

CLEMENCE DANE

THE BABYONS

*CREEPING  
JENNY*

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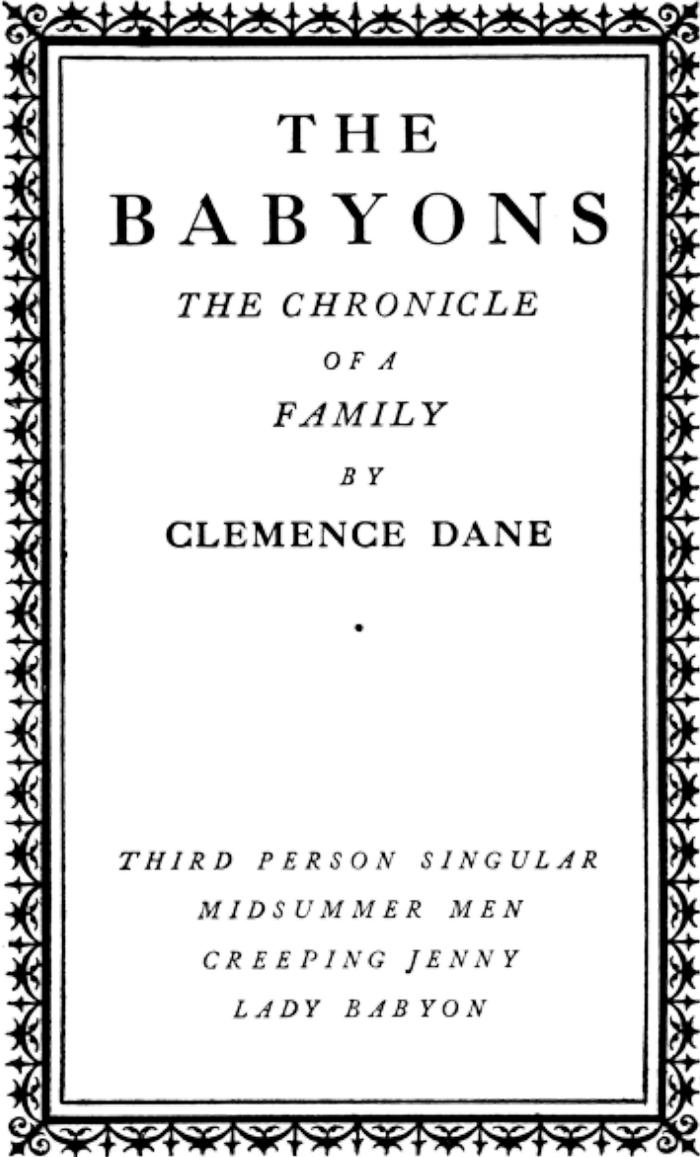
*Author:* Winifred Ashton (as Clemence Dane) (1888-1965)

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THE  
BABYONS

*THE CHRONICLE*

*OF A*

*FAMILY*

*BY*

CLEMENCE DANE

.

*THIRD PERSON SINGULAR*

*MIDSUMMER MEN*

*CREEPING JENNY*

*LADY BABYON*

CREEPING  
JENNY

•  
*EARLY VICTORIAN*



*GARDEN CITY:*  
DOUBLEDAY, DORAN  
*and COMPANY, Inc.*

1928

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FIRST EDITION

CREEPING  
JENNY



# Table of Contents

<a href="#">I</a>
<a href="#">II</a>
<a href="#">III</a>
<a href="#">IV</a>
<a href="#">V</a>
<a href="#">VI</a>
<a href="#">VII</a>
<a href="#">VIII</a>
<a href="#">IX</a>
<a href="#">X</a>

‘Man is the oak, woman the ivy tree.’

*Old Saying.*



# CREEPING JENNY

## I

THE oak tree grew in Petticoat Lane, and when Mary Anne was sixteen years old the ivy that ran up it in straight pale-green lines reached no higher than her heart. When Mary Anne, daughter of Robert Thistledallow, was sixteen years old she was formally acknowledged her father's heir, thus, as he said, smoking out the wasps' nest. But she did not inherit his name. Of that her father's prudence and her mother's passion had robbed her before she was born, though the cold and heat of their opposed natures fought in her while she lived. She would have given much for the name. What they gave her she did not value. She hated her blood and she never had any passion for money.

Her mother, the gipsy Teresa, was a handsome woman of thirty, whose tribe had reappeared one summer, after many years' absence, upon the common land above Babyon Court. Teresa's mates told fortunes and taught charms to support themselves and their husbands; but Teresa had no husband, which was singular by gipsy standards. But Teresa, past her bloom as they reckoned it, kept her beauty and kept it to herself, till, at Lambhayne Races, the spring after her tribe's reappearance, she told his fortune to that amorous yet prudent bachelor, Robert Thistledallow of Riverhayes Farm.

Robert was fifty—stout, handsome, light-eyed, the ruler of a fawning string of cousins and their wives, a money-getter and keeper, a farmer by training, an inspired dealer by nature, and a fair judge of horses, women and servants. He had, too, a boisterous sense of humour; but though he loved a joke as he

loved a badger hunt, he seldom forgave a man or woman who contradicted him to his face, and never one who, to his face, made a jest of him. He was too eccentric and independent to be popular, but men liked him well enough: and he knew that a generation of valley housewives, because they feared him a little and liked his looks and his goods, had schemed to become Mrs. Thistledallow, and were now advancing their daughters for selection. He liked the knowledge and chuckled: continued to give good parties at Christmas, Michaelmas and Hallowe'en, and to boast that no woman would ever catch him. In his fiftieth year, however, his housekeeper died and Teresa the gipsy told his fortune at the Lambhayne Races.

When, the following spring, the gipsies resumed their wanderings, Teresa remained behind. She was sick: and a dark, bowed, elder woman, much muffled in a shawl, sought and paid a week's lodging for her at High Babyon, the brown village whose walls rise sheer from the roadside and whose gardens run down the cliff between the moor and the valley bottom. Teresa, the villagers understood, was to follow her wild people when she could get about again.

Teresa, drifting on to the moor at the end of the week to see if the encampment were indeed deserted, and finding her answer in the blackened fireplaces and reviving grass, recovered like the grass between a night and a morning. She was blooming and dewy with health and high hopes as she told her landlady a luck-penny fortune, swung a bundle over her shoulder and sprang away. She had indeed the sideway swiftness of a cat surprised in the woods. Under the woman's eyes she moved once or twice at a tangent from the path, and was gone. You would not have thought that a creature could be so easily invisible on the open moor. Presently she reappeared, a black stroke whose shadow lengthened, touched and was swallowed by the fringing shadows of the Babyon woods. She ran into them as a drop of water runs down a pane to the pool on the sill: and the moor was once more a pure bloom of colour unflecked by the passing of the human fly.

Teresa, equally invisible in the guarded Babyon woods, dropped lightly down the hot slopes till she reached the river where it entered Riverhayes land. She went as one who knew the place by description: she recognised landmarks with interest. Here, after a pause, she sat down, dabbling her arched brown feet in the musical water, plucking and nibbling sprig after sprig of the luxuriant cress. She was smiling. She was waiting. Here, at the noon halt in the haying, she was found by Robert Thistledallow: and the farm spies reported that they did not meet as strangers.

When work resumed, Robert came back into the fields across the river, splashing through the shallows in his high boots, and the gipsy, still barefooted, followed, with hazel eyes under strong brows flashing for any one who looked at her, with white teeth flashing only when Robert looked or spoke. She worked with the rest till the dews fell: then, at a crook of the farmer's finger, followed him home. The mystery was explained. Here was the new housekeeper. Now who but old Bob——? The men chuckled: the matrons raged: while the younger generation repaired once more with relieved hearts to the forbidden gates and oak-shaded primrose banks of Petticoat Lane.

From the first, however, though there was inevitably incessant discussion of the farmer's action, there was no feeling against the woman. As a housekeeper she was a failure: helpless as a fine lady and careless as a slut; but though the moment was awaited with excitement in which Robert should discover her inefficiencies, nothing was done by the farm feudality to hasten the catastrophe that all knew must come. On the contrary, the hinds and milkmaids ran at her bidding and hid her blunders whenever they could, for no discoverable reason except that she had a manner which they accepted, as dogs will obey the voice of a stranger who has dogs of his own. They liked her easy lady ways, feared the flash of her eye, and spoke well of her.

Nevertheless the farmer's goods began to waste. The woman did not care, because she was incapable of realising that in sinning against her lover's pocket she sinned against his soul. It was her season of mastery over him and, reckless of his goods, she was reckless also of her mastery.

For very naturally the half-planned, inevitable purpose which their first meeting had created in the heart of each, had been accomplished. The wild woman could not sleep easily in her attic, whose little window was level with the floor. Gasping like a fish on a bank in the hot nights, she had, on the very evening of her advent, slipped down with her blanket to the half-cut stack in the little paddock fringed with apple trees. There, heedless of river mists and river music, she slept blessedly. For two nights Robert Thistledallow lay awake after her footsteps had passed his door: on the third he rose and followed her. That she meant him to follow need not be doubted. She was thirty and chaste: now, for reasons that seemed good to her, she had set him up in her heart. The attraction of opposites may be the rule, but these two were exceptions: they had the rare disastrous attraction for each other of likeness of purpose. Each was a whip-handler. He had whistled and she had come meekly; but at heart she came like the Norman Conqueror who, clutching a fistful of earth as he fell on his knees, cried, "This is my land!"

For there was blood in her that turned with as much distaste from the life of the nomad as it turned from the quick dark men among whom she had lived. The gipsy wanted to be a landed woman: the dark blood desired the fair. Robert had the colouring of those Flemish ancestors who had taught Devon to make lace: he had their slow speech and prospering ways: and these things made him so new and strange that she was ready to worship, though she intended to rule. For it was only in their craving for and dependence on rule that they resembled each other: and she did not realise that the resemblance existed. For the rest of the summer, because she was young and quick and he was old and slow, she did rule; but her passion in the end frightened and wearied him. In the autumn, moreover, the cold drove her back into the house to sleep, and in the house she was property—a noble mare in a stable: in the house he regained his mastery of himself and her. By Christmas it was plain that she was with child.

Would he marry her? It was the one question that all his relatives asked each other at the New Year party.

Would he marry her? It was the one question that her eyes asked him whenever he looked at her. No blinding admiration, no dazzling promise, no mystery, no deviltry, dwelt in her eyes any more: only the doubt, the question, the order—“Will you marry me? You must marry me. When are you going to marry me?” He said to himself that he would not be coerced: probably he would marry her; but he would not be coerced. He began to watch her, irritably: and seeing her unshapely, with her fire quenched, his fire, too, died low. The dust of the ill-swept rooms, the overflowing pig-pails, the weedy gardens, offended his thrift and decency: in dust, refuse, weeds, his inclination vanished. He would not be drawn into discussions: he would not vouchsafe his decision: he let her stay till her child was born, fetching in the new housekeeper, a safe old woman of sixty, to see the discarded mistress through her labour. Even when she was well again he was too prudent or too indolent—it was a mixture of both—to end the situation. The days dragged on, and Teresa was even beginning to gather a rein or two—willingly resigned to her by the timid new importation who had nursed the quality and, in obeying Teresa, found life like old times—when a dispute occurred between the two masters in the house that settled the matter. Sooner or later the child must be christened—what?

“I call it Isabella,” said Teresa.

Robert did not like the outlandish name. It did well enough for a gipsy; but ‘Mary’ and ‘Anne’ had been Thistledallow names this hundred years.

“I have called it Isabella,” said Teresa. “It’s a pretty name among my people. See, she knows it already. Don’t you, Belle?” And the child gave her in answer the seraphic knowing smile of infancy.

“It’s a name not liked hereabouts,” said Robert heavily. “There was a trollop up to The Court afore I settled here called Isabella. A Jew had this house then, and she took up wi’ him. She bled him finely. Isabella! They’ll tell ye the tale of her if you ask hereabouts.”

She pressed her fine lips together.

“It’s still a lady’s name.”

“Lady! She left two behind her, dead and dying. Would ye call the child after such a one?”

She said nothing. Her look derided him.

“Answer me! Would ye?”

She laughed in his face.

“Noise doesn’t muzzle me, Master! Shout away! You won’t frighten me or Belle here. Belle’s the littl’un’s name! I’ve called her after my own mother. You could have given her a grander name in a gone time, Robert: you could ha’ called her Thistledallow. But she’s Belle now. Belle Come-by-chance—Belle Haycock—Little Belle Heather-bell, born beneath a roof an’ all! Come, my bonny!” And she tossed the child till it crowed and gurgled while he watched glowering, and said at last—

“Come now! Whose house is this?”

She gave him a witch look from under her half-dropped lids as she turned to the open door and called. The housekeeper came running. Said Teresa disdainfully—

“You’re very slow. Here now, take your master’s daughter! That’s it! Hold her right! Take care of her! She’s weaned in the nick of time, I reckon. Laugh at me, my bonny! There, take her!”

She thrust the child upon the bewildered woman, bundled her from the room and turned to him—

“Whose house? Yours, Robert! Do I question it? Didn’t you invite me into your house?” She had a light in her eye. It was an invitation to battle or a dance, but he did not look at her as he weighed his words before answering. In the end he said heavily—

“You’d better be gone.”

Her look hardened. She said nothing.

He mumbled—

“You’re too masterful. It don’t go down with me. No! ‘Belle,’ would you? Two of you—it would be two too many.”

He went to his desk and was busy with keys. Then, from a cavity below the desk face, his heavy body used as a screen to hide his simple secrecies from the scornful woman, he took out a chinking bag, untied it and counted out twenty coins, bright as his infant daughter’s hair: and as he counted them, elaborated his decision. He would tell her now that he had meant to marry her; but she was too masterful. He had meant to keep the child and call it Mary from his mother; but now he would not. She might keep her Belle. But he was dealing fairly by her none the less. Here was twenty guineas, dear money, easy earned. Let her take it and the child and begone, and good luck all round.

She had sat down in the high chair by the fire, and now, with her pointed chin pressed into her palm and her pointed elbow digging into the chair-rest, she laughed at him as she listened, till he was red with the insult of her continued, impudent laughter. When she had laughed enough, she leaned back against the horsehair, and then he saw, drawing herself up out of the slackness of illness and ill-training, bodily, like a snake rising from its own coils, a new Teresa, a lady dealing with a tenant, a fine lady, cool, vicious and remote. She dismissed his money with a glance as an impertinence. Then she dealt with his notion of saddling her with his child. She told him, with a faint gesture of dislike that stuck his pride full of pins, that it had been burden enough in the bearing. Well, it was born, and now he might keep his own. Some day perhaps she might return and see how it had thriven. She did not know, but it might be. Meanwhile—and she dropped mockingly to the gipper whine—“Good-day to you, kind gentleman!”

And so left him and his house within the hour, pausing only to bestow upon the new housekeeper the silk gowns that had been given her, and upon the blubbering eight-year-old errand-maid a string of corals from her own brown long neck. There were no petitions, no delayings. Instead, she sprang away from Robert’s doorstone like a young mare loosed from a stable, coat dusty and staring, but with the clean gait of the wild.

Robert, her farewell ringing in his ears, stood for some time in his empty, deserted room looking at his rejected money. Then, with a certain

satisfaction, he put it all away again. Then he went upstairs. The excited maids peeped after him—“The master’s gone to see the littl’un! What now?”

## II

HE had gone indeed to take stock of his property. "What now?" he too asked himself. He was angry and perplexed, yet, looking down at the pretty sleepy creature in its cradle, he found that he had a pleasure in being a father. The child, though unwanted, was now at least undividedly his.

He saw in it, too, a certain protection. He was not disturbed by any fear of a slur upon his morality: he surmised rather that his legend would be enhanced by a scandal so virtuously concluded, and he was right. It was not long before the mothers of the marriageable returned to hunt him: and the hunt continued until his increasing age and preoccupation with his farm and his child made it clear to all that the gipsy would be the last scandal at Riverhayes, unless indeed it were a scandal that a man should be so taken up with a mere natural daughter. For Robert's curt references to 'my brat,' 'my young one,' mellowed as the years passed into tales of 'the little miss,' 'the young madam,' and after a chance talk with a travelled crony, into 'Princess.' For the crony had seen the little heir to the throne at Tunbridge Wells, and reported her to be "own sister to little miss here, but for her clothes." What had she worn? "Oh, a black hat tied with blue ribbons, a muslin dress, and a black silk pelisse over it. Ay, the wife said it was a pelisse!" Next market-day Robert, on his way home, turned aside to his sister's house to leave a parcel for his daughter: out fell a roll of ribbons and one of these new-fangled pelisses. "Nay, black's not mourning, 'tis the fashion." And while his sister exclaimed at his extravagance, he called noisily to his small daughter to come down and try on her present.

"Bring her down! Bring down the little princess to say good-day to her father! Dress her up, sister! See, child, the Duke o' Kent's daughter has no better." Then, behind his hand, "And they're as like as two peas, they tell me the young princess and missy here." And so went off to his bachelor home, rubbing his hands and chuckling, quite sure that he was a happy man and a wise one.

Indeed, the mistress and mother had, in five years, so died from his memory that he could plume himself on his sagacity in discarding the dross while retaining the gold. Why, he had seen in its cradle what a little madam it was and had not let it go! He had known how to order his house. He had not been jockeyed into sharing with a clamouring, feckless woman—not he! but he

had kept his daughter: he had kept his flesh and blood. Here would be something of his own to have in the house to serve him when he was old.

And he was likely to be proud of her, he told himself. The good old burgher strain was coming out in her already, the strain of merchant princes who lived softer than kings. The arched foot, the light walk, the small head and finely modelled features, the widely set eyes, so mild a blue yet so arrogantly browed—all these good points in his daughter he recognised with delight, thinking it but natural that the long-historied blood which she inherited from him should obliterate the raggie-taggle in her. Her guinea-golden hair and fair cheeks confirmed his title-deeds. Let his sister then take care that missy had what she wanted. He could pay for frocks and ribbons and what-not. And his daughter was not to run with the village children neither! Later there should be a school, a young ladies' school. Time enough for that! Meanwhile let his sister look to his daughter!

Mrs. Drax looked to her.

Mrs. Drax, Robert's sister, was his feminine shadow, thinner in mind and body, hard cider to his port; for with five daughters to rear she had not been able to mellow her nature as he had done in the pleasures of saving, gaining, and enjoying money. But she was honest. Robert paid her handsomely to bring up his daughter, and she reared the child with scrupulous care. It was her pride to do so: she honoured her own virtue when she ringed in the youngster with particular observance, gave it an egg for breakfast while her true-begotten children ate their porridge, sashed and shoed and combed it while they paddled barefoot in the river or ran shouting against the wind in the tousled fields of spring, let them run hatless while Mary Anne wore a fine Leghorn straw. Mrs. Drax took a bitter pleasure in this pampering of the cuckoo in the nest, this niece by courtesy, not law. If everybody were in his true place, Mary Anne would be dragging at a trollop's heels, binding brooms or plucking berries on the moor: instead of which, let the world see her waited on by her betters! Let Thistledallow's whim be obeyed! She would do her duty by her charity niece and see that moneys destined for the come-by-chance should be spent solely upon the come-by-chance. All the cream should be hers for which her father paid, and her cousins humbly should drink the skim she left, never forgetting that though they were poor and their cousin rich, they were the daughters of a married woman and had surnames to show.

Thus Mrs. Drax, in season and out of season. The first fact which the little Mary Anne learnt about herself was that she had no name. She hunted for it among the primroses and celandines of the hedges one spring, saw it

blooming on the far side of the ditch, a solitary bloom bigger and paler than a cowslip, fell in as she reached to pluck it, and came home with muddied pantalettes but the flower in her hand, and was punished in moderation—Mrs. Drax had no intention of being shown unkind—for running away from home, dirtying her clothes and talking nonsense. Next year she found the oxslip plant again, but by then she was six and knew well enough that the flower was not her missing name. Children were seen and not heard in Mrs. Drax's parlour and Mrs. Drax's kitchen, but be sure they saw and heard.

It is not to be said that she was treated with unkindness. It would indeed have taken a cruel woman to be unkind to the willing, obedient child: and Mrs. Drax was not a cruel woman. Strife was breath to her: her brother's energy was in her, but, hampered as she was by her sex, her widowhood, her poverty, her children, she could only rule by hectoring. She hectored her farm into prosperity and her girls, who were too much like her to fear her, into fine free-tongued, impudent young women, of whom she was proud as a cat is proud of the kittens it cuffs when they claw her too sharply. But there was no need to cuff Mary Anne. Mrs. Drax found the little Mary Anne of more use to her than her own robuster daughters. The child liked to knit, to sew, to sit quietly in the grandfather-chair by the window darning Mrs. Drax's tablecloths, or in the best kitchen to run over her cousins' muslins with the smoothing-iron or gauffer her aunt's caps and pillow-frills. She was always ready to take the heavy earthen colander and sit in the triangular cottage garden shelling peas and stalking strawberries, watching sideways the while from under her golden lashes the bees scuffling in the canterbury bells at her elbow. And when she was seven she was trusted to make the butter, carrying it out at five in the morning to stand on the cool brick mouth of the well that was frilled with hart's tongue and shaded by the blossoming elder: and there she churned the scald cream round and round with her bare hand, softly and patiently, liking the movement and the quiet and the scent of flowers and dew, in no hurry whatever for the butter to come. Indeed any quiet piece of work was to Mary Anne's taste, any small job that nobody wanted to do, that needed no discussion and drew upon her no notice. "A quiet little thing!" was Mrs. Drax's praise of her at Mrs. Drax's most amiable; but it was always coolly said. Mrs. Drax liked spirit.

As for her cousins, Georgina and Bessie, they called her Creeping Jenny. Mary Anne was so pleased at the name when she first heard it that she was actually betrayed into a confidence: she, too, had seen that her long plait of hair matched the amber flower. But her Cousin Georgina soon put her right about the reason for her nickname. She was a Creeping Jenny because she slipped about the house as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth; you never

knew when she was in the room with you. Georgina supposed that Mary Anne wanted to overhear Georgina's secrets. Was that it? Wasn't that it? Bessie had caught her listening, hadn't she now, only last week? Why didn't she answer? Look how red she was getting! Oh, the quiet little thing! the good little thing! Oh, it was mean to be as good as Mary Anne! Georgina did hate a Creeping Jenny!

Mary Anne, in a scarlet-cheeked agony, crept away; for it never occurred to her to defend herself. She could not have done it. She was a dumb-souled creature, shy in grain—shy, not like the colt who will one day nuzzle in your coat for sugar and stand to be saddled, but shy with the alien shyness of a butterfly. "Yes, Aunt Drax! No, Aunt Drax!" Mrs. Drax got no more from her at any time and resented it, and told her twenty times a week that there was many a lawful orphan who would be grateful for a kind aunt and a good home, and be ready to say so too. Let Mary Anne consider what it meant to be a beggar tramping the commons on a wet night, with no Aunt Drax to mix a posset or pack a naughty girl off to her warm bed. Let Mary Anne pray to God Almighty to make her grateful to her auntie, who made no difference, for all there was a difference, between Mary Anne and Mrs. Drax's own Georgina and Bessie. Let Mary Anne pray for a grateful heart! "Do you hear me, Mary?"

"Yes, Aunt Drax," quoth Mary Anne.

Was it not an aggravating child? But then God Almighty never did deal justly by Mrs. Drax. Was it not the usual ill-fortune that undeservedly dogs a deserving woman, that Georgina should be abed that autumn with the scarlet fever just as the early berry, the king fruit of each bramble-head, was bursting ripe? There was Bessie to send blackberry picking; but Mrs. Drax knew her duty and had put Bessie to bed with her sister that she might catch the fever too and be done with it. She would have packed Mary Anne also into the double bed with her cousins, but Georgina fell ill on a Saturday, and on Sunday Mary Anne was bound to go to church that she might say good morning to her father. This was too formal an arrangement for Mrs. Drax to break; and when Robert, meeting his sister and his daughter in the churchyard after service, missed his nieces and heard of their plight, and heard too his sister's practical plans for his own young madam, he humm'd and hah'd and looked down at Mary Anne—

"H'm! D'you want the fever, child?"

Mary Anne was instantly in her usual flush at being addressed and she had no words, but she shook her head. He watched her.

“Scarlet fever? She looks as if she had caught it already. Well, child, do you want it?”

“No,” she managed. Her little heart was beating as fast as a caught sparrow’s under her starched muslin; but how was her father to deduce from that whisper the frenzy of distaste that was upon her? To be three in a bed with Georgina and Bessie, to toss and talk and be watched and made to answer, not to have the cool night to herself—this was a future of nightmare: her eyes were saucer wide with the fear of it. It lent her strength to repeat her “No!” and look imploringly at her father.

“Mary Anne will have what’s good for her,” said her aunt. “I can’t be nursing first one child and then the other all autumn. Let her catch it and get it over.”

“No!” said Mary Anne a third time.

“You be quiet, miss!” Mrs. Drax gave her niece’s arm a shake. The sharp possessive movement annoyed Robert.

“Will you come home with me, Princess, eh? Pay Papa a visit?”

“Now, brother, don’t tease her!”

“Will you come, Mary?”

Mary Anne’s eyes wandered from the strange father to the familiar aunt. Which was the more terrifying? To be three in a bed with Bessie and Georgina, or to face the unknown? Slowly, once and for all she decided: thus, her life long, she made her decisions: and being made, nothing changed them.

“Yes, Papa, please.”

“Robert, she’ll do no such thing! Who’s to look after her?”

“There’s old Judy,” said he.

“And you so particular! What, let your own daughter (after all, she is your daughter, Robert!) be a month with none but old Judy to keep her clean and tidy! You’re out of your mind, brother! Come now, Mary Anne, kiss your Papa good-bye and come home! He’s had a joke with you.”

Robert hesitated, half convinced.

“Maybe you’d better,” he was beginning. But the look on his daughter’s face stopped him, though he was not an observant man. The firm red lips were trembling, the eyes were no longer blue skies but blue lakes. In silence,

under the eyes of her father and aunt, Mary Anne fought her disappointment and so won the first round against unfriendly fate. For Robert was flattered. The child wanted to come home with him! She preferred him to her aunt! He picked her up, the small creature, and swung her, while she gasped with terror, into his waiting curricule, and jumped after her, bending down good-humouredly to his sister as he gathered up the reins:

“You send along her traps, Selina! Judy’ll do for her well enough. Why shouldn’t she pay me a visit? ’Twill save you the nursing.”

“Such goings-on!” Mrs. Drax pressed her lips together as she thought of it. Two children abed and no one to pick the blackberries! “What will the parish think—me letting you take Mary Anne from me at the church door like, as if I were no better’n a hired nurse to be rid of!”

“Come now, sister, don’t scold!”

“Or a mother to be rid of! Well, the girl’s used to it, that’s one comfort!”

Robert’s face grew black.

“Stay your tongue, can’t you, before the child!”

“I? I’ve no cause to hold it. It’s well the girl should know her place, Robert Thistledallow, though it suits you to pamper her like a prize rabbit. But I’m her own aunt by nature though not by church, and I have my duty to her. She shall hear the truth from me while she’s young enough to profit, little as she likes it or you like it. What, is she not to know the difference between her state in life and a girl’s like my Georgina? Now listen to me, Robert Thistledallow! If you take Mary Anne from me now when I’m ready to continue in duty——”

“Oh, hold your noise, sister, before the neighbours and all!” quoth Robert: and lifting his whip, he flicked off his irritation on the fine young mare between the shafts as he bowled away. They were light blows, but, to his little daughter watching him, he was an awful figure as he beat the mare—red, hairy, immense, Samson with the jawbone in morning lesson. When he turned to ask her how she did, and whether she was pleased to be going home with him, he got no reply, only the sight of drooped eyelids and hands that clasped and unclasped. But it was her luck to be so pretty that silence did not matter, and to have a father who hated talking unless he had a mind to be garrulous. So she came back without mishap to Riverhayes and old Judith, who remembered the gipper seven years banished, and told the gipper’s daughter tales of her: while foolish Ellen, the help, had coral beads to show, and her own version, picked up from farm talk and a grandmother

who knew everybody's business. Ellen was the daughter's daughter of Clemency, the wise woman and gate-keeper up to Babyon Lodge: and Ellen's mother would have been no better than she should be, but that she was dead: and Ellen's father, as Ellen confided to her young mistress with an awe-struck giggle, was the Black Man, they did say. But that Ellen was the best hand at butter in the valley, while her grandmother was known to bewitch the churn against those who flouted her granddaughter, Ellen would never have shown her nose inside the farm gates, said Judy—"and you remember that, Miss Mary!"

Mary Anne, listening as was her wont in silence, was nevertheless friendly to Ellen, and Judy, her duty done in the warning given, made no further objection to their companionship. Pale-eyed, clumsy Ellen, grateful for good words, resigned to harsh ones, adored the pretty little girl, and with this sorrowful, silly Ellen, Mary Anne was quite at ease. It was as if the older girl's weakness called into action a latent strength in the younger. She was kind and masterful with Ellen, saved her from the follies of her clumsy hands and feet, taught her her own mature neat ways and her own prim speech; for, with Ellen, Mary Anne found her tongue. Judy, seeing in the older girl's slavish devotion a relief from service, saw to it that Ellen had neat print dresses in which to attend upon the young mistress, turned her from kitchen-maid into nursery-girl and maid to the young mistress.

For Mary Anne definitely had become the young mistress of the farm. She so pleased her father, sat so demurely at meals at the other end of the long table, was so meek a butt for his humour, so curious an ornament to his parlour when his cronies visited him, that when Georgina's fever was cured (but Bessie died), and Mrs. Drax in tears and in mourning visited her brother to demand the return of her charge, Robert refused to part with the little girl. He said bluntly that she did not cost him a tenth of the thirty pound a year that he had paid Mrs. Drax, that she was well enough where she was and had better stay there. Mrs. Drax asked indignantly what sort of an upbringing was this for a girl in a bachelor's house? Robert said that old Judy saw to her, that she had a maid already, the little madam, and that he had in mind to let her go in a year or two to the young ladies' seminary in Exeter.

What! where the Miss Eypes went and Lady Stockland's granddaughter?

Ay, that place! Did she know aught against it? Wouldn't it be good enough for Robert Thistledallow's daughter?

Mrs. Drax tittered herself into a speechless fury at that, and the brother and sister parted without compliments. Presently the news went round the parish

that old Bob Thistledallow was set on making that brat of his into a lady: and the farmers' wives who had not married him were very sure that, fine school or no, the girl should never set foot in their parlours, to delude their sons with finicking gentility and bring the bad gipsy blood into an honest family. Was virtue to go for nothing? Let Bob Thistledallow be shown his place, and the girl hers, money or no money!

Thus did Mrs. Drax, though she avoided open quarrel with her brother, avenge the death of her daughter, the failure of her bramble jelly, and the loss of thirty pounds a year.

Of the feeling against him and his, Robert was unconscious. But his daughter knew it in the cold-shoulderings of the boys and girls of the village dame-school, through the giggles of Georgina as she repeated the gossip of her mother's kitchen. The child's defencelessness invited attack: and it came one day to stone-throwing. Judy heard of it through Ellen at last and kept the child at home on the score of a cold. The cold passed; but Mary Anne stayed at home. The school-mistress, in slow Devon fashion, planned to talk to Robert Thistledallow when she met him, and did not meet him, and in time forgot about her missing pupil. The days, weeks, months, the years went by and no-one sent to fetch her back to school. Mary Anne, having got her letters, spelled over books now and then on wet afternoons, but not often. She liked better to knit and sew and make butter, and wander on the common with Ellen, listening to the strange stories that Ellen could tell of fairies and the Black Man and the Babyons.

### III

ELLEN knew all about the Babyons, as plain dwellers know all about Olympus and the private lives of gods. Hills, moor and sea, Babyon common and Babyon woods, these bounded the elder girl's universe: and on their moors, in their woods, between their hills and their sea, the Babyons had, in their day, met and conversed as men with men and women and had been smitten strangely by the fate that is stronger than Babyon.

Ellen knew their names and their attributes and their legends. She could tell you what Norman wife first brought a frothing demon to Babyon in her dower chest, and whom the mad devil possessed and whom he spared: and what the fortunes of the race had been under the Red Rose and the White. But she liked best the nearer times, to tell why a long-dead Sir Jamie broke his faith with a long-dead dark Hariot Babyon and spilled his own life three months later—"up here on the moor where we are standing—the very spot, Miss Mary!" Mary Anne stared at the billowing crimson tableland, all astray, but Ellen knew the death spot by a sign, and showed her how to part the heather tufts, and bade Mary Anne mark the rust-red moss with its fairy-fine red stems and pinhead flowers, velveting the earth between the tough roots. "Did you ever see red moss afore?" demanded Ellen. "It grows where blood's been, Granny says. Granny knows the spot. Sir Jamie had gone galloping from Miss Hariot all down the drive. Granny says you can hear the hoof-beats still on a July night."

"But wasn't Miss Hariot dead?"

"Dead and walking, deary! Great-granfer saw her too. Great-granfer knew well enough what killed Sir Jamie. Yellow hair he had, your colour. And so had his lady. They were fair men, the Babyons, eighty years ago, black as they are now. I seen their pictures. She was so little, that Lady Babyon—little as you, Miss Mary!"

"Was she, Ellen? Well, go on, Ellen! When Sir Jamie saw the ghost and ran away, what did his wife do?"

"She drove after him in her coach, fast as she could pelt. She screeched when she found him, Granny says her dad told her, like they owls in summer. Oh, and she did take on. But she didn't die till long after—not till after the duel."

“Oh, Ellen, what’s a duel?”

“A duel, Miss? That’s a fight about Miss Isabella.”

“I thought you said she was called Hariot?”

“No, Miss, another Miss Babyon. Miss Hariot had been in her grave twenty-five years. She rested quiet once Sir Jamie come to her, I reckon; though Granny says they did say she and Miss Isabella was like as two blackberries. Have you picked your basket full, Miss? We ought to be turning.”

“But why was there a duel about Isabella, Ellen?”

“Why, Miss, she was wild as a wild horse—witch wild. She wanted to run away with a dirty Jew from Taunton. My granny says ‘good riddance’! But Sir Ludovic stopped it. Oh, Sir Ludovic, he was a handsome man!”

“Who was he, Ellen?”

“He was her twin brother. Darker they were, dark Babyons like their Cousin Hariot. He and the Jew fought one night in the woods above Riverhayes. They were lying atop of one another when Granny found ’em. Ay, she found ’em: warm still. And never a sign more of Miss Isabella. They say, some of ’em, the Black Man took her.”

“Did he, Ellen, do you think?”

“There’s not much he can’t do, Miss Mary. But Granny says he’ld have met his match in Miss Isabella. Granny would have hanged Miss Isabella with her own hands if she could have caught her, the bloody murderess!”

“Ellen, you mustn’t say words like that.”

“No, Miss Mary! But Sir Ludovic was a handsome man to be killed so. Since his day the Babyons have all been black as death and devils to cross. Look at young Sir Charles now, up to Babyon. And yet he’s one to laugh too. He’ll toss you a shilling soon as look at you. Once when Tom Jasper was after Granny for witching his heifer, Sir Charles come along on his horse and the stone struck it and it reared like a breaker. Sir Charles he leaned over and slashed Tom Jasper proper with his whip. Cut his cheek and all, he did. Tom Jasper ran for it. And Sir Charles he gave Granny a guinea. Oh, he’s as kind as a fine day, Sir Charles is. Twice I’ve had a shilling from him too, Miss Mary.”

“Have you, Ellen?”

“Ay.”

“Ellen!”

“Miss Mary?”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-one on his birthday.”

“When is his birthday?”

“May-day, Miss Mary.”

“Ellen, does your Granny like him?”

“She says he’s like his grandfather again. She says she can’t say more. But Sir Ludovic were browner.”

“Ellen?”

“Yes, Miss Mary?”

“Would she like me, your grandmother?”

“We can try, Miss Mary,” said Ellen doubtfully. “She don’t like people much. Will you come a walk one day, to the lodge, Miss Mary?”

“Does your Granny live there?”

“Why, Miss Mary, she keeps the gates. We’ve always lived to the lodge. My great-grandfer Jabez, he were put there by Sir Jamie.”

“Shall you keep the gates, Ellen, when your Granny dies?”

“Shan’t I, Miss Mary? I oughter. I’ll ask Granny. Will you come with me, Miss, this afternoon?”

“Not this afternoon, Ellen. When she asks me.”

Ellen’s face was doleful.

“She don’t ask people, Miss Mary.”

“Then I shan’t go with you, Ellen.”

“Well, Miss Mary, I can ask her.”

“Yes, Ellen, ask her!”

No more could Ellen extract from her young mistress. Ellen never guessed how keenly Mary Anne longed for that demanded invitation. She wanted to see the fabled outskirts of actual Babyon, to pass under the immense stone gateway at the entrance to the estate. It was a gateway of legend. There were two coloured pillars which Sir Endymion had brought home from Italy,

supporting a cross-beam of marble; and on the marble sat the Babe itself, the point-eared babe of the Babyons which you saw on the tomb of the church and on the blue china bowl that had come to Judy from Babyon Court one lean Christmas before Judy had taken service at Riverhayes. Mary Anne had seen the lesser gates of the estate, plain stone arches not more than fifteen feet high, with a Babe on each little larger than a real baby: it was the great gate that she wanted to see. She might want; but nevertheless she would not go where she was not wanted. So Ellen must ask; though, as a result of it, Mary Anne might never pass under the gate of wonder into Babyon. It was hard to decide so, and harder to wait; but she decided so, and waited.

Astonishingly Ellen returned with favourable news. Granny, it seemed, might like Mary Anne if she saw her. So it came that Mary Anne proceeded by invitation one afternoon up the overhung lane that wound between the moor and the woods, struck into the Roman road and so came at last to the gate and tea with Ellen's grandmother, who was subservient with her: and when the swinging kettle on the huge hearth of the tiny room had boiled and the precious tea had been made (and none but Robert Thistledallow in the Babyon valley could afford tea like Ellen's grandmother) told her stranger stories than Ellen's of Babyon—Babyon—Babyon—till the child's imagination glowed like the Babyon chimneys under the westering sun. Clemency had no other stories; and no treasures that had not found their way to her from the big house at the other end of the avenue. Yet old Clemency, the children considered, was as rich as a dream. She had two carved chests filled with clothes, ladies' clothes, and a box of cobweb laces, and a tea-caddy with a shell on it, and a round cracked silver mirror that made Mary Anne look like an ugly doll, and that too came from the white parlour at Babyon! When my young Lady Babyon went home to her people and the house was shut up for a generation the housekeeper had bestowed it upon Clemency.

“Oh, but why did she leave Babyon, Sir Ludovic's wife?”

“Why, little miss, how should she stay, the poor young creature, with old Lady Babyon dead and Sir Ludovic dead—dead: and Miss Isabella gone like a bad dream? What should she do but shut up the place and go home to the living, she and the heir unborn? Ah, she nearly lost him: he was a seven-moon child, and no wonder. He was Sir Henry before he was born; but he never came to Babyon till he was a man and married: and his mother, my young Lady Babyon that was, she married again. Ay, Miss Isabella scattered them.”

“Did Miss Isabella never come back?”

“Not she. I saw the last of her the day she gave me that gown I was showing you, the green lute-string there. She was always giving, so that you would be glad to fling back in her face. She said ‘Good dog now!’ to you. That was Miss Belle. ‘Down, Clemency! Good dog now!’ May she die in a ditch!”

Clemency’s voice was so calm that Mary Anne was as little afraid as she would have been to hear Judy swearing at a cockerel in the seed-bed. Aunt Drax could be bitterer when Mary Anne let the butter grow sleepy or iron-moulded a cap. Aunt Drax grew hot and red and screamed till the window-panes rattled, and Mary Anne wanted to cry because noise frightened her, and, iron-moulding more linen in her fright, would be slapped till her head rang all for a spoiled handkerchief that would wash clean again if you were clever. Aunt Drax stayed crimson-red all day and never stopped talking if the standing cream did not skim off in an inch-thick blanket: and Aunt Drax was terrible if you skimmed the pan that had stood only twelve hours instead of twenty-four, or let the cat lick the skimmer before it was dipped in boiling water and sand-scoured. How terrible was Aunt Drax!

But old, old Clemency whom even Aunt Drax feared was not terrible at all. She was so bent that Mary Anne herself was taller and stronger, and she sat quietly by the fire stirring her pot: she had a nice plump pink old face, and she said ‘May she rot in a ditch!’ in a thin tired voice no louder than Mary Anne’s when they called her Creeping Jenny. Mary Anne was made bold by such gentleness.

“Oh, but—I saw a cat once—dead in a ditch. No, Clemency, don’t! For I looked at it. You don’t know how cold and poor it looked. Ellen and I put dock leaves over it. Besides I think she must be dead long ago, that Miss Isabella. Wouldn’t she have come back to Babyon unless she were dead? How could she have helped it?”

Clemency stopped stirring.

“I’ll know when Miss Belle’s dead. The day will be brighter, and the dusk lighter, and the night stiller, and the world gayer for me when Miss Belle’s gone out of them. She breathes my air still, I tell you, children! There are times when I feel her coming nearer to me, drawing my sweet air, till I’ve run to the window to see who’s passing; but there’s never aught to see but the gipsies on the moor. Miss Hariot, she came and went long after she was buried: Sir Jamie, he saw her: Father saw her. That’s so strange about the Babyons: they come and go to the folk that love them or hate them: and Miss Belle, I tell you, she comes and goes. Ten years ago I felt her near—the spring you were born, Missy. When I heard of your mother at the farm there

were times, what with living alone and thoughts scaring round my head like a spider under a glass, when I wondered, was it Miss Belle come again? So I let Judy Parry have my Ellen in prenticeship to spy for me. But Ellen's no use to me: she feeds from any hand: Ellen was all red eyes for your mammy when she flitted, and, fool as she is, she's my blood, and no blood of mine could weep for loss of Miss Belle. Besides, Miss Isabella had been nearer eighty than seventy. Seventy-five to-day I am, and there's five years between me and Miss Belle. And yet, I tell you, child, till yon gipsy left I felt Miss Belle drink my air. From hilltop to hilltop I could feel her thoughts fleeing and returning like swallows in September making ready to go. This summer it's been the same: she's sucking my air again, till the common air and the woods' air, and the winds themselves are so flat to me as river water where it meets the sea, and I choke as I breathe. Why, I feel her now, Missy! I could swear, but that I've sworn so often for nothing, that she was tramping down the pike-road towards us. Missy, I'd tell you something—but you'll be afraid."

Mary Anne was staring.

"I'm not quite afraid," said she.

The old woman stared in turn.

"Are you not? All the valley children are afraid of me. What are you then, I'd like to know? That's what I had to tell you! Little flaxen come-by-chance as you are, you've a look of the Babyons. Ay, you have, and be you proud of it! You're not like Miss Isabella, no, nor like him, Sir Ludovic: you've no laughing eye: and Sir Henry was nothing—he was that Caroline, his mother, over again. Good riddance! You've no look of him, nor of young Sir Charles up to Babyon now—ay, he came home for his holidays but yesterday—and he a true Babyon, nose and eye and look. Wait! Who is it then? Look at me, child! Don't blink! There! There 'tis! I know who you're like. It's the old lady, my father's Lady Babyon: Menella, Sir Jamie called her. She was waiting-woman to Miss Hariot when my father knew her first. But she was old Lady Babyon to us, with white hair and a face like a leaf that's yellowed off in height of summer. Yet for all that you've a look of her. Now what call have you, Missy, to resemble a Babyon? The old lady, she was no Babyon, but a Traill; but she was chosen into the Babyons: they choose their own sort. And my Sir Ludovic had a look of her now and then, when he was afraid of anything, when he was afraid of Miss Belle." The old woman caught the child's wrist and peered with once blue eyes into the calm little face. "My Ellen says you're afraid of your own folk: yet you ain't of us. Now why? You're yellow-haired like your dad and yet—I wish I knew

your mother's breed. Why aren't you afraid of me and Ellen, Missy, like the rest of the village?"

The wrinkled face thrust so close to her own made Mary Anne uncomfortable. But she was aware that she was a visitor and must be courteous. Her eyes evaded Clemency's, and she turned her head uneasily, seeking an excuse to disengage herself. She found it.

"Somebody wants you," said Mary Anne, and twisting her hand out of Clemency's grasp she pointed to the door. Two tall women stood on the threshold, blocking out the light.

Ellen rose with a cry and her hand went to the string of red beads at her throat. Her eyes were on the younger of the strangers. But Mary Anne, the grave child, watched old Clemency: and into her mind as she watched came the clear picture of her sampler at home, with its two cross-stitch carnations on grey crumpled linen and a straggling text beneath—"Prepare to meet thy God!" She thought it looked like Clemency. And when Clemency spoke, the words popped out violently yet slowly, like Mary Anne's slow needle popping out with a rasp of drawn thread from the ill-stretched sampler on its frame—"You? Here? Again? At last?" These were the words. And Mary Anne was interested, though she was not enough accustomed to strangers to take in the meaning of the conversation that followed, as clearly as she took in the meaning of the women's gestures and glances.

"You? Here? At last?" rasped old Clemency all over again. And this time Mary Anne thought she was like a clock getting ready to strike.

The taller of the two women answered her. She was old, older than Clemency: her skin was a network of wrinkles, so innumerable yet so fine that her old cheeks had rather the air of young smooth cheeks veiled with a gossamer-fine net or illusorily dappled by the shadows of woodland. The quick-moving eyes had sparks of gold light in them, and soft depths and hard surfaces: they were memorable eyes; but her lips had become part of the modelling of her face, undistinguished from the rest of the skin by any trace of colour. Her arched eyebrows were black, and her hair, though streaked with grey and dishevelled, was a darkness about her face; but when she turned her head the knot upon her neck was smooth brushed. Her nose was sharp and curved and her whole face had a bleak worn iron look, as if it were a carved rock face from which the winds of heaven and the scouring sands had filed away every flower, every moss, every layer of surface soil, and had then smoothed the very bones of the rock to a grey polish that was not soft to the touch.

The woman who stood beside her, so like her but richer, softer, wilder, was such a rock still flushed with rest-harrows and bramble blooms and the garlands of July. She had a smiling mouth as red as the strings of coral at her throat, and white teeth. Her hair wreathed about her temples like briony in autumn: her coarse skirt billowed, her shawl flaunted, the scarlet scarf about her head trailed upon her shoulders, and the sprig of heather at her breast was astir continually.

“’Tis her,” whispered Ellen: and clutched at Mary Anne’s arm. “’Tis your own mother, Miss Mary! I tell you, she gave me her beads, but now she don’t know me. Tell her who you are, Miss Mary.” But Mary Anne shivered and shook her head, and dragged Ellen back with her into the darker outskirts of the room, and the younger woman’s light glance rested on her but momentarily and passed her to rove like a bee on to the chest, the brass pans, the little window, the rose nodding under it, Clemency’s shawl, Clemency’s face, and back to the older woman. For the older woman was speaking and Mary Anne thought, delighted, as she listened, ‘That is how to speak! I will practise till I can speak so.’ The tone was careless, casual, with the carelessness and casual friendliness of one immeasurably superior. Yet the speaker’s skirt was torn, her shawl dusty, and the legs that disappeared into men’s heavy boots were bare.

“Ah, is that Clemency? Still here, Clemency? Good woman! Give me a chair and get me some milk. So!” She seated herself—“We’re neither of us as young as we have been, Clemency. I have walked beyond my strength.”

And behold, Clemency brought the chair: Clemency went to her cupboard and returned with milk in a jug and a delicate glass. Her hand shook as she filled it and gave it to her visitor and stood watching her, twisting her hands together, while the seated woman drank. She did not speak again till she took the glass from her. Then she said—

“And you come here, to my house——”

Said the tall woman—

“My brother’s house.”

Clemency raised a hand so furiously clenched that Mary Anne, watching, caught her breath. But the tall woman said sharply—

“Now, Clemency, don’t be a fool!” Then—“My shoes are wet. Take my shoes off, please, and dry them for me!” And at that old angry Clemency gave a strange cry, and her hand dropped to her side.

“You’re not changed, Ma’am! Oh, no, you’re not changed.”

It was as if she had tumbled on to her knees in her grovelling, feverish haste to do as she was bidden. She pulled off the heavy boots as if they had been glass slippers and set them up to dry, and made a lap of her knees for the small arched naked feet, rubbing them softly as she cried—

“Where have you been, Ma’am, these fifty years and more?”

“Up and down the earth, Clemency, up and down the earth.”

She stretched out her thin length, relaxing to the warmth with a cat’s gesture of pleasure. Her voice purred:

“And now I’ve come home, Clemency, to lay my bones by my father’s.”

“And by your brother’s, Ma’am?”

“Ay.”

“And your mother’s, Ma’am? She didn’t last the week after you—and him.”

The woman stared at her—

“The family vaults—too full, eh? Well, I shan’t trouble the sexton. I’ve seven sons to bury me, Clemency: and a grandson or two: and there’s all the heather. But I thought I’d lie beneath Babyon heather. The air here, it’s sweet enough to drink. More milk, Clemency!” Then, as the old woman poured it—“Is there henbane in it?” She laughed, and to the amazement of Mary Anne and Ellen, Ellen’s grandmother laughed also. It was as if the two old women had some bitter good joke between them. Said Clemency, between the spasms of her laughter—

“It’s not for lack of wishing it in, Ma’am, in the old time.” And the tattered beggar who so strangely dominated her nodded with an air of comprehension:

“Probably not! Well, I’ll spare you the trouble. I’m dying, my girl!”

That made Ellen laugh in her turn to herself, to hear her grandmother called a girl: while Clemency answered with the same propitiating note in her voice that had welcomed Mary Anne—

“You’ll outlive me, Ma’am! You were always as strong as death.”

“And as cruel as the grave?”

“Yes!”

The stranger put her hands to her own flat breast:

“Does it gnaw you still, Clemency, your old trouble?”

“Like a rat at a piece of wood,” the other answered her, dull-voiced.

The stranger pressed at her breast, yet gingerly, like one who touches a bruise:

“Now it gnaws me, Clemency.”

Clemency started:

“You, Ma’am?”

“With a difference, Clemency.”

“What difference? Speak plain, Ma’am!”

The woman laughed:

“Once I read books. I wear my rue with a difference. That means, my poor Clemency, that my flesh has something to show for it. You’ve sorrowed all your life, but you can’t show the marks of it on your breast, can you? Now I haven’t sorrowed; yet I——” For a moment the watching child thought that she would have unbuttoned her close bodice; but she checked herself and laughed in the face of her white-haired contemporary. “No, I won’t show it.”

Clemency’s gnarled hands caressing the smooth foot were shaking.

“Don’t say it, Ma’am! Don’t say the word! It’s never been among the Babyons, that way of dying.”

“I do say it.”

“Let me see it. ’Twill be no more than a sore. Herbs I have, and charms infallible—they all come to me for healing when Dr. Scrupous has delivered them to the tomb.”

“Old Scrupous?”

“Nay, his son: and he has a nevvv—new-fangled—says there’s no power in a charm.”

“No power?” The light careless laugh quavered through the room as if it had been of one nature with the firelight leaping on to the cob walls and the raftered ceiling. Then the younger woman joined in—

“No power!”

Old Clemency listened to their laughter till, unwillingly, her own face relaxed and she too began to titter. “’Tis what he says. But for all that, Ma’am, so you’ll trust me——”

The seated woman moved her head in a slow negative.

“Your charms are no use to me, Clemency, for good or ill. I’m too far gone.”

“Let me look, Ma’am!”

“Into my breast? Never!”

“Mother, have done talking!” said the younger woman. “Ask your questions and come away!” She was pattering restlessly about the room like a dog in a strange parlour. The older woman nodded agreement; but she did not stir. Instead she asked—

“Clemency, does the child at Riverhayes flourish?”

“At Riverhayes—at Riverhayes?” Clemency looked from the older woman to the younger, and her mouth opened in amazement: and Ellen cried again—

“I tell you, ’tis the gipsy lady, Gran! She gave me my beads——” and ended in a confusion because the younger woman rolled on her at last a laughing eye. Clemency’s face began to work:

“The gipsy!”

“My daughter, Clemency!” said the old woman.

“Did you go with the gipsies, Ma’am? Was that the way of it? I never thought of that. And I cursing you as a great lady at some foreign court like my father saw: or in a theatre maybe: or maybe starving in a ditch!”

“All three, Clemency!” said the taller woman harshly. “I’m the queen of little Egypt, and I tell fortunes: and a dry ditch is warm lying when the wind blows in November: better than a roof-tree is the height of the hedge above you, as my daughter learned. She had no peace till she learned. So I sent her back to Babyon; but the slut got no nearer than Riverhayes.”

Cried Clemency with a shrill of triumph in her voice—“I was in the right of it then! The child’s a Babyon then, a fair Babyon! And Robert Thistledallow’s done well for himself and his bastard!”

The old woman reared herself as she sat, like a snake uprising on its own coils, but the younger woman thrust in arrogantly:

“Let me, Mother! Who are you giving the name to, old woman, with this on your hands?” She had been gentling the ecstatic Ellen as you knead a puppy’s head and neck and ears; but now she spun the stumbling creature round, and forward into the firelight and held it under the eyes of the two crones—“Isn’t it yours?”

Clemency glowered at her:

“Ay, ’tis mine, at remove: and it waits on yours, gipper!” And, still trembling from her sudden rage, she turned back to the elder woman, crying—“My father on your father, Ma’am, and I on you, Ma’am, and better than you. Ay, he let me wait!”

“Was there ever a child, Clemency?” said the tall woman in her passionless voice that contrasted so strangely with the fury of the other two.

“Born to your brother? There was the lawful one, Sir Charles’s father. There was none born to me. And you know why, devil gnaw you for it! I took the keeper in the end to still the gnawing: and this is his child’s child; though my daughter never told me who the father was.”

“The Black Man,” piped up Ellen, pleased with her knowledge: and the old woman shrugged.

“Like as not,” said Clemency. “It being so, I have hired her out to serve in her turn——”

“The gipsy at Riverhayes!” concluded the younger with a laugh.

“The Babyon at Riverhayes!” said her mother sharply.

“Nay, the bastard at Riverhayes,” said Clemency mouthing.

It was then that Mary Anne, overborne by the strangeness of the scene and the aspect of the three women, and the sense that was growing on her of being once more the target for flights of stones, began to cry softly. Ellen heard and ran to her.

“Miss Mary, Mary, don’t ‘e now!” On which the two strangers, turning with the same gesture, for the first time perceived her.

“Another of yours?” said the younger to Clemency.

“Nay, of yours,” said Clemency, tasting her triumph.

The elder woman lifted her eyebrows, but the younger gave a cry and swept across the room to the child: and Mary Anne was folded in strong arms and her cheek pillowed on a brown neck and a dress that smelt of burnt turf and heather and the open: and struggled in terror against this onslaught, and was hushed as a bird is hushed by caging fingers into a forced docility. She was cried over and crooned over, and held away to be looked at, and kissed again, wildly kissed, cradled and caressed till, at last released, she fled back into her corner, an outraged creature, full of fear.

“I never thought to find her here,” the elder woman was saying thoughtfully.

“She’s a gipsy,” cried the younger. “She fought me, Mother! Look at my hand!” And she showed with a laugh the new-moon dents made on the back of it by resisting fingers.

“She’s a quiet child,” said Clemency. “She’s good to my Ellen. Ellen brought her.”

“How long have you known?” said the elder.

“Not till this hour, Ma’am! She never came afore. But I knew when I saw her. ’Tis my lady again.”

“My mother?” The tall old woman stared at the sobbing child. “Yes, it’s Mamma. Here, child, come here to me!”

Mary Anne came, for she was trained to instant obedience: and looking up at the stranger, her tears ceased. The woman did not try to touch her and there was respect in her eyes. She found it easy to answer when the woman said—

“What is your name?” She did not say ‘Missy,’ or ‘my dear.’

“Mary Anne.”

“What else?”

“I haven’t got an else. I’m not like the others. I’m like Ellen. Not like Johnnie Daw—he’s a natural; but I’m only a natural daughter. Aunt Drax says it isn’t the same. Father doesn’t mind. He speaks to me, and Judy speaks to me, and Aunt Drax has to because she’s my aunt in nature not in law; but Cousin Georgina won’t till I get a husband: and who’d marry me or Ellen without a name to sign?”

It was the longest speech Mary Anne had ever made to a stranger.

“That settles it, Mother! I’ll take her with me!” cried the younger gipsy eagerly, masterfully, brilliant as a child with a new toy.

“You’ll not, my daughter.”

“I will, I will! See how I must, how I will!” She had thrust the child aside in her eagerness to combat her mother’s opposition and dispel it by gestures, quick smiles, and persuasive speech. Overwhelming creature that she was, there was no hint in her rich vigour of any belief that she could dominate her elder. She flowed over the other’s protests like sunrise flowing over a hillscape: she coloured the discussion, but she did not alter the shape it took.

“Dear Mamma—my own child—my own little Belle! Can I leave her? Would you have me abandon her—mine—ours—now—having heard what she has to say? And I always meant to take her. Why did you let me return if no such thought were in your mind too?”

“You discovered maternal uneasiness, Teresa: a little late perhaps: still, I was ready to quiet you. I too—” she stared across her daughter to meet Clemency’s eyes and her hand once more stole to her breast—“I too, perhaps, was ready to be quieted. Well, now you’ve kissed the child and seen that she’s rosy. Let that be enough! To take a tame bird and let it fly in the woods, that’s murderous. The others’ll peck it to death.”

“Mother, I want her.”

“Better not, Ma’am,” croaked Clemency.

“It’s not to be thought of. Our people are strict. They would not countenance you. You know it. At Riverhayes or in the forest, still you can’t give her a name. Let her stay where she’s known, and marry and right herself. She has an air—or will have. What’s the boy’s name, Clemency, living at home now?”

“Sir Charles, Ma’am? What—are you meaning——” Clemency’s cackle grew joyous and the older woman’s cold laugh chimed in: the two tasted a jest. But the younger woman raved on—

“I tell you I’ll take her! I will, I will! No name? She shall make her a name! She shall be the white gipsy they talk of, that’s to come and lead us home to Egypt. I see it clear—clear.” Her voice took on the chant of the fortune-teller—“She shall sit in your stead one day, Mother, and work the charm that you can’t work, the charm that’ll make us a people with vineyards and houses. Watch and I’ll prove it! Give me the cards!” She snatched at her own draperies and drew forth from a hidden pocket a tattered pack. Some of them slipped from her hand and fell scattering to the floor, the painted pictures uppermost.

“Ill luck,” cried Clemency, and stooped clutching.

“Let them lie! Read them as they lie!” the gipsy commanded, and fell on her knees beside Clemency.

“Fools!” said the elder woman. Her face, tilted back on the head-rest of her chair, was white with fatigue or pain or contempt. She glittered at her daughter from under half-closed lids—“Fool!”

It was the latest sound that Mary Anne heard as she escaped.

For out of the uncomprehended babel, with the speech of the eldest woman ringing through it like the speech of a river through the confused speech of woods, one sentence only had a human accent—'I'll take her with me!' She understood that sentence to the exclusion of all others. To her timid heart it was a sentence of death. Mary Anne did not doubt the power of the dark woman to take her out of security into a larger Mrs. Drax's kitchen, full of stonings and reproaches and fond assaults. She was to be stolen by gipsies: this, the village child's nightmare, was to be her fate. To this fate had Ellen, treacherous, trusted Ellen, lured her. She was at first so paralysed that she could only crouch, passive as a rabbit, on the seat against which the gipsy's impulsive gesture had whirled her. Nevertheless, as once before in her short life, having a decision to make, she made it: and, having made it, only ropes could have held her back. She would run while they talked.

Shivering with fright yet unhesitating, she began to creep like ivy from Ellen's side. It was easy to sidle from the chair, drop behind the table to her knees, round the chest, and flatten her small body to the wall to avoid the circle of light from the lamp. She was nearing the safety of the high chair's shadow when a dropping turf lit up the room blindingly for a long instant: and she stiffened where she stood, like a hedgerow creature of the dusk when the chance flash of a lantern surprises its night paths. But the three women took no heed of the falling turf, and Ellen's simple face was still a worshipper's as she watched the gipsy's quick finger counting and checking. The light died down to leave the room darker than before: and Mary Anne moved again, first behind the chair in which the elder woman sat, then to the curtain behind which the green lute-string hung, then on hands and knees again to the door. It was closed, not latched, and it yielded. Like ivy through a crack in a wall she slipped her little body through the narrow opening and was out.

To her left the avenue was an interminable, ever-narrowing streak of grey, roofed and walled with dark trees; but to her right the dying day came streaming through the black frame of the great gateway, and the marble Babe, high above her as she raced through, was bathed in clearest crimson. Once outside the air was fresh, the world radiant and full of friendly movement. As she ran down the chequered lanes between hedges of gold, pleiads of midges met and passed her, their minute bodies lit by the level western beams along which they slid dancing. Cows, turned out to graze on the roadside grass, lifted their heads to watch her: birds settling to rest were still lively in the bushes and she could hear a church clock chiming, a mile away. Her fear lightened as the distance grew and no footsteps followed her, but it did not lighten enough to check her wild running. Physical distress at

last sent her hand to her throat and she began to gasp and reel; but she ran on, till, as she turned into Petticoat Lane a loose stone brought her rolling to the ground, where she lay half stunned but more exhausted, with the trickling water of the ditch soaking her clothes.

Here she might have lain for hours had not her Cousin Georgina been tempted out by the golden evening; but Cousin Georgina, sweethearting with the red-haired farmer's son from Queen's Tanleigh, tripped in her turn over Mary Anne's hat and so found her. Georgina had sense enough not to let the farmer's son carry her cousin to her mother's house, for Mary Anne's room had been let to a lodger, and Georgina had no mind to share her bower with a Creeping Jenny; but she revived the child with water and a slap or two on the wrist and a hail of questions: got no answer: found no bones broken: set her on her feet and presently on her way. Indeed, with cousinly prickings of conscience, she even strolled behind her, her wreathed poke bonnet sufficiently close to the red head from Queen's Tanleigh, till Mary Anne was safe on Riverhayes land. Then she went home, joyfully ensuring supper and welcome to herself and the farmer's son by the tale of how Uncle Thistledallow's Mary Anne had been gadding about the lanes like any gipper-woman and was probably coming—though the little dumb fish would say nothing—to any sort of harm you pleased.

The family made an excellent supper: and Mrs. Drax in her state black bonnet and cachmire shawl set out next day to see her brother.

But Mrs. Drax was ever a disappointed woman. The twenty-four hours had got ahead of her; for Mary Anne had stumbled home in the twilight into the arms of old Judy, already frightened by Ellen. Ellen had come home in a panic by a cut through the woods, with nothing to say for herself, without her young mistress: and Judy, in her rage against Ellen, in her solicitude for Mary Anne, her sense of a mystery somewhere which the two children conspired to hide from her, and a lively sense of the danger of letting Robert hear of his daughter's undue absence from anybody but herself, had gone clamouring to the parlour with her own version.

Robert disliked her outcries and his daughter's draggled looks, and the sense of being smothered by womanites. Mary Anne had better go back to his sister at this rate, or to school. He did not care where she went; but he must have quiet in the house. Mrs. Drax, seen through the office window advancing upon Riverhayes in Sunday bonnet and shawl, decided him. He loved to get the better of his sister: and let her renew her offers of guardianship and her warnings of the necessity for supervision of a girl with gipsy blood in her, before he told her that all was settled: Mary Anne was to

go to school. Cost? Let it cost! He had money to spend on his daughter: and who had better right to his money than his daughter, he asked his sister? And Mrs. Drax was discreet enough not to indicate who, in her opinion, had a better right; but to listen instead as if she liked it, to her brother's declaration that Bob Thistledallow's natural daughter would be found a better match than another man's lawful begetting, in education, in looks and in dower, when it came to marrying. A duke might be glad to marry Mary Anne when she came back to them a lady. And so much did Robert Thistledallow enjoy his own eloquence and his sister's disgust, that with no more than a fortnight's delay he did ride over to Exeter, and there took counsel of his lawyers, who were also the lawyers of the Eypes, and the Powdells, and the lesser Babyons. A school was found and inspected: compliments and money passed: Mr. Robert Thistledallow was content to leave the matter of milliners, mantua-makers and the forming of his daughter's character in the hands of gentility undreamed of at Riverhayes. He returned home, gave Judy a night to pack in, and in the cold October dawning jogged off again with his meek child at his side.

He was more pleased with her than ever. She made no fuss, asked no questions: had said good-bye to Judy without emotion, but sweetly. He did not know, it would have meant nothing to him had he known, that to blubbering Ellen she had refused to say good-bye. In the days that had elapsed since the unlucky visit to Clemency's cottage Mary Anne had had no confidences with Ellen. She ran from her as from a dog that had snapped at her once when she stooped to pat it. She was blind to Ellen's piteous looks, deaf to her appeals. Ellen, it was clear, had much to tell; but Mary Anne would not listen. And when Ellen at the end of the week came, tear-streaming, to show her money and report her dismissal, still Mary Anne would not listen.

"Now you're to go to school, Miss Mary, they don't want me. But you'll tell Judy to keep me on, Miss Mary, till you come again? Miss Mary, you'll want a girl to wait on you then?"

Mary Anne shook her head. Mary Anne would not look at her nor lift a finger.

"What's come to 'e, Miss Mary? Can I help it if the gipsies came to Gran's door? Can I help it 'twas your Mam, Miss Mary? I'll never tell, nor Granny, not unless you bid us."

"It wasn't my Mamma. Go away, Ellen, or I'll call Judy."

And to all Ellen's wails came the same answer—"Go away! Go away!"

If Mary Anne had been cleverer she might have been less cruel; but she was too unstrung to reason. Indeed, throughout her life, she judged by the fact as it occurred, never by the motive behind the fact. Motives went for nothing for her: people did what they did. She had trusted Ellen: she had taken off her protective armour to play with Ellen: and Ellen had betrayed her in a naked hour, to shock and shame and fear. How should the hunted be merciful?

“Didn’t mean no harm, Miss Mary Anne!”

“Go away, Ellen, go away!”

Ellen had run as fast as her stumpy legs could carry her down the farm road to open the gates for Master and Miss Mary Anne as they drove away, and wept and dropped curtsies in vain. Mary Anne, faced with exile that Ellen had brought upon her, would not look at her.

And indeed she may be forgiven; for she did not know where she was going: she did not know the name of the town or the house in which her father left her, and, as he kissed her farewell, when he would come for her again. She had not asked him and he had not told her.

The farm, when he jogged home to it in the twilight filled with the sense of being a father such as few daughters knew, had an emptied look that pleased one side of his nature as much as it displeased the other. He sighed as he sat down to his solitary dinner and felt himself a good father suffering loneliness for his daughter’s good. It was pleasant, nevertheless, to have the parlour to himself again. His tobacco-box—where was his tobacco-box? Mary Anne! No Mary Anne came creeping. But presently he found his tobacco-box and had no other need of his daughter for four equal-flowing years. But once a quarter she wrote him a dutiful letter in an Italian hand: and once a year he went to see her and brought back from each visit marvellous knee-slapping tales of his Mary’s needlework, piano-playing, French dresses: and in her last year at the school the tale of her all-remarked resemblance to the young Queen-to-be. And Mrs. Drax repeated all the stories to all the mothers of the village: and the village repeated them on market-days to the town: and the town talked to its doctors, its solicitors and its clergy, who went now and again to the city of Exeter: and though it took four years for the news to reach Miss Lavendell, she did hear at last that her select seminary harboured an unsuitable pupil, and greatly distressed she was. For Mary Anne was a model inmate, and the school-mistress, like every other woman whom he chose to flatter, had a soft corner in her heart

and an indulgent smile always ready for that bright-eyed buccaneer, Robert Thistledallow, when he visited his daughter.

The lady did not, however, hesitate one instant between her feminine instinct and her duty to her school. Miss Adeline Eype was the new parlour boarder. Miss Adeline Eype was daughter to a baronet and cousin to a baronet. If Miss Eype should write home to her parents that her particular friend was a Miss Thistledallow who lived on a farm near Babyon: if Lady Eype should ask her mother-in-law, who, as every one knew, had been the wife of a Babyon before she married Sir Hervey, what she knew of the Thistledallows, and learn that there was no Mrs. Thistledallow and consequently no Miss Thistledallow, whatever Mary Anne chose to call herself, what, oh what, would be the effect on Miss Lavendell's school?

There was only one thing to be done: and Miss Lavendell did it, in tears, on lavender-tinted note-paper, with a lavender monogram in violet ink. A chaise and a French governess were ordered to be in attendance the next morning, and Mary Anne packed, supped and slept by herself that night, and drove away next day without seeing her schoolfellows or saying good-bye to laughing Adeline Eype. The French governess, when they reached the farm gates, would not have any one sent in search of the farmer; but pressed instead as she departed hastily a lavender envelope addressed to Robert Thistledallow into Mary Anne's hand.

## IV

THUS at the age of fifteen, Mary Anne, by courtesy Mary Anne Thistledallow, came home for good, grown to her full height, a tiny blonde woman with a rounded figure, a pretty walk and a quiet face, slow-spoken and speaking seldom. She melted quickly and thankfully into the middle-ground of the farm: she took up duties so quietly that Judy did not perceive that Mary Anne did any work in the house or garden. If the furniture began to show a polish, if the silver was brighter, the china more often used and better arranged on its shelves when its use was over, Judy never saw. But Judy was very kind in teaching Mary Anne to cook, and was glad of help in the dairy and the still-room, even in the brew-house. Regimental rows of cordials increased the cellar ranks: and Robert Thistledallow, who had thought to himself that an old man must look to lose his appetite, began to hurry home once more to his dinner and his supper and his Sunday tea. Mary Anne seldom played upon the piano that her father had bought her, but she sewed every evening on delicate muslins that he thought pretty: and he would chaff her before his cronies about her bottom drawer. He liked to see her blush. Mary Anne never said anything. It never occurred to him in his amusement over her, in playing with his pretty china doll and calling her Vicky before strangers and asking her questions about the contents of her bottom drawer, that he was tormenting her. But it was torment to be displayed—French dresses, white stockings, sandal shoes, smooth braids and womanly shape, item by item—to every invited guest. It was, however, her duty to please him and he wanted her to adorn his house; so she sat at the head of his table at his dinners, and performed her part to his liking, not talking but serving the guests. He liked to see her curtsey, as she had been trained to curtsey on a rising movement to the principal woman guest, and then usher out her flock and leave her father to pass the bottle and talk as he pleased.

Yet there was a fly in his wine. Robert's dinners were better than ever, and his invitations were accepted by his cronies of three counties: it was worth a journey to dine, wine and sleep at Robert Thistledallow's. But the wives and the daughters had made up their minds about Bob and his daughter. They would not sit at table with a gipsy's brat, French dresses or no French dresses. Robert Thistledallow had been indiscreet: his daughter, who could

not restrain him, paid for his indiscretion. The delicate dresses, that were so out of place in that countryside, had to be paid for: and she paid for them every Sunday as she sat crimson-cheeked in her pew, or crept down the aisle afterwards, conscious of the raised eyebrows of the county ladies, the titters of farmers' daughters, the stares of the men. Once she saw a late schoolfellow in the Eype pew. Miss Adeline Eype caught Mary Anne's eye, flushed and half smiled; but her mother touched her arm and she did not stop in the churchyard on her way to the Eype carriage with its coachman in livery and its crest upon the door, though Bob Thistledallow had his girl on his arm and was waiting. Old Bob told his girl what he thought of her fine friends all the long way home: and Mary Anne had nothing to say.

She had nothing to say when invitations were sent out, nothing to say when refusals came in. She said nothing when Robert, salving his pride, called in his innumerable family to feast with him and inspect his treasure. He had no fear that these invitations would be refused. Sisters, nephews, nieces, cousins, cousins' wives, spinster god-daughters, and callow great-nephews in trade at Exeter and Taunton, how eagerly these flocked to do honour to Robert Thistledallow's table and Robert Thistledallow's money! And there was always Aunt Drax. Mary Anne, sitting at the head of the table in her wasp-waisted muslin, with bare shoulders and cowslips in her hair, said "Yes, Aunt Drax!" and "No, Aunt Drax!" like the sweet modest piece that her father called her: and under the table wrung her hands together because the hand of the clock in the corner moved forward, for all her prayers, to the unavoidable moment—

"Shall we go into the parlour, Aunt Drax?"

Aunt Drax would go out, and Aunt Page would follow, and Mrs. William Thistledallow, and Mrs. Thistledallow Darcourt, and Mrs. Robert Dear, and Cousin Susan and Cousin Roberta and Cousin Georgina, and old Miss Crane. Mary Anne would accompany them with the childish sick fear of them upon her; for the parlour was the ring and Mary Anne's tea-table the stake to which she was tied: and there, once a fortnight or so, they baited her.

She gave them poor sport, for she never said anything but "Yes, Cousin Susan!" or "I don't know, Aunt Drax!" But they continued to accept every invitation, for the dinners were good and there was the hope of the old man's money. How rich he was no one knew, but he had made half promises. Mrs. Drax reckoned on a third at least and the family furniture. Mrs. Drax's Georgina was Uncle Thistledallow's god-daughter: Cousin Tom was his younger brother's only son: Cousin Susan's husband, dead at sea, had been

his favourite when they were boys together: Cousin Bob was called after him: and Aunt Addie's grandson, as all save Mrs. Drax agreed, was his living image. In short, each had a special claim to push as occasion served: and Robert Thistledallow liked the flattery, and in his will, made some five years before, had satisfied many of the claims. Mary Anne had her slice, but not more than her aunt. For Robert, though he did not own it, agreed in his heart that she must pay some penalty for being no lawful daughter.

Mrs. Drax, however, changed his mind for him.

# V

THE occasion was a dinner, a small family affair in honour of the safe return from London of Cousin Bob, employed upon old Bob's business. Cousin Bob and Cousin Bob's partner were overcome by old Bob's port long before the host had settled down to his third bottle. Their weak stomachs spoiled his evening, for he had no pleasure in drinking alone. So, leaving one young man to sleep in his chair and kicking the legs of the other impatiently aside, he betook himself to the ladies a little before his hour.

They were gathered, some half-dozen, about Mary Anne's tea-table, busily discussing the preparations for Georgina's wedding: and Mrs. Drax was appealing to Mary Anne's good sense just as Robert stepped the two steps down into the parlour. He paused behind the screen that shut off draughts from the room to listen, for his sister often amused him. But that night she did not amuse him.

The four Drax girls from High Babyon, Georgina's second cousins, and the two little Thistledallow girls beyond Exeter, were of course to be bridesmaids, said Mrs. Drax: and Georgina, whose kind heart, said Mrs. Drax, could not bear to let any one feel slighted, had suggested asking Mary Anne also. But though Mrs. Drax was very pleased that Georgina should call cousin with Mary Anne whenever they met, Mary Anne herself, sensible girl that she was and had been brought up to be by her aunt, would no doubt feel that——

“Oh yes, yes, Aunt Drax! With six already: it would be an odd number.”

“It's not so much the numbers, Mary Anne, it's what folk would say. But there, we needn't go into that. And Georgina will be pleased to see you in the church.”

“Thank you, Aunt Drax!”

“You do understand, Mary——” it was Georgina's turn——“that it's no ill-will. It's what his people would think.”

“Mary Anne understands,” said her mother complacently. “For her to be bridesmaid at her cousin's wedding, just as if there was no difference between you, why, there'd be questions asked and remarks passed. Mary Anne knows that well enough. Don't you, Mary Anne?”

“Yes, Aunt Drax.”

Robert went out again quietly as he had come, so quietly that none save Mary Anne, who had inherited his sharp ears and quiet tread, was aware that he had been in the room.

Relieved, she bent lower than ever over the white satin she was quilting; for Georgina’s wedding-dress was cut to Mary Anne’s pattern, and the sewing had, as a matter of course, been left to Mary Anne. Mary Anne’s hands left no dulled mark on the surface: she never pricked her finger nor ravelled thread against it. Georgina’s troubles were over when she heard her mother tell Mary Anne that she would be given an opportunity to prove upon the wedding-dress that she had learnt something useful at her fine school after all. Mary Anne, quilting the yards of satin in shell pattern, wondered if she should ever quilt a wedding-dress for herself. She did not think it likely. She was relieved that her activities at her cousin’s wedding were to be limited to work upon the wedding-dress. She did not want to be bridesmaid and run the gauntlet of eyes; but she knew her father. For her to be bridesmaid would not satisfy him: he would expect her to be chief bridesmaid and travel with the wedded couple on the honeymoon. She prayed that he would let things be; but, watching his darkening face behind the screen, she had awaited an outburst that would drag her into the candlelight. She knew well enough how the discussion would run and shrank from it in hot embarrassment, dreading his protests, her aunt’s retorts, his insistence, her aunt’s martyred yieldings and final concession—‘Well, my dear, if your dear father really wants you to be bridesmaid, of course, it’s not for us to deny him. Heaven knows that I don’t wish, and Georgina don’t wish, to make things hard for you. We only thought it would be wiser like, but Lord, if your father don’t mind, we needn’t. Well then, it’s settled, Mary Anne, you’re to be bridesmaid after all, just like your cousins. Aren’t you a lucky girl now? Why, there’s not one girl in a million placed as you are placed who——’

For once, however, Mary Anne anticipated an evil that did not come to pass; for her father had made no protest, and the rest of the evening passed off peacefully. When the guests had left, however, old Robert’s voice came muffled from the dining-parlour in a call, and when she answered it she found the little panel door in the wall open, and ran down the flight of stone steps to the cellars which it concealed. There, candle in hand, she found her father stooping over a bin. He spoke off-hand as he held his lantern high and peered and fumbled in the straw:

“What’s all this high talk about your cousin’s wedding, Mary? Han’t she asked ye?”

“To the wedding?”

“To be bridesmaid.”

“No, Papa.”

“Hm! What’s here?” He tapped at the edge of the bin.

“Isn’t that the madeira, Papa?”

“You’re right. And this?”

“That’s the ‘97 port.”

He grunted.

“You know more than most cackling women. You’re right, that’s the ‘97. What’s this?”

And with that he put her through her paces and secretly marvelled at the exact knowledge and still tongue of his mouse. He did not realise that quick intelligence, if it cannot spend itself normally, will turn to hoarding. Yet it was his own case: lavish as he could be, he was yet a hoarder; for his wealth was so much greater than he allowed any one to guess that his very generousities would have been pronounced meanness by his contemporaries had they been better informed. He hoarded, not as a miser, but for the pleasure of mastery over material things. If he had owned a wife and governed a baker’s dozen of children, it is questionless that his nature would have been satisfied, and he would have been no more of a riches-monger than a masterful man must be. This he knew dimly; but wondering over his daughter’s knowledge he did not comprehend that her acquiring spirit was like his own. Money was his obvious treasure; but hers was knowledge. She also hoarded, but she hoarded facts—fact upon fact, whether it concerned wines or farming, the lore of the seasons or the making of clothes. So she too made herself rich and busy, coldly, as her father did. Later her knowledge was to serve her and she was to bless it; but in her youth it was an instinct that she obeyed not knowing what she did. Already, however, the instinct served her with old Bob. He concluded his examination with a chuckle and a declaration that he would trust his Mary with his own keys, so he would: “And that’s more than I’d say of any other woman alive. I wouldn’t trust your aunt in my cellar. And now let’s see if you’ve a palate. Run, child, and fetch me a glass—two glasses.”

And when she came down with the two glasses, glasses with folded feet and baluster stems and the portrait of Robert’s grandfather engraved on one of them, all set out neatly on a painted lacquer tray, he had been busy with

duster and corkscrew and was holding a cobwebbed bottle against the light that streamed down the cellar stairs from the parlour. He gave the liquid a doubtful look as it flowed into the glasses, but all he said was—"There, child, taste that!"

Gravely Mary Anne tasted, swallowed, tasted again.

"Well, do you like it?"

"No, Papa."

"What, are you no better than your aunt?"

"Papa, you've given me a glass at Christmas, every year. This doesn't taste the same."

"What?" He snatched at his own glass, tasted, spat, and went off into a shout of laughter: "Corked, by the Lord! I knew it: and you knew it too, did you? Mary, you'll be the death of me. Tell you what, Mary, we'll save it for your Aunt Drax. She'll know no better. 'A wine indeed, brother!' 'Take the bottle then, sister, if you like it!' And she will too. I tell you she'll drink every drop. But you're a caution, Mary! What you know you know." Then, with a change of tone—"So you're not to be bridesmaid? D'you know why, since you know so much?"

"Yes, Papa!"

At that he set down the bottle which he still held, straightened himself and, catching up his candle, holding it high to survey her the better, took his daughter by the chin. She flushed as she always did at any sudden touch, but she looked him straight in the eye. In the faint light the pupils of her eyes had dilated, flooding the blue irids. The change of colour altered her expression: her innocent look was changed for a stare, black and unfathomable.

"D'you know why?" he repeated.

"Yes, Papa."

"You do, do ye? And you but fifteen!" Then she began to colour till in mercy he released her. But as she turned from him hurriedly his voice checked her, one foot on the lowest step of the stone staircase: "How long have you known why, Miss?"

"About being bridesmaid, Papa? Aunt Drax told me to-night."

"I mean the why." His voice had swollen and, stealing a look at him, she saw that his face too had the swollen look which always witnessed the

sudden coming or return of anger. Old man as he was, he reddened as easily as she: “Come now, answer me, can’t you?”

“Oh, Papa, I’ve always known why.”

“Who told you?”

“Aunt Drax.”

“What did she tell you?”

“That I was a——” She hesitated: then, dropping her head, she said—“That I was like Clemency’s Ellen. That it was good of you to keep me.”

“H’mph! When did you hear?”

“Oh, when I was very little.”

“Mary,” said he heavily—“look ye here, Mary! Mary——” There was a pause. Then the father began to bluster—“Let them say what they like! I tell you you’re as good as your cousin and better! Can’t you believe your own father? Well, wait till you marry. That’ll show.”

“Aunt Drax says——”

“Well, what does t’old bitch say?”

“She says nobody could marry me hereabouts. Papa, I don’t mind——”

But he was roaring—

“Not marry! D’you know what I’m worth?”

She shook her head.

“I’m worth——” He checked himself. “Well, I’ll show ’em when the time comes what I’m worth. Mary!”

She waited.

“How old are you, Mary Anne, my dear?”

“Sixteen next week, Papa.”

“Would ye like a birthday party?”

She looked at him quickly, a “No” on her lips; but read as quickly in his eyes that there was only one answer to be given, and gave it—

“Yes, please, Papa!”

He slapped his leg with one of his roars of laughter:

“Ye shall have it: and a present worth having. I’ll show ’em, one and all. Send Judy to me in the morning. I’ll order your birthday dinner. And, Mary —” he tugged at his pocket and hauled out a wallet of leather, leather-strapped—“Mary—if you’re not good enough to be bridesmaid to my sister’s brat, still ye shall have a new frock!” Then, as she hesitated—“I say ye’re to rig yourself out from top to toe—and smart now! Ye’re not to spare. Here!” He selected a bill and rammed it into her hands.

“Papa, it’s fifty pounds!”

“Damme, an’t you my daughter? A smart rig now! Spend every penny, and if you want more, tell me! I’ll show ’em there’s a difference between my daughter and Clemency’s Ellen! Not good enough to marry hereabouts, aren’t ye? Not good enough for your cousin’s wedding? Well, that’s as may be. They shall come to your birthday party and maybe they shall learn a thing or two. Off to bed wi’ ye!”

Off to bed went Mary Anne. Her bedroom under the thatch was breathless with the stored heat of the day; but outside the night was moonlit, cool and sweet-breath’d: and her adored garden shone in the bright light. She leant out of the window when she had brushed her hair and made ready for the night. Her golden plaits dangled against glossy twigs of myrtle as she drank the night scents and identified one by one the pale glowing patches in the universal grey foliage, patches that were by daylight her flowers, her white lupins, her pansies, monkshood, marguerites, carnations, sops-in-wine, lilies, canterbury bells and scented double stocks. Her eyes wandered and feasted. It came into her mind with an exultant rush of realisation that the flowers she had sown, watered, planted, divided, would not have had lives but for her. She had made and tended them, mothered them into life. Her throat swelled on a wave of feeling for the flowers which had responded to her: their loveliness, their kindness filled her heart and emptied her mind of all human perplexities: and so she had peace, though she could not sleep. Thrice she tried to settle in the hot room, but the close indoor darkness choked her like a blanket flung over her head: and she returned to the window-seat at last, content to spend the night there watching her garden and listening to the reedy fluting night-song of some bird that was cousin to the nightingale, and to the hoot of owls and the tireless murmur of the river. The black bulk of a haystack in the once-orchard at the end of the garden cut off the silver line of the water, and she began to have a longing for which her orderly mind could not account, to slip through the dark house, out and down the flagged path, to make her bed in the hay for the rest of the night. But the light streaming like a yellow flag from the parlour window below

signified that her father was still up, and forbade the venture. So she sat drowsing in the hard window-seat with a shawl over her till the birds struck up, the garden began to lighten, the black patches turned to martagons and scarlet poppies and the white to pink poppies and lilies: and true day rose and she with it.

The light still burned as she crept downstairs and peeped through the crack between door and lintel upon her father. Relaxed and unshaven, he had slept as he often slept, sagged in his chair. But when she came to him later with a cup of his green tea, she found him stirring and gruff, slamming down a heavy hand on the paper beside him, and bidding her to let her dustings and his papers be, and to be off to the dairy.

Yet there was but one paper lying on the table with the dried pen upon it: and that was in his own hand. Her quick eye had taken note of it, with its crossings out and interpolations, and she believed it to be the draft of a business letter.

## VI

MARY ANNE never forgot her sixteenth birthday.

The square polished parlour was filled with Thistledallows, and near-Thistledallows: and the table was laden as Robert loved to see it. The beef, the mutton, the ducklings, the boiled fowls and cold bacon on the side table, the flour, butter, eggs and honey that made the bread and the crusts of the pasties and the pastries, the fresh fruits, the conserves, the cheese, the ale, perry and cider, all were his growing and making. He could boast that even the lobsters were his own, for he owned a slice of the cliff and foreshore, six miles away, a cove, three fisher cots and a string of smacks: and even the madeira and the port had lain in his cellar long enough to make him forget that it had had any connection with any land that wasn't Thistledallow, or any care but that of his own wise trafficking brain. Even his Mary in her silk gown was more his own than most men's daughters. She had no one to look to but him, no hope of grace, favour, countenance, from any mortal but her powerful father. That was sweet to him, and he smiled at her benevolently. Indeed his white-faced daughter should see what he would do for her, he thought to himself, as he plied Mrs. Drax with "a bottle got up specially for you, sister!" and admired his Mary Anne's command of countenance as she filled her aunt's glass, but herself modestly refused even a sip. Robert in that hour felt and looked and knew that he looked more like forty than sixty. His red handsome face was a sun beaming on his kith and kin. He piled their plates and refilled their glasses, broadly complimented his nieces and his cousins on their looks, figures, gowns and conquests, and was agreeable to the young gentlemen who had not his privileges or his slow reckless tongue.

But he took so little notice of his daughter that more than Mrs. Drax remarked it: and young Cousin Bob who had thought to himself that a pretty gilded Mary Anne, turned Thistledallow by marriage, would be less of a drag on a Thistledallow born than a Drax or a Dear, lawfully begotten but dowerless, thought better of the notion and devoted himself to the twenty-five-year-old Roberta Dear. Roberta was plump and had a loud laugh that old Robert encouraged, for he joked with Roberta more than Georgina or Mrs. Drax liked, and snatched his kiss as he filled her glass. Mrs. Drax had a pang as she reflected that Robert was still a personable man, and was sourer than ever with Mary Anne because she, the ninny, showed no dread of a

step-mother. Didn't the chit understand that there would be no place for her if her father brought home second-cousin Roberta? And so—

“Not enough sage in your stuffing, my dear!” quoth Mrs. Drax.

“Oh, Aunt Drax, I'm sorry.”

“Ah well, you're young to keep house. And they'll not have taught you cooking at your fine school, I reckon! But your father was always a patient man.”

The patient man grinned across the table:

“More port, sister? Mary Anne, help your aunt to her port.”

“Yes, Papa.”

Mrs. Drax sipped.

“A wine indeed, brother!”

Bob's shout of gratification set them all dutifully chuckling, as Mary Anne's lavender pink gown slid away from her Aunt Drax, and Mary Anne sat down again in her place and helped her aunt to more duck and less stuffing without a word.

“How stupid she is!” thought Georgina. But Mary Anne's stupidity could not damp the party. Never had old Bob been more entertaining, lavisher in immediate benefits and hints of future benefits: benefits not too much in the future either. Old Bob said quite plainly that he had a surprise for every one that very night. But in vain Mrs. Drax manipulated the talk, in vain were Roberta Dear's eyes beseeching question-marks: old Bob would not be hurried. Not till the cloth was drawn and the preserved ginger and the sugar-plums set before the ladies, and the ratafia and cherry brandy poured into the small-cupped glasses with baluster stems and huge feet, and coaxed to the ladies' lips, not till Mary Anne was actually beginning her “Shall we go into the parlour, Aunt?” did her father loose upon them his surprise. He rose, glass in hand:

“Sister Drax—Miss Crane—Cousin Roberta—ladies and gentlemen all—I've a health for you to drink, a birthday health. D'you know the day? What? Don't tell me you've forgotten Mary Anne's birthday? Eh, Mary, have you no presents to show?”

Mary Anne shook her head, imploring him with her eyes to deflect attention from her. She was in a glow of embarrassment: her cheeks burned till she put up her little cold hands to cool them, and then checked herself hastily

lest the movement should also be remarked upon. If they would only leave her alone and not look at her! It was a pity that her hot cheeks turned her delicate good looks into a prettiness more to the taste of the country people among whom she lived. They delighted her father.

“Look at her! Look ye, young Bob, there’s a pink may-tree for ye! Have you brought your cousin no birthday ribbon from London? And you—Tom, Georgina, Roberta, and you, sister—have you nothing for your own niece on her birthday? What? Didn’t know it were her birthday? That’s not cousinly. Has she or her father ever missed yours?”

He delighted in their blank faces as he flashed at them his bold challenging smile.

“Papa—Papa——” implored Mary Anne.

“Hold your tongue, my dear! Well, sister?”

Mrs. Drax was ever one to snatch victory out of defeat.

“Why, brother, what a notion! Is this Mary’s party? There now, how you spoil her! Happy returns, my dear, and may you long have your kind father to spare you the worritings that come to the rest of us poor folk. And your birthday, is it? Well, to be sure! If I’d known I’d have brought you a lace or a ribbon to mark the day.”

“That’s kind of you, sister,” quoth Robert. “Thank your auntie, Mary Anne!”

He waited for the timid “Thank you, Aunt Drax!” before he continued:

“Don’t let it trouble you, Selina! Mary Anne has no need of your presents. She’s not asked you here to beg from you, but to give. I’ve—she’ve a surprise for you all. Mary, open the cupboard door!”

She was as bewildered as his guests, but she did not show it. With her air of being in his confidence that so flattered him, she slipped out of her seat: and the guests behind whose backs she passed swung round in their chairs to follow her movements. She could see herself approaching in the dark polished oak as a wavering pinkish shimmer; but she could not see how, against the oak, her hair shone as if she wore a gilt helmet on the nape of her white neck. Her father, watching her as she turned the key, had a sudden memory, the first for many years, of the girl’s mother, bronze-helmeted, brown-necked. What had become of her, he wondered. Dead? Not she! Teresa was as hardy as his Mary was tender. He leaned forward and gestured imperiously to young Cousin Bob to slide the bottle in its lacquer stand

along the table, helped himself, washed away that memory with a draught, and turned again to his daughter:

“Well, Mary, what have ye got?”

“Here are parcels, Papa,” said Mary Anne doubtfully.

“Parcels, are they? Well, hand them round!”

She went about the table with her hands full.

There was a packet for every guest, little bundles, some light, some heavy, and each was addressed in Robert’s copper-plate hand—

To her kind Aunt Drax, from Mary Anne.

To her dear Cousin Georgina, from Mary Anne.

To her second-cousin Bob, from Mary Anne.

And so on, down the long list of relationships, ending with a little packet—

To her father’s old friend, Miss Crane, from Mary Anne.

Each packet contained a neat roll of money or notes. The second-cousins had twenty pounds apiece, the first-cousins, fifty. Georgina, the bride, had a bond for a hundred pounds, and Mrs. Drax, the fattest parcel of them all. Pushing away her plate, she tore it open and began then and there to check the bonds it contained—

“Twenty, thirty, forty—” her black eyes snapped—“sixty, seventy—my dear brother, how obliged, how kind! Eighty, ninety, a hundred—what, more? Upon my honour, two fifties! Oh, brother, brother, brother, here’s two hundred pounds!” And she rose from her chair and swooped down the long table-side with arms outstretched to her dearest, dearest brother.

He ducked and held her off, laughing:

“T’an’t me! You’ve to thank Mary Anne, sister! It’s all her plan, all her doing: so give your thanks, all of you, to Mary Anne!”

Mrs. Drax gave them handsomely as, folding the bewildered girl to her bombazine, she bade Heaven witness that here indeed was reward for the training she had given her motherless niece.

“Cast your bread upon the waters—yes, Georgina, kiss your Cousin Mary! The dear child! And her birthday—and we never knew! Indeed, brother, I’ve always said we should keep her birthday. And she must be chief bridesmaid, Georgina, now—indeed, I had planned it, hadn’t I? But there, we hardly

liked, brother, to ask you to spare her for so long. But two hundred pounds! Noble, I say, quite noble! And all because Mary Anne wanted to please her old auntie, and her cousins and Georgina. Ah well, many a time Georgina's brushed your hair for you, Mary Anne, and buttoned you: and Bessie, too, for that matter. Ah, my poor Bessie! And little doubt if Bessie were here and alive she would have had her present too—her share, as one might call it. But with her in the churchyard that would be too much to expect. Well, Bob? Well, Roberta? Have you thanked your cousin? Have you said thank-you to Mary Anne? Have you thanked my niece that I brought up to remember you all so kindly?"

She was thanked then, the stunned, frightened girl. Her father had given her no hint of what was brewing in his eccentric mind; but she sufficiently understood his methods to realise this—if he said that she was the giver, she must say so too. And here the training of the select school in Exeter helped her. She was never so much the lady of her father's ideals as in that undignified moment of terror (for her father's suddennesses always terrified her) when she had to receive the praises of her elder relatives and endure the hand-clasps and the waist squeezings, the rompings and the embarrassments of her boy and girl cousins. She was shy and courteous, slipped in and out of embraces like a shadow, persuaded her Aunt Drax to sit down again, and curtsied to her male kinsfolk with so quiet an air that the joyful bustle subsided sooner than Robert liked: he could have watched the scene for an hour. However, he had not finished:

"Well, has my daughter pleased you? Drink her health then! Mary Anne!" And he had them standing, while Mary Anne sat smiling with lips pressed together, twisting her handkerchief and praying for her father to make an end. But still he had not finished:

"Have you drunk? Now sit and hear me! Still, all of you, while I drink to my own daughter, my own flesh and blood, and a good girl! You've given your kith and kin their own presents, Mary, to pay for all their civilities, and you're quits, I reckon. So I tell 'em now, before you, and you before them, lest there be mistakes later, that they get no more from Robert Thistledallow, this or t'other side of the grave." Then, as Mrs. Drax half rose—"Wait ye, sister! Wait a bit, all of ye! Your bellies and your purses are full: sit quiet now and see me give Mary Anne her present on her birthday. Here, child!"

He reached backwards to the cupboard and drew to him out of it an object that at first sight the craning family took to be a framed picture, and held it up. And then they saw that the yellow mahogany enclosed an oblong of parchment in lawyer's copper-plate, with signatures and a seal.

“There you are!” Robert shone upon them. “No crowding now! I’ll hand it round in a moment. It’s your father’s will, Mary Anne, drawn up in sane mind. And there’s naught doing there, sister, for I went to the doctor in Exeter before I signed. Don’t snatch now—you shall read in your turn. See, here’s set down all the sums that have passed between me and the pack of you, and what you’ve had to-day: in consideration whereof—that’s fair enough, sister!—I leave all of which I die possessed (read it, Mary! ’Tis your birthday present!) to my natural daughter Mary Anne, by courtesy called Thistledallow. Don’t crowd now! Here’s my signature and here’s witnesses and all. There’s a copy to the lawyers, fear of accidents; but this, my last will and testament, is to hang on my wall here, to remind my guests and neighbours to give honour where it’s due, and that’s to the mistress of this house while I live in it and after I’m gone. See, Mary, I put in a nail last night. Hang it up now! Carefully, girl!” For Mary Anne’s fingers shook as she took the frame from her father’s hand, and stepping on the hearth-stool, hung her present over the mantelshelf while the stunned table turned to Aunt Selina for a lead, and did not turn in vain.

Mrs. Drax rose out of the mob of relatives like a thunder-cloud rising over a village. She had plenty to say, had her brother given her a chance; but he would not. He, too, had risen. He, too, had the light of battle in his eye. He, too, growled a thunderous warning—

“Better not, Selina! You’ve as much as you’d have got anyway. If Mary gives you more when I’m gone, that’s her own doing: and I dare say if you’re civil, civil to Mary Anne, she’ll be civil to you—eh, Mary? You’d never let your auntie or your cousins starve, if she’s civil, if they’re all of them civil, would you now?” He flung his arm about her and drew her to his side. “Eh? Answer me!” He took her by the chin and turned up her face to his.

“I—I——No, Papa!” said Mary Anne.

“That’s a good girl. Well, Selina?” He challenged his sister over his daughter’s head.

Mrs. Drax was a warrior. But, like those warriors who lead successful armies, she knew when to run away. Here was calamity so overwhelming that her very anger was stunned. Also, the wine she had drunk slowed her wits. Instinct, the same instinct that made her brother the richest farmer in Devon, cried within—‘Least said——! Least said——!’ If anything were to be saved from this pillage of her hopes, it would not be by resistance. ‘Least said, soonest mended! Least said——!’ Mrs. Drax met her brother’s bright

eye, cocked and whimsical as a robin's, for a long moment. Then she dropped her own, bit her lip, swallowed, spoke—

“I'm sure,” quavered Mrs. Drax, “that we're all pleased enough, brother, that you should make good Mary Anne's misfortune to her as far as can be——”

“Ah, I'm sure o' that,” responded Robert. “So's Mary. An't you, Mary? Now give us a kiss and say ‘Thank you,’ and take your aunt and the rest of them into the parlour. We'll be along presently.”

“Thank you very much, Papa!” said Mary Anne in her low, unemotional voice, and kissed him on the cheek. Then, for the first time in her short life, she disobeyed him. For though she left the room with her Aunt Drax and the rest of her guests, opened the door of the parlour across the passage, ushered them in, and softly closed it again, she herself remained outside, listening, and as the shrill voices rose in a common swell of anger and excitement released, she slipped away to the side door, took her bonnet from a peg and hurried out, skirting the garden till the hedge of the orchard hid her. Then she began to run, past the byres, across the meadow, up over the hilltop, on and down into the green tunnel of the lovers' lane where no one came weekdays, and cast herself down at last panting beneath the oak tree that marked the boundary of her father's land and the Babyon woods. In that quiet place, with no one to spy on her, she put off her habit of restraint as a runaway nun might put off her convent serge, and huddling herself in her own arms, fell a-crying, crying, crying, as loudly and pitifully as a starved kitten.

## VII

UNTIL that hour she had not felt resentment at her state: and even at that moment of revolt she did not question her father's kindness, nor the right of all her relatives to remind her of her inferiority; but she did feel it intolerable that her father should use her shame to punish the kinsfolk who wearied him. She knew, with a wish towards gratitude, that she was championed; but his method of protecting her was a humiliation too bitter for her to endure. She knew well enough that she was bound to her father's house and pleasure, that he was treating her with unheard-of liberality, and that his liberality would make her not only despised but hated. She knew, too, that no protest would alter his purpose and that he would expect her to enjoy with him the broad jest that set her in perpetual pillory. Her tears increased as she thought of her lot, now and to come. She pictured her life alone after his death till she beat the moss with her little hands, and cried with a bitterness that surprised her own ear, "I ought to have a name of my own! Oh, I ought to have a name!" The more she thought upon her wrongs, the hotter burned her cheeks, with that strange sudden anger which she could always feel against any one who betrayed her. Thus, hot-cheeked, had she once turned, and for ever, against Clemency's Ellen. Now she felt the same hot flood rush to her cheeks, and her heart grow cold as it turned slowly, but for all time, against her father and her mother. "They didn't give me a name!" cried Mary Anne. "What's the good of his money, his money? He ought to have given me my name!" cried Mary Anne.

She was in a state of excitement and emotion such as she had never before experienced. She wanted to calm herself and could not: her control, once so completely lost, was not to be recovered easily. It was as if a wildness in her character, long completely repressed, had seized the reins and was driving her body furiously into excesses of conduct that bewildered and frightened her even as she committed them, but that she yet enjoyed committing. And so she continued to beat the earth with her hands, to cry and sob and choke and fling herself into unnatural positions, and found relief and excitement in such abandonments. Yet so much did the luxury of being unobserved contribute to her state, that it would have been impossible to her to relax her soul and body in any spot less screened. But here, walled and roofed in greenery, she was in the free air and yet the very sky could not see her, and

any faint sound, the mere crack of a twig in that stillness, would have warned her to have done.

A sound did so warn her. There was a stir in the copse not ten yards away and she whirled to meet it, stiffening where she sat into normality, unable to believe that any one could have come into her range of hearing undetected. Nor could any man or woman of her acquaintance have thus approached her; but this was a creature of the wild. Leaning against a lost tree, already half obliterated by its black hangings of ivy, stood a tall woman holding aside the bramble trails of the bushes to right and left of herself and the tree. Her black stuff dress had the green tinge that comes from exposure to sun and rain, and her maroon shawl was duller than the reddening bramble cones. She had but to stand still to be part of the wood: she had but to move, to lift her chin so that the sunlight splashed it, to be the life of the wood focussed in a human being. She moved now, with a gesture eager, deprecating, amused: emotions rippled one after another over her face like flecks of sun and shadow. She took a step towards the young girl and, seeing her thus, separated from her background, Mary Anne knew her. She was the younger of the two women encountered long ago in Clemency's cottage.

Once again Mary Anne would have fled from her, but this time the woman saw her intention and with a step, barred the exit from the glade. Mary Anne retreated: her hand reached behind her to the oak for support: she would not speak first. She looked at the woman and the woman looked at her as they shared the silence.

“What is it then?” said the woman at last.

Her voice was tender, and she pursed her mouth as if she were addressing a bird or a kitten or a very little child.

Mary Anne looked down at herself, smoothed her frock, put back her hair and straightened her bonnet over it, so that only the stain on her cheeks and the brightness of her eye hinted at the past storm. She was indeed, like a garden, the better for the storm.

“Well?” said the woman.

Mary Anne looked at her again and opened her resolute mouth—

“I haven't anything to give you,” said Mary Anne.

The woman whitened:

“Nothing? Have you forgot me then? Well, it's six years ago.” She took a step nearer—“Are you in trouble?”

“No,” said Mary Anne.

“I was in the hedge: I saw you running: I heard you cry.” The woman took another step forward—“I heard you—you—you little thing—putting your curse on us.”

“Will you let me pass, please?” said Mary Anne, and took a step forward.

The woman spread out her arms across the entrance:

“Pass? No, you shan’t pass. Ah, you don’t know me; but I know you. You’re Robert Thistledallow’s daughter. Tell me, is he unkind to you?”

“No,” said Mary Anne.

“You’re happy?”

“No,” said Mary Anne.

“Why not? What is it? What do you lack? You can tell me. You remember me, I see you do. You guess, don’t you? I’m your mother. You can tell me your trouble. What is it, eh?”

Mary Anne came a step nearer. The woman fawned as she spoke again:

“Tell me! I know, for I’ve read your fortune many a time. But tell me! It eases the heart to tell: and I’m your poor mother. So tell me! What is it? What do you want?”

“I want to pass, please,” said Mary Anne politely.

“Brat! Devil’s brat!” The woman lifted her hand and struck wildly at the set rosy face, and Mary Anne fell back against the oak, her hand to her smarting cheek, and her cry rang through the woods. On that the woman rushed to her

—

“I didn’t mean it. You angered me. He and you—dumb devils! Belle, little Belle, I didn’t mean it! Let me see! Did I hurt you? Lift your hand! Lift, I say! Will you not? You left your claws on me last time. Don’t fight me so! I’m your mother: don’t I know all your comings and goings—don’t I bide my time? Look at me! What are you screaming for? You’ll have my people on us. I say I didn’t hurt you. I’m your mother! Listen, I say!” And Teresa’s strong hands wrenched apart the locked fingers that hid her daughter’s face and stooped to read. The blue eyes were alive with fear, dislike, revolt; but behind these emotions shone so pure an anger that Teresa’s gaze shrank before it. She cried—“How can you understand? For all that I’m your mother! Why do you hate me so?”

“Let me go!” cried Mary Anne, twisting in her mother’s grip, and screamed again. This time, to the astonishment of both combatants, a hail answered and there was a noise of footsteps crashing through the brushwood.

Teresa, her gipsy instinct roused, relaxed her hold, harked a moment, then rippled into the bushes like a snake and disappeared. The trails were still shaking from her passage as a man’s figure filled the opening.

## VIII

A YOUNG gentleman goes for a stroll and thinks about his debts and his unrequited passion. Because he shares his passion with young gentlemen of rank by the dozen, and young gentlemen not of rank by the fifty, it does not appear to him ridiculous to be romantically in love with the fair hair, pink cheeks, blue eyes and dignity of his sovereign as displayed in Parliament, at the Abbey and in her Drawing-room. Though he did not act upon her royal Uncle William's hint and tattoo her portrait on his arm, he did discuss, with other infatuates, the alleged private marriages of Henrietta Maria, the Queen of Hearts, and the first Virgin Queen. He did go to see a portrait of Leicester at a friend's house: he did wish that cloaks were the fashion and streets less well paved. In short, he fancied himself into the pleasantest fever and could have remained a happy melancholic for years if his purse had allowed him to reside in London.

But a passion for one's sovereign is more difficult to cherish in the country, with a neglected estate to overhaul, a neglected grandmother, agent, major-domo, garden, and gamekeeper to placate, and a county, a parson and a village to call upon, receive and patronise. There was everything to be done for the stables, the kennels, the granaries, the barns, the gardens; but, as in London, his purse betrayed him, and for the fiftieth time he cursed his own and his father's expenditure. So noble a fortune—where had it gone? He was sure he had not a spendthrift's vices: he spent no more than made life pleasant. He had, in retrospect, no patience with the half-remembered father whose aimless melancholy had embittered his own life and divorced him from his wife and family, until at Waterloo he laid it down with the rest of his burdens. Why, thought Charles, could not an old man, a man near forty, be content to settle at his home? But Sir Henry's sense of duty, though it sent him on sudden visits to his family seat, could not keep him there. As a compensation for his neglect of Babyon he had spent money like water in useless grandiosities for its adornment. A huge new wing had been added: the house had been refronted like a Greek temple: the woods sacrificed to the new gardens and shrubberies: immense stone gateways had been set up at every exit, and the road round the estate was the wonder of the county. And if the father had satisfied his scruples by lavishing money on the property, the son would have been content. But, though he enlarged it, Sir

Henry did not keep it up. The spending mania, Babyon wildness cropping out in a new form, was not to be satisfied by such sober follies. Melancholy and bored, Ludovic's son found in spending his excitement and his anodyne. He did not gamble: he did not drug; but without ostentation and without cease, he spent. Whatever he saw—horses, jewels, houses, pictures, curiosities, rarities or commonest tourists' joys—these he must buy. Having bought, his pleasure was over, and he would give away his accumulations as fast as he could find any one to relieve him of a burden. The pictures and the statuary, indeed, went home to Babyon; but for the rest—"Help yourself!" said Sir Henry to the greedy world: and in time—"Help yourself!" said Sir Henry to greedy death: and to the ghouls of the battlefields, stripping the bodies on the night of Waterloo—"Help yourselves!" said his stiff lips and glazed eyes. But to his only son there remained but the wreck of the fortune, and the only son in the five years of his majority had dispersed the wreck in the ordinary experimental extravagances proper to his period, his age and his position. Thus, at twenty-six, Sir Charles Babyon came home perforce to Babyon Court, to live on his dwindling rents and see his patrimony fall to pieces because he could not afford to keep it up, and be glad to compromise with his grandmother Caroline over her jointure, by having her to live with him in the empty swollen house.

Caroline, who had married, a few years after the death of Ludovic, a Sir Hervey Eype, had brought up her son Henry, and later her orphan grandson Charles, in her second husband's home. On his death she found herself a second time dis-housed and thought Babyon, in spite of its tragic memories, a more comfortable place of retirement than the Eype dower-house. After all, it was sixty years since poor Ludovic had been killed, and he had not been killed in the house. So she returned, a brisk and coquettish eighty, and ruled amiably, got on well with her grandson, promised to leave him her savings rather than bestow them on the grandchildren of her second marriage, encouraged him in all his extravagances and did not cease to impress upon him the need for marrying money.

But Sir Charles wanted to rescue Queen Victoria from the hand of the assassin, and he would have liked to win the Derby, and he had bought a couple of hunters for which he could not pay. The Queen lived in London: so did the Jews, and his tailor, and his harness-maker, letter-writers all. He sighed for London and led the rat-hunts in the barns, and strolled daily through the thinned Babyon woods marking down the timber that must be sold and the many tall trees that the ivy had ruined in the days of his minority, and considered his immediate need of a thousand pounds and the estate's need of a round ten thousand, an ill-treated, unhappy young man, for

he loved his woods. As he strode along the leaf-mould paths, blue with towered bugle, on the evening of Mary Anne's birthday, and swished off thistle heads, he harangued his correspondents in so loud a voice and swore so fiercely at the fierce bramble trails clawing his sleeves as he broke through the wild ways they were closing, that some village children, picking bilberries on the skirts of the wood, fled in alarm before his scowl and his inexplicable thundering monologue. But his dog was not disturbed by his thunders and his threatenings: his dog knew Charles.

Thus Sir Charles Babyon progressed, until a cry reached his ears and hurried him towards the belt of sunshine that was a background for the wood. Oh, the boon of a new happening, thought Charles, in his standstill county! And the cry was in a woman's, in a young woman's voice! The voice was enough for Charles. He ran: he pelted: not till he reached the white and yellow radiant fields did he pause panting, and dazzled by the sudden warmth and the slanting rays, put his hand to his eyes, seeking a direction. Then the cry, now unmistakably of a young lady, was repeated on his left. He plunged through a dance of midges, round and into the golden shoulder of gorse, and found himself, though it was still his property, in a place he did not know, in a glade starred with tormentil, late milkmaids and soapworts, pink, white, lavender, cherry, azure and purple. A royal oak dappled the sunny place with shifting shadows, and Charles checked and flushed as he beheld, leaning against the oak's grey pillar, the living, breathing and agitated simulacrum of the august ruler of his imagination. Here was the hair like yellow silk, parted and looped over the ears: here the smooth broad forehead and ingenuous cheeks, and the obstinate mouth which would not demand the succour which the blue eyes sought. She was no higher than his shoulder: she wore a fashionable silk dress of a tint between rose and lavender, cuckoo-flower colour: her bonnet had fallen among the cuckoo-flowers at her feet. She had been crying: she had almond-blossom tear-stains on the soft shelves of her cheeks: she was exactly like the Queen in the Abbey: at least—she was more delicate than the Queen in the Abbey! Her face changed at sight of him; for her face was more expressive than the Queen's in the Abbey! She was relieved to see him: she was shy: she was flushed: she was tiny: she was perfect: she almost seemed to know him: she was certainly enchanted to see him: and the Queen in the Abbey was not to be compared with her! The Queen? The Queen after all was a mere doll in an unbecoming crown and her face, he had thought at the time, was too full. The Queen? The Queen should come to Babyon to learn grace! Here was a delicate air, yet with fashion! Here was a model for any queen!

He plunged handsomely into speech, and never guessed that, to the long-lived woods, his speech was but an echo sixty years and more delayed.

“I heard you call. Can I be of any assistance? Has any one alarmed you? I am sure some one has alarmed you. Which way did the rascals go? If you will wait a moment while I knock their heads together——But you are faint, you are frightened, you must not be left, of course you must not be left. Assistance? Refreshment? May I not take you to my grandmother? Or shall I escort you home? You live here? We have not—that is, I have not the pleasure of acquaintance; but I—but we—I am Charles Babyon,” said Sir Charles Babyon in a hurry, falling in love.

Charles Babyon! He was Sir Charles Babyon! This was Sir Charles Babyon who had caught Tom Jasper stoning old Clemency, and had beaten Tom Jasper and given Clemency a guinea and shillings to Ellen several times! Was this indeed that Sir Charles Babyon, son of the gods, a hero in his own right, very kind?

She looked at him. He had a full brown face with a sun-flush. He had strong black eyebrows and hot eyes, a beaked nose and well-cut lips: his dark hair, brushed forward fashionably over the high forehead, was loose and curly. He had broad shoulders and was buttoned into a tight-fitting, narrow-waisted coat; but he moved easily, as if the world belonged to him. His manner to her, however, was cautious, as if she were china and he might break her: and this manner of his gave her a feeling of security: she felt protected: she looked up to him with her eyes, with her spirit, as to a dark glowing tower of kindness: she liked him so much. See, he had driven away by his mere approach the wild woman who had touched and tampered and whined, who had struck her on the cheek. Mary Anne’s hand went up again to her bruised cheek as, with a look and a movement, she put herself, her passage home, her after life and her soul’s salvation, confidently in his hands, revelling in his adequacy and rule.

He stooped to her, questioned, listened to her stammered tale of a beggar woman and a sudden fright, and he was angry with her for excusing her calls for help. Mary Anne said that she should not have been so silly: she should not have screamed. But indeed she should have screamed, he told her: it was the perfect thing to do: only an excessively intelligent woman would have so instantly, so wisely, done such a thing. How glad he was that she had screamed; for gipsies, tramps and so forth would always and naturally take advantage of a lady, of an unprotected young lady. In fact he was infinitely obliged to her: gipsies had no business in his woods: he would give orders: he would see to it that the miscreants were hunted down and brought to

justice: transportation: out of the country. One had one's duty to one's neighbour.

Mary Anne in sudden bright terror cried—

“Transportation? Oh no, no! It was a woman!”

A woman, was it? That, in Sir Charles's opinion, made it worse. However, there were proper places of detention, and he would see that the gypsy cooled her heels in a Bridewell, and considered her sins—trespassing and night-running and terrifying a lady!

Mary Anne had a vision of that dark proud face shrinking under blows dealt instead of giving them: and then of a cunning creature bribing the gaoler to send word to a nameless daughter. Mary Anne stammered out that the woman had done her no harm, that she had not even begged of her: she would rather the woman were let go: and was commended by an enraptured young gentleman for her final perfection, for her exquisite exhibition of womanly compassion.

She raised her wondering eyes to his and found that he meant his praise of her, that it hid no mockery of her creeping-jenny ways. She saw quite plainly, though she could not believe it, that, in her country phrase, he could not take his eyes off her. Indeed he did not try, but met her timid look with a gaze so bold, so inquiring, so eager, that she turned from him and began to play with the runnels of ivy upon the great trunk behind her, stammering that she was infinitely obliged to him and that she ought to go home. She did not, however, stir. He requested respectfully to be allowed to escort her home, and did not stir either. There was a pause. The tracery of the ivy was absorbing Mary Anne. Her pink, pointed fingernail ran down the pennants of the ivy one by one, while Charles developed out of the crowd of courtesies the question that he wanted to ask, that she did not want to answer. He was too polite to ask it directly, but he cleverly wondered—was she fatigued? Had she not better sit down? Had she come far? Was she alone? He supposed that she must be staying in the near neighbourhood; for her friends would not have allowed her to come far alone?

No, she had not come far. Her finger reached the top of one ivy trail and began to descend another. Not very far: only over the hill.

“By Riverhayes? Oh, did you come by Riverhayes? That's a property now with a strange romantic story. It belongs——”

She broke in quickly—

“Yes, yes—to my father.”

“What? You are Miss Thistledallow? Why then, we are acquainted. I have the pleasure of your acquaintance. We are neighbours. Better than neighbours. My cousin, Adeline Eype—were you not schoolfellows? Were you not friends? I am certain that I have heard Adeline speak of you.”

In her wonder she let the ivy be. Her eyes said—‘Is it possible that you know? If you know me, then you must know what there is to know of me: and yet it makes no difference to you? Then you can’t know.’

But indeed he did know her not uncommon history. He knew her for old Bob’s heiress, and had heard it lamented by his grandmother that so much money would probably be the portion of a girl doubly disqualified, a girl neither legitimate nor a lady. And Adeline had overheard the comment, Adeline, who had had an elder girl’s careless liking for the little outcast and a quick, picture-painting tongue. She agreed with Caroline that Mary Anne’s situation made it impossible to know her; but she told them so eloquently why she lamented it, money or no money, that Caroline tut-tutted her out of the room and Charles was moved to cross-question her afterwards concerning the blue eyes and the quiet ways of the disreputable heiress, and for quite half an hour was resolved on making the acquaintance of the pretty girl whom Adeline was forbidden to know: and forgot all about her then; but found now that this half knowledge of her enhanced his admiration. He was young enough to find illegitimacy romantic. He wanted to tell her—he did not know what he wanted to tell her: so he, too, turned to the ivy and had ripped off a long trail before her little shocked exclamation stopped him.

“Oh, don’t!” softly said Mary Anne.

“What?”

“The ivy. Why do you tear it?”

He was the practical landowner—

“It kills the trees. It clambers over them and sucks them. A trail like that—” he spanned the delicate growth—“can kill a young oak in twenty years.”

She said oddly—

“Ivy has to live too. It must hold on to something.” Then she put out her hand, arresting his as it worried at a second tight-glued climber—“Must you?”

He was serious.

“I would not see a strong thing killed.”

Said she—

“I would not see a weak thing killed.”

They stared at each other: then said Mary Anne as if there had been no break in their talk—

“I was at school with your cousin. I am not her friend.”

Charles looked down at the ivy—

“Shall I let it live this summer?” And then—“Indeed she regrets it—the circumstances—she spoke of you with friendship.”

She nodded—

“Yes, if you please—for the summer. She speaks of me?”

“You should hear her.”

“I saw her once in church—since—after—after I came home. She did not speak to me in the churchyard coming out.”

He hesitated—

“She spoke of that too. She regretted—Indeed, dear Miss Thistledallow \_\_\_\_\_”

She winced.

“I have not—I am not—sir, that is not my name. Your cousin is right. I cannot have friends.”

He cried out, ardently—

“You—you can have only friends.”

She stammered—

“I? If you knew——”

“I know.”

She was scarlet.

“My misfortune?”

“What has it to do with you—or me? I know you for yourself. That is all I care to know.”

She turned on him—

“Oh, how can you talk so? I have known you for ten minutes.”

“What is time?” cried Charles, inspired.

It struck her as a deep thought. She waited in profound admiration, in growing excitement, with parted lips, for him to continue. He continued—

“Time? You called to me for help. I came. I saw you standing there. I thought—‘I was born for this.’” His voice was hushed. He admired the workings of Providence. He told her, awed—“These things happen.”

“Oh, do they?” cried Mary Anne.

“You see they do.”

She said doubtfully—

“In books——”

“In life. Books are shadows of life. ‘Whoever loved that loved not at first sight!’ That’s Shakespeare or—or some one.”

“Oh! Oh, I see!” said Mary Anne.

“Yes. So you see, at the sight of you—the first sight—frightened—turning to me for help against——”

She stopped him with a little fierce gesture—

“It was my mother,” said Mary Anne, despair in her voice.

“What?”

“It was my mother. I saw her once before. She frightens me. Nobody knows. Now you know. You say you know about me—that I am not Miss Thistledallow—that I am only Mary Anne. Now you know this too, how can you want to know me? So I will go home,” said Mary Anne. Then, as he stooped to her—“Please, please, I will go home.”

“I will come with you,” said he.

“No, no!”

“Yes.”

“My relatives are all there—my father has made his will. They are all so angry with me.” And she shrank. It was inevitable that his arms should go round her.

“Angry? With you? How dare they?”

“He told them he would not leave them his money. They were all talking. So I came away up here to get my breath. They will think me ungrateful. When

I go back he will be angry that I came away. So I must not stay any longer. Please let me go home.”

“I will come with you.”

“It will be worse.”

“I will talk to your father.”

She faltered—

“What can you say? What can you do? We don’t know each other.” But all the while she felt that she knew him. His shoulder pressed against hers. She was between him and the rough bark of the tree. Her mind said—‘He is like this oak!’ It was bliss to listen to his sure voice.

He was saying—

“Do? I am a Babyon. We always know what we’ll do.”

“Oh,” she cried—“what will you do?”

“It will be best, I think, to take you home to Babyon,” said Sir Charles, aglitter with the excitement of burning boats.

She stared, mazed.

“To Babyon?”

He laughed.

“Will you marry me?”

She took it like another blow upon the cheek. She didn’t draw away from him, but her eyes filled.

“Will you?”

She said—

“You are worse than my mother. Please let me go home.”

He revelled in her incredulity.

“Try to understand—marry!”

Her eyes brimmed over.

“No-one could want to marry me. Why should you want to marry me?”

“Why? Leave that to me! Will you?”

She began to understand that though he might be a madman, at least he meant what he said: and he continued to smile and say—"Will you?" and he sounded sane.

"Will you?"

She was much agitated.

"Will you?"

She faltered—

"What you wanted, I would do."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

"Would you kiss me, Mary Anne, if I asked you?"

"Yes."

"Kiss me, Mary!"

She swung back in his grasp a moment, staring up at him, making up her mind once and for all. Tiptoeing, she lifted her head and kissed him.

Then he knew that he loved her. He had an odd pleasure in holding himself back, in urging the active part upon this creature of tremors. For he had not been sure. He had been afraid of his own fantastic impulse and yet proud of his impulse. He had said to himself—"I've gone crazy—like all the Babyons. Who else but a Babyon, on sight, in half an hour—I'm all the Babyons in a nutshell—more than them all. But if she has the courage—then she'll be right for me—right for Babyon. Let me see if she has the courage—the little thing." "Kiss me, Mary Anne!" Then, when her timid lips touched his, then her obedience amazingly touched his heart and he exulted as he held her fast and kissed her again and again, frightened yet willing under his kisses. He had been right. All the Babyons in him had not failed him. Here was the adventure of his life! Here was the perfect woman, already loving, already beloved. At the back of his mind, completing his heady happiness, was the recollection that if, madly and amazingly, he married this pretty child, he need no longer worry about his creditors and the estate. But he was scrupulous not to let his thoughts dwell upon the matter. For this headlong, frantic Charles had his code. He could admire himself for so magnificently upholding the Babyon reputation: he could see himself as a Cophetua; but with his whole heart he resolved to be a kind king to his beggar-maid.

“Mary Anne, Mary Anne, we have known each other twenty minutes; but I think I love you, Mary Anne. Do you hear me? Do you understand? I say I love you, Mary Anne!”

## IX

THUS was she wooed: thus she satisfied her father's ambition: and if she had studied all her life to satisfy it, could not have done so more completely than by walking home in the dusk on her stranger's arm and introducing to the shocked turmoil of the parlour—"Aunt Drax—Sir Charles Babyon!" blotting out utterly her father's anger with—"Papa, Sir Charles was very kind: he will tell you how he helped me," and leaving Charles, gay, dashing, delighting in the adventure's oddity, to carry on the course of the play. Robert seconded him like an old actor who happens, out of time, on the part of his life. Before Mary Anne could say to herself, "I am loved," she found herself betrothed: and before she grew accustomed to the Babyon Mizpah ring upon her finger, had a second ring upon it, and found herself, the nameless, the Creeping Jenny, young Lady Babyon of Babyon Court in the county of Devon.

She was so happy that she thought sometimes that there was a sun inside her breast instead of her former heart. She had but one cloud in her sky—what if she proved unworthy of her husband's amazing goodness to her? For consider his goodness! He had given her his name, his ring to wear, his house to rule: he had put her on a level with every one else: he had made of her a lady!

"Who is that driving by?"

"Young Lady Babyon. Don't push now! Keep back! Wait in the porch till she passes!"

"Who's the little miss getting into the coach?"

"That's Mary Anne—Thistledallow, they call her."

"Oh, so that's old Bob's Mary Anne!"

"What are you talking of? That's not Mary Anne. That's a married woman. That's a lady—Sir Charles Babyon's lady."

"Good-day to you, my lady! Did you see her smile at me?"

"Do you know who that was, driving with Miss Adeline? That was young Lady Babyon!"

But oh, suppose she did not bear herself like a Lady Babyon! What if her birth and her breeding betrayed her? Her voice was not quite the voice of Miss Lavendell at Exeter. She had not the drawling certainty of old Lady Babyon, the crisp flutter of Adeline Eype. She spoke like the Devon folk, more softly, more neatly, but still she spoke like the Devon folk: she herself could hear it. Would not the others hear it? She must speak as little as possible, decided this dumb Mary Anne, lest a rustic phrase betray her. For how could she bear to live if she, by a rough accent, an unguarded movement, a foolish phrase, betrayed Sir Charles and his glorious bounty? If any one should laugh at him for marrying her, how should she feel, what would she do? Her happiness shivered and rocked like a card-house built too tall as she thought of the invisible dangers that beset her new path; for the gay, blessed, whirling, laughing honeymoon was over, and Sir Charles and Lady Babyon had come home to Babyon Court. Charles was busy spending money, and she had been thrice to see her father: and at her last visit had been told bluntly not to come again—"Letting yourself down! I'll not have it! And you, Mary Anne, you should know better. At this rate your aunt and your cousins will be dropping in on me, sure of seeing you! Where's the joke on 'em then? Stay at Babyon and be a lady. When I want you here I'll send word."

Thus Robert. She obeyed him: and did not come again till on his death-bed he sent for her; for they were literal creatures both. He lost meanwhile no opportunity, by constantly speaking of her, to bait his sister and her people. He never tired of hearing them revile Mary Anne for her pride and lack of heart: he tasted their anger like a fine wine, and rubbed his hands, and his heart warmed to his daughter, and he worked like a young man to increase his substance. Her portion had been big enough to reconcile the grandmamma; but let them wait till his death to see the true value of his girl. Thus Robert: and died happily ten years before he need have done, of work he had no call to do. Said he, on his last bed, looking from his sister to his daughter—

"Mary!"

"Yes, Papa?"

"Let your aunt have the port! Mary!"

"Yes, Papa!"

"Do you know what I'm worth?"

"No, Papa! Papa, you tire yourself."

“You’ll know to-morrow,” said Bob—“Wish I could see Selina’s face.”

“What’s that, brother?”

“You’ll know to-morrow,” said Robert, and grinned and died.

But his decision cut the last link between his daughter’s old life and her new, and killed any monstrous notions she may have harboured of confiding the difficulties she foresaw to her father. She never thought of confiding them to Charles. To him she must be the lady he thought her, must never let him guess how frightened she was of her ladyhood and the immediate future. She knew well enough that the marriage was a nine days’ wonder, and that, in exact accordance with her bearing, Charles would be the most glorious of all the Babyons or a fool trapped by a farm wench. Thus they might speak of him if she shamed him; and if they spoke so then she would have lost him his place in the county. What if she had lost it him already? What if the county would not know her? Could Charles ever forgive it if the ladies and gentlemen did not come to visit them, or were not at home when she returned their visits? She found that to marry into happiness is not to be happy. And if they visited her, how should she behave? What would he say to her when they left if she had behaved out of fashion? Would he be angry? Could she live if he were angry?

Then her bridegroom would come rioting in from his important business and stun her fears with his love-making. He had a royal way, had Charles. He rode down her timidities and modesties as he had ridden down the opposition of his relatives before his marriage. He enjoyed opposition that he could overcome. He had said to her on the great day, as they drove away from the church—“Now, you see! Didn’t I tell you to trust me? I always get my way. It’s the Babyon motto—don’t you know our Babyon motto?—‘I go my way!’ So we do, all of us. I tell you, my little love, I always go my way.”

Listening, his little love wondered what would happen to a woman who would not go his way with Charles, and thanked God that she loved him as she loved her life and so would always go his way. Love? That was a little, short word for what she felt: and once again the sun in her heart began to glow as she looked at him with the passion of the saved for the saviour. But there was still the black spot on her sun of happiness—Would the county visit her?

The county visited her and her sun shone brighter as she found herself pleasing her visitors, and Charles. She made no slips: smiled, spoke little, listened well, was formal and beautifully dressed. Charles was proud of her

and showed it, though, to do him justice, he would have laughed at her fears if he had heard them. Charles cared nothing for the county: he went his way.

Nevertheless he was pleased to accompany her on their first state visit to their nearest and most-looked-upon neighbours, the Tanleighs of Queen's Tanleigh, ten miles away across the moor. The heir was marrying Adeline Eype, and Charles was sorry for his cousin, he told his Mary. Ley Tanleigh was a queer fish: he looked before he leapt: he'd be sorry to live between Ley Tanleigh and his pompous mother all his life. But if Adeline liked it, said Charles, that was very well, and there was no doubt that the connection was a desirable one, and no doubt at all that Lady Augusta's invitation must be accepted, though for himself he hated dining at six and on a Tuesday too. Tuesday was his day for the accounts, said Charles, who had shed the young gentleman of fashion for the country squire with his usual enthusiastic rapidity. Nevertheless they ought to go.

They were to drive over early on the day, see the gardens and take tea, and dress there for the formal dinner. The young Lady Babyon would meet the families who had called upon her during the past three weeks, and she understood that it would then be decided once and for all whether she lived upon intimate visiting footing or formal calling terms with her neighbours.

She looked at herself in the glass as she dressed and was satisfied with the set of her bride's travelling dress. Caroline's terrifying maid had packed her evening gown in silver paper, her wedding-gown recut to show her sloping shoulders and bare arms. Her open band-box held the house-cap and evening head-dress without which a married woman was clothed but not attired. She was tying on her bonnet and adjusting over it the bridal cream lace veil when Charles came in with the Babyon emeralds in their cases. These, not the string of pearls he had given her on their wedding-day, were the thing to wear that night. She was sorry; but he insisted and growing interested in this question of his wife's adornment, he went on to point out that her engagement ring, the Babyon bride-ring, would clash with the emeralds, so newly reset. He thought she had better not wear it in the evening. Here, you see, was the ring for the occasion—a fine emerald set between two brilliants. No, she had better not wear the Mizpah ring as well: "Slip it off to-night, Mary Anne!"

She astonished him by her look, as if she were near weeping and she shook her head. But naturally he did not give in to a mere sentiment. Not till she turned the hoop on her wedding finger so that only a second gold hoop showed by the marriage band, was there peace between them. It was their first difference of feeling, and the dispute wonderfully flustered Mary Anne,

so that she hardly gave him enough looks of admiration for the Babyon emeralds. He could never be satisfied by moderate praise: and he stayed so long displaying the merits of the bracelets, ear-rings, zone and brooches, that in the end the carriage was waiting before either he or she was ready, and they had to run for it with the emeralds swept up hastily into Mary Anne's travelling bag. And once in the carriage and fairly started he was still not content till he had opened the bag again and pulled out the contents in order to finish extolling the emeralds, and extract, phrase by phrase, the superfluity of comment that alone could satisfy him from his smiling tongue-tied wife.

Thus they drove, contentedly occupied, the length of the avenue and on to the Common: and it amused him then, as he played with the linked dangling stones and tried a bracelet on his Mary's arm, to picture to her the dangerous business such a drive had been a hundred years earlier, and so fell into the tale of his Uncle Jason—his great-great-grand-uncle Jason, a Sir Jason in the end—"but at my age," said Charles, "a younger son without a penny." Uncle Jason had done as gentlemen, younger sons, did now and then—ay, and were hanged for it when caught, gentility or no. He turned highwayman, masked and armed, one desperate afternoon, on this very Babyon Common, stopped a coach and took from the father of a pretty girl two hundred guineas but had gallantly refused to touch the lady's emeralds: had ridden away rejoicing, to dine at a neighbour's, and—to escort the lady in to dinner whom he had robbed in the afternoon! She had known him by his voice but had kept his secret, and in the end the two had married. "She brought us our money, and if she and Uncle Jason had had a son we'd not be sitting here trying on her emeralds. But there was only one daughter, a mad creature who never married: and when she shot herself in one of her fits all her money went to her cousin, my great-grandfather James."

"I know. He died there." Mary Anne pointed to a mound of heather rising beyond a tract of bog.

"It was somewhere hereabouts," said Charles indifferently. "He shot himself too. Did you know?"

"I'd heard."

"Poor fool!"

"He must have been so unhappy," said Mary Anne.

"But to kill oneself! You know the story?"

"Yes."

“Well, isn’t it incredible?”

“Oh, no!” she said.

“Oh, yes, I say. Quite incredible. There’s no excuse for such an act save illness. Then—yes! Cancer now——If I were told that I had cancer——”

“Ah, don’t!” breathed Mary Anne. A voice out of her past rang in her ears as if his words had opened a shut door, a shut cottage door—‘Don’t say the word! It’s never been among the Babyons, that way of dying.’ She puzzled over the memory while she listened to her husband.

“But to put a bullet through your head because you’re unhappy——” Charles was continuing—“that’s beyond me. That’s mad, eh?”

“To be always unhappy—here——” Mary Anne touched her breast—“that would be, don’t you think, a cancer?”

“Pooh!” said Charles, who was bothered by answers to his rhetorical questions: so he told her that he never knew a woman who could think logically: they always began to feel, which was the end of reasonable conversation: was she afraid of cancer, that she flinched like that?—“Don’t be so silly, Mary Anne!” and with that kissed her wide eyes till they lost their quaint fixed look. Then he tossed the handful of jewels back into her lap to be tidied and packed away: and as she did so, looked at his watch and thrust his head out of the carriage window to tell the coachman to whip up now or they’d be late.

At this moment Mary Anne, stowing the cases in her travelling bag, realised that her band-box had been left behind. She caught at his sleeve—

“Charles! Sir Charles! Oh, please stop!”

“What’s that?” Still standing, he turned back into the roomy carriage, ready to put out his head again when she finished speaking.

“Charles, my band-box is forgotten.”

“Well, what of it?” quoth Charles: and at her look of dismay, abandoned the window, sat down beside her and began to kiss her once more. She found herself irritated: she began to push him away.

“Don’t, Charles! Not now! Listen! My band-box—my cap is in it!”

“Is it indeed?” He found her unfamiliar eager flow of words entertaining. His one complaint against her was her dumbness. “Well?”

“Why, we must go back for it.”

“My dear, we’re late already.”

“But my cap is in it! How can I go visiting without my cap? Please tell them to stop!”

“What—now? Nonsense!”

“Please, Charles—I must wear my cap! Your grandmother herself would tell you—I must wear a cap. Don’t you see—I’m a married lady—oh, please, please, dear Charles, don’t you see?”

He did not see. For at least six weeks he had been the sturdy farmer, despising the whims of fashion. It was a point of honour not to see. It was no question of ‘would not’: he could not see, though he was neither malicious nor empty-hearted; but he was the Nelson gesture made into a man. He did think it the greatest joke in the world that the loss of a cap should turn his obedient Mary Anne, his crooning wood-dove, into this frantic, stammering piece of vanity. He could hardly believe that Mary Anne should set such store by a finery. She actually asked him to turn back five miles for the sake of a lace and ribbon. Delicious Mary Anne! He teased her till her stammered entreaties ceased to amuse him: and then told her loudly and firmly, as a husband needs to do at honeymoon’s end, that there was no question of turning back—“I shouldn’t think of overheating the horses. So now stop talking about it, Mary Anne!”

She stopped talking about it then: sat stiff and still in the corner of the luxurious carriage that old Robert’s money had purchased, trying to understand that there was no question of going back, that he, her saviour, her strong tower, her rock, was going to let her walk into a strange drawing-room dressed as no decent woman dressed, so that every one would understand once and for all that she was no true Lady Babyon, but a farm girl too ignorant of decorum to know that a married woman must have her head covered. Only women without their marriage lines, women like her mother, went without a cap. But now she, Mary Anne, who thought that to be Lady Babyon was to be in harbour, must walk into Lady Augusta’s parlour without a cap! All the great ladies would be there to watch her, to recognise her origins, to say—“Poor Sir Charles! he might as well have married his housemaid!” She remembered how her country manners had isolated her at the Exeter seminary, and that, for all she learnt the new way so quickly, the first slips had never been forgotten to her: and she was to go into Lady Augusta’s drawing-room, into that formal gathering of well-born, well-bred women, not dressed like a lady! And they would stare and smile

and be kind to her: and it would never be forgotten that Lady Babyon came to dine at Lady Augusta's without her cap. And Charles——

She turned once more to him, and for the last time in their married years with confident affection——

“Charles——dear Charles——you were laughing at me, were you not? Don't laugh at me any more, but stop the horses. You will stop the horses? You see I have not my cap.”

Charles, cramped with sitting, bored, irritated, half listening, and truly unconscious of the importance of the matter, cried out——

“Oh, to the deuce with your cap!”

They drove on then in silence for another five miles and arrived in good time at Queen's Tanleigh, were received with cold and courteous formality by their host and his mother. They walked about the gardens, drank a dish of tea, and presently were shown into an uninhabited state bedroom and there left to dress. Mary Anne put on her bride's dress of white satin, decked herself with the emeralds, and went down to dinner on her husband's arm: and caught every glance, and understood every glance, as she entered the glittering withdrawing-room and curtseyed to the gold tissue and gauze turbans of the younger matrons, to the erections of lace and frilled ribbon of the dowagers. She behaved very well, scarcely spoke, “but, wasn't it odd, she had no cap on her head? What could you expect though of a farmer's daughter? On the whole we think she did well enough. But to put on all the Babyon emeralds was to overdo it: and then to appear in them sans cap! Well, well, one must be civil for Caroline's sake: and of course we all know Charles had to marry money. But Caroline might have seen to it that her grandson's milk-maid observed the decencies. Would you believe it? Could you believe it? The new Lady Babyon walked into the Tanleigh drawing-room without a cap on her head!”

# X

IF the lack of a glove cost a Mary Stuart her liberty, and the lack of a handkerchief cost a Desdemona her life, need the gods laugh if the lack of a cap cost a Creeping Jenny her mere happiness? For that, precisely, was the price that she and Charles between them paid for the forgotten twist of net and ribbon; though it is to be doubted if Charles were ever aware of his bankruptcy. He was faithful to his Mary Anne and she to him. She kept his house well, was careful of his interests, obeyed him, was respectful to him, bore him ten children and reared him six, and never till the day of his death spoke a word to him outside the bounds of her duty. "Yes, Aunt Drax!" "Yes, Papa!" was replaced by "Yes, Charles!" on the lips of Creeping Jenny. But Mary Anne never had been fluent. Charles did not remark a change in her manner to him, though it is to be confessed that he did soon begin to feel that married life was a flatter business than he had conceived it: and began to absorb himself, sooner than might have been expected from so romantic a personality, in the red clay diversions of a Devon squire. His estate fitfully held his interest, though he was by nature no farmer: and between occasional tidal waves of experimentation and steady ebbs of mismanagement, he dissipated a part of the dowry his wife brought him. The rest he spent on his sufficiently conventional amusements, on his dogs, horses, bets, debts and cellars. As he grew older he drank rather more than was beginning to be thought respectable: and though he did not actually lose the countenance of his coevals, Sir Charles Babyon in his old age was a less considerable person than he had been in his youth. It was commonly said that he had not fulfilled his promise: indeed, it was as if some necessity of his nature had been withdrawn, as if some sap had ceased to rise in him: so that in the last years of his life (he died at sixty-five) he was still the noisy, impetuous dogmatic, and consequently found himself disregarded by the contemporaries who had grown fastidious as they grew old. Inevitably he spent more of his time with his inferiors in rank, though his wife saw to it that his degeneration was not so complete as to affect the status of the heir, Nicholas, their last child and only son.

That she in turn knew how she had affected her husband is also to be doubted. Her withdrawal from him of the affection, admiration and confidence that his nature required for its proper development, was as

instinctive as her previous withdrawal of affection from her own father, as her childish recoil from poor Ellen of the Lodge. She was incapable of forgetting an injury, forgiving a betrayal or desisting from a hate: and it was into a hate that her first love for him had been turned. Nor could she understand that she had in any way wronged him by accepting his invitation to regard him as a hero, or to comprehend that a pedestal can suffer a night-change into a pillory. Charles had been the prince of Cinderella's tale, bringing as wedding gifts name, rank, security and honour, and in his sunshine she had flung off her disguise of rags and ashes—"Throw them into the dustbin: I shall never need them again. Never again, my prince, my saviour! And oh, how I worship you for throwing my rags into the dustbin and making me sure that I shall never touch ashes again!"

And then her prince and saviour, for less than a whim, in pure stupidity (she knew well enough that there was no malice in him), had sent her in her bride-dress back to servitude and the mockings of the ugly sisters.

She did not picture it thus. She had not a mind that dealt in pictures, phantasies or phrases. She dealt with facts: with the fact that it was Charles—Charles—Charles—and no other who had put her to shame in the Tanleigh withdrawing-room. She re-lived the scene as they drove home together that night, weighed it against his protest of love for her. His love, she judged, weighed light in that balance: and her heart grew cold as it turned against him, slowly, once and for all.

Her life's course was, however, plain to her. Her dowry was in her husband's control: she had no alternative to obedient service. She had borne him two children, nursed old Lady Babyon through her last illness, and seen the best part of her dowry trickle through Charles's well meaning fingers when, for the last time, the emotion of her earlier days brushed her in passing, as, for the last time, she came into contact with the actors in the first part of her history. She had speech with her mother again, and her father died.

Charles had a notion that Mary Anne and her children should have their portraits painted. All the Lady Babyons had been painted as young wives, and Mary Anne was looking very beautiful, with a child on her arm and another clutching at her skirts. Charles had made acquaintance with an artist fellow, Dux-Tanleigh, the R.A., a cousin of the Leys and the Shropshire Tanleighs, who had lodgings at Queen's Tanleigh and was busy on his Academy picture—some classical subject or other, pillars and drapery, very fine! He had already asked Charles if he might sketch, if only from memory, the lovely profile of Mary Anne, swore it would be the making of his picture—what was it now?—Creusa and Medea—and he had already found his

Medea. Well, you know, when a fellow asked you, and is a cousin of the Leys, what could you say?

And so Sir Charles had the picture gallery, with its polished floor and square window, put at the disposition of his new bosom friend, who was to stay at Babyon and paint Mary Anne. As for the Academy picture, he could work at it very well, eh? when he wasn't painting Mary Anne. Why shouldn't his model sit to him at Babyon when he wasn't painting Mary Anne? Of course Lady Babyon wouldn't object to the old woman: she knew well enough the sort of people an artist needed to sit to him sometimes. But ask her!

"My dear, Mr. Dux-Tanleigh has begged permission to use a sketch of your head for his Academy picture—some one or other and Medea—classical—he'll tell you the story. We'll go up and see it on the line, eh?"

"Lady Babyon hasn't given her permission yet." The artist was watching Mary Anne as he listened to Charles.

"She'll give it. Better begin the sittings to-morrow."

"If Lady Babyon permits." Dux-Tanleigh was obstinate.

"Of course she permits it," cried Charles. "Don't you, Mary?"

"Yes, Charles."

Dux-Tanleigh acquiesced with a proper expression of gratitude, but he was not satisfied: and his portrait of Mary Anne expressed his dissatisfaction. He had schemed a Grace with Loves: he achieved a cold Charity with a tidy babe in her arms and a second clinging to her skirts. Charles, however, liked the picture, and superintended its hanging in the gallery beside two other Lady Babyons, a fair Caroline and a fairer Menella. Lady Babyon, gentle and tongue-tied, did not seem to own an opinion one way or another as to the merits of the picture: and Dux-Tanleigh, unaccountably nettled, cast aside his suspicion that Lady Babyon had no great liking for the rôle of Creusa in an Academy picture and availed himself of her husband's permission to persuade her to sit to him. His model for Medea, an elderly gipsy, discovered one dusk telling fortunes in little Queen's Tanleigh, attended daily, a tall, unbowed, dark woman, very well spoken: and Charles, excited over the picture-painting as he was invariably excited by watching the exercise of any craft that he had not himself mastered, wandered in and out of the improvised studio, twitching draperies, opening and shutting windows, and recommending brushes that Dux-Tanleigh was not ready to use. The picture did not progress at a speed satisfactory to Charles, though the Medea was nearing reality. But he wanted to see his wife materialising,

and suggested that she should be present at all the sittings—“How can the witch look as she should if she can’t see her enemy? You painter fellows have no imagination!”

“But would Lady Babyon be able to spare the time?”

“I’ll call her. Mary Anne! Mary Anne! Where are you, Mary Anne?”

The painter and his model could hear the hearty voice of the master of the house echoing down the stairs. A common impulse stirred them: they looked at each other, bright-eyed, questioning and quizzical, though one was a draggled slut and the other a young man of fashion. Suddenly in that look’s silence, the gipsy laughed aloud.

“Ah!” Dux-Tanleigh caught at his brush and fumbled among his tubes—“Stay so, please! Just so!” The woman laughed again and stayed just so, her eyes fixed upon the open door: and, as they entered, upon Mary Anne and the panting Charles. Dux-Tanleigh had never had so good a model. In the days of work that followed the woman had never to be told to fix her eyes on Mary Anne or compose her looks into the expression of hungry mockery that fulfilled Dux-Tanleigh’s conception of Medea—witch, mother, murderess, discarded wife and daughter of a king. Lady Babyon, understandably, did not sufficiently concern herself with the woman to give her more than a glance. That too suited Dux-Tanleigh’s conception of his Creusa. He admired Lady Babyon’s sensitive appreciation of a painter’s requirements in a model, though he deplored her invincible lack of interest in her own face. His picture throve: unless Charles invaded the studio he was able to work in a blessed and profitable silence; for his model did not offer, and Lady Babyon did not choose to speak to him. Indeed, had it not been for the companionable Sir Charles, he would have worked in ideal conditions; but Sir Charles would have him break off now and again to taste a port, to attend a rat-hunt, or try a horse, and a fashionable painter must be a good fellow and follow a patron’s lead, even though he be a cousin to the Tanleighs and so cousin’s cousin to a duke. Thus he missed a sensation. In one of his absences his two models did speak, and to each other, though Dux-Tanleigh never guessed it.

“Belle! Heather-bell! Little Mary Anne!” began the Medea whispering—“Do you know me?”

Mary Anne did not answer.

“Don’t you? Won’t you?”

Still there was silence. Then the gipsy began again, tossing back her long trails of grey-streaked hair with a laugh—

“How proud we are grown! Aren’t you glad to be home?” Then, as Mary Anne turned on her a dumb startled glance—“Home, I say. Your home. My home. What, don’t you know?”

“I don’t understand you,” said Mary Anne, breaking her vow of silence.

“You don’t know? But my mother let it out to you, that evening in Clemency’s cottage. And you didn’t understand? You don’t remember? You never knew? Well now, that’s strange.” She pondered: “I was quite sure you knew. I was proud of you for it.”

Mary Anne said nothing. Presently the gipsy spoke again—

“Child!”

“Mother?” said Mary Anne harshly.

“Child dear, I’ll make a bargain with you.”

“It takes two to a bargain, Mother!” said Mary Anne.

“Your father’s dying——”

Mary Anne blazed at her—

“What’s that to you, Mother? It should be nothing to you. He turned you out. Oh, how he shamed you!”

The woman’s eyes startled and kindled as her daughter spoke. She came nearer: she was confidential—

“That’s it! I’ve a mind to his house, my darling. Child dear, when he dies and his money and his house is yours—oh, I have heard of your birthday present—I want you to give me the farm—let me the farm. Will you?”

“No,” said Mary Anne.

“I ask no charity. Haven’t they told you, there’s no such thing as a poor gipsy. Here!” She fumbled in her breast and drew out a lustrous, dancing river of moonlight—“See, here’s a fortune of pearls. I’m the daughter of a king, my daughter. It’s yours for Riverhayes.”

“No,” said Mary Anne.

“I’ll not torment you nor betray you. Have I ever betrayed you?”

“When I was born,” said Mary Anne.

“Fiddle! I mean, to your husband? I’ve kept the secret. Now give your mother’s bones a home. I was happy at Riverhayes when I was young. Now I’m growing old I’d like to die there. Let me!”

“No,” said Mary Anne.

The woman rose:

“No? No? Are you a stone? I’m your mother. Would you have me rot in a ditch as my mother did?”

“Yes,” said Mary Anne.

“Don’t! Don’t say it! Dear! Sweetheart! Little thing! Be kind to your mother! See, dearie, I’ll bargain with you. I know you and I know your injuries. He rules you and drives you, your Charles Babyon, and you can’t get free of his rules. Now I’ll give you a knife to cut ’em with. Let me into Riverhayes when it’s empty and I’ll put my knife in your hand.”

Mary Anne shrank back in her chair:

“How can I give you Riverhayes? What goes to me will belong to Charles.”

“Not so. To you. Tied up as tight as the lawyers can—to you and your children. I’ve made it my business to know. We have our ways of knowing, for all we go ragged. Robert doesn’t like to see his money spent the way my son-in-law has spent it. You’ll have the rest of the spending. You can believe that, dearie! I tell you, Mother knows. So will you let me go to the farm when Robert dies? I’m but quarter gipper: I’m sick of wandering. I want my home as my mother wanted hers. Will you let me? I’ve such a secret for you if you will. You won’t? The secret isn’t worth it? That’s what you think. Ah, but you don’t know what a secret it is. Come now, promise me, if it’s worth it to you when you hear it, will you let me live at Riverhayes and see me sometimes? Come, I’ll tell you without a bargain struck. I’ll trust you to do right by me. Aren’t you my daughter? But, daughter, who’s your mother?”

Mary Anne would not look at her:

“You are. You say so.”

“And my mother?”

“One like you, Mother.”

“Ay, like me, as you’re like me, for all your fairness. But who else is my mother like? Use your eyes! Look there!” And she flung up her wild head and her brown hand with its claw nails towards the darkened painting on the wall close by. Hariot Babyon, the mad heiress, stared down at them.

Mary Anne considered the portrait while the gipsy cried impatiently, "Don't you see? Don't you see?" Then her eyes strayed, puzzled, to the Medea upon the canvas. She said slowly in her cold voice—

"I see that she is a little like the Medea."

"Like the Medea? Like me! Like my mother! And like you when you look at me scared and vicious. Here's my mother!" She turned to the Reynolds portrait: "Look at her, and her cousin, and you and me, as like as a four-leaved clover, for all you're Robert's colour. And why not, when we're all Babyon women?"

Mary Anne was stiff with the effort of control. She felt the blood draining away from her face, but she spoke clearly and calmly—

"D'you say I'm a Babyon?"

"This was my mother, Isabella Babyon."

"That murderess?"

"That was my mother—your grandmother. You met once, and she knew you for one of us. Besides, I've proofs enough if you care to see them."

"I don't care," said Mary Anne, and began to shake.

"So you won't believe me?"

"I think I believe you. I believe you," said Mary Anne. "It—it makes a difference." She drew her little figure together, rose, and came stately to her mother—"I don't forgive you—you and Papa—never! Nor my grandmother Isabella: nor—" she whitened—"nor Charles. But I see, Mother," said Mary Anne slowly, "that you are like me. You are what they made you. It makes a difference," said Mary Anne.

She sat still when the others had returned, breaking in upon their conference, thinking of the difference it made: and crouched Medea watched her and thought of the difference it could not make. Dux-Tanleigh, surprising them, was voluble—

"Just as you are, good woman! I beg you, Lady Babyon! If you will stay just as you are I won't keep you ten minutes."

Dux-Tanleigh was no prince of painters, but he knew his world, and he would have dearly liked to understand the look that he was for ever surprising in the eyes of his patron's wife. As he could not understand it, he painted it.

How could he understand it? It was the look of a conqueror. She had loved and feared. Then she had hated and feared. Now she hated but did not fear; for, you see, she was a Babyon by birth as well as marriage. Charles was no longer a royalty: his blood was in her veins. His caste was no longer a mystery: she belonged to it. If she had thought Babyon Court the Earthly Paradise and found it no such thing, at least in Fool's Paradise she had a right to her bed and board. She belonged in it. It seemed that she would be able to live her life.

She did live it.

She reared her children and kept up the house on the income secured her by the terms of old Robert's will. But she gave her husband no more money. Thus, with the years, he became, as his extravagance increased and his income lessened, her pensioner. Yet she never altered in her obedience save in the one question of money, never withstood him save only over money, or when (her only eccentricity) she installed, some years later, the old woman who had sat for Dux-Tanleigh's Medea as caretaker at Riverhayes. Charles had thought such an arrangement fantastic. He had crowed with laughter at Mary Anne's scheme for farming Riverhayes land. His Mary Anne a farmer! How should she know kelk from crop? She said that she did not know, but that she was quick to learn. In the end he allowed her whim. Riverhayes thrived. She added to it out of its profits and presently began to use her knowledge on the languishing Babyon fields, bargaining with her Charles for a free hand. Her reputation among the farmers grew: as an old woman she was the local oracle of the country people just as, among the neighbouring families, she was the local legend: a woman who would walk into your drawing-room without her stockings if she chose—"and yet, my dear, she must be worth thousands!" Thus did her early indiscretion become the nucleus of incredible yet credible fables. For gentle and simple had a sort of pride in her exploits. It was known that she had twice saved the Babyon estate from shipwreck, and by incredible parsimonies and more incredible shrewd business dealings had restored the Babyon patrimony to a glory it had not known since Sir Henry's day.

But in spite of the respect that her big neat daughters and the dependants of the neighbourhood and her neighbours in the county paid her, she lived a retired life. She married off her daughters suitably in turn, and was able for the last five years of her life to devote herself wholly to her youngest child. He was fifteen years old when his father died, and had been sent to school unusually early. At sixteen he was as silent as his mother had been at sixteen: nevertheless when infection kept him at home for three months and

Lady Babyon nursed him in the silence and emptiness of the huge emptied house, they contrived to form an acquaintance. Perhaps his silence put an end to hers. They talked sometimes, walked sometimes, were happy together. In his childhood she had played the part of a just shadow flickering in and out of his life; but now she opened her heart to him, and even that strange, oblique confession of hers that his sisters had meant nothing to their mother, did not alienate him.

“I did my best by them: they were very good daughters, very kind to me. I do wish them well.”

“Do you wish me well, Mother?”

No answer from Mary Anne.

“Do you, Mother?”

“You——” said Mary Anne: her hand on his arm tightened. They had been walking together, he suiting his pace to her old little steps, up Petticoat Lane under the meeting oaks. He looked down at her and was concerned by the look of fatigue upon her small drawn face. The neighbourhood had seen for a year or two that old Lady Babyon was ‘failing’; but he had not seen it. Now for the first time he saw it and suffered a strange pang as he drew her into a little gorse-hedged glade that had been a lair of his boyhood:

“Sit down a little, Mother! I’ve walked you too far. See, here’s a tree-trunk. It makes a seat.”

It was the noble carcass of an oak, long since strangled by the embraces of its companion ivy. He himself had watched its felling.

“It’s changed here,” said Mary Anne out of her fifty years’ remembrance, looking about her.

“Not much,” said her son out of his fifteen years’ remembrance. “Only the oak down. They had to fell it. It was rotten with ivy.”

“Your father hated to see ivy on a tree when I first knew him. Later, he did not care about the woods.” Mary Anne was still looking about her. She caught his eye: “Here—here, my son, I first saw your father.”

He looked his interest:

“Was he like me? I mean, am I like him?”

“Yes. He was handsomer. He had brown eyes. You have mine. They are dull now, but they were once blue.”

“Mother, what was my father like when he was young? Was he always—as he was?”

“What do you mean?” said Mary Anne, not looking at him.

“Oh, Mother, you know what I mean. He ate and drank and talked and never listened to any one. He couldn’t have been like that, could he, when you and he——”

Said Mary Anne—

“No, he wasn’t like that.”

“What was he like, once? Make me a picture.”

She shook her head. She dealt in facts. He puzzled:

“Mother—Dux-Tanleigh’s picture of him——”

“Yes?”

“Mother, I’ve thought about my father. Dux-Tanleigh’s picture isn’t like him as we knew him. It’s like—with those nostrils and the lift of the head—like a horse rearing, beating the air with his hooves.”

Said Mary Anne—

“I shouldn’t have thought of it, but—yes, that was your father.”

“But, Mother, what happened to him then?”

She looked at her son as she shook her head and said steadily—

“For many years I did not know anything about your father.”

“Mother!”

“I wouldn’t let my eyes see him nor my ears hear him. He was not there for me.”

There was a silence between them. Her son broke it at last with his—“But, Mother——! But we—my sisters——But there were all of us born!”

She said patiently—

“Don’t you know, dear—don’t you know a husband has his rights?”

He flushed, not she. He did not look at her, but stared at the trails of torn ivy heaped between them, wilting beneath their polish. She put out her hand and picked up a long wrenched-off trail and then, holding it in her hand, with the forefinger of her other hand running round the pennant leaves, up one, down another, as if she were telling a rosary, she told him, halting, faltering,

hesitating, awkwardly told him the truth about her childhood, her girlhood and her marriage. She ended with—

“I never told any one before. I never had any one to talk to.”

He made her no answer and for a while she watched him as he sat, frowning, his eyes on the hacked ivies and litter of dead boughs. Then she murmured timidly—

“My son, we must go home.”

He turned to her and said loudly, as he helped her to her feet—

“Take my arm. You have me now. Take my arm.”

He was not prepared to say any more. Nor was she. They were not talkers. But her eyes were misty with blessed tears as they walked home together happily. She had him now.

The dragging trail of ivy slipped from her hand and was forgotten, as completely forgotten as those former trails which she had defended from Charles and destruction so long ago. And that incident of her courtship was also forgotten: indeed she had not time for memories now. She had her son now.

And for a full year she had him. Then the same gnawing that had destroyed her mother and her mother’s mother, had its way with her also: and Lady Babyon, in life and death as gentle and relentless as the ivy he hated, slept unwillingly beside her ruined oak.

## THE END

### TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Decorations and book cover cannot yet be used in this eBook as the artist Joseph E. Sandford's (1892-1976) work is not yet in the public domain.

[The end of *Creeping Jenny* by Winifred Ashton (as Clemence Dane)]