom a moment during the day when the favourite position at the counter—the one farthest removed from and almost out of sight of the street—was not occupied by one of the male inhabitants of Melhampton, engaged in a leisurely and extremely protracted purchase of tobacco or cigarettes. As for Clift himself, he was seldom visible. As his engaging assistant was careful to tell all callers, they had made Melhampton their temporary home entirely on account of his health, and for that reason he was incited every day to take long country walks, to lose himself upon the moors, and to leave the conduct of the business entirely to his wife. The stock, by some means or other, had become replenished—perhaps Harry Foulds and Mr. Tidd,

the bank manager, were the only two who knew how—and business, of its sort, was brisk enough, for Mabel’s favours were distributed with irritating impartiality amongst her best customers. She accepted occasional presents of flowers, vegetables, and even chocolates, with a very delightful friendliness, but when any hint was made by the more buccaneering youth of the place as to some slight return for these favours, her little sigh and reference to Lenny’s dangerous jealousy, and his habit of dropping in at odd moments, was usually an adequate protection. She had the knack, however, of conveying with this intimation a dim but flattering suggestion that she was the sharer in her victim’s sufferings, and that he alone, of all the little army of her admirers, might some day hope, under more favourable circumstances, for those slighter but pleasing returns with which complacent femininity is sometimes disposed to reward its votaries. In plain words, Mabel Clift was, or appeared to be, a flirt. The only person who apparently received a larger share of her favours was Harry Foulds. His entry into the shop was, as a rule, the signal for anyone else to depart. Occasionally he had been seen even taking her for a drive after closing time, and he was known, on more than one occasion, to have passed into the little room behind the shop for supper. The progress of his amour formed a never-failing subject for gossip in the bar parlour at the ‘Melhampton Arms.’

“I seed him,” Granfer Crocombe told them all on one occasion, “holding her hand last Tuesday evening. He was driving along the Woolworthy Road, with the reins in his right hand, and his other way underneath the linen apron, holding hers, that be very certain. Like a couple of gawks they did look,” the old man chuckled, “when they seed me. I was sitting on Farmer

Crocombe's stile, smoking a quiet pipe like."

"Yes, and with your eyes open for any bit of spooning that might be going on," Mr. Scroggins observed, digging his neighbour in the ribs. "I know your little ways, Granfer."

Granfer was a trifle disconcerted.

"Someone must have an eye to the respectability of the place," he declared. "I can tell 'e sometimes, when they sees me sitting there, they unlinks arms and walks on like loons. 'Tis the maidens what be the most brazen," he went on reflectively. "Like as not they'll look round and wish 'un 'good evening,' with the fellow's arms still around their waists, though they bain't tokened nor nowt like it. Times do be changing, for sure. If there's many of 'em takes heed of this little tobacconist's wench and her goings on, there'll be rare doings in Melhampton before long."

221

"Steady on, Granfer," Tom Baker remonstrated, leaning forward in his place. "I've heard nothing against the young woman except that she and Harry Foulds are a bit friendly."

"Happen you're buying your own honeydew at Clift's these days," Granfer Crocombe suggested with a grin. "They do say that it be rare sweet stuff."

There was a little titter of laughter at this sally, for it was well known that the ironmonger had become a regular customer of the Clifts. The latter endured a volley of chaff good-naturedly.

"I see no harm in the young woman," he confessed frankly, "and the young man being sickly, and struggling hard for a living, 'tis

but a reasonable act to patronise them.”

“You’ll have Harry looking after you, that’s what you’ll have,” Granfer giggled.

“There’s one thing I will say about Mr. Foulds,” Mrs. Dowdswell interposed, wiping a glass upon her apron. “He’s a solemn sort of young man than he used to be, but he’s quit that nasty habit of taking one or two more glasses than were good for him.”

“’Tis love,” Granfer assured her gleefully. “It puts ’un off the liquor as well as the food. Oh, sure-ly Harry Foulds is in a troublesome state!”

“Well, that’s as it may be,” the landlady declared. “I know nothing of the young woman beyond what you gentlemen say, and although I admit her clothes don’t seem altogether modest to us that was brought up round in these parts, she may be none the worse for that, really, she being used to town fashions, and we country. Anyway, Harry Foulds is old enough to look after himself.” . . .

But was he? Harry Foulds, sitting in his dog-cart at the top of Woolworthy Moor, conscious for the first time of a faint, exquisite return of the pressure of his fingers, felt as though the heavens were emptying themselves in fear and delight. Impulse at that moment conquered a shyness which, coupled with a sort of pathetic, unspoken pleading on her part, had hitherto acted as sufficient restraint. The spell was broken. He drew her flushed but rather frightened little face up to his, and their lips met. Harry Foulds had kissed other women, but

there had never been anything like this. He felt as though he had been drawn up into a world which had lain hitherto outside his ken, a world where beautiful things attained a new significance and men's coarser instincts were strangled at their birth. She lay in his arms unresistingly enough, more like a child who has come home to rest than a woman giving herself up for the first time to the claims of a lawless passion. . . .

Nevertheless, it was all a dream of delight—the cling of her soft lips, the happiness in her eyes, the soft, confiding way in which she nestled up to him on the homeward ride. Those first words of his which brought them into contact with ugly things seemed to him uncouth and ill-spoken.

“What about—your husband?”

It may have been necessary, but it seemed like a terribly marring note. She drew gently away. A queer, distressed little smile parted her lips.

224

“Lenny!” she murmured. “Yes, there is Lenny!”

She relapsed into a brown study. Presently, as they drew near the streets of Melhampton, she withdrew her hand, sat upright and arranged her somewhat tumbled hair with nervous little pats and smoothings.

“Don't come in to-night,” she begged, as they drew up in front of the shop. “To-night I want to be alone and think. To-morrow _____”

“To-morrow?” he interrupted eagerly.

She laughed up at him from the pavement on to which she had sprung lightly.

“To-morrow you ought to be wanting some more of your special honeydew,” she told him.

Then she disappeared with a little wave of the hand, and his last recollections were of a backward glance, a look half of trouble and half of joy in her great eyes, a faint return of that enigmatic smile upon her lips. Harry Foulds drove back to his own abode, stabled his horse, ate and drank what the woman who attended to his wants had left for him, and, catching up his hat and stick, climbed the steep hill which was crowned at the top by Tom Baker’s ugly red brick villa. 225

He found his friend enjoying an after-supper pipe on a garden seat at the end of the lawn, from which favoured position he had a magnificent view of the sleepy old red-tiled town, and of the moors and hills beyond. The ironmonger made room for his visitor by his side.

“Come to sell me a pair of carriage horses, Harry?” he asked facetiously.

The horse dealer shook his head.

“I’ve come to ask you for a bit of advice, Tom.”

“Go right ahead,” his friend invited.

“You be a man, Tom,” his visitor began, “well known hereabouts for common sense and having mixed with the world a little more than we others. Now I be in a difficult position and

I want your advice.”

Tom Baker sighed.

“If it had been a matter of a loan now, Harry,” he said, “you know well enough that I’m your man, but I tell ’e frankly, before you start, that I’m not one of those who understand these fakements about women. A wife I’ve got and married I’ve been for wellnigh thirty-five years, and with Mary there ends and begins all I know about the female sex. We do hear of disturbances all the time, even amongst married people, Harry, but they’re just matters I don’t understand.”

226

“Put your mind to it, Tom, I beg of you,” the other persisted, “for it’s concerning a woman I’ve come to see you. I’m not exactly the sort of man that you are and have been, Tom. I’ve lived laxer, in a sort of way, though doubtless I’d have been steadier if I’d met a woman like Mrs. Baker and married her when I was young. But that not being the case, I’m driven to face matters as they are, and I’ve come to ask you, Tom, what is a man to do when he feels those things for a married woman which he ought not to feel unless he’s free to ask her to be his wife?”

“That be a serious question, Harry,” Tom Baker conceded, knocking the ashes from his pipe and looking reflectively into its empty bowl.

“It’s a matter of life or death for me,” Harry Foulds declared. “I’m free to admit that I’ve not lived the life that you have, Tom. I’ve had what you might call triflings with women, and I haven’t cared a brass-headed pin whether they were married or not. And yet this very evening, on Woolworthy Moor, I kissed a

woman who's living with her husband, and I tell you, Tom, that though in a way I never felt so happy, I feel as though I'd done something mortal wrong."

"The woman being Clift the tobacconist's wife?" Tom Baker surmised slowly.

"That being she."

"And she willing?"

"Not what you might call willing, but yielding like," Harry Foulds acquiesced reluctantly. "We've been out together and alone many a time, but never has this thing happened before. She's always made me feel—well, it's hard to explain," the horse-dealer went on, gazing down at the grass—"that if I once kissed her, well, there'd be an end of it."

"And there must be an end of it," Tom Baker pronounced firmly. "All that you say convinces me, Harry, that a trifle flighty though the young woman may seem to others, she's got a heart like all good women. She's married to that poor consumptive fellow, and marriage is a thing there's no honourable way out of. You don't want to bring her to sin, Harry."

"God knows I don't!" was the fervent reply. "But I want that woman like I want nothing else in life. Not just as a playmate, you understand, Tom, but to keep and look after and worship always. She may seem flighty to you others, but there's something about her—and what it may be I can't tell—she makes me feel a better man every time I talk with her."

The ironmonger slowly refilled his pipe.

“Harry,” he decided, “you’ve only one course open to you. You told me last week about that offer you’d had from the Government to go to South America and buy young horses. You’d best go, lad. You can come back when you’re cured, or when they Clifts have gone away, but you’d best go.”

There was a long silence. It seemed to Harry Foulds that someone was tugging at a thing which had dwelt in his heart not for a week or two but for all his life.

“You reckon that, Tom?” he said at last.

“I do indeed,” was the ironmonger’s steady response. “If so be that’s she’s the good woman you think her, it’s not for you to pull her down, Harry, and if you’re mistaken, and if at heart she’s one of that other sort, she’d best be left where she is for your own sake.”

There was a further long silence. Then Harry Foulds rose to his feet.

“Time we paid our respects to Mrs. Dowdswell,” he suggested laconically. “Let’s be getting down, Tom.”

* * * * *

Whether or not he discovered his need of honeydew, Harry Foulds paid his promised visit to the tobacconist’s the following morning. It was not such a visit as he was accustomed to pay, however, for although Mabel was looking her prettiest, with a delicate little flush in her cheeks which had only recently come into evidence, and although Leonard Clift, after a somewhat surly “good morning,” betook himself to the back premises,

Harry Foulds' stay was brief indeed. For the first moment they both seemed tongue-tied. Any reference to the event of last evening, which, though trifling in itself, had made some change in their relations inevitable, seemed curiously difficult. Yet Harry Foulds was a man, and what he had come to say he said.

"Mabel," he began, as he watched her deft fingers sweeping the tobacco into the tube of yellow paper, "I want to say that for what happened last night—I'm very sorry."

She made a little grimace.

"Sorry?" she repeated, under her breath, flashing a wonderful look up at him, a look which had in it more of reproach than anger.

230

"Sorry for the thing itself I never could be," he went on stolidly, "and that in your heart I think you know. But it was my job to remember that you belong to another man, and this sort of thing can bring nothing but unhappiness to you. And that's why I've come to say good-bye to you, Mabel."

"Good-bye?" she repeated blankly. "You're not going away, Harry, just because I let you kiss me?"

"Pretty well that," he admitted. "Anyway, I'm off up to London to-morrow, and if things go as I'm hoping there, I'll be for South America next week."

She turned a little pale.

"Are you so anxious to get away from me, Harry?" she asked, in a low tone.

“God knows I’m not,” he answered. “But you’ve got your man here, and I’m not one to ask you to break faith with him, poor invalid that he is.”

“But, Harry——”

“Little woman,” he interrupted hoarsely, “I’m trying to do the right thing, not for my own sake—just for yours. Don’t look at me out of those big eyes as though you wanted me to stay. I’ll—I’ll——”

231

Then suddenly Harry Foulds felt something coming of which he was ashamed, and out of the shop he went and up the street to his home, where he saddled a young colt he was breaking and had a few hours of dangerous exercise. That night he supped alone, never daring to go down even as far as the ‘Melhampton Arms.’ The meal was scarcely finished and he in his easy chair, when there was a tap at the door. He opened it himself. Leonard Clift stood there—a pale, dour figure.

“I want a word with you, Harry,” he said, his thin, nasal voice sounding harsher than ever.

“Come in and welcome,” the horse dealer replied, with a sudden sinking of his heart.

The two men seated themselves in the little parlour. Harry Foulds offered whisky, but the other shook his head. So far, Melhampton seemed to have done him little good. His cheeks were still hollow, his eyes hard and bright. Before he could find breath for words, he coughed for several moments, and held his handkerchief to his mouth. When he spoke, his voice was peevish and ill-tempered. It lacked the dignity of

232

righteous anger.

“Harry Foulds,” he said, “you’ve been making love to my wife.”

“I’ll not deny it,” was the prompt admission. “I think a powerful sight more of her than of any other woman in the world, and that’s why I’m going away.”

“Going away?” the other repeated, his tone rising almost to a shriek. “What’s the good of that? The mischief’s done. She won’t even look at me. She’s restless every day till you come in—won’t have me near her. You know what they call it in the Law Courts. You’ve alienated my wife’s affection, that’s what you’ve done.”

Harry Foulds was a little taken aback. Nevertheless, underneath his bewilderment there was a curious little thrill of joy.

“I’m not one that understands much about this sort of thing, Leonard Clift,” he said slowly. “If I’ve done you an injury, I’m sorry. It’s to prevent myself doing you a worse one that I’m going to quit these parts.”

“Don’t be a silly fool,” was the furious reply. “What’s the good of your going away now? The mischief’s done. The thing to consider is how to make it up to me.”

“Make it up to you?” the horse dealer repeated, a little dazed.

233

“Ain’t it plain enough? I’ve lost my wife. She’ll never be anything to me again. What I want to know is what you’re going to do about it?”

Then Harry Foulds began to understand the sort of man he had to deal with. A great pity for Mabel stirred in his heart.

“That eighty pounds I lent you, Clift,” he began——

“Curse the eighty pounds!” the other interrupted. “That’s spent, every penny of it. And here’s the doctor telling me to-day that I’m getting nicotine poisoning and can’t stay at my job any longer. You’ve got money in your pocket. I know it, for I see you coming out of the bank. Give me some of it and let me get away. I’ll go to one of them open-air ’orspitals. Give me the money, and I promise you, if there’s enough of it, I’ll never trouble you again.”

A year ago the suggestion would have seemed a wonderful one to Harry Foulds, but that was before he had known Mabel.

“I’ll find you some money, if needs must be,” he said slowly, “but I’m not going to encourage you to desert your wife.”

“Then find it quick and be damned to you!” was the snarling answer. “Give me what you can and I’ll be gone to-night—to-night, do you ’ear. There’s a motor going to Okehampton to catch the midnight express. I’ll go by it. I’m fed up with the place.”

234

Harry Foulds shook his head slowly.

“You mustn’t go like that, Clift,” he insisted, “and when you go, you’d better take your wife with you. I’ve drawn some money, ’tis true, for I’m going to London to-morrow, and it’s likely I’ll be off to South America at the end of the week. I’ll spare you a hundred pounds out of it, but it will be on condition that you

treat Mabel as she should be treated.”

“Give me the hundred now,” Clift demanded.

Foulds stared at his visitor curiously. He seemed like a man torn to pieces by some passion. Every now and then he coughed.

“Give it me now, damn it, or I’ll take it!” he shouted, rising to his feet and coming forward in threatening fashion.

Harry Foulds, who had done a little prize-fighting in his time, held him away with his left hand. With his right he fumbled in his pockets.

“You’ll take nothing from me, Leonard Clift,” he said. “There’s no man in Devonshire could do that against my will. But here’s your hundred pounds, and good luck to you! Sit down and drink a glass of whisky with me, and we’ll talk of your plans.”

235

But Leonard Clift had no mind to stop and talk of plans. Coughing and stumbling, he made his unceremonious exit. Harry Foulds listened to the slamming of the front door, heard the unsteady footsteps pass along the paved way. He waited until they had died away and there was silence again. Then he took up the whisky bottle. It was three-parts full, and his eyes glistened as he saw it. A fierce and brutal joy was upon him, the joy of the man who has felt the clutch of strong liquor and who deliberately brings it to his aid. He poured out half a tumblerful and added a little water.

“To-night,” he muttered, “I’ll be drunk—gloriously drunk! . . . What the hell’s that?”

There was another tapping at the door. He set down the tumbler untasted, went out and opened it. Then he gave a hoarse cry. It was Mabel who stood there. She looked up at him a little pathetically, as though surprised at his dour expression.

“You’ve seen Leonard?” she asked. “He’s been here?”

“Yes, he’s been here,” Harry Foulds assented.

236

“Well?”

The monosyllable was amazingly spoken. Harry Foulds’ hand clasped his head. There were more bewildering things in the world than strong drink.

“Have you nothing to say to me?” she asked.

He closed the door and led her into the sitting-room. All the time she watched him anxiously. She seemed to be seeking for something in his face which was not there, listening for some word which did not come.

“You’ve seen Leonard?” she repeated.

“Mabel,” he said, “I’ve seen your husband. He’s been here and he’s gone. He’s gone God knows where. I did all I could in the world to stop him. I told him that it was his duty to stick to you as husband to wife, come what might between, but he’s gone, and though I was strong enough to keep away from you and book my passage——”

“Stop!” she almost shrieked. “What did Leonard tell you?”

He looked a little dazed.

“Just what the doctor had advised—that he must give up the tobacconist business and get to an outdoor hospital.”

“Nothing else?”

237

“Nothing save a trifle of talk about money,” was the hesitating admission.

Then she stood for a moment like a woman who suddenly sees the truth. Once more that strange smile played about her lips. She came a little closer to him and Harry Foulds groaned.

“Harry,” she said softly, “I understand. Leonard has always been a trouble to me. Now I know that he is worse even than I thought. He has not told you what I sent him to tell you.”

“What’s that?” he demanded.

She drew closer still.

“Leonard is my brother—not my husband,” she confided. “Oh, Harry!” . . .

“You see,” she explained presently, “when mother died she begged me to look after Leonard, and I did my best. We started in a tobacconist’s shop in Shoreditch, and Harry—don’t think I’m conceited, but I couldn’t get on with business—couldn’t keep the young men out of the shop who were pestering me all the time to go to cinemas and places with them. Then when we moved to the Commercial Road I suggested to Lenny, half in fun, that I should pretend to be his wife. We found it worked

238

all right, because I had always an excuse for not going out by saying my husband was jealous. We kept it up here until—well, after last night. Then of course I told Leonard to come and tell you, and——”

He stopped all further speech.

“There isn’t going to be any manner of doubt as to who your husband is in the future,” he assured her.

“I don’t want there to be, Harry,” she half sobbed.

* * * * *

“Parfictly easy it was for any man of common sense to see that they two were never husband and wife,” Granfer Crocombe declared a few evenings later. “I seed it from the first, but being a man what’s naturally averse to scandal, I kept a still tongue in my head.”

“You do be a wonderful man, surely, Granfer,” Mrs. Dowdswell admitted. “You find out most things.”

The old man chuckled.

“I can tell ’e more,” he declared. “Her aunt arrived from Lunnon this afternoon—a very personable and pleasant body. I come down in the bus from the station with her.”

“When’s the wedding?” Tom Baker asked.

“Thursday fortnight,” answered a familiar voice as Harry Foulds, his rubicund face aglow with happiness, made his

unexpected entrance. “Fill up the glasses, Mrs. Dowdswell. You’ll all drink to my good luck.”

There was a little chorus of pleasant wishes. Granfer, as usual, was spokesman.

“You do be the luckiest man and the cleverest in these parts, Harry Foulds,” he declared deliberately. “There bain’t one but you, I’ll be bound, who’d ever have found out that they two was never husband and wife, and would have had the courage to go courting the young woman.”

“He do beat the band, does Granfer,” Tom Baker declared beneath his breath as he drained his glass.

VIII

A THIEF BY NIGHT

“There do be folk that say different, for sure,” Granfer Crocombe announced, holding his pipe in his hand to secure clearer enunciation and leaning a little forward from his seat of honour in the bar parlour of the ‘Melhampton Arms,’ “but I do hold that for a town of its size there be more happenings in Melhampton than in any other town of Devon.”

“What us counts happenings, William,” Tom Baker, the ironmonger, pointed out, “would count for nothing much, say, in Exeter or London.”

“That be a foolish saying, Tom,” the other contended, “and one, if the truth were spoken, not according to your own mind. Why, only a few months ago——”

Granfer Crocombe got no further with his reminiscences. The sacred door of the bar parlour, the right to enter which belonged only to a chosen few of Melhampton’s most respected residents, was suddenly and violently thrown open. From the street, only half the length of the passage away, came a blast of icy wind and a flurry of snowflakes. Granfer Crocombe drew a little nearer to the fire. The others, ignoring the increased cold, stared with amazement at the figure of the young man who had made so precipitate an entrance. He stood, the very prototype of a harbinger of ill-tidings, unsteadily upon the threshold, his pale face damp and glistening with the driven

snow, the flakes themselves melting from his outer garments and running in little pools on to the floor. Whatever the nature of his enterprise, he was ill equipped for it, for, although the upper part of his body was moderately well protected by a thick leather jacket, below he was wearing black evening trousers, patent shoes, reduced to almost a pulp, and what might once have been silk socks.

“There is an accident,” he exclaimed, “outside—just outside. Please hurry.”

The young man’s voice was very soft and distinct, with faint suggestion of a foreign accent. His manner was unruffled, but his gesture insistent. One and all they rose from their seats; even Granfer Crocombe snatched at his gnarled oak stick and followed the rush through the door, under the curved archway which led into the night, and Alice, the barmaid, whose head had been thrust through the window dividing the bar from the parlour, after a moment’s hesitation also joined in the exodus. In these few seconds no one noticed that the young man himself remained behind.

* * * * *

Five men and a girl lined the arched entrance to the ‘Melhampton Arms’ and gazed out into the darkness. There was not a sound to be heard nor in those first few seconds anything to be seen. Around the lamp-post, a few yards distant, the snowflakes came twirling and tumbling, but electric light had not yet arrived at Melhampton, and the illumination of the ill-burning oil-lamp, protected by a smeared and streaming glass, reached scarcely more than a few feet. The precipitous street

lay in a pool of darkness. Old William Crocombe began to cough.

“Get you in, Granfer,” Tom Baker admonished. “Us’ll bring word in if aught’s happened.”

Harry Foulds, the horse dealer, being younger and hardier than the others, plunged out into the darkness. They heard his voice from the middle of the street.

243

“I can’t see naught,” he announced. “The snow’s a foot deep.”

Then inspiration came to Tom Baker. He thrust his hand into his pocket, produced his electric torch, and light flashed into the abyss of darkness. In the centre of the road lay a dark, uneven-looking object, already half covered with snow. Leading to it from westwards was a single faint track, rapidly becoming undistinguishable. Harry Foulds hastened forward, stooped down and called out almost at once:

“It’s just a motor-bicycle with a buckled wheel. The chap must have skidded.”

“There ain’t anybody lying out there hurt, then?” Granfer Crocombe demanded quaveringly.

Tom Baker, who had advanced to the edge of the sidewalk, swung his light backwards and forwards.

“Not a soul,” he declared.

Granfer Crocombe’s grunt, as he turned and hobbled back towards the bar parlour, might almost have been one of

disappointment. The others presently followed him, having between them dragged in the damaged machine and propped it up against the wall. The young man was stretched in one of the most comfortable easy chairs, holding a bare foot out to the blaze. He had drawn off his coat, disclosing the fact that he was attired in the conventional dinner garb of the “gentry.” What puzzled them all from the first, however, was that his track had led from the moors, passage across which on such a night for a stranger must have been almost impossible.

“Us don’t call that a proper accident,” Granfer Crocombe grumbled, addressing him disapprovingly. “A fall off one of them bicycles with their stinking popping box is only to be looked for with snow on the ground. Why, you bain’t even hurt!”

“Did you skid, or what?” Tom Baker asked.

“I had the sensation of running into something,” the young man declared.

“Us don’t see how that can be,” Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, objected. “There’s no mark of vehicle or human all down the street fronting the way you came.”

The young man passed his hand for a moment across his forehead. He was a good-looking youth, apparently in the early twenties, whose appearance under other circumstances might even have been attractive. He seemed, however, still dazed and shaken.

“I was riding into the darkness,” he explained. “Suddenly my lights went out. Directly afterwards there was a crash. I picked myself up and stumbled in here. Bring me some brandy, please,”

he added, turning slightly towards the bar window, behind which Alice was standing.

Mrs. Dowdswell, the landlady, came fussing into the room. She was a stout, pleasant-faced woman, dressed in black silk, with a garnet brooch and other trinkets of a massive order.

“What’s this about an accident?” she demanded.

Tom Baker pointed to the new-comer.

“Young gentleman fell off his bicycle outside. Thought he’d run into something. We’ve been out to see, though, and there bain’t nothing unusual to be seen.”

“What you ran into,” Harry Foulds suggested, “was probably the ground. Your lights going out’d give you a bit of a twist, and there’s a coating of frost beneath that snow.”

The young man swallowed his brandy eagerly. Mrs. Dowdswell was staring at his attire in amazement. His voice and habiliments demanded respectful address, and she proffered it. At the same time she, like the rest, was curious.

246

“Might one ask how far you do have come on such a night, sir?” she ventured.

He paused for a moment before replying. He had the air of one who sees difficulties ahead.

“I came from the Hall,” he answered.

There was a little murmur of astonishment.

“From the Hall!” Mrs. Dowdswell exclaimed. “Why, sure Sir Henry would never let you leave, or her ladyship either.”

“Nevertheless,” the young man replied dryly, “I left. And here I am. Is there any hope of my being able to pursue my journey?”

Tom Baker took it upon himself to be spokesman. He shook his head.

“Not a likely matter that, sir. The wheel of your motor-bicycle is badly buckled and the petrol tank leaking.”

“There is perhaps a car to be hired?” the young man suggested.

“The only cars for hire belong to me,” Tom Baker said, “and I value them and my drivers far too much to trust them out on such a night. Why, there’s thirty miles of moorland on either side of Melhampton, young sir, and the roads by now are level with the moor itself.”

247

“Then I must remain here,” the young man decided, with obvious reluctance.

There was an awkward pause, natural enough under the circumstances. The whole of the little company were engrossed with one reflection: for what reason had this strange young man left the notably hospitable roof of their Squire on such a night and under such hopeless conditions? If the object of these speculations sensed their curiosity, he made no effort to gratify it. He was holding up his other leg to the fire now, and a little cloud of steam escaped from his dripping trouser-leg.

“You be wet,” Mr. Scroggins observed at last, consumed with a

desire to break the silence.

“I am very wet indeed,” the young man acknowledged.

“Mostly about the legs,” Granfer Crocombe remarked.

“Mostly about the legs,” he assented gravely. “My socks, in fact,” he added, throwing them into the fire, “are ruined.”

There was another period of silence. The new-comer produced a thin gold cigarette-case from his pocket and smoked. It was obvious, however, that he was not at ease. More than once he lifted his head as though to listen. He still showed no signs of being willing to relieve the painful curiosity with which the little gathering was afflicted. This time it was Tom Baker who broke the spell. He tapped with his pipe upon the table by his side.

248

“This being, so to speak, an unusual night,” he said to the young lady who leaned forward from the bar, “the company present will take another drink with me. Will you join us, sir?” he invited the stranger.

The latter nodded.

“You are very kind,” he said. “I will take some more brandy.”

The drinks were served almost in silence. The young man looked up as his glass was handed to him.

“Is my room being prepared?” he inquired.

“Mrs. Dowdswell is seeing about it, sir,” Alice replied.

Tom Baker made an effort to direct the conversation towards some subject of slight local interest which they had been discussing previously in the evening. The result was a failure. A ponderous yokel silence brooded once more over the place. The minds of everyone present were still absorbed by curiosity about the stranger in their midst. Then suddenly the latter, who had been looking into the fire as though deep in thought, sat up in his chair. The others, too, turned their heads. From outside they could hear someone knocking heavy boots against the wall as though to remove the snow. A moment or two later the door was opened. Red-faced, with the snow gleaming from his waterproof cape and the buttons of his hastily-donned uniform, Police-Constable Chopping made a somewhat portentous entrance. He looked round the room, and his eyes fell upon the stranger. He closed the door behind him. The customary greetings were withheld. It was Police-Constable Chopping who was master of the situation.

249

“Good evening, gentlemen all,” he said.

There was a little chorus of salutation. There was also something approaching excitement. The policeman made no attempt to hurry matters. He looked once more deliberately around and finally addressed the young man, who was still warming his feet.

“Owing,” he announced, “to a telephone message received ten minutes ago from the Hall—from the seat of Sir Henry Melhampton,” he corrected himself—“I am here with certain instructions.”

250

“Instructions from whom?” the young man interrupted.

“Sir Henry, being a magistrate, is qualified to issue such,” Police-Constable Chopping answered. “I believe that you, sir, until this evening were a guest at the Hall.”

“I was staying there,” the young man admitted. “What concern is that of yours? I do not understand.”

“That I will now make clear, if so be that you wish,” was the stolid reply. “My instructions be to prevent any young gentleman who may have left the Hall this evening from proceeding further on his journey.”

“And how should you stop me,” the young man demanded, “if I desired to go on?”

The police-constable coughed.

“Bearing in mind, sir,” he said, “the urgency of the message received from Sir Henry, I should, if necessary, prevent you leaving this hotel by force.”

The young man looked at his interlocutor critically, yet not ill-humouredly.

251

“You are a large man, constable,” he admitted, taking note of the girth of his limbs, but taking note also of his somewhat high complexion and the difficulty with which his belt was kept in position, “yet if I chose to go it is not you who could stop me.”

“You think not, sir?” Police-Constable Chopping observed, in a tone which plainly indicated that he held a different opinion.

“I think not,” the other repeated calmly. “In the first place, you

see, I am something of a boxer. Although I am not altogether English I was, nevertheless, at your Oxford University and from there I won the amateur championship. Furthermore,” he went on, changing his position to one of greater comfort, “I have taken the trouble to master the principles of jiu-jitsu as expounded by one of its cleverest exponents now in England, and if these should fail me—although I can assure you, constable, that I could put you on your back in seven different ways in seven different seconds—I have other inducements.”

Almost insensibly his hand had stolen into his pocket. With a little thrill the assembled company saw the firelight flash upon a very small but very wicked-looking revolver. 252
They all instinctively shrank back in their places; even Police-Constable Chopping retreated a step. Tom Baker shook his head gravely.

“Young sir,” he said, “what trouble you may have found for yourself there’s none here can say, but let me warn you that you’ll do yourself no good by being found with a weapon of that sort on you.”

“You’re a sensible fellow,” the young man concurred. “To show how thoroughly I agree with you,” he added, turning it upside down and opening the breech, “I will first of all demonstrate that it is unloaded, and in the second place I will deposit it upon the mantelpiece.”

“The carrying of fire-arms,” Police-Constable Chopping began

“Spare me this twaddle,” the young man begged. “We are very

comfortable here. If you would like a little exercise I will box with you or wrestle with you. If you prefer to remain in an upright position perhaps you will let me know for whom or for what we are waiting.”

“The Squire,” was the solemn announcement. “He be now on his way down.”

The young man made no remark. He lit another cigarette and continued to gaze gloomily into the fire. There was an additional little thrill amongst the company. They had now only one fear: lest some evil chance should deprive them of witnessing the *dénouement* of this curious happening. The suspense, at any rate, was not long lived, for before another minute had passed they heard the throbbing of a motor outside and, a few seconds later, Sir Henry entered abruptly. The occupants of the bar parlour, with the exception of the barefooted stranger, rose to their feet. Mrs. Dowdswell from behind the raised window bobbed.

253

“Good evening, all of you,” Sir Henry said, waving them back to their places. “What the devil is the meaning of this, sir?” he demanded, addressing the young man.

“I do hope,” the latter replied, “that you have not come out on such an inclement evening, Sir Henry, to ask me that question. Surely the answer is obvious enough.”

“Then you are a thief?”

“I do not admit it. Finding myself accused in a strange house where it happens that not a soul has ever seen me before, I may have thought flight judicious. I am not yet, however, prepared to

plead guilty.”

Tom Baker rose to his feet.

254

“I think, friends,” he suggested, looking around, “as we’d better leave the Squire and this young gentleman to have their bit of talk together.”

With an unwillingness which seemed to creak in their bones, they all rose. The Squire stopped them impatiently.

“Nothing of the sort,” he declared. “There is no secrecy about this matter. This afternoon this young man arrived, proclaiming himself my son’s guest. My son was motoring from Exeter and has not reached us—we presume owing to the weather. We made this young man at home, accepted him at his own valuation, and offered him our hospitality. To-night we discovered in the billiard-room that a priceless jewel—a rose pearl belonging to my wife—was missing. It was hanging as a pendant from her neck not five minutes before its loss was discovered. No one had entered or left the room. By my orders the doors were locked and I announced that everyone present was to be searched. This young gentleman, as though moving casually round the room, reached the switches, plunged the room into darkness, climbed out of the window and escaped on a motor-bicycle.”

There was a little murmur. The delinquent shrugged his shoulders.

255

“I have the utmost dislike to being searched,” he observed, “especially in the presence of ladies.”

“You know perfectly well,” the Squire said coldly, “that there would have been nothing undignified about the proceeding. The Lord-Lieutenant allowed himself to be searched, and the screen which protected him would, I presume, have sufficed for you. Furthermore, the ladies had already left the room.”

“Nevertheless,” the young man acknowledged, “I felt a repugnance to the whole proceeding—hence my flight, which the weather, alas, seems to have brought to an end.”

“The weather,” Sir Henry pronounced, “was providential. Now let me tell you, sir, that I do not believe your name is de Mellet, nor do I believe that my son ever sent a telegram that a friend of his might arrive to-day. You brought no luggage except a small suit-case.”

“It is on its way from Exeter.”

“You call yourself by a name which no one has heard of before.”

“It is my own—one of them.”

“One of them, I dare say,” Sir Henry assented, “your second or third *alias*, no doubt. As I do not believe that you would be fool enough to risk your liberty for a jewel that you threw away into the darkness, I shall ask you once more whether you consent to be searched? If not——”

256

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

“More than anything,” he confessed, “I should hate a night in a police cell with Police-Constable—did you say Chopping?—in

the vicinity. You had better search me. Would someone kindly close the bar window as a tribute to my modesty?"

He took off his dinner coat, waistcoat and trousers. The little company gaped. They had never before seen underclothes of thin white silk. The young man resumed his seat nonchalantly.

"My garments you can search at your leisure," he invited, addressing his late host. "When you wish you can come and pass your hand over my body. If you follow the latest practices you will be careful to look between my toes, and Police-Constable Chopping will also shine his lantern down my throat. I have an idea that I should like to spend the night comfortably here, so pray satisfy yourselves. If you will permit me a cigarette from my own case? Thanks."

257

The search was duly and grimly made. The young man once glanced round when he saw his host with a pocket-book in his hand.

"Pray satisfy your curiosity," he begged. "The pearl star could scarcely be concealed there, but you might discover secrets of my crime-stained past."

Sir Henry bit his lip and threw the pocket-book upon the table. The search was completed.

"Satisfied?" the young man asked.

"Not in the least," was the curt reply. "It may have seemed better to you to have thrown the thing away than to have faced arrest."

“I was alone in this room for thirty seconds,” the suspected thief confided. “Why not try here?”

Sir Henry glanced around. There were few possible hiding-places, but the next five minutes were spent in a systematic search.

“Now that this is all over,” the young man demanded at last, “am I under arrest or am I not?”

Sir Henry hesitated.

“I shall consider myself justified,” he announced, “in detaining you until my son arrives. If you are really a friend of his——”

258

He broke off in his speech. Once more there was the throbbing of a motor outside. With even more haste than that which had heralded the entrance of Sir Henry, a younger edition of him burst into the room.

“Good God!” he exclaimed, looking around. “What’s all this? And what in the name of all that’s ridiculous are you doing in your underclothes, Armand? What’s it mean, dad?”

“Do you know that person?” Sir Henry asked his son, pointing to where the young man was resuming his outer garments.

“Know him? Of course I do,” was the emphatic reply.

“Calls himself de Mellet,” Sir Henry continued doubtfully.

“Arrived on a motor-bicycle with scarcely any clothes and says that you asked him to stay. Who the devil is he?”

The eyes of the two young men met. George Melhampton laughed for a moment heartily.

“I don’t know what it’s all about,” he said, “or why he called himself only de Mellet, except that he’s so beastly modest. Let me introduce you, dad: Monsieur Armand Paul de Mellet, Marquis de Severan. There’s lots more of it, and I’m not good at French titles, but that’s right so far, isn’t it, Armand?”

259

“It is undoubtedly correct,” his friend admitted.

“Then why the devil——?” Sir Henry began.

“I owe you an apology for my reticence, Sir Henry,” the young man acknowledged. “It was really your servant’s fault. I happened to have a very old dispatch-case——”

“I can see how that happened, especially as George didn’t mention your name in his telegram,” Sir Henry acknowledged, “but why on earth did you refuse to be searched and do a bolt?”

The young man finished tying his tie to his satisfaction. Then he turned around.

“Because I had the pearl,” he confided.

There was a breathless silence. Events had marched a little too rapidly for the original company. They simply sat, steeped in a sense of the unexpected. Sir Henry frowned. His son stared.

“You had the pearl?” George repeated.

The young man nodded. He reached for a horn snuff-box upon the mantelpiece, thrust his fingers down to the bottom and passed the missing jewel across to his friend.

“I just had time to hide it when everyone left this room thinking there had been an accident,” he observed. “Now I must really tell you what happened. I dislike doing it very much, and I should prefer to speak in private.”

260

Sir Henry was suddenly obstinate.

“I think you had better explain here and now,” he said. “Our village friends know so much; they may as well know the rest.”

The Marquis shrugged his shoulders.

“Just as you will,” he assented. “What happened was this: I came down to dinner rather late, as you know, Sir Henry, and the introductions were a little inaudible to me, as, since the war, I suffer from a slight deafness in my left ear. I sat next a very charming young lady,” he went on, “who was, I gathered, a companion to Lady Melhampton, and for whom, I must confess, I conceived a very great admiration. We talked the usual sort of dinner conversation. She seemed to find much fault with my sex—preferred the more chivalrous epochs of the past, and thought none of us nowadays capable of anything in the way of self-sacrifice.”

“Who the devil was she?” George exclaimed. “Mother hasn’t a companion.”

De Mellet seemed a little taken aback, but he proceeded.

261

“Anyway, in the billiard-room I saw the pearl fall and roll under the table, and I saw the young lady—whoever she was—pick it up. I was surprised, of course, when she said nothing about it, and I was even more surprised when the alarm was given and she still remained silent. However——”

Then came the third interruption; once more the throbbing of a motor; this time light flying footsteps. A girl entered, an ermine cloak flung hurriedly over her evening dress. There were tears in her eyes. She was obviously almost hysterical.

“Dad—George!” she exclaimed. “Whatever have I done?”

“Who is this young lady?” the Marquis asked.

“My daughter,” Sir Henry replied.

The Marquis coughed.

“Then I have been very stupid,” he confessed, after a moment’s pause of obvious bewilderment. “To finish my story: I thought that Mademoiselle had been tempted and had been momentarily foolish, and then in her terror had slipped the thing into my pocket. It was incredible, but what was one to understand? I thought I might get away and then return the thing anonymously.”

262

She came towards him with outstretched hands. Her eyes were like stars.

“You can’t forgive me,” she exclaimed. “I don’t know that you’ll ever believe me, but it’s the truth. I did keep the pearl for a minute, and, as I felt sure that you had seen me pick it up, I put

it into your pocket to see what you would do. Directly we had been searched we left the room. I thought in five minutes it would be up to me to explain. Instead of that I went to my little study. I had been skating all day—I told you at dinner that I was tired out—and there was a huge fire there, and—and—it sounds absurd, I know, but I went fast asleep! I woke up half an hour ago and heard all these horrible things. You can't forgive me, but do believe—it's the truth. I had no idea of going to sleep. I never do such a thing. But I did. I wouldn't have stayed away for a minute, and I thought you knew who I was and that it wouldn't be really serious.”

Beyond the outburst of spoken words the appeal from her eyes and her trembling tone was almost pathetic. The young man took her hands in his. He certainly held them a great deal longer than was necessary.

263

“A chapter of accidents,” he murmured. “As for forgiveness—it is yours. But perhaps you will reward me with your kindness for these slight discomforts. I am going to stay for a week.”

Her answer, if a little incoherent, seemed to be very satisfactory. Sir Henry whispered with Mrs. Dowdswell. There was a great deal of bustle behind the bar; a very disjointed conversation in front of it between the two young people who were still standing hand-in-hand. Somehow or other they all found themselves in a circle round the fire. The Squire himself served the steaming glasses. Granfer Crocombe raised his.

“Here's to them as says that nothing ever happens at Melhampton,” he declared. “To my mind it's the excitingest place that ever a body lived in.”

Police-Constable Chopping drained his glass and whispered officiously to the Squire.

“Closing time be damned!” the chairman of the bench of magistrates replied.

IX

THE REMARKABLE ASTUTENESS OF POLICE-CONSTABLE CHOPPING

The boy and the girl—they were scarcely more—stood at the edge of the thicket, symbolical figures in their way, gazing at the promised land which rolled from their feet in waves of splendour to a horizon mistily blue, indistinct only because its borders were the range of their vision. Below them the flaming moor stretched for a mile or so on either side of the narrow, winding road until it reached the beginnings of the long valley, or rather basin, in the hills, on the farther side of which lay Melhampton. Beyond were ripe cornfields, through which at times the wind swept with a murmur of the sea, but which on this August morning were like great carpets of gold set in the midst of rich meadow land. Farther away still, as the ribbon of road zigzagged once more upwards, was a wild stretch of moorland where the patches of colour were less frequent and the grey lichen-covered boulders rose unexpectedly.

265

Then again, in the farthest distance, came more cornfields, pools of deep Devonshire green, farm-houses, some lonely enough, but most with their group of sheltering trees. The eyes of both as they stood hand-in-hand had wandered for a time in every direction as though drinking in the quiet beauty of the scene. Finally it was towards the town they looked, the picturesque medley of red-tiled roofs, of cobbled streets, clean and sweet beneath the sunshine.

“So that is Melhampton,” the girl murmured.

Her companion nodded despondently. He was a good-looking youth enough, but tired, lean about the face, hollow-eyed, with something of despair in his half-querulous expression. The girl in normal times must have been beautiful. She, too, however, bore the marks of suffering. The linen gown she wore was clean but patched; she was almost painfully thin and her blue eyes were filled with a brooding anxiety, for which indeed there seemed some cause in her words.

“It has been a long way,” she sighed.

“A long way for both of us,” he agreed tonelessly. “If I could have spared the money for a new sparking plug yesterday it would have been easier to climb. As it is I can get down. Unless I have luck I’m not so sure about getting back.”

266

“How far is it?” she asked. “It looks so near.”

“A matter of nine miles.”

“Nine miles!” she repeated wonderingly. “It is all downhill, though, Leonard, and you won’t have the side-car.”

“I can manage it all right,” he assured her. “You’d better lie down and try to rest again, Frances. Yesterday must have tired you terribly. I wish I dared go and ask them for some more milk at the farm.”

“Don’t do it, please,” she begged. “They were so kind to us last night. Wait until you have tried—down there.”

He acquiesced reluctantly and turned back into the thicket. For some minutes he busied himself detaching a worn-looking side-

car from a very ancient and old-fashioned motor-bicycle. The girl, who had followed him, dragged one of the rugs upon which they had apparently spent the night, out into the sunshine.

“I shall just lie here until you come back, Leonard,” she said —“lie here and rest and pray. It is all so beautiful. It seems wrong to fear that people could be unkind here.”

267

He took her face between his hands and kissed her fondly, after which he mounted the bicycle and rode off, looking back once or twice to wave his hand. Presently, however, he had to settle down to make the best of his very rickety machine. With every mile he travelled his face grew more set and his expression grimmer.

* * * * *

It was the hour, sacred to every man, woman and child in Melhampton, of the midday meal. There was not a sound to be heard or a person to be seen in the long steep street. Mr. Tidd, the manager of the local bank, bending over a ledger, awaiting the return in some half-hour or so of his assistant, became a trifle somnolent in the heat. A bluebottle buzzing about annoyed him. He looked up to wave it away, and found himself gazing into a very ugly little black aperture held only a few inches from his chest by a most astonishing apparition—a man with a clumsy black mask tied round his head.

“Give me all the money you have in the bank,” the intruder demanded. “Quick! I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m desperate. The money before I count ten!”

268

The left hand struck the counter for the first time—then for the

second. There was a very short pause between the beats. Mr. Tidd, a small, neat-mannered man, conscientious to a fault, but never intended by nature or disposition for deeds of heroism, did not hesitate in his mind for a single moment. It is true that instinctively his eyes swept the empty street; true, too, that he listened for the sound of any approaching or passing vehicle. His lack of response, however, was a matter of seconds only, and when it came, if a little tremulous, it was distinct enough.

“You shall have the money,” he promised. “There isn’t a great deal.”

“There had better be,” was the fierce rejoinder. “Where is it?”

“In the drawer just in front of me.”

“What about the safe?”

Mr. Tidd shook his head.

“There are only securities there and bank-notes for large amounts,” he replied. “They would be of no use to you. There are half a dozen people who know the numbers, even if you got rid of me.”

“How much loose money—Treasury notes—have you got in there?”

269

“One hundred and nineteen pounds,” was the hesitating admission.

“Hand it over. Get a move on!”

Mr. Tidd did as he was told. Mechanically he moistened his forefinger on the damp pad which stood by his side.

“Chuck that!” the young man insisted. “Give ’em to me as they are. I’ll count them afterwards. Don’t trifle with me. I’ll swear to God I’ll shoot if you do.”

“I have accepted the situation,” Mr. Tidd reminded him with some dignity. “There is the money.”

The marauder stuffed the notes into his pocket. He listened for a moment. The silence was still unbroken. There was not even a footfall upon the pavement outside.

“What’s that room in there?” he inquired, pointing to the diminutive office in which Mr. Tidd was accustomed to interview his clients.

“My office,” was the laconic response.

“What I ought to do,” the young man reflected, depressing his revolver a little, “is to shoot you in the leg or knock you about until you couldn’t give the alarm.”

“I trust,” Mr. Tidd said earnestly, “for your own sake as well as mine, that you will not indulge in unnecessary violence.”

270

“Will you give me your word,” the intruder stipulated, “to go into that office and sit there for ten minutes without moving if I let you alone?”

“Under compulsion,” Mr. Tidd assented, “I give you my word.”

“Then leg it there as quick as you can,” was the brusque command.

Mr. Tidd disliked the phrase, for his usual walk was a somewhat deliberate proceeding. He certainly hurried, however, during the last few steps and breathed a sigh of relief as he closed the door behind him and listened to the turning of the key in the lock. Presently he heard swift footsteps pass the window on their way up the street, and later he fancied that he could catch the faint, irregular explosions of some sort of motor-vehicle. He sat with his eyes fixed upon the clock. In exactly ten minutes he threw open the window and leaned out. Mr. Tom Baker, the ironmonger, was strolling by on the other side of the road and obeyed at once with some surprise Mr. Tidd’s call.

“Did you want me?” he asked a little doubtfully.

271

Mr. Tidd leaned farther out of the window.

“Tom,” he confided, in a voice shaken with emotion, “I’m locked in here. The bank’s been robbed. Come and let me out.”

Mr. Baker showed every sign of amazement; an expression of incredulous horror filled his eyes; his mouth remained for some seconds wide open. A bank robbery in Melhampton! The thing was unbelievable.

“Hurry, please!” Mr. Tidd begged piteously. “We must telephone to the police.”

“God bless my soul!” the ironmonger exclaimed as he made a dash for the front door.

Late in the afternoon, whilst Melhampton was still quivering with the excitement of this undreamed-of happening, Mr. Tidd, neatly dressed as usual and carrying the malacca cane which had been one of his many presents from his daughter in America, rang the bell at the Vicarage door, and was duly admitted to the presence of the vicar, Mr. Haselton. The latter welcomed him warmly, and with much consideration offered his own easy chair.

“Dear me, Mr. Tidd,” he said, “what an ordeal! Mrs. Haselton and I have been most distressed, I can assure you. You have had tea?”

272

“I have had tea, thank you,” Mr. Tidd replied, folding his gloves mechanically and placing them inside his hat.

“Let me hear the story from your own lips,” Mr. Haselton begged. “There are a hundred different versions going about. Most unfortunate that the inspector was away and that only Chopping was here. A good fellow, Chopping, but lacking a little in intelligence, I fear.”

“Chopping has done what he could,” Mr. Tidd conceded. “He has telephoned to most of the surrounding towns, and the police are on the look-out for anyone attempting to leave the neighbourhood. This is just what happened.”

Mr. Tidd told his story to the accompaniment of many sympathetic exclamations. When he had finished he remained for a moment or two curiously silent.

“I sincerely hope,” the vicar said, “that the robber will be found to be a complete stranger to our little community.”

Mr. Tidd’s expression was ominously grave.

“Vicar,” he confided, “I am here to ask your advice—
your serious advice—upon a very difficult matter.”

273

Mr. Haselton inclined his head slowly and composed himself into an attitude of absorbed attention.

“I want to put this question to you,” his visitor continued, speaking with great deliberation. “Supposing I had an idea—more than an idea, a very strong conviction—that I had recognised my assailant, supposing I felt that I could go to the police confidently and tell them the name of the man, do you believe that there are any circumstances under which I should be justified in withholding it?”

“My dear Mr. Tidd!” the vicar exclaimed. “Dear me, dear me!”

“You see the point,” Mr. Tidd urged. “I want your candid opinion. Supposing the person was one to whom I desired to show consideration, for whose people I had a friendship, should I be justified, provided the bank were not the losers, in withholding such aid as I might be in a position to give the police towards his identification?”

The vicar shook his head slowly.

“Mr. Tidd,” he confessed, “you have placed before me a
problem. I know your kindly nature, and I fear that my
reply will be a disappointment, but there—we have often to face

274

these things in life. If you feel that you can identify the thief it is your duty to confide your suspicions to the police. I can see no other course open to you.”

Mr. Tidd sighed.

“Supposing it was the first offence,” he persisted; “supposing the young man comes of respectable parents, who would have to share in the shame of his conviction?”

The vicar’s pause was obviously not one of hesitation, but intended to give more weight to his words.

“These are not considerations to be taken into account, Mr. Tidd,” he pronounced.

The bank manager’s honest countenance became even more overcast.

“I am sorry,” he said. “Mr. Haselton, I am convinced—I may say I am absolutely certain—that the man who robbed the bank this morning was your son Leonard.” . . .

There was a very ugly, almost a ghastly, silence. Mr. Haselton was a strong, high-coloured man, whose cheeks were tanned with Devonshire sun and winds, whose eyes were bright with health and whose figure was, to say the least of it, portly. Five seconds after the words had left Mr. Tidd’s lips, even, in fact, as he realised their import, he seemed to have aged a dozen years, to have lost his dignified poise, his appearance of well-being, even his ordinary courage of living.

“It is impossible!” he gasped.

Mr. Tidd's gravity was undiminished.

"I should not make such a statement if I were not absolutely convinced of its truth, Mr. Haselton," he said. "I saw your son last time he was down here and, as you know, I have watched him grow up. His attempts to disguise his voice were ridiculous. He was successful in effecting the robbery, it is true, but he was obviously a novice. When did you last see him?"

"Six months ago," the vicar groaned. "You have heard, no doubt, the sad news. We do not speak of it. He was married to a young actress and was trying to obtain a situation himself upon the stage."

"And since then?"

"There have been letters. He has applied to us for pecuniary assistance. We were perhaps wrong in refusing him. We were perhaps wrong, Mr. Tidd. God has punished us."

276

"The young man has failed to earn a living, then, since he left the army?" Mr. Tidd opined. "Have you given him assistance often?"

"Three or four times," the vicar replied in a choked tone. "He lost his first job through no fault of his own. When he went on the stage—it was a great blow to his mother—to us both—we withdrew our countenance. Then this marriage! It was terrible, Mr. Tidd—terrible!"

"Life sometimes is terrible," Mr. Tidd assented gravely. "We live here a very sheltered existence, you know, Mr. Haselton. Sometimes I have wondered whether we are very good judges

of what goes on in other places.”

“That may be so,” the other acknowledged. “If he had come to me—if he had only come to me!”

“Did you ask him to?” Mr. Tidd inquired. “Did you give him any encouragement to come?”

Mr. Haselton’s head was buried for a moment in his hands. He shook it sadly.

“On the contrary,” he confessed, “I forbade him the house. You may as well know the whole truth, Mr. Tidd; I received a letter only yesterday morning, saying that he was in the neighbourhood and asking whether he could bring his wife to see us.”

277

“And you replied?”

Mr. Haselton’s voice was more than ever unsteady. He presented the picture of a man torn with regrets and self-condemnation.

“We refused. I—Mrs. Haselton declined to receive her—a young actress—my son’s wife—here in Melhampton!”

Some part of the gentle sympathy seemed to pass from Mr. Tidd’s manner.

“To where did you address the reply?” he asked.

“To Market Obery—the village on the other side of the moor. He asked for it to be sent there.”

There was a lengthened pause, broken by a discreet knocking at the door. The maid-servant entered. She addressed Mr. Tidd.

“Police-Constable Chopping would like to see you, sir,” she announced.

This was no day to stand upon ceremony. Police-Constable Chopping had followed close behind. He forgot to salute the vicar; he forgot to salute Mr. Tidd; he forgot to wipe his boots upon the mat.

278

“If you will be so kind as to spare half an hour for I, sir,” he said eagerly, “there’s a tinker just cum in, says he passed a young man pushing a motor-bicycle up Penstaple Hill way about two o’clock, and there’s talk of him and a young woman having spent the night in Farmer Foulds’s wood.”

Mr. Tidd nodded.

“Well, what do you want of me, Chopping?” he inquired.

“If you’d cum along with me at once, sir,” the constable suggested, “I’d be justified in making the arrest if so be as you were able to identify him. We’d do it,” he added, with a wonderful anticipatory gleam in his eyes, “before the inspector cum.”

“I see,” Mr. Tidd murmured.

“On Foulds’s Farm,” the vicar remarked, rising unsteadily to his feet. “That’s eight or nine miles away, isn’t it?”

“Nine miles and up hill,” Police-Constable Chopping

acquiesced. "I was wondering," he went on, scratching his head and looking anxiously at the vicar, "if Mr. Haselton would mind, it being a special affair for the town and all——?"

279

"I will drive you there," the vicar interrupted.

* * * * *

At the bank Mr. Tidd kept them waiting for a few minutes whilst he indulged in certain somewhat irregular proceedings. From the bottom of the safe he drew out a certain number of notes which he replaced with his own cheque. By emptying the smaller till and visiting his own bureau he made up the sum of one hundred and nineteen pounds and seven shillings, which he sealed in a plain envelope addressed to himself, and locked up in the safe. Afterwards he took his place by Mr. Haselton's side and they commenced the long ascent out of the town. The vicar sat very still with the wheel in his hand, his face set. He only once broached the subject of their recent conversation. He turned a haggard face towards his companion.

"You asked me a while since for my advice as your vicar, Mr. Tidd," he said. "I gave it to you. I cannot retract it. You must do what seems right."

"It is sometimes," the bank manager reflected sorrowfully, "an extraordinarily difficult thing in this world to know what is right. Is there a fixed standard, or isn't there?"

280

"If I were in my pulpit," the vicar groaned, "I should tell you that there was. Just now I am a man, not a clergyman."

"It seems a pity," Mr. Tidd sighed, "that the two can't sometimes

change places.”

They mounted higher and higher, climbed the last ascent, and neared the thicket. The policeman leaned over from the back, agog with excitement.

“There he be, sir—there he be! He’s tinkering with the motor-bicycle. Us’ll tackle him right away, Mr. Tidd. It be a good half-hour before the inspector can cum along.”

Mr. Haselton brought the car to a standstill and remained at the wheel whilst Police-Constable Chopping and Mr. Tidd approached the little clearing. At their advance the girl, who had been lying on a rug, half raised herself and stared at them, her eyes wide open with horror. The young man paused in his task. He gripped the wrench which he had been holding fiercely in his right hand. He was by no means a pleasing-looking person at that moment.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

Police-Constable Chopping produced his note-book. It was of no particular use, but the handling of it gave him a feeling of confidence.

281

“Us just wants to ask a question of you, young sir,” he announced.

“Like your damned cheek,” the young man muttered.

“’Tis a plain question and needs nobbut a simple answer,” the policeman continued. “Has you’ m been down to Melhampton this morning on that there bicycle?”

“That’s my affair,” was the curt response.

“Um! Refuses to answer,” the policeman commented. “Very well, young sir, then I’ll put it to you straight. There’s a robbery been committed at the Melhampton Bank.”

The young man threw the wrench upon the grass. The girl had staggered to her feet.

“Leonard!” she shrieked.

She was in his arms. For a moment no one spoke. Police-Constable Chopping’s smile broadened. He turned expectantly towards his companion. Mr. Tidd swallowed hard and faced the situation. For the first time in his life he told a deliberate and amazing falsehood.

“This is not in the least like the young man who robbed the bank,” he announced, in a clear tone, “not in the least like him.”

The policeman’s smile faded away into an expression of blank disappointment. The young man seemed suddenly to stiffen. He turned his head half doubtfully towards the speaker, but the girl’s arms were tight around his neck. Her eyes, too, were fixed upon the little bank manager and they shone with a light which made Mr. Tidd feel that lying was a most delightful avocation.

282

“You are sure, sir?” the policeman persisted dejectedly.

“Absolutely certain,” Mr. Tidd declared. “The young man’s appearance seems somewhat familiar to me, but he is not in the least like the young blackguard who tackled me this morning.

Why, Chopping,” Mr. Tidd went on, finding his task easier every moment, “didn’t I tell you that my assailant was a short, fair-haired man of sturdy build?”

“I can’t rightly remember,” Police-Constable Chopping observed dolefully, “that you described the thief at all—said you’d wait, maybe, until the inspector cum along.”

“Well, well!” Mr. Tidd exclaimed, with a sudden change of tone, looking hard at the young man, into whose face some sort of apprehension was beginning to dawn, “I do believe—why, it’s Leonard Haselton, of course. Dear me! And your father has been looking out for you every hour. . . . Mr. Haselton!”

283

The vicar had already descended from the car. He came hurrying up. It was all he could do in passing to avoid gripping Mr. Tidd’s hand, but he remembered Police-Constable Chopping, who was standing solemnly aghast in the background.

“My dear Leonard,” he said, taking his son’s hand, “and your wife, of course—Frances, I think. My dear, we are expecting you both. If your bicycle is out of order, Leonard, you had better come into the car and I will drive you home. I am afraid,” he went on, “that you can’t have had a very comfortable tour.”

The girl’s smile, the happiness which suddenly shone in her simple but beautiful face, were more than Mr. Tidd could bear. He turned away, and, dropping his cane, was several moments picking it up.

“Supposing you take the young people down to the car, Vicar,” he suggested. “We will follow directly.”

The vicar extended his arm. The girl, clinging to it, moved happily off. Leonard hesitated once or twice, but Mr. Tidd's gesture of dismissal was peremptory.

“Chopping,” the latter said, as soon as they were alone, “I am sorry for your disappointment, but I had to tell the truth, hadn't I?”

284

“Sure-ly,” was the somewhat doubtful response. “What might that be you picked up just now, sir?”

“A piece of black material—part of a lady's dress once, I should think,” Mr. Tidd replied, completing the destruction of the clumsy black mask. “What I should like you to understand, Chopping, is that I think in this matter you have shown great intelligence and promptness. It was not your fault that we came off on a wrong scent. I shall take care that the inspector knows that.”

The stalwart guardian of the peace said nothing. He was gazing thoughtfully down to the valley. Mr. Tidd watched him covertly. Presently the former delivered himself of a portion of his thoughts.

“I thank 'e kindly, sir,” he said. “You be a man of brains, Mr. Tidd, and the vicar—well, he do be a much-respected gentleman. Maybe it's best for the likes of me to keep a silent tongue. But, Mr. Tidd——”

“Well, Chopping?”

“I wudna have you think me a simpleton.”

X

THE ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OF MR. TIDD

“What I do say is that Melhampton bean’t no place for strangers,” Granfer Crocombe pronounced. “Strangers doan’t have no call to come here.”

“Come, come, Granfer!” Tom Baker, the ironmonger, expostulated. “Where should we tradesmen buy our goods if it wasn’t for the commercial gentlemen? Mr. Meekes yonder has half a dozen of them every week.”

“And a great convenience beyond a doubt,” Mr. Meekes, the draper, confessed. “Why, in my business we couldn’t do without them.”

Granfer Crocombe snapped his fingers.

“Give heed to what I be talking of,” he enjoined. “When I says strangers I mean them as come and act mysterious-like—no one knowing their business—not them as comes in a straightforward way with goods to sell. Right useful them are to such as has a mind to buy and to Mrs. Dowdswell here.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what we should do,” Mrs. Dowdswell acknowledged, “but for the commercial-room.”

“What I was meaning is known to all,” Granfer Crocombe persisted. “I mean a stranger what acts like this Mr. Smith, or whatever his name may be. Now that man do act, to my mind, mysterious-like. What’s his business down here? Has he ever spoke a word of it?”

Mrs. Dowdswell shook her head.

“Whatever it may be I wish there were more of his sort,” she declared, “private sitting-room, best bedroom and wine every night for dinner. I don’t care what his business may be, but the longer he stays the better I shall be pleased.”

Granfer Crocombe grunted discontentedly.

“I was allus one myself for minding my own affairs,” he observed, “but this Mr. Smith, he do seem to my mind summat out of the way. What’s he do with hisself all day? Leaves here at nine o’clock in his little car and gets back about six with muddy boots and looking like a man what’s done a day’s honest work.”

“A tourist, maybe,” Mr. Meekes suggested.

“A geologist, perhaps,” Mr. Tidd, the bank manager, ventured.

“A writing gentleman,” Mr. Scroggins, the butcher, opined. “Some of them story-makers are all for finding a quiet place out of doors for their work.”

287

“May be one of them artists,” Harry Foulds reflected.

Granfer Crocombe snorted in disgust.

“Do ’e look like an artist?” he demanded. “Do ’e look like a story-writer? You folk is all just wandering. I tell you he’s up to summat. He’s a man what doan’t come down here to waste his time, and he doan’t meet strangers up on moor what doan’t belong to these parts for nothing, either.”

There was a little murmur of interest. Granfer Crocombe nodded his head slowly.

“When I says a thing,” he went on, “I be sure of what I be talking on. I saw Ed Swanton, yesterday, from up over, and he says to me, ‘Granfer, these’re queer goings on at Lamater Moor,’ and I says to him, ‘Ed, how goings on?’ and he told me that he’d seen this very gent of ours meet a couple of youths in a motor-car, all covered over with dust as though they’d come, maybe, from Exeter. They was all talking in the road when Ed passed, and the lads had got spy-glasses and long white sticks.”

“Surveyors!” Tom Baker exclaimed.

288

“You may call ’em what you like,” Granfer Crocombe declared. “To me it do seem most mysterious-like, and what I says is that if the man comes to a quiet peaceful place like Melhampton and stays here most part of a week meeting folks out on the moors and tramping about like a looney—why, he should say what his business be.”

“Do ’e get any letters, Mrs. Dowdswell?” Scroggins asked.

“Many a one,” Mrs. Dowdswell replied, “often six or seven a day—and newspapers. There do be all sorts of letters after his name. He do pay like a gentleman and behave like a gentleman, and whatever his business may be, I’ll say it’s honest business.

You're a curious old man, Granfer, that's what you be."

Granfer Crocombe snorted.

"An' you be a simple old woman," he declared.

Tom Baker intervened as peacemaker.

"Come, come!" he said. "All this talk is making us thirsty. Mrs. Dowdswell, ma'am—all the glasses, if you please."

Granfer Crocombe accepted the olive branch.

"I will say this of 'e, Tom," he conceded: "since that mine turned up trumps and made 'e a warm man you doan't forget to spend a bit. There's some, the richer they get, the meaner. That bean't like Tom here."

289

There was a little chorus of assent, during which Mrs. Dowdswell bustled about collecting the glasses. Just as she had completed her task, the door was tentatively opened and the object of their discussion loomed for a moment upon the threshold. He was a large man, dressed in a rough, knickerbocker suit, with tanned cheeks, shrewd grey eyes, and a firm mouth. He seemed a little embarrassed at facing so large a company.

"I wanted you to send a bottle of whisky up to my room, please, Mrs. Dowdswell," he begged.

"Certainly, sir, it shall be up in half a moment," she promised.

"Won't you step in, stranger, and take summat along with us?"

Granfer invited. "There be an easy chair alongside the fire again Mr. Tidd, the banker."

The new-comer hesitated, but accepted the suggestion.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," he said, making his way towards the chair. "I'll have a whisky and soda here, then, Mrs. Dowdswell."

"Along with me, if you'll pardon the liberty, sir," Tom Baker insisted. "We were just having a round."

290

"You'd find it saft up on the moors, to-day," Granfer Crocombe remarked.

"It seems to be raining everywhere," was the somewhat evasive response.

"You've not had the best of the weather for your holiday, sir," Mr. Scroggins ventured.

"An uncertain climate, the English."

The drinks were brought and served. A few polite remarks were addressed to the stranger, to which he replied courteously but vaguely. After a time he drifted out of the conversation, which was chiefly concerned with local topics. He filled a great pipe, leaned back in his chair, and presently relapsed into a doze. In his attitude of relaxation most of the little company permitted themselves a curious glance or two. On the whole their observation was favourable. There was nothing in the least sinister or mysterious about his appearance. . . .

The stranger suddenly aroused himself.

“I beg everyone’s pardon,” he declared, sitting up. “I really believe I was dozing.”

“Quite all right, sir,” Mr. Tidd assured him.

“The air be strong in these parts,” Tom Baker added.

291

The stranger knocked out the ashes from his pipe and summoned Mrs. Dowdswell.

“The drinks are on me, if you please,” he insisted. “I have been guilty of a serious breach of good manners. As you were remarking, sir, the air here is strong, and I was always a ready sleeper. A healthy place, this, I should think.”

“Us never dies,” Granfer Crocombe croaked.

“A fine air,” the stranger went on. “I can’t help wondering——”

He broke off abruptly, refilled his pipe, and sat up in his chair.

“I was up on the top of Lamater Beacon yesterday,” he observed. “Grand view!”

“One of the finest in the county,” Mr. Tidd agreed. “On a clear day you can see the Channel.”

Mr. Smith nodded.

“What I did see,” he observed, “was how that branch railway from Exeter seems to go actually out of its way to avoid

Melhampton. Tell me, you gentlemen, now—I am just a curious stranger—not criticising or anything of that sort—but why did you so strongly oppose that line being brought to Melhampton?”

292

There was a brief silence. Mr. Tidd leaned a little forward in his chair.

“I can quite imagine,” he admitted, “that to a stranger our opposition must seem ridiculous. The town was very much divided at the time. Let me ask you this, Mr.——”

“Smith,” the stranger announced, “Mr. Welman Smith.”

“Let me ask you this, Mr. Smith,” the bank manager continued: “whilst you were on Lamater Beacon, did you look down at Melhampton?”

“I did,” the other assented. “I looked at it for some considerable time. To tell you the truth, I came to the conclusion that it was one of the most picturesque towns I had ever seen.”

“That makes it easier for me to explain,” Mr. Tidd declared.

“You see, we were most of us born here—some of us had fathers and grandfathers who were born here, too. We are not only fond of the place, but it seems to have become a kind of cult with us—a religion almost—to keep it just as beautiful as we have always known it. We haven’t a factory in the place; I think I may say we haven’t an ugly building.

293

Where we have had to build or restore, it has been done with the utmost care. The atmosphere of the place is just the same now as it was hundreds of years ago. Some of us had seen towns to which the railways had come, and we were terrified at the

idea that Melhampton might become like them.”

Mr. Welman Smith nodded gravely.

“Well,” he confided, “I’ve been all over the world, and, although I confess myself a utilitarian, I’ve learned to respect the other fellow’s views. I am bound to say you’re the only company of business men I’ve ever met with who didn’t want to see their town grow. It’s all right if you’re satisfied, I suppose.”

“There’s no doubt,” Tom Baker admitted earnestly, “that we were too conservative in those days. We didn’t foresee, for instance, the coming of motor-cars. The truth of the matter is, Mr. Smith, that if we had to make our choice again we should probably choose differently. Motor-cars and motor transport have been a cruel plague to Melhampton without changing it. The railway would have done no worse and been more convenient.”

Mr. Smith looked at the speaker keenly.

“That’s interesting,” he observed. “Are you of the same opinion, sir?” he added, turning to Mr. Tidd.

294

“I certainly am,” the bank manager acknowledged. “Our decision seemed to us a wise one at the time, and I am not going to say that I, for one, regret it. To-day, however, we should no doubt look upon the matter differently. Melhampton has grown and prospered, it is true, but the more it has grown and the greater its prosperity, the more we feel the inconvenience of being twenty miles away from the railway.”

“If ever,” Tom Baker ventured, looking covertly across at Mr.

Smith, “the railway should have it in mind to make a branch line and connect us up, I don’t think it would find the same measure of opposition to contend with.”

“On the contrary,” Mr. Meekes remarked, “I think they would find us inclined to welcome the suggestion.”

“Or any similar scheme,” Mr. Tidd agreed.

They all looked at Mr. Smith inquiringly, almost eagerly. Unfortunately the heat of the room had once more asserted itself. To all appearance Mr. Smith had fallen into a heavy doze.

* * * * *

It was doubtless a coincidence that on the following day—it being early closing at the bank—Tom Baker invited Mr. Tidd to accompany him for a trial run in his new automobile.

“Out Lamater way?” the ironmonger suggested tentatively.

“A very pleasant road,” Mr. Tidd acquiesced.

They climbed from the valley, from the fertile cornfields, to the moors, and up above that to where the land became hard and stony and something of the loneliness of Exmoor asserted itself. Half-way round the famous road which crosses the ridge behind Lamater Beacon, Tom Baker brought the car to a standstill. Below them was a magnificent panorama; the moors with their flecks of colour, pool-like shadows; and billowy outlines sinking to the cultivated land and rising again to the grimmer outline of Dartmoor. In the middle distance, many miles away,

there was a faint wisp of white smoke from the train—itsself invisible. They both gazed at it thoughtfully.

“I have wondered many a time,” Tom Baker confessed, 296
“why the railway company didn’t kind of link us up. It’d pay them, for there’s a many that motors up north from here and travels on the other line.”

“It would cost money,” Mr. Tidd reflected; “and, after all, Melhampton is only a moderate-sized town.”

“But look at the farms around,” his companion pointed out. “Why, I could count three score from where we sit. There’s the fetching and carrying trade, too, Mr. Tidd; that’s more to be considered than the passengers. It be split up now in a dozen ways, but the Great South Railway’d have the lot if they built the railroad.”

The one thought which was in the minds of both of them they had as yet not touched upon. Suddenly Mr. Tidd gripped his companion’s arm.

“Here he comes,” he whispered. “Now I wonder what he’s doing up here.”

A small two-seater shot round the bend, and Mr. Smith, recognising them, slackened speed and drew up by their side.

“Didn’t expect to see any Melhampton folks so far away from home this afternoon,” he observed a little suspiciously.

“I’m trying a new car,” Tom Baker explained. “We allus brings them up this road. It’s a fine, steady climb—one in 297

twelve to one in six—a good test for any engine.”

Mr. Smith nodded.

“I’ve been having a picnic all by myself,” he confided. “A wonderful country, this, for a complete rest, Mr. Tidd!”

“Wonderful,” Mr. Tidd acquiesced.

“We just caught sight of a puff of smoke over yonder,” Tom Baker remarked. “Made us think of what you were saying last night about the railway.”

“Ah, the railway,” Mr. Smith repeated carelessly. “Well, you made your choice. I dare say you’re as well off without it.”

“There’s been talk once or twice of its coming after all,” Mr. Baker ventured.

The new-comer frowned.

“Most unlikely, I should think,” he declared. “It would have cost very little, when they made the line, to have linked Melhampton up. It would be a different affair now.”

The ironmonger had lighted a pipe and was looking stolidly down across the country.

“They’d have to bring it from Lyeford Junction as things are now,” he pointed out, extending his pipe stem in that direction. “It do be a terrible piece of country between there and this side of Turberry Rise, and ’tis valuable farming land.”

Mr. Smith for a moment forgot himself.

“Good God!” he exclaimed. “You don’t imagine that any engineer in his senses would think of tackling Turberry Rise and having to deal with a lot of grasping farmers to lay a line from Lyeford to Melhampton?”

“I don’t see how else they’d come,” Tom Baker confessed.

Mr. Smith laid his hand upon the other’s shoulder and pointed out across the landscape.

“Look here,” he said, “you see Lamater, just where I’m pointing.”

“Aye,” Tom Baker assented, “that be Lamater, sure enough.”

“Do you suppose,” the other went on, “that any engineer in his senses would rule a straight line as you’re suggesting from Lamater to Melhampton? The idea is simply ridiculous. This is where he’d come; to the right, across that heathery stretch of moorland, round the back of those hills, and straight across Lamater Moor from one end to the other, behind the Beacon here and into Melhampton from the north. Don’t you see, man, there’s never a bit of land to be crossed that’s worth a pound an acre, and a couple of tunnels and one trestle-bridge over the stream is all he’d have to do in the engineering way. That line could be made in two years; yours would take twelve. And as to cost—practically all the land to be bought would be Lamater Moor. Why, they’d build that railway for—let me see, how much a mile?”

Mr. Smith was busy for a short space of time calculating.

Suddenly he intercepted a quick look passing from one to the other of his two companions. He stood perfectly rigid for a moment. Then he frowned heavily, took out a cigarette-case and lit a cigarette. It was noticeable that his fingers were shaking a little.

“I don’t know how much it would cost,” he admitted. “I’ve no head for these sort of things. I don’t know anything about engineering either, but it’s absurd to suppose that any man with common sense would think of building a railway as the crow flies, or taking it through country where they’d have to pay a stiff price for the land.”

“No doubt you’re perfectly correct,” Mr. Tidd acquiesced, turning away. “In any case, the question of the railway will probably not arise again in our time. We had our chance once, as you remarked.”

300

“Nice little car, yours, if one might make so bold,” Mr. Baker observed, moving a little nearer to it.

Mr. Smith pulled the mackintosh covering more completely over some object lying across the back seat.

“Suits me well enough,” he remarked. “I do a lot of wandering about the country. I’m very fond of photographing effects. I have a camera stand in there behind.”

“Shall us see you later?” Mr. Baker inquired as the other returned hurriedly to his place and started his car.

“Very likely,” was the dubious assent. “I may have to leave tonight, though. I’m expecting a wire.”

He waved his hand and drove off. The two men watched him until he rounded the corner.

“Camera be damned!” Mr. Baker exclaimed. “I see’d the top of that thing. It was one of them instruments they look through when they’ve got the white posts in the ground. Mr. Tidd, I suspected it before; I’m dead sartin now—the railroad’s coming, and he knows all about it. Didn’t you notice how he suddenly stopped himself when he realised that he’d given away the plan for the new line?”

301

“His behaviour was certainly strange,” Mr. Tidd admitted.

The ironmonger led the way to the car.

“Us must have a talk about this, you an’ me,” he insisted. “If there’s money to be made out of Melhampton it’s for Melhampton folk to touch a bit of it.”

They began the long descent in silence. Scarcely a word passed between them until they reached the outskirts of Melhampton. Then Tom Baker betrayed where his thoughts had been.

“He was surely right, Mr. Tidd—right as a man could be!” he declared. “From Lamater to Melhampton, the way he pointed out, there isn’t a scrap of land that couldn’t be bought for an old song.”

“Unless——” Mr. Tidd ventured.

“Unless the owner happened to know what was afoot. You don’t chance to have heard, Mr. Tidd, whose property Lamater Moor might be?”

The bank manager shook his head.

“That’s what I’ve been asking myself all the way down,” he confessed. “If there’s anyone knows round here it’s Lawyer Martin, and it’s his day in Melhampton.”

302

“We’ll ask the question,” Mr. Tom Baker proposed. “It’ll cost us only that much breath.”

They drew up outside the offices of the local lawyer. Mr. Martin was in and glad to see them. The question they propounded obviously surprised him.

“Lamater Moor,” he repeated, leaning back in his chair. “Well, Tom, I can tell you as much about that as anyone. The whole moor was bought some five years ago by a small syndicate on the other side of the county who thought they might do something with the peat. It was a new process they had in mind. They were going to build a factory, but it didn’t come off for some reason or another. I don’t know what’s become of the syndicate, but I can tell you the name of the secretary.”

“Who might he be?” Mr. Baker inquired.

“His name’s Tye—Richard Tye, of High Street, Barnstaple,” the lawyer confided. “He’s a member of my profession, but I don’t know much about him. I don’t even know whether the syndicate’s been wound up. You could find out everything from him. What’s the idea?”

303

Tom Baker shook his head.

“It’s just a small interest Mr. Tidd and I had in that matter of

peat,” he confided.

“There’s no money in it,” Martin warned them.

“I’m inclined to think you’re right,” the ironmonger agreed.

“Still, we’d a mind to ask the question. Would six and eight-pence——”

“Get out, you rascal!” the lawyer chuckled. “You wait until you get your yearly bill and you’ll see what I charge you for this.”

“’Tis but a step across to the ‘Melhampton Arms,’” Tom Baker suggested.

The lawyer sighed, pulled down his rolled top desk and reached for his hat.

“You’re the client I was waiting for,” he admitted.

* * * * *

Mrs. Dowdswell was not in the most pleasant of humours that evening.

“A good customer, one of the best, gone on account of the prying ways of some people!” she declared, a little tartly, in response to inquiries.

304

“Has that chap Smith gone, then?” Tom Baker demanded.

“Left half an hour ago,” Mrs. Dowdswell replied. “Said he’d been very comfortable, but he was a quiet man leading a harmless life and he objected to people who asked him

questions. No offence meant, Mr. Baker, but he seemed to think that you'd followed him up to Lamater Beacon this afternoon."

"He was very much mistaken," the bank manager intervened. "Tom Baker and I were there first. He came on afterwards."

"That's as may be, sir," Mrs. Dowdswell sighed. "I am sure it was quite innocent-like if you was a bit curious about the gentleman, but anyway he's packed up and gone."

"Do you know where to?"

"He asked the way to Dunmoor. If so be that he goes there he'll be sorry that he ever left the 'Melhampton Arms.' There's no comfort in the place, and as for the cooking!—why, my kitchen-maid's a better hand at it than Mrs. Leary."

"Well, I'm heartily sorry if we've drove him away through asking a few simple questions," Mr. Baker apologised.

"And if an extra drink for the good of the house, yourself included, will help matters—well, it won't do us any harm. I don't acknowledge to being a mortal curious person, but I'll admit I had a fancy to know what his business was."

305

"If there'd been a railway here I could have understood it," Mrs. Dowdswell observed as she filled the glasses. "He was always writing or telegraphing to the Great South Railway."

Neither Mr. Tidd nor Mr. Baker made any remark, though the former's hand, as he lifted his glass to his lips, shook a little. Tom Baker, with some skill, directed the conversation into other channels. When the time came to leave, however, he and Mr. Tidd went out arm in arm. They walked slowly up towards the

bank house, the front door of which Mr. Tidd opened with his latchkey, ushering his friend into his little sanctum.

“Mr. Tidd,” the ironmonger began, after the duties of hospitality had been attended to, “you and I are neither of us what might be called poor men, but I surely would say that when the chance presents itself there’s no need to let it pass by. How much could you put into this if so be that the deal comes to our hand?”

“I could manage four thousand pounds.”

306

“I’ll match it. If the syndicate’s kind of broken up and the moor’s on their hands we ought certainly to get it for a sight less than that.”

“You don’t think it’s our duty to let any of the others in—Mr. Meekes, for instance?” Mr. Tidd suggested. “It seems to be rather taking advantage of our fellow-townspeople.”

“Not in the least,” was Tom Baker’s vigorous pronouncement. “It was you and I who tumbled to the thing, and it was entirely our luck that we caught Mr. Welman Smith, or whatever his name is, tripping this afternoon. If it turns out as big as I think it may, we’ll touch summat handsome between us, but it woan’t be worth splitting up amongst the crowd. You’ve got to make up your mind, though, to chuck the bank for a day, Mr. Tidd. This business won’t keep.”

“My vacation begins to-morrow,” Mr. Tidd replied. “As it happens, I am perfectly free.”

* * * * *

They discovered the office of which they were in search on the second floor of a small row of houses in a back street of Barnstaple. Mr. Tye turned out to be a small, untidy-looking man, with a waxen complexion, bead-like eyes and heavy eyebrows. He received his visitors with obvious surprise. The furniture in his office was dusty, and although there were several rows of tin boxes and a good many placards hanging upon the wall announcing forthcoming sales, the general atmosphere of the place scarcely denoted a thriving business. Mr. Tidd, as being the scholar of the two visitors and more versed in the ways of mankind, assumed the role of spokesman and negotiator.

307

“We have called upon you in the first place, Mr. Tye,” he began, “to inquire if you were in any way connected with the Lamater Moor Syndicate.”

“I had that misfortune, sir,” was the depressed response. “I acted as solicitor to the company from its incorporation. I paid out considerable sums for stamps and fees, and in the end, for my trouble, I got nothing.”

“Nothing at all?” Mr. Tidd asked sympathetically.

“I got the damned moor, if you call that anything.”

Mr. Tidd remained silent for a moment. The information, gratifying though it was, came rather as a thunderbolt.

“I gather that the speculation was an unfortunate one,” he observed presently.

308

“Ruinously so. And now perhaps, Mr.—Mr. Tidd, I think—you

will let me know in what way I can serve you?"

"By all means. Did I understand you to say that Lamater Moor is now your property?"

"It's my property," the lawyer admitted, "such as it is. Possibly you can tell me, gentlemen, what on earth I can——"

Mr. Tye stopped abruptly in the middle of a speech. The mention of the Lamater Moor Syndicate had seemed instantly to upset him, but he apparently now for the first time realised the indiscretion of his candour. His visitors had certainly shown interest in hearing that the moor belonged to him. There was perhaps another peat scheme in progress.

"Well," he continued, "the moor's all right, of course, for what it is, but I've been a lot of money out of pocket for a very long time."

"Would you like to sell the property?" Mr. Tidd ventured.

The other did not hesitate.

"I am rather a good lawyer," he confided, "but I'm a bad man of business. I can't beat about the bush. There's nothing in the world I should like more than to sell."

309

"Then perhaps you will kindly fix a price."

"You mean that you are thinking of buying it?" Mr. Tye exclaimed, a certain amount of incredulity mingled with his eagerness.

“We might consider the matter if your price was reasonable,” was the urbane reply.

Mr. Tye ran his fingers through his hair, which was already ruffled.

“God bless my soul!” he muttered. “A price for Lamater Moor! Let me see. My fees alone amounted to four hundred pounds.”

“If eight hundred pounds,” Mr. Tidd suggested, “would be a satisfactory sum for you, we could perhaps deal.”

There was no mistaking the light in the lawyer’s eyes. He seemed to be itching to accept the offer on the spur of the moment. With an effort at self-restraint, however, he kept silent.

“We are prepared to buy it at that sum,” the bank manager continued, “and to carry the transaction through for cash this morning.”

Mr. Tye rose to his feet.

“You must excuse me, gentlemen, for one moment,” he begged. “I must have a word with my partner. This offer is entirely unexpected. I will not detain you a minute.”

310

They acquiesced graciously, heard him descend the stairs, and the front door of the building closed.

“Seems all right, so far,” Tom Baker remarked under his breath.

Mr. Tidd nodded.

“I wish he hadn’t gone wandering off, though. He very nearly accepted the offer on the spot.”

“To get the moor for eight hundred pounds,” Tom Baker murmured, “sounds almost too good to be true!”

They realised this on Mr. Tye’s return. He was evidently in a state of some excitement. His eyes were more like beads than ever and there was a distinct spot of colour in each cheek.

“I am sorry to have kept you, gentlemen,” he said, hanging up his hat and resuming his place, “but I cannot pretend to be sorry for the cause. I am much obliged for your visit, but the Lamater Moor is not for sale.”

“Not for sale?” Mr. Tidd repeated blankly. The lawyer smiled.

“That anyone should have wanted to buy the swamp,” he observed, “seemed to me so extraordinary that I thought I had better just mention the matter to a great friend of mine here, who is also my partner in certain financial speculations.”

311

“Well?” Mr. Tidd exclaimed.

“He advised me not to sell at any price. He hinted—it isn’t a matter which seems to be talked about, but he hinted at the possibility of the moor being required before long for an extension of the Great South Railway. The fact that you have taken the trouble to come here and try to buy the moor from me rather lends point to the suggestion,” the lawyer concluded, with a sigh which was almost a grin.

Mr. Tidd refused to accept defeat.

“There is always a chance, of course, that the railway may come that way,” he admitted. “On the other hand, nothing is settled or likely to be settled for a long time. If you think that under the circumstances eight hundred pounds is too small, will you name a price yourself, Mr. Tye?”

“It is a difficult matter,” the lawyer ruminated. “If the railway comes, twenty thousand would be a very modest valuation. If it doesn’t—why, then your eight hundred pounds would be worth having.”

“Well, choose a sum between the two,” Mr. Tidd proposed coolly. “If we can’t afford it we can but say so.”

312

“What about seven thousand five hundred pounds?” the lawyer suggested. “That will leave you plenty of room for a profit if the thing comes off.”

“And plenty of room for a loss if it doesn’t,” Mr. Tidd rejoined. “Our utmost price, Mr. Tye, was arranged before we came into this room. We will not beat about the bush with you. I will declare it at once. We will give you five thousand pounds for the moor; five hundred pounds on receipt of your agreement to sell, this morning, and the remainder on receipt of the conveyance.”

Mr. Tye had the look of a man torn in divers directions. He made little calculations and tore them up. Then he sat with his hands in his trousers pockets, thinking.

“Five thousand pounds,” he confessed, “is a damned nice sum of

money. Twenty-four hours ago I never thought I should get anything for the beastly moor. Five thousand pounds!”

“You accept?” Mr. Tidd asked equably.

“I accept,” the lawyer agreed.

Mr. Tidd produced his pocket-book. The lawyer waved it away.

“The matter shall be put through as speedily as possible,” he promised. “You are staying in Barnstaple?”

313

“We are leaving this afternoon.”

“In that case,” the lawyer promised, “I will have the agreement to sell and the agreement to purchase ready for signature this afternoon. When you have signed and paid the deposit money the deal is concluded.”

“At about half-past two?” Mr. Tidd suggested, rising.

“The deeds shall be ready by then.”

* * * * *

The two visitors from Melhampton reached the hotel at which they proposed to lunch soon after twelve o’clock, and at once betook themselves to the bar. A glass of sherry, drunk to their success, was followed by a second, which they discussed in more leisurely fashion. The third was an adventure which Mr. Tidd had never previously undertaken, but he found its only result a pleasing sense of well-being and happiness.

“At the most moderate computation, Tom,” he said, half closing his eyes to revel in the sound of his words, “we may be said to have made twenty thousand pounds this morning.”

314

“A wonderful day,” Tom Baker declared. “You will forgive my remarking, Mr. Tidd, that you surely did handle the whole affair like a master. That comes of being a man learned in figures and with a knowledge of his fellow-men. ’Tis a great gift, sir.”

“One has to study character in my profession,” Mr. Tidd acknowledged modestly, “and of course all matters of finance come easy.”

“There’s a many before now that have called Tom Baker a shrewd man at a bargain,” the ironmonger continued, “but I’ve learned summat this morning. I’m hoping we’ll keep you long at Melhampton, Mr. Tidd, but I’m thinking your folk in London will be wanting you at one of the more important branches afore long.”

Behind them was a small bar parlour connected with the hotel. Just at that moment they heard the door open and the sound of voices. Mr. Tidd suddenly stiffened. Mr. Baker opened his mouth wide but said nothing.

“Two gins and bitters, Bessie,” a familiar voice demanded, “double ones.”

“You’ll have to wait a moment, sir, whilst I get another bottle of gin,” the girl replied.

“Hurry along, then,” was the brief admonition.

315

Below, Mr. Tidd and Mr. Baker sat spellbound. Without a doubt the voice of the speaker was the voice of Mr. Welman Smith.

“Of all the scoundrels unhung I’m damned if Richard Tye isn’t the cleverest,” the pseudo-Mr. Smith confided. “You know he got landed for his fees by that absurd syndicate to buy the Lamater Moor and start a peat factory?”

“I heard something about it,” the other man replied. “He hadn’t any money in it himself, though, had he?”

“Only a few hundred for his fees. Well, he made them convey the moor to him and he’s hung on to it now for four years. It isn’t worth a bob—never will be—but listen to this for cunning. He rigged me out as a supposed railway land surveyor, made me go down to Melhampton—a sort of backwater of a town full of mugs—and pose as a mysterious stranger. I used to go out and pretend to take observations on the quiet, drop hints about the railway, in the bar parlour, and leave bogus letters about addressed to the Great South Railway. You wouldn’t believe that you could catch anyone green enough to fall for such a stunt, but, by Jove, it came off! Two greenhorns must have followed me up from Melhampton, and I’m damned if old Tye hasn’t sold them that moor this morning for five thousand pounds!”

316

There was a hearty peal of laughter, followed by comparative silence as the girl returned with the bottle of gin. Mr. Tidd turned his head slowly and looked at his companion. Mr. Baker was scratching his chin. As though by common consent they both rose.

“The car is outside,” the ironmonger whispered, as they passed on tiptoe through the door. “We might just as well lunch at Borton.”

THE END

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THE RED MASS	VALENTINE WILLIAMS
THE THREE OF CLUBS	VALENTINE WILLIAMS
BLIND CORNER	DORNFORD YATES

HODDER & STOUGHTON LIMITED, LONDON, E.C.4

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[The end of *Chronicles of Melhampton* by E. Phillips
Oppenheim]